



---

Feminism and Fear of Mind: Margarethe von Trotta's Rosa Luxemburg

Author(s): REGINA JANES

Source: *Salmagundi*, No. 164/165 (FALL 2009 - WINTER 2010), pp. 225-239

Published by: Skidmore College

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40550166>

Accessed: 08-02-2019 10:54 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Skidmore College is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Salmagundi*

JSTOR

# **Feminism and Fear of Mind: Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosa Luxemburg***

BY REGINA JANES

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. . . .

Her life is proof that politics is not enough.

—Margarethe von Trotta

Je ne regrette rien.

—Édith Piaf signature tune.

There is of course no comparison between Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986), now twenty-three years old, and Olivier Dahan's *La vie en rose (La môme)*, the recent Édith Piaf bio-pic (2007). Both have stunning, vanity-free performances by leading actresses, Barbara Sukowa as Rosa and Marion Cotillard as Édith. Both fragment chronology to force the viewer without firm control of the heroine's history

upon inference and guess. Absent linearity, the heroine's present displaces her trajectory to disaster or triumph. Both films avoid juxtaposing their subject with even more famous contemporaries who might upstage her. So Yves Montand and Simone Signoret are mentioned, but do not appear, and Lenin never twirls his beard at Rosa. Serious and well-made, both aim for a wide audience as "movies," not just "films." As bio-pics with female subjects, *La vie en rose* is the typical tragic story of the successful, heartbreaking, heartbroken female popular artist: Billie Holiday, Fanny Brice, Maria Callas, Judy Garland, Janis Joplin, Gypsy Rose Lee. *Rosa Luxemburg* is the less typical tragic story of the successful, heartbroken female political leader, who, unlike *Evita*, doesn't sing and, unlike Elizabeth or Mary, doesn't inherit a kingdom. But there is no comparison.

The makers of *La vie en rose* loved Edith Piaf's *métier* as well as her tragic life. They loved her art, and they loved her for her art. Otherwise, she was a mousy little woman who knitted and shriveled. Margarethe von Trotta does not love Rosa Luxemburg for her *métier*. She does not love her for what was distinctive in her art, her brilliant political analysis and brutal practical stupidity, fostered by imprisonment. Her political prominence occasions the film and shapes many scenes, but her political thinking does not motivate it, as if Piaf were valued as "a great singer" without her own signature tunes. Instead, von Trotta is drawn to the "warmhearted, subtle and almost poetic" letter writer, whose "private life [is so much more interesting] than her public role."<sup>1</sup> What made Rosa Luxemburg special matters less than what she shares with Anywoman, quarrels over babies and a lover's infidelity or truthfulness.

The films' endings bear out von Trotta's alienation from Luxemburg's intentions. *La vie en rose* uses its fractured, derivative structure to end where it wants. It concludes with the Piaf we have already seen die, alive once again, singing. Violated chronology enables its maker to end on its heroine's immortality. Von Trotta, who pioneered the temporal discontinuities others imitated, abandons discontinuity to close in death. *Rosa Luxemburg* ends with Rosa's disappearing under the water. Light flickers on the surface, but the water is very black. As von Trotta's unease with the placarded Rosa of 1968 suggests, Luxemburg's immortality is more conflicted than Piaf's. She served a revolution that failed in her own terms, especially when it succeeded in the world. In 1986, before

German reunification, the revolution that made Luxemburg iconic still survived. Yet Luxemburg had criticized the Bolshevik tactics that secured such revolutions. Dumping Luxemburg in the water, von Trotta avoids celebrating either the East German icon or the fiercely independent critic of Bolshevism, either revolution's success or its failure.<sup>2</sup> The biographical detail hints failure, but it is only biographical detail.

A rational choice for a West German filmmaker in 1986, disengaging from Luxemburg's politics does not mean an absence of political representation in the film. The film makes much of the public figure, speaker, and woman of ideas and devotes generous screen time to speeches and arguments. Such scenes display a woman acting without disinterring her more difficult ideas. Absent, dispersed by the film's structure, is the excitement of developing political passion. The film strings political scenes like isolated beads, but circles round and round the personal, developing and deepening relationships. A paradoxical consequence is that the political gains interest in subsequent viewings. At first, the political vanishes relative to the personal; later, as the personal grows familiar, the political gathers interest from its variety.

The point warrants remark only as it relates to a persistent aversion to women's intelligence and concomitant preference for emotion that turns up as frequently among certain feminists as it once did among those who barred women from universities and professions. "Male-identified" is such feminists' ultimate slur; their preference is always for Mary Wollstonecraft's life over her arguments; and they demand emotional truth from Hillary Clinton, blithely indifferent to her brains. Von Trotta does not share the aversion, but her film fosters the preference. Luxemburg specialists have appreciated the film's portrayal for the depth and fullness of its characterization, but many of its admirers love an '80s feminist idea of a womanly woman helplessly trapped in a web of man-made institutions. That is not von Trotta's argument, but, not surprisingly for 1986, it is a reading deducible from many of her artistic choices.

When the personal is the political, the political soon turns personal, too. Luxemburg is treasured as a "whole human being."<sup>3</sup> A more politicized Rosa, according to that persistent cliché, so dismissive of those one dislikes or envies, would be deformed, partial and incomplete. Like almost everyone else, Luxemburg loves and travels and feeds her cat at

the table. On view is the intellectual's equivalent of *People* magazine or *USA Today*, a celebrity at play rather than at work. So the Rosa fond of plants, corresponding with women, chatting about hats, empathizing with a beaten buffalo, encouraging other women to read, raging at a lying lover, wanting a baby, watching the sky from a prison cell, enduring solitude, is a real Rosa, and a moving one. But political Rosa, mindful Rosa, Rosa whose critique of Lenin was buried with her, is reduced to a bon mot and opposing the first world war, rather like Vanessa Redgrave in *Oh What a Lovely War!* She characterizes herself and Clara Zetkin as "the last two men of the Social Democratic Party," shrugs off women's issues as some one else's work, specifically Clara's, and stumbles into her own death. Carping aside, this stunningly made film gives us a Rosa Luxemburg very much worth meeting.

Any historical or biographical film introduces some viewers to a history of which they know nothing and so shapes their understanding of historical figures and their situation. The results can sometimes be dire. An eighteenth-century reader once confessed to Clara Reeve that she had never been able to forgive Elizabeth I for her mistreatment of the daughter of Mary Queen of Scots, even though she now knew the daughter was the novelist's invention. Wikipedia Rosa was a Polish Jew, active in the German Social Democratic Party along with Karl Kautsky and August Bebel. She admired the Russian Revolution but opposed Leninism and co-founded the Spartacists, who rose unsuccessfully in Berlin in 1918 against the Social Democratic government. With what had been her own party in power, Rosa was arrested, murdered and dumped in the river by the Freikorps officers who put down the rising. Her body was found four months later. She had not supported the rising, but had been outvoted within her new party. She and Karl Liebknecht neglected to escape the country when the rising failed, trusting implicitly in the rule of bourgeois law that had so often simply imprisoned her. She and Liebknecht were long celebrated in the GDR as the founders of the German Communist Party. Hence she found a place on the placards of 1968.

From such facts, an American must wonder what sort of movie a female director—or any director—will make of a female political icon. Americans have no models for such things. There is no Rosa Parks movie, and Rosa Parks was no Rosa Luxemburg. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth

Cady Stanton will show up on the odd PBS special, but a movie, with a popular audience in mind? Even possible subjects are thin on the ground: Margaret Sanger, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Jane Addams, Emma Goldman, Barbara Jordan, Shirley Chisholm (documentary, 2005). Who are the famous American female heroes, beyond the writers and entertainers with a tragic edge? So, in the absence of an American tradition of a) female heroes, and b) movies about them, what would the movie be, coming from a nation lucky enough to have had female political activists and to have killed them, making martyrs?

It is easy to make malevolent predictions about such a film. If this were an American movie, Rosa would be in love—and she would leave her love and get rifle-butted for her pains, teaching all would-be female activists to know their place. Since this is a German movie made by a female director, perhaps she will disdain love in favor of ideas and her passion for justice and the common people? (She doesn't.) Certainly she will be strong and righteous, with a good jaw. She will stun people with her eloquence. Some men will even listen to her. Will there be other women around, or will Rosa be the queen bee? Remember the date and the director: Rosa begins in correspondence with a woman, and ends murdered by men. The feminist issue will be raised: things must be up to date, and feminism was an issue for turn-of-the-century socialists. And there will, yes, there will, be a love interest. Oh, nothing crass, no marriage or baby or even gross flirtation, but there will be a Cary Grant to her Rosalind Russell. (There are actually Cary Grant and his younger replacement.) She will occasionally be harsh, but only because she is so strong. She will dress somewhat neutrally, asexually, but the film will manage to suggest a whiff of desire in there somehow. She will be warm and funny. She will laugh. They will all have high collars and buttoned shoes. Her hair will be in a bun, with a tendril here and there. There will be music, her ten favorite tunes maybe? (Liebknecht plays Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" for her, as a young lady plays the piano for her beau.) She will be a whole, complete, and admirable person, a model and a beacon. Her death will be elided—we will see it, but unlike Mel Gibson's Christ, we won't be treated to a drawn out struggle. The screen will go blank, black, letters will fill it. There will be lots of shots of bridges. (No, only the one that counts.) Water underneath. Will there be shots of memorials to her?

Will that be where we begin? (No) But what life can or will be given to the dialectic and the quarrels over political positions? Surely those will just vanish, as insufficiently “cinematic.” Given that the film seems so predictable, why should anyone even watch it?

The answer to the last question is easy: the brilliance of von Trotta’s filmmaking. Yet to preface art’s unpredictability, let us listen for a moment to an absent Rosa, dripping wet as she may be. In 1986, the Berlin Wall had not yet fallen; Germany was not unified; Rosa Luxemburg’s public memorials were in East Germany, not West. When the West German government put her face on a stamp in 1974, no one bought it. (The Susan B. Anthony dollar comes to mind.) Rosa Luxemburg was firmly identified with the GDR, representing a communist revolution that prevailed after WWII, under Soviet domination, thirty years after she was dumped in the river. In 1968, the company she kept was, except for Marx, with men who had led or were leading successful military uprisings—Mao, Lenin, Ho Chi Minh. Although her uprising failed, she too had been assimilated to the Marxist-Leninist pantheon. The problem with this structure of admiration (which von Trotta’s film resists in its own way) is that what makes Luxemburg important now is her critique of Leninism within her devotion to revolution.

When the film appeared, many reviewers complained of the absence of Lenin, with whom Rosa had friendly relations, whose tactics she tolerated, and whose theory she deplored. Von Trotta volunteered that she deliberately left him out to avoid “the recognition of such a major ‘film’ figure. . . portrayed in hundreds of films.”<sup>5</sup> Antonia Lant, severe on the film’s “sentimental and emotional” Luxemburg, rejected von Trotta’s explanation and complained bitterly that suppressing Lenin “severs . . . [Luxemburg’s] link with the one successful revolution of her era.”<sup>6</sup> Anna Kuhn lamented the omission but speculated, convincingly, that von Trotta omitted Lenin, and Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin, “for the sake of the East-West solidarity of the peace movement.”<sup>7</sup> Kuhn wonders if doing more with the critique of Lenin might not have provided moral support to East German dissidents, but recognizes that any such emphasis would have been contentious. She cites a 1987 demonstration in East Berlin on the anniversary of Rosa Luxemburg’s and Karl Liebknecht’s deaths, demanding the right to emigrate and an end to “repressive state controls.”<sup>8</sup>

By omitting Lenin and his eternal little beard, von Trotta unified Germany before the fact and gave us a Rosa with whose politics no one would disagree. Politically comprehensible, commercially desirable, the choice reflects that curious feminist fear of mind, its preference for the personal over the political, its failure to be as aroused by a woman's intelligence as by her sex life. Granted it is pleasant to find that Rosa's charisma enabled "an ugly duckling like me," as the subtitles put it, to acquire younger lovers with ease and to keep her faithless lover securely in her orbit. Yet one would also pay to see von Trotta engage the erotics of Luxemburg's thinking, specifically her critique of the tactics by which Bolshevism seized power for seventy years and created a model for other repressive revolutions. Far from boasting "her link with the one successful revolution of her era," Luxemburg attacked the methods that made that revolution successful: its concentration of power and suppression of democratic freedoms. Passionately committed to revolution, she occupies the incongruous, anomalous, yet seductive, position of opposing the revolutionary means that, in the name of revolution, put an end to popular revolution, controlling it, repressing it, and replacing it with the rule of a disciplined party that usurped revolution's name.

Like other revolutionary thinkers from the French Revolution on, Luxemburg appropriated the Pauline vocabulary of transformation and *parousia*: "Socialism in life demands a complete spiritual transformation in the masses. . . .Social instincts in place of egotistical ones, . . .idealism which conquers all suffering, etc., etc."<sup>9</sup> She trusted the experience of revolution itself, governed by particular historical circumstances and development, to be self-correcting and improving: "Only experience is capable of correcting and opening new ways. Only unobstructed, effervescing life falls into a thousand new forms and improvisations, brings to light creative force, itself corrects all mistaken attempts." Grounding her analysis of the Russian Revolution in earlier examples, Cromwell's mid-seventeenth century English revolution and the eighteenth-century French Revolution, she argued that revolutions follow a pattern of increasing radicalism to single party rule: "from moderate beginnings to ever-greater radicalization of aims and, parallel with that, from a coalition of classes and parties to the sole rule of the radical party." This pattern was "the basic lesson of every great revolution, the law of its being, which decrees: either the



revolution must advance at a rapid, stormy and resolute tempo, break down all barriers with an iron hand and place its goals ever farther ahead, or it is quite soon thrown backward. . . and suppressed by counter-revolution.” In the Russian context, then, she applauded Lenin and the Bolsheviks for seizing the revolutionary momentum. Some of their proceedings she found mistaken, anti-socialist in their consequences. Peasant land-seizures created small proprietors, not large-scale socialized agriculture. They also enhanced class hostilities. Self-determination for nationalities promoted nationalism, against socialist internationalism. Lenin—and Stalin—would later correct such errors, at considerable human cost.

Other aspects of Lenin-Trotsky policies went against her sense of what revolution meant, of the enthusiasm for revolution that she shared with the German and French placard-carriers of 1968. While she did not oppose dissolving the Constituent Assembly, she did object to not electing a new one, more in tune with the revolutionary movement. She rejected contempt for “the cumbersome mechanism of democratic institutions” not because she respected institutions, but because such institutions would be animated by the spontaneous, undirected energy of the people. “[T]he living fluid of the popular mood continuously flows around the representative bodies, penetrates them, guides them.” While she sneered at “some sort of abstract scheme of ‘justice,’ or . . . any other bourgeois-democratic phrases,” she defended what others mocked as “the bourgeois democratic freedoms”: suffrage, popular assemblies, freedom of the press, rights of association and assembly. While such freedoms are historically associated with the defense of private property, for Luxemburg they were essential to revolutionary socialism. Without them, “the rule of the broad mass of the people is entirely unthinkable.” “Unlimited political freedom,” “the broadest political freedom” alone guaranteed the political activity of the masses.

Political freedom was the “renovating principle” of revolution itself. Relentless, all-powerful, overpowering revolution must coexist with freedom that protected opposition to power: “Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party—however numerous they may be—is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently.”

As a result, she had a very peculiar notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat. That necessary stage between capitalism and socialism would “be the work of the *class* and not of a little leading minority in the name of the class.” The masses would participate actively, their political training growing as they overturned bourgeois economic relationships and rights. Order would emerge from spontaneous action. So von Trotta’s Rosa observes that before the revolution there were no unions in Russia: popular organization occurred within the revolution, as part of the revolutionary process. Praising Lenin, Trotsky, and Bolshevism for initiating the first socialist revolution, Luxemburg regarded their centralizing, democracy-denying moves as errors, mistakes produced by the peculiar conditions of Russia, not general principles to be followed elsewhere.

Presciently sketching the consequences of dumping the “cumbersome mechanism of democratic institutions,” Luxemburg laid out the brutal dominance of a self-protective elite, unconstrained by the power of public opinion, supported by docile, co-opted lackeys. “Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution. . . . Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule. . . . [A]n elite of the working class is invited from time to time to meetings where they are to applaud the speeches of the leaders, and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously—at bottom, then, a clique affair—a dictatorship, to be sure, not the dictatorship of the proletariat, however, but only the dictatorship of a handful of politicians. . . . [S]uch conditions must inevitably cause a brutalization of public life: attempted assassinations, shooting of hostages, etc.” As early as 1904, she foresaw in Leninist centralization a “*bureaucratic strait jacket*” ready to “*enslave a young labor movement to an intellectual elite hungry for power. . . which will immobilize the movement and turn it into an automaton manipulated by a Central Committee*” (italics in orig.).

Luxemburg had a mysterious sense of socialism as about to be. Its “realization” lay “completely hidden in the mists of the future.” The revolution was “the only healing and purifying sun,” ultimately burning off those mists. Her last recorded words, written the night she died and quoted in the film, adapt the Torah passage in which God identifies

himself to Moses, when asked his name: I AM THAT I AM, or as Robert Alter translates it, "I-Will-Be-Who-I-Will-Be" (Exodus 3.14). The last words the revolution speaks, or Luxemburg writes, belong to that sublime God, raising before Ezekiel's eyes a field of dry bones (Ezekiel 37.7) and naming himself: "the revolution will already 'raise itself with a rattle' and announce with fanfare, to your terror: I was, I am, I shall be!" Continually toppling, the gods rise again in other forms.

The curious question Luxemburg raises is what we are to make of the representative of a dead ideology who saw so clearly and with such accuracy the disastrous outcomes of a revolution she supported—all the horrors of "decree, dictatorial force of the factory overseer, draconian penalties, rule by terror." Paradoxically, her views put her at odds with the men on the placards—Mao, Lenin, and Ho Chi Minh—but at one with the spontaneous, renovative spirit of those carrying the placards, the spirit of 1968. Certainly the company was not "really suitable" for her. Given that the movements of '68 were movements of deep democracy, Rosa Luxemburg's was perhaps the only picture that really belonged aloft. Any of the other heroes, excepting the powerless Marx, would have made short work of those demonstrating under his image.

Like another thinker whose present value stems in part from the predictive power of his thought, her antithesis Edmund Burke, Luxemburg raises the question as to how we should value thinkers whose ideologies, aristocratic or revolutionary socialist, have been dumped unceremoniously and unregretted on the scrap heap of history. Empirical correctness and predictive accuracy confer prestige not only on the thinker but also on the ideological position from which she proceeds. Yet Luxemburg and Burke make the same predictions from opposite positions, suggesting ideology and acumen have nothing to do with each other. Besides, why should we value anyone for her power to predict what is already past? We know what happened, thank you; we don't need any near contemporaries predicting what is now for us ancient history. Why should anyone care that they got it right? The past is so. . . past. Yet it is curious that from their diametrically opposed ideological positions, both predicted, and deplored, the repression of the popular movement by terror and power.

They make an odd couple, Burke and Luxemburg. He would have called her a fury, another Roland unleashing her own destruction, over

whose drowned body (“headless trunk” was how he put it for Roland) her fellow revolutionaries now shed crocodile tears. She wouldn’t have troubled thinking about him at all, a petty bourgeois arriviste and original counter-revolutionary. Much of the similarity in their views derives from her using both the English and French Revolutions as historical precedent, while Burke used the English revolution as precedent within the French Revolution and shaped how both revolutions were later interpreted. She valued the spontaneity of revolution, that element he termed the combustible gases, likely to explode and make a stink. She extolled freedom; he agreed that liberty was desirable, but suggested it was wise to consider what people would do with their new liberty before politicians released them from prison or the madhouse. She exulted in the communication of enthusiasm to representative bodies by the electric presence of the people. He saw mob intimidation and hysteria, overpowering rational judgment and thoughtful political independence. Both argued for the vital importance of circumstances and experience, and against the abstractions of one-size-fits-all theory.

Her principal desideratum—that the masses control the state and the course of the revolution—he would have thought a pathetic absurdity, so foolish as to be unsatirizable, unmockable, unthinkable. One could neither reason nor argue with anyone living so manifestly in cloud-cuckoo land, so out of touch with the way the world works. His principal desideratum—the maintenance of the power of property, aristocracy, and monarchy—was everything she wanted the revolution to smash. Neither wanted to see the triumph of military rule or militarism that both predicted.

Burke saw the triumphant rule of force as the inevitable consequence of a vacuum of power, when the symbolic center has been emptied out, and the social order itself is contested, rather than sustaining. Luxemburg wanted the revolution, her “healing and purifying sun,” to become that symbolic center, but her model of permanent revolution has been embodied only in the grotesque perversions of Mao and Pol Pot. They were not what she had in mind, but she did see them coming. Would she ever have been able to theorize, as other than an accident of historical circumstances, the recurring conflict between her desire for spontaneous, populist, minimally violent revolution and Leninist control of the population, thought, and force? That recurring contest has played out again and

again, from Russia to Cuba, as popular revolutions, creative, energetic, artistic, liberating, turn over into the same dreary power grab by an inner circle of ideologues, intent on repressing artistic freedoms and the liberty of individuals. She also knew, if the left does not suppress its own revolution, the right will oblige, as in Chile, Brazil, and Guatemala.

The joys of revolution and violence are, of course, great. So in *Charlie Wilson's War* the brilliant Mike Nichols had American audiences cheering for the Taliban as they shot down Russian planes to a tune from Handel's *Messiah*: "And He shall purify." Purify they did: blowing up Buddhist statues, erasing Afghan women, and enabling the spectacular attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. When Nichols made the film, the U.S. had long since replaced the Russians as the next invader the Taliban had taken on. Nichols' irony, too severe for most reviewers to grasp, reveals American good intentions, street smarts, know-how, authority-thumbing impudence, and tactical skill, our most admirable and seductive traits, creating a situation that continues to maim and destroy us on a daily basis. Winning Charlie Wilson's war gave us 9/11/2001 and American forces blown up, routed, and dying to this very day. Now the Taliban are doing it on their own; they require no help from an external super-power (unless heroin dealers count). Yet the film prevents viewers from wanting any other results than those the film and its viewers deplore. All the right steps and inspiring motives lead straight to disaster. Luxemburg called for freedom, demanded liberation for the people from old oppression, invoked a revolutionary rhetoric of destruction and release, and provoked repressions. One destroyed her, another perverted her principles.

Still, Luxemburg's hopefulness is more endearing than Burke's masterful rightness. She promises an undefined future of indeterminate glories, and she lived as we do, in a world needing social and economic justice. Yet, as befits the maker of *Marianne and Juliane*, von Trotta does not seem convinced. She wants neither to glorify the revolutionary nor to call the revolution in question. So she skirts Rosa's politics. Rosa's relationships develop, building, deepening, and shifting as they are seen from different angles, over unspecified periods of time. Her politics pop up as diverse scraps, fragments. Politically, terrible ironies hang over the film.

The film begins nowhere—a solitary uniformed guard marches in the snow on a field, a hill, a precipice, a bridge? Moving forward, he meets another on what at last seems a parapet; they turn and reverse their steps. They are guarding a prison. The camera moves down the brick wall to find Rosa, writing a letter alone in her cell in 1916. The film's last scene parallels the opening. In the final shot, uniformed military men will also be above her, on the bridge where they throw her over, and the camera will track down again. There in 1919 the camera finds only black water, rippling with light, and the credits begin. The music lasts much longer than the credits, as if anticipating an audience sitting in silence, for a long time, suspended over that black water and its meanings.

The second scene presents a different prison, a squalid cell, crowded with women, who scramble on each others' backs to the high, barred window. They want to identify the four men being shot by firing squad in the courtyard below. Always prisons, always death threatening: this is a Czarist prison in Poland in 1906, after the Russian revolution of 1905; the first was Wronke, in Germany; the last will be Breslau, where, transferred from Wronke, Rosa will be released from "protective custody."<sup>10</sup> When she demands release, Germany having become a parliamentary democracy, freedom beckons, but the viewer knows she had better stay put. Prison is safer than she will be in the world that has finally achieved part of what she had been struggling for.

In the second of her public speeches, using a podium for the only time, Rosa channels the beautiful Jacobin at the tribune in Marseille in Jean Renoir's *La Marseillaise*. Playing her audience, she contradicts and mocks her social democratic leaders. The Parisian Jacobins later excluded women from public participation, but Rosa's socialists did not. No one could be more powerful or persuasive or amusing than she. In her last appearance near a podium, she does not speak, though Jean Jaurès, the name of so many French boulevards, concludes his own speech by offering her the floor. Rosa's last public word is silence.

After the opening letter's 1916, 1900 is the only date the film specifies, represented in flowers at a great socialist new year's party. A radiant Rosa introduces her Polish lover Leo to all the names of German socialism—August Bebel, Karl Kautsky. She rushes off to Clara Zetkin, as Natasha in *War and Peace* attends to her sister rather than to Prince

Andrei and thereby wins his heart. She refuses to dance with Edward Bernstein, a pleasant metaphor for rejecting his reformist socialism. The party is charming, and Bebel ushers in the new year, affirming that the century of hope, the nineteenth, has yielded to the century of achievement, the twentieth. Some ironies are perhaps too broad.

The film finally ironizes its own fictions. Toward the end of the film, von Trotta splices in documentary footage of trench warfare, Berlin at the end of the war, a brief image of the real Rosa Luxemburg, and the Spartacist rising. Against such images of reality's destructiveness, Rosa Luxemburg's beautifully decorated dying emerges as an elaborate cinematic allegory, a confection of resonances. Paraded from darkness to an upstairs room through a brilliantly illuminated lobby crowded with elegantly dressed men and women, scoffed at as "Red Rosa," Rosa exchanges a few words with a common soldier. The direction then reverses, down the stairs, through the crowd again, to the exit where Liebknecht has just been rifle-butted and Rosa will be. The last words von Trotta gives her, to the officer aiming at her head, are "don't shoot." The private Rosa does not want to die; the political Rosa opposes both the world war and the Spartacist rising; the anti-Leninist Rosa deplores the shooting that only worsened as the twentieth century's ideological juggernauts rolled on. "Don't shoot": Rosa Luxemburg has only to express a wish, and the opposite happens.

Von Trotta creates a Rosa imprisoned, murdered, betrayed, silenced, agonized. In 1986 she was still the icon of a socialist state, but that would not last. Within a year she had become an icon of socialist resistance to a socialist state. Every cause she touched was a lost one. The cause she refused to touch, feminism, makes a film about her. In a delicious moment, Rosa names her new party "Spartacus." Asked if there was not a single woman whose name could be invoked, she smiles, "Ask Clara, she will know; she will invent one." Von Trotta and Sukowa invent a Rosa for the 1980s; doing so, they evoke the Rosa of other times, a Rosa for other seasons. Still demanding social justice and participatory politics, that Rosa might well look forward, across the century following her death, and say, "Je ne regrette rien."

## Notes

1 Karen Jaehne and Lenny Rubenstein, *Cineaste: America's Leading Magazine on the Art and Politics of the Cinema*, 15:4 (1987): 24, 25.

2 *Milk*, another recent biopic, marks the contrast more sharply. I have not yet seen the film, but its trailers make no reference to Harvey Milk's assassination: in prospect, he lives forever, he and his cause inseparable and unambiguously celebrated.

3 From the headnote to Anna K. Kuhn's informative "A Heroine for Our Time: Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosa Luxemburg*" in *Gender and German Cinema: Feminist Interventions. Part II*, ed. Sandra Frieden, Richard W. McCormick, Vibeke R. Petersen, and Laurie Melissa Vogelsang (Providence, RI: Berg, 1993), 163. See also 169, 172, 175-76, 182.

4 Jaehne and Rubenstein, *Cineaste*, 28; Kuhn, 167n6.

5 *Cineaste*, 25.

6 Antonia Lant, "Incarcerated Space: The Repression of History in Von [sic] Trotta's *Rosa Luxemburg*," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 1:2 (1988), 112; 122, 111-12.

7 Kuhn, 181. Richard W. McCormick makes the same point, "Cinematic Form, History and Gender: Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosa Luxemburg*," *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 32: 1(1996), 38.

8 Kuhn, 183-4.

9 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism*, ed. Bertram D. Wolfe (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1961), 71. Further references to this volume in my text are without page indications.

10 Kuhn, 171-72. Lant supplies the "boggling. . .complete list" of temporal shifts in the film, 123n15.