



Letter to Editor

HOW TO SURVIVE A SHIFT - A REVIEW OF PETRA B. VOLPE'S FILM LATE SHIFT

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LETTER TO EDITOR

After watching most films in the cinema, our thoughts often return to everyday obligations as soon as we leave the theatre. Sometimes, however, a film leaves a strong impression and keeps us immersed in its atmosphere and content. Such is the film *Late Shift* by director Petra Volpe.

The film's main character is the nurse Floria, whose late afternoon shift becomes a space in which professional, moral, and emotional challenges intertwine. Volpe does not portray the heroine as a classic hero; her strength arises from constant presence and responsibility toward others, rather than from spectacular actions. It is precisely in this "ordinariness" that the film's power lies: Floria is simultaneously a pillar of the healthcare system and its victim.

The plot is simple and does not abound in spectacular or romantic scenes. Unlike many healthcare-related films, *Late Shift* deliberately avoids dramatization and the glorification of the profession. The camera work is minimalist and often handheld, creating the impression that we are watching through the protagonist's eyes while simultaneously intensifying the sense of urgency and haste. While other films emphasize rare medical cases or charismatic doctors, Volpe depicts routine, repetition, and exhaustion.

Natural lighting, the absence of pathos, and minimal use of music force the viewer to follow the character in the rhythm of her breathing, fatigue, and inner tension. The camera often stays close to bodies, hands, and faces, emphasizing the physical aspect of nursing care: touching, waiting, calming, and lifting patients.

We learn very little about the characters, including Floria—only fragments of their lives. Based on this scarce information, we form impressions that change throughout the film. Floria is

under constant time pressure and overwhelmed by excessive tasks, attempting to accomplish the "mission impossible" of maintaining professional communication and control over emotional and moral challenges.

The way the film addresses moral dilemmas without judgment is particularly striking. It offers no clear culprits or simple solutions; the system is depicted as a complex network of protocols, lack of time, and staff shortages, where even the best intentions collude with real limitations. Professional ethics in this context becomes an everyday struggle: a series of small decisions that sometimes have serious consequences.

The film explores the emotional burden often overlooked in healthcare discussions. Fatigue is not only physical but also moral, arising from the constant balance between empathy and self-preservation. The viewer can almost physically feel this exhaustion, prompting the question of how long one can remain "good" within a system that applies relentless pressure without offering protection. This subtle, yet powerful study of invisible labor and the ethics of care depicts the emotional depletion of individuals in an overstretched system. Set during a single hospital shift, the film uses temporal and spatial constraints to expose a broader reality: healthcare depends on individual self-sacrifice while systematically wearing people down. Floria's strength lies not in emotional detachment, but in feeling deeply and continuing nonetheless.

The film critiques society's neglect of the mental health of helping professionals. Rather than diagnoses or therapy, psychological strain is shown through signs of exhaustion—pauses for breath, suppressed anger, guilt, and lingering looks. Volpe illustrates how constant urgency and responsibility accumulate into psychological wear, making the film especially relevant to discussions of burnout, secondary traumatization, and the need for systemic support.

Care is portrayed as an ethical and political act, rooted in emotional presence and moral judgment rather than technical skill alone. The ethics of care repeatedly collide with efficiency, rigid protocols, and scarce resources. Floria is forced to make painful choices about whom to help and whom to reduce to administrative necessity—not from indifference, but institutional pressure. Ultimately, the film can be read as a critique of neoliberal values of efficiency and productivity within spaces meant to be humane. It moves beyond a single profession to offer a universal portrayal of labor in contemporary institutions operating at the limits of endurance. From a gender perspective, *Late Shift* clearly illustrates how care work has been historically feminized. The nurse's role, performed by a woman, is framed as a natural extension of stereotypically female traits such as care, patience, and emotional availability—qualities that render the work undervalued, underpaid, and largely invisible. Although gender is not explicitly addressed in dialogue, it is evident in the expectations placed on the protagonist: professionalism, calmness, empathy, and constant availability without allowance for weakness. In this sense, *Late Shift* functions as a critique of gender injustice in institutional care. Floria's emotional labor is taken for granted rather than recognized as additional effort, raising questions about who bears the cost of the care system and why women so often pay it with their mental health. Her dedication reflects not only professional duty, but also socially conditioned expectations that women provide emotional support.

The film's power also lies in its refusal of catharsis. Instead of resolution, it leaves the viewer with uncomfortable but necessary questions about the value and cost of care, and society's responsibility toward those who provide it. It does not seek pity, but sustained attention, making its impact enduring. Though focused on a single night shift, the film speaks to the broader limits of care in contemporary society. By moving beyond the individual story, the film exposes working conditions in which caregivers' mental health is neglected while their empathy is treated as an endless resource. As Petra Volpe implicitly asks: can a system that fails to care for its caregivers truly be humane? This dilemma constitutes the film's lasting social relevance. It is therefore unsurprising that the film is Switzerland's Academy Awards submission this year and that its lead performance has been recognized by the European Film Academy.

Beyond a strong recommendation to watch it, the film also holds significant educational potential—something the teacher in me cannot overlook.