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A Great Woman Theory of History: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARGARETHE VON TROTTA

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# A Great Woman Theory of History

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
MARGARETHE VON TROTTA  
by Karen Jaehne and Lenny Rubenstein



Margarethe von Trotta  
(photo by Judy Janda)

**N**o more appropriate director could be found to make a film about Rosa Luxemburg than Margarethe von Trotta, who has consistently delved into the personal motivations behind political acts, as well as the political responses to private experience. *Sisterhood* has been examined in-depth in von Trotta's films about contemporary women searching for their fair share of a complex world. With her most recent work, von Trotta investigates an even more complex world—Berlin in the early part of the century under the shock waves of revolutionary fervor and an impending world war. At the center of that political hurricane is Rosa Luxemburg, researched and revitalized in every aspect of her unique position as a woman and an intellectual. In the following interview, Margarethe von Trotta reveals the sense of purpose and keen intellect that set her on the path to Rosa Luxemburg in the 1980s, a time when peace seems as improbable as it did then, and when a woman in a leadership role is likely to be as lonely and thrown back on her own resources as the title heroine of Rosa Luxemburg.

**Cineaste:** It was widely asserted that Rosa Luxemburg was the project Rainer Werner Fassbinder was working on at the time of his death. Is that the same project that you developed into your film?

**Margarethe von Trotta:** For many years I had wanted to do a film about Rosa Luxemburg. But I had told myself I must make at least ten pictures before I would have the basic craft and knowledge to approach such a woman in such a time, because I wanted to apply a mastery to it. You may remember a scene in *Marianne and Julianne*, where a photo of Rosa Luxemburg hangs above a desk. That was not only deliberate — it indicated my intention to make that film. And I offered the role at that time to Jutta Lampe to make with me *some day*. I had thought Jutta resembled Rosa with her high forehead; but as fate likes to have it, it turned out to be the other sister, Barbara Sukowa, who would play Rosa.

**Cineaste:** Is your interest in Rosa Luxemburg of a strictly political or feminist origin? All of your films demonstrate a tough feminism against a chaotic political background, it seems.

**von Trotta:** In 1968 during the student upheaval in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg was carried as a poster through the demonstrations in Germany, the only woman among Ho Chi Minh, Mao Tse Tung, Marx, Lenin, and so on. Dragged around through the streets that way, this lonely woman struck me as not really suitable for that company. Do you know that portrait of her, with finely chiseled features and somewhat saddened expression, most unusual and almost emotional? I bought a few of her shorter political essays and the letters, and she fascinated me immediately. On the one hand, in her political works, she

had a clear, concrete style with firm beliefs logically argued and progressive and hopeful, but then, in her letters, she is warmhearted, subtle and almost poetic. These two dimensions in one woman made me want to address her from the very beginning. It was unusual, perhaps, for me at that time to look into a political mind that also expressed itself on clothes, style, music, literature, and a gigantic scope of humanistic problems. She painted, drew; she had plants and studied botany and biology. She had, in short, an intellectual curiosity that sometimes is suspect in the modern world of narrow expertise. But her spectrum of talent beyond politics is what I really wanted to bring out: how a political mind expresses itself not just in writing and at the podium but in the scope of one's whole life.

**Cineaste:** Did you think of her as a 'genius'?

**von Trotta:** Ach, the concept of 'genius' is truly nineteenth century. I simply admired and respected her. She had patience and worked hard for what she knew and believed to be important on any level. That was the beginning, years ago. I had no idea at that time I could ever direct a film. It was beyond my reach, really, as a woman then.

**Cineaste:** Do you know how Fassbinder seized upon the idea?

**von Trotta:** No, but upon his death there was a script by Peter Märtesheimer [*Maria Braun*, etc.] which Fassbinder usually took and then molded according to his vision of his subject. Fassbinder's producer then offered the project to me, particularly because he thought as a woman, I might have a special insight. At first, the whole situation made me uncomfortable. I hesitated because I had intended *Rosa* as my tenth film, you see, but friends insisted that I do it and talked me into it. Even after agreeing, I had to find my own way, because Märtesheimer's script was not how I conceived of either the character or the history. I don't want to go into it, because it was interesting in its own way, but it did not reflect my understanding of Rosa.

**Cineaste:** Were you able to go right into the project?

**von Trotta:** No, it's too sensitive and complex. I spent a year and a half in research in East Berlin. The last two volumes of the five that constitute Rosa's letters were not yet out, and I had to sort out of her other work what ever could inform the film narrative. It was massive. In particular, I talked to historians, and Annelies Laschitzka was most helpful. She is the author of a book about Rosa and it struck me that when you become so involved with a historical figure, as we both were, you develop a love and understanding for that person as if they were alive and close to you. But I was still awed by the prospect of bringing her to life on the screen, and the way Rosa brought me close to Annelies really helped me face the responsibility of doing this kind of historical film. So many minuscule problems — those of a filmmaker — stymied her rather of-





Barbara Sukowa as Rosa makes an impassioned speech in *Rosa Luxemburg*

ten. Questions of a filmmaker are not those of a historian, but we managed to merge our knowledge, even where she thought the matters not exactly weighty. I attended a Rosa Luxemburg symposium in Paris in 1983, but . . .

**Cineaste:** *The historical approach with which you began seems to have let you down at some point.*

**von Trotta:** Well, the academic language is not cinematic, and since I had read her 2,500 letters several times, at least four or five, I was looking for the individual motivation more than her impact on history. I tried to sink myself into her life as if I were faced with playing her role. I was once an actress, you know. After eighteen months of that kind of research, it still took me six months to complete the screenplay—over several drafts.

**Cineaste:** *How did you decide which historical figures to include in her biography, since she knew so many prominent figures?*

**von Trotta:** I was uncomfortable doing a film that would require a historical analysis and unexpurgated authenticity, because that usually turns into an epic, which is not my kind of film. I would just never do that, because I think it is impossible and potentially kitschy. Her private life interested me so much more than her public role, which is of interest to historians primarily, and in the attempt to show how those two aspects were interwoven, I had to bring in a few personalities from the chapter titles of history. But only where they affected Rosa's private life.

**Cineaste:** *Did you do independent research then on the other historical figures and their relationship to the same events?*

**von Trotta:** No, I tried to portray them as Rosa saw them and described them. I made my point of view—and that of the film—Rosa's. Some might argue that Kautsky or Bebel are wrongly represented, so I decided to cling to Rosa's vantage point and not get into historical squabbles. I omitted Lenin, for example, because I find his whole personage as it has traditionally appeared in films simply embarrassing. I had to avoid the recognition factor of such a major 'film' figure. As you know, he has been portrayed in hundreds of films.

**Cineaste:** *Did you see her personal story as a tragedy? She seems to shatter on her own principles.*

**von Trotta:** I don't agree. She certainly had a disciplined ethical sense and she was very hard on herself as well as others. It's important to realize that when Rosa rejects her lover Leo Jogiches, it is not because he has been unfaithful to her but that he lied to her. She was utterly fanatic about truthfulness, especially in private affairs. I believe that she believed, on the one hand, in the idea of absolute love—a personal principle—and, on the other hand, the idea of one love between two people remaining steadfast and true all their lives reigned over their society. The combination seems to have held sway over her subsequent life, for she never again asserted the power of total love. In the two volumes of letters written to Leo, you can perceive the development of their relationship on an intellectual level, but she repeatedly asks him to write her something about their personal life or about his feelings for her. That's why I included the scene where he reads to her from her own letters and asks how that could change. She reacts by challenging him with the fact that he never answered those letters with a single personal word. Only work and the Party! But she wanted life and a child.

**Cineaste:** *He also denies her that desire when he warns her in the film that a child would make her horrible, just another woman, and that her ideas are her children.*

**von Trotta:** That's why, ultimately, she left him, for she could show only one side of herself to him, the political, and her life is proof that politics is not enough. That is the deeper cause of their separation. Their friendship and their work kept them together in some form, but what is really amazing in the letters is that Rosa suddenly uses the formal address instead of the familiar 'you' (*Sie* rather than *du*) or she finds oddly formalistic ways of stating things, after that point. Then very gradually over the years, she softens again toward him until after her last time in prison. At that point, they have a very deep love and trust again. He was *the* man in her life.

**Cineaste:** *The final scene of the film shows Leo looking back as Rosa is led away, and a certain ambiguity in his*



**“** limited Rosa's historical importance to the weight it had relative to her other values. She was one of the only revolutionaries to experience such an intense life apart from politics. The lessons of Rosa's life are as valuable for the women I personally know as for those who tote up facts and figures. And I hold the view that, when we study historical personalities, private life is as politically important as public life. **”**

expression led many to believe that he knew what was about to happen to her. Did you mean to indicate a betrayal on his part?

**von Trotta:** For the audience it may be ambivalent, but for me it's not. He watches her go. He knows he'll never see her again. The situation had become so dangerous, and she would not leave Berlin, although in Berlin her life was utterly in peril. And he will be killed only two months later. That, too, he could have predicted. If that kind of interpretation applied, I fear the film would be reduced to the cinema of cliché. Leo is never portrayed in the film as a man capable of such betrayal. It would be uncharacteristic—and stupid from a cinematic point of view. That's all.

**Cineaste:** You introduce Rosa's female friends as powerful influences in her life, but also as an ersatz for her lost love. Was that the case?

**von Trotta:** Quite so. I also tried to show the complexity with which she tried to replace Leo through her affair with Kostia Zetkin, the son of her friend Clara, and likewise a substitute son for herself, after Leo has rather refused her the right to have children. She finds both son and lover in Kostia, but it seems to be consolation. Rosa was ultimately very lonely in matters of love.

**Cineaste:** In politics, too, she seemed to have been alone as the only woman permitted to cross into the debates and decision-making circles controlled by men. You make that very clear in the dining room sequence, where the men at the table try to invite her to see to women's affairs in the party. . . .

**von Trotta:** And she tells them that Clara takes care of that! Clara Zetkin actually was responsible for the

women's movement within the party, and she published *Die Gleichheit (Equality)* a social democratic paper for women. Rosa wrote for that paper occasionally, but did not want *only* to be assigned to that sector of the party. She insisted on being considered on equal footing with the men and was. During my research, I met an elderly man who had known her and her involvement in politics and he maintained that she was the abiding spirit of the party. And she knew it, and exercised it. She had no complexes at all about being a woman among men.

Her friendship with Clara began as a political association. They struggled together within the left wing of the party and later established, together with Karl Liebknecht and Leo Jogiches, the Spartacus League. Out of the political developed an intimacy and trust for a personal friendship, that was, in turn, dealt a death blow by politics. With Lulu or Luise Kautzsky, Rosa enjoyed a close personal friendship from the beginning, until Rosa and Karl Kautzsky had a falling out over political positions on the Russian Revolution's impact on their movement. Still, that did not mean they stopped seeing each other. Their contact was cooler, strained. After all, Clara Zetkin wrote *Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht* in 1919, and Luise published memoirs in 1929 entitled *Rosa Luxemburg*. Among these people, political principles had a priority over their personal lives, because they saw themselves in historical terms.

**Cineaste:** And yet you were more inclined to sift Rosa's life through the exceedingly personal criteria of our modern vision of life rather than apply the historical dimension by which she measured herself.

**von Trotta:** I think I did both, but I limited Rosa's historical importance to the weight it had relative to her other values. She was one of the only revolutionaries to experience such an intense life apart from politics. And beyond that, we must remember that a strictly historical perspective would be safer conceived as a documentary. The lessons of Rosa's life are as valuable for the women I personally know as for those who tote up facts and figures. And I hold the view that, when we study historical personalities, private life is as politically important as public life.

**Cineaste:** The Russian Revolution seems to have impressed Rosa enormously and provided a model for the politics she wished to follow in Germany.

**von Trotta:** At first. But only initially. Her happiness and enthusiasm gave way about a year after the revolution, when she wrote to Lenin to reprimand him for his elitist thinking. Her belief in social democracy was based on a firm belief in "the spontaneity of the masses," by which she meant that when the masses react to political events, they can be trusted, and that they should, in fact, be followed rather than led in another direction by 'know-it-alls' (*Besserwisser*).

In 1906, Rosa came back to Germany from Russia—well, Warsaw, which belonged to Czarist Russia—with the

Leo (Daniel Olbrychski) and Rosa (Barbara Sukowa)







Rosa (Barbara Sukowa) is protected by Paul Levi (Winfried Glatzeder) in *Rosa Luxemburg*

opinion that in the interest of German democracy things could definitely be learned from the events taking place in Russia. Simply by thinking through, 'What can one learn and apply to Germany?' That's when she discovered that her colleagues within the party did not feel it applied to their situation. They saw themselves as a legally established party in the position to evolve into the governing structure. Verbally they were revolutionary, but in their actions quite cautious, due to 'evolutionary' thinking.

**Cineaste:** *That's where you chose to begin the film. Why?*

**von Trotta:** I consider the time in her life from the first Russian Revolution, when she returns full of the spirit of change, to the time of the German revolution, which she had truly believed would be a leap forward for the German people, the essentially meaningful part of Rosa Luxemburg's life. She was a revolutionary — not in the discredited sense associated with that term today—but she lived in a politically turbulent world and had a clear vision of a path of progress that she believed would lead to a better, more peaceful world. Her belief in revolution insisted on turning away from war, which had always been considered somehow inevitable among Europeans. Part of the way we chose to get along, traditionally . . . I, too, can be discouraged by that fact.

**Cineaste:** *It required flashbacks, however.*

**von Trotta:** Yes, in order to explain what kind of relationship she had with Leo we have to look back, and at a certain point, I think one wonders what kind of child Rosa must have been. I tried to place the flashbacks about where I thought they organically would fill in the picture for the audience. I also find it more intriguing to show an effect and then turn to examine the causes. It's less linear, and I think we look at our own lives that way sometimes. Rosa's major achievements were sandwiched between two revolutions, both of them unsuccessful, but they illustrate the goals, struggles and frustrations about the other avenues of her life, which are often more elusive.

**Cineaste:** *As a Pole and a Jew, she had two extreme disadvantages within the German party, don't you think?*

**von Trotta:** Mmm, not so extreme, no. At that time, the Jews were very well assimilated in Germany. That's why I avoided putting a strong focus on the fact that she was Jewish. From today's point of view, it seems more powerful a factor than it was. I had a discussion about this with Rudolf Arnheim, the German film historian and theoretician. He said to me, "At that time, we intellectual, bourgeois Jews were totally assimilated. Nobody made an issue of it. We were no longer religious; we were integrated and secularized. We had Christmas trees . . ."

**Cineaste:** *Yes, that scene around the Christmas tree raises more than a few eyebrows.*

**von Trotta:** That's why I included it. At the beginning of the century, German Jews were quite different from the Jews in other countries, particularly here in the U.S. where they had immigrated, in part, in order to preserve their traditions. A certain level of German Jews participated in a political climate where religion had the least impact. Particularly if they were communists or leftists. But even the run of the mill bourgeoisie took little notice of Jews as a special case, and Jews had no foresight of how it would be used against them.

**Cineaste:** *Was Rosa Luxemburg's Jewishness held up as a reason for her death?*

**von Trotta:** No, it was because she was a radical leftist and a powerfully charismatic leader and writer. Others eliminated at the same time were not Jewish, and I think it shifts the focus away from the real cause, the political grounds, to favor a fatalistic or deterministic reason for the crime. Her politics, not her race, were the cause of her murder.

**Cineaste:** *How did she fit in, then, as a Pole?*

**von Trotta:** She had a light accent, which Barbara Sukowa recapitulates, but her German was excellent. When I read her works today, it strikes me that she wrote a more modern German than her peers, because it is less laden with literary affectations and clunky phrasing. Clara Zetkin and Kautsky are today impossible to read without an understanding of the nineteenth century underpinnings of purple flourishes and dry density. Rosa



Luxemburg is clear, precise and strikingly appropriate to modern politics.

It's also significant that the idea of internationalism held sway in socialist circles, so she was all the more welcome. Whatever private comment was made cannot be determined, and I refuse to speculate on the gossip about "that Polish Jewess" or "Red Rosa." We must remember that Bebel was defending her when he said, "Red Rosa is not as terrible as they say. I couldn't do without this troublemaker in my party."

**Cineaste:** *Didn't internationalism take a turn for the worse in Rosa's time?*

**von Trotta:** She believed very strongly in it, as did others, which brought them a terrible disappointment in 1914. It was the death knell of internationalism and the defeat of the Social Democratic Party in Europe. Its generosity was laid waste by the chauvinistic patriotism of war. It was the lowest point in Rosa's life. Their utopia was lost.

**Cineaste:** *You portray that event as a rather brief indulgence in suicidal impulses.*

**von Trotta:** Well, it was the realization that her function was no longer valid. I portrayed her appearance at the International Congress, where she is physically incapable of rising to address the madness she sees before her, like a Cassandra. She saw in that moment that they would all march to war together, no matter how senseless it was. That's why her speech fails her.

**Cineaste:** *Did her sudden incapacity cause her colleagues to distrust her? Did they find her weakness feminine?*

**von Trotta:** Leo accused her of that, until she explains to him. I didn't find it elsewhere, but I also believe nobody had time for that kind of pettiness. Events were moving too quickly to permit that kind of cabal. There is a line she wrote from that period that compelled me to believe in her and to make this film. In 1914 the Party had voted for war credits, and Clara and Rosa hopelessly were reduced to suicide—seriously. But Rosa advanced to the next logical thought in such an instance, "If we commit suicide, who will carry on?" So they carried on, even though the task was greater than they could imagine.

**Cineaste:** *What role does Rosa Luxemburg play in modern Germany?*

**von Trotta:** You know the story about the West German government issuing a Rosa Luxemburg commemorative stamp which nobody wanted to buy and expressly rejected. The film, on the other hand, was better received. I believe for two reasons: first, I concentrated on her struggle against war and militarism, and those scenes found a resonance among German viewers; secondly, her struggle within her own party, the Social Democrats, which is also rather relevant to modern German politics.

**Cineaste:** *How would you compare Rosa Luxemburg's politics to those of the Federal Republic of Germany?*

**von Trotta:** She always accused her political opponents of never having a clear program. And what do we have today? Parties that accept compromise after compromise, until they find themselves in an arms battle in the middle of something they don't believe in. Then, they backtrack and try to cope with problems they might have foreseen, but they think they can contain the problems. Young people immediately recognized the parallel, and when she speaks of freedom or peace, young German audiences are appreciative, because they hear that nowhere else, or, at least, not in public debate. The tragedy is that the dialog that should have taken place before the first world war is still trying to take place.

**Cineaste:** *Were you personally attacked for the film's political views?*

**von Trotta:** The German press attacked me to a certain degree. Reviews were quite mixed, with some arguing

that I was too sentimental and emotional in the context of a political narrative. They also claimed that this and that was missing, that I was short on history, too long on biography. But what struck me was that the academics and historians were loath to attack my 'history' than were the critics, who became instant 'Rosa Luxemburg Experts.' There were adolescent attempts to show me what I had omitted, as if I had created this film by totally neglecting my research. It was appalling how little understanding or respect many critics had of film as a medium for opening up history rather than turning into a didactic medium. It is the Luxemburg specialists who have defended me, pointing out that as an artist, I have the right to interpret her life, to choose what I show. But that's not unusual in Germany.

**Cineaste:** *Did anyone ever say that the film depicts the dilemma of modern West Germany, with Luxemburg as an example of a voice in our wilderness?*

**von Trotta:** If that were the case, nobody would ever express it in such a clear way. For example, when I was looking for funding for *Marianne and Julianne*, I went to every television station, but did ever a single one reject my proposal because it was political? Never! Nobody dared say, "The story involved a taboo theme, and you may not make it." Instead, they talked about dramaturgy and plausibility of sisters such as these and blah, blah, blah. Nobody would say simply, "I find this a politically dangerous film." That's what I mean by the way criticism is deflected into whining petulance. I probably know better than anyone what is missing or doesn't work in my own films. And that's why I wanted to practice my art so long before assaulting *Rosa Luxemburg*. Perhaps it was premature for my talents. But it was not premature for today's politics. It had to be done. ■

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