

# German film prize goes to Margarethe von Trotta, director of *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986) and *Rosenstrasse* (2003)

**Bernd Reinhardt**  
19 August 2019

Film director Margarethe von Trotta was awarded an honorary lifetime prize at this year's German Film Awards ceremony in May. The filmmaker is best known for *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* (1975, with Volker Schlöndorff), *Marianne & Juliane* (1981), *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986), *The Promise* (1994), *Rosenstrasse* (2003) and *Hannah Arendt* (2012).

Much of the media coverage surrounding the award ceremony conveyed the impression that von Trotta's main contribution to cinema has been to present strong female characters on screen. The director, however, has never regarded herself as a "woman's filmmaker." Von Trotta's works have never been exclusively devoted to women's issues, but always dealt with the problems and conflicts of women in the context of broader social issues. The film director has said she regards the denunciations associated with #MeToo as "a kind of reverse witch-hunt: women used to be hunted down, now some men are the target."

Margarethe von Trotta is one of the most important postwar German filmmakers. Born in Berlin in 1942, she belongs to a generation—born in the shadow of fascism and the Holocaust—that made a conscious decision to oppose the social and political conditions that prevailed in the 1960s. She was part of a generation that also demonstrated against the continuing presence of former Nazis in German politics and opposed the US war in Vietnam. Like many others of her generation, she placed much of her hope in the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

Von Trotta spent her childhood and youth in Düsseldorf before becoming an actress. In Klaus Lemke's television film *Brandstifter* (1969) she plays a young woman, Anka, who sets a department store on fire as part of a political protest. The role was modelled on the Frankfurt department store fires of 1968 carried out by individuals who were later to become the Red Army Faction (RAF, better known in the US as the Baader–Meinhof Group) terrorists, such as Gudrun Ensslin and Andreas Baader. Von Trotta collaborated with other directors of the New German Cinema movement, such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Volker Schlöndorff, whom she married in 1971.

She began directing in the mid-1970s, influenced by French New Wave films, among others. A number of Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman's films were also important to her, especially *The Seventh Seal* (1957), a work that, like some of Bergman's other films, reflected doubt and pessimism regarding post-World War II conditions of life. Another important inspiration for her work was Bergman's *Sawdust and Tinsel* (1953). The film about the aging director of a travelling circus and his young mistress raises the question: can one be more than a mere victim of circumstances? Last year, von Trotta released her own cinematic homage to Bergman.

Like many of her generation, Trotta despised the hypocrisy, self-pity and repression of the past expounded by former Nazis or their apologists.

Instead, she wanted to create a new, democratic society through enlightened, and often radical criticism.

She is drawn to vibrant, resilient personalities with a sense of social justice who seek to understand and change their environment, in both the private and social sphere. A number of her films closely explore intimate relationships. A recurring theme is the conflict between sisters, as in her films *Sisters, or The Balance of Happiness* (1979), *Marianne & Juliane* (1981) and the television movie *Die Schwester* ["The Sister"] (2010).

The first film for which von Trotta is credited as co-director is *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum*, based on a story by the German author Heinrich Böll, who also worked on the script. The theme of the film is the hysterically charged atmosphere of the 1970s when Baader–Meinhof members were hunted down by the state and many intellectuals—including Böll—were denounced as "terrorist" sympathisers.

One night, Katharina Blum (Angela Winkler), a young woman, takes home a young man, Ludwig (Jürgen Prochnow), who is being watched by the authorities. When police attempt to arrest Ludwig the next morning, he has already given them the slip. Thereupon Katharina is immediately accused of being his accomplice. Entirely innocent, she is helplessly exposed to a massive media campaign of hatred and lies. In utter despair, she shoots the tabloid journalist leading the campaign. At the subsequent funeral, her desperate act is cynically condemned by the journalist's editor as an attack on freedom of the press. The film, which warned against a conspiracy of police, judiciary, big business and the press, was a great success at home and abroad. (Certain similar themes appear in Fassbinder's *Mother Küsters' Trip to Heaven*, also 1975).

The Schlöndorff–von Trotta effort demonstrated the fragility of Germany's postwar democracy and the persistence of authoritarian ideas and practice. This was true not only of the 1960s, when student leader Rudi Dutschke was shot amidst a frenetic anti-communist media campaign, but also of the so-called "social democratic" decade, which witnessed a series of attacks on democratic rights in the name of fighting terrorism.

Von Trotta's first film as sole director was *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (1978). Christa (Tina Engel) is an impulsive young woman with both a big heart and mouth, who seeks social retribution and raids a bank to save her children's daycare center from financial disaster. In the course of her flight from police, she realises that "expropriation" on a small scale cannot result in fundamental change. Being branded a criminal who risks the lives of the innocent cannot advance progressive aims. "Be patient," she writes finally on the wall of her room.

*Marianne & Juliane*

One of von Trotta's most significant films is *Marianne & Juliane*, which won the Golden Lion at the Venice film festival in 1981. The film features two very different sisters, Marianne and Juliane, and is based on the story of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist Gudrun Ensslin and her sister Christiane.

Born—like the filmmaker—during the Second World War, Marianne (Barbara Sukowa) and Juliane (Jutta Lampe) grow up in a pastor's family and experience the bigoted and conservative atmosphere of the 1950s. Their father shows a film to his young parishioners. It is the first documentary on the Holocaust to be screened in West Germany, *Night and Fog* (1956, directed by Alain Resnais).

The film strikes the sisters to the core and becomes a key experience for both of them. The Nazi crimes must never happen again. At a later point, they are both alarmed by similarly horrifying images of the US invasion of Vietnam, which is supported by the German government. Internationally, fascist movements are gaining ground, a development the sisters resolve to oppose with all their might.

Juliane consciously chooses the arduous path of politics of small steps and rejects Marianne's anarchist-based radicalism. Juliane is the stronger personality in the movie. She is more down-to-earth than her sister who has more in common with a Christian martyr. Juliane realises that the struggle for a just society requires the patience to win over the majority of the population.

Marianne, who was such a gentle child, takes up arms. Juliane becomes a journalist, joins the women's movement and fights against the existing ban on abortion. When Marianne is arrested, her sister visits her in prison. At first Marianne refuses to talk to her, but Juliane persists and recollections of their childhood bring them closer together. During the prison visits, Marianne accuses her sister of wasting her time on trivial matters. Juliane replies that Marianne romanticises revolutionary action in an arrogant manner. Nevertheless, she remains loyal to her sister and acknowledges the energy with which Marianne endeavours to resolve the problems that drove both of them into politics, even if their political methods differ entirely.

After Marianne dies in prison Juliane demonstrates with the tenacity and energy of her sister that her death could not have been a suicide, thereby going far beyond the narrow horizons of the middle class women's movement. The death of the three RAF prisoners (Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe) in Stuttgart's Stammheim Prison in October 1977 was hotly debated at the time and remains unclear until today. There are certainly indications that the leaders of the Baader-Meinhof group were in fact murdered while in Stammheim prison. It is also possible that the RAF trio did commit suicide in a desperate protest against what they alleged was a fascist state.

Journalist Christiane Ensslin, sister of Gudrun Ensslin, met von Trotta personally in 1977, at the funeral of Gudrun and other members of the RAF.

Alarmed about the development of society, but full of political prejudices against so-called "bourgeoisified" workers, many intellectuals not only sympathised with the armed struggle of national liberation movements, such as the Palestine Liberation Organization in the Middle East, but also expressed some sympathy for the actions carried out by the Red Army Faction. Von Trotta temporarily hid a suitcase belonging to someone associated with the RAF and became involved in a campaign for improved prison conditions for RAF members.

In an interview with the *Tagesspiegel* she said about this period of time: "I may have been too intent on following an ideology, instead of thinking things through to the end. Today I think I got carried away, although I do not reject everything that we believed in back then."

In common with Fassbinder, who shot the television series *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* about young workers in the early 1970s (and in three of whose films she acted early on in her career), von Trotta demonstrates a sensibility towards the plight of ordinary people. As the offspring of

immigrants (her mother was a former German Baltic noblewoman who fled Moscow), von Trotta learnt about the hardships of life as a child. She remained stateless until the mid-1960s and only received full German citizenship following her marriage to Schlöndorff.

Trotta's film *Rosa Luxemburg* emerged at a time when a broad anti-war movement was actively opposing Germany's intensified efforts at military rearmament in the 1980s. Based on actual texts, the film deals with the last 20 years in the life of the outstanding socialist and revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg was murdered together with Karl Liebknecht by mercenary soldiers in 1919 during the counterrevolution sanctioned by the Social Democratic Party-led government of the time.

The movie features key political and personal episodes from the life of the revolutionist, demonstrating her enormous courage and political determination.

In 1905 revolution breaks out in Russia. A wave of spontaneous mass strikes spreads across the country. The German SPD leadership, dominated by its conservative trade union wing, reacts defensively. Returning to Berlin from Russia in 1906, Luxemburg (outstandingly played by Sukowa) salutes the revolution. Leading figures in the SPD argue that the situation in Germany is not ripe for the type of mass actions associated with the 1905 Russian revolution. Even aging party leader August Bebel (Jan Biczycycki) declares, "You cannot compare the Russian situation with Germany."

Luxemburg recognises that the Russian Revolution is an expression of a new historical era ending the relatively peaceful period that had lasted for 40 years. The issue is not one of manipulating mass actions from above, as one of her critics claims, but rather of "consciously participating in the historical epoch." Restricting political work to trade unionism and parliamentary manoeuvres is isolating the party from its real, international workers' base, Luxemburg argues. The new development of world capitalism requires that the SPD embrace the mass movement in Russia as its own.

Shortly afterwards, at the Mannheim Party Congress in 1906, Luxemburg criticises Bebel's restraint regarding the stance of the SPD in the event of a German military assault on Russia. His contribution at the congress suggests that nothing can be done. She welcomes the stand taken by the French Socialist Party at that time, which has declared in the event of an outbreak of war, "Rather a popular uprising than war!"

Luxemburg's passionate speech at a workers' assembly in Frankfurt am Main in 1913 would be highly topical even today: "The delusion of a gradual trend towards peace has dissipated. Those who point to 40 years of peace in Europe, forget the wars that took place outside of Europe and in which Europe played a role. Those responsible for the war danger hovering over the cultural world are the classes who supported the rearmament mania at sea and on land under the pretext of securing the peace. But also sharing responsibility are the liberal parties that have given up any opposition to militarism. (...) The rulers believe they have the right to decide on such a vital question over the heads of the entire people. (...) When we are asked to raise the weapons of murder against our French and other brothers, we declare: No, we refuse!" [1]

The granting of war credits to the German government by the SPD parliamentary faction in August 1914 is a gigantic blow for Luxemburg and the entire socialist workers' movement. At a stroke it annuls the educational work patiently carried out by the party during the previous 40 years. Justifying the SPD's treachery, new party leader Hugo Haase declares on behalf of its parliamentary group, "In this new hour of need, we must not concede patriotism to the right."

Karl Liebknecht (Otto Sander) and Luxemburg found a left opposition inside the SPD, which shortly afterward adopts the name "Spartacus" (*Spartakusbund*). In a second vote, Liebknecht rejects awarding any further war credits. In August 1914 he voted in favour of credits to

maintain party factional discipline.

The barbaric experience of World War I leads to the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and political turmoil in Germany in 1918. Von Trotta's film features Liebknecht's electrifying speech in Berlin's Tiergarten. "The revolution in Germany has come! (...) We call for revolutionary readiness and the utilisation of all our energy in order to undertake the rebuilding of the world. Either we slide back into the swamp of the past or we continue the struggle until the freeing of all humanity from the curse of bondage. Long live the world revolution! Long live Spartacus!" [2]

Liebknecht fiercely criticises all those inside the SPD who denounce the minority of socialist opponents of war as traitors in 1914 and are now agitating against Spartacus. The SPD is openly defending the "swamp of the past." Shortly before the collapse of the monarchy, the SPD joins the imperial government in 1918. A few weeks later, Liebknecht and Luxemburg are victims of the counterrevolution unleashed by the new Social Democratic government headed by Friedrich Ebert.

The figure of Rosa Luxemburg remained a red rag for the West German establishment in the late 20th century. In the 1970s, a stamp with the portrait of Luxemburg triggered hysterical reactions. Von Trotta bravely challenged the anti-Communist propaganda against "bloody Rosa" and refrained from turning the ardent revolutionist into a pacifist. The director made clear that in January 1919 Luxemburg did not oppose the Spartakusbund uprising because workers had taken up arms, but rather because the movement was completely isolated. The socialist revolution advocated by Luxemburg had nothing in common with political adventurism, Stalinist bureaucratism or the "revolutionary" terror of the RAF. The revolutionary "utilisation of all our energy" for which she fought was only possible with the support of the working class, the majority of the population.

The director's respect for Luxemburg's struggle against capitalist militarism pervades the film. The speeches in the film were drawn directly from original sources and the scenes of everyday life are based on Luxemburg's letters. The latter deal with her personal relationships, and her unfulfilled yearning for children and family. At times, the film's concentration on Luxemburg's "softer" character traits appears to be somewhat overdone. The letters she wrote while in prison provide insight into Luxemburg's mental state under the harsh conditions of her detention and it would be wrong to draw more general conclusions about her character and development simply based on that phase of her life.

To its credit, von Trotta's film, in the end, does not do this. Luxemburg's great sensitivity to her immediate environment and her compassion for the weak and defenceless are driving forces for her intransigent struggle for socialism. Deeply shaken by the fact that the Second International did not prevent the world war, she briefly contemplates suicide. But then "who else will do our work," she asks Clara Zetkin (Doris Schade) in the film. At the same time, she wrote her famous "Junius pamphlet" in prison. "The Crisis of Social Democracy," its actual title, appeared in 1916, a year before a second "thunderbolt," Lenin's own analysis of the imperialist epoch.

The response to von Trotta's *Rosa Luxemburg* in 1986 was in no small part due to its continuing political relevance—and threat. German society had begun to shift after the collapse of the student movement of 1968; a new layer of socially critical young people began to make their presence felt. The year 1969 was marked by a series of strikes by workers. The government of the time passed emergency laws in response, and the SPD reacted with increasing hostility to this leftist development. In 1972 the government led by SPD leader Willy Brandt passed a Radical Decree, banning leftists from employment in the public sector.

Under the pretext of combating sympathisers of the RAF, Brandt's successor as SPD Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, provided the police with new powers. For the first time technology was used for mass surveillance.

As noted above, artists and writers such as Heinrich Böll were vilified in the press as the intellectual mentors of "red terror." When mass protests took place against the deployment of US medium-range nuclear missiles in West Germany, Schmidt and the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) lined up demonstratively behind the German army (Bundeswehr).

Germany's leading weekly at the time, *Der Spiegel*, lashed out at von Trotta's film because it pointed to the links between the counterrevolutionary soldiers who murdered Luxemburg and Liebknecht, and the SPD. Margarethe von Trotta and Christiane Ensslin, who jointly published a book on the film, printed part of a 1962 interview with Captain Waldemar Pabst (also in *Der Spiegel!*), who ordered the executions in January 1919. In the interview, Pabst made clear that the murders of Liebknecht and Luxemburg would not have taken place without a green light from the SPD government. The SPD continues until today to defend the murder of Liebknecht and Luxemburg.

Margarethe von Trotta remained associated with the SPD for years, but this did not prevent her from criticising both the role of former Nazis, their rise to political office in postwar German society and the SPD's political lurch to the right in the 1970s. In a television documentary screened last year, she denounced the thoroughly right-wing tradition of German "democracy." The use of violence to achieve political ends, which characterised German politics, she said, was aimed primarily at left-wing critics, and commenced with the murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

In von Trotta's films, the German state apparatus never appears in its favoured role as a paternal, caring "father state," but always as a dangerous power base, ready and willing to collaborate with right-wing dictatorships to ensure the maintenance of law and order. At the start of her movie *The Promise* (1994), about a couple who were separated for 40 years during the Cold War, the point is made that the barbed wire for the construction of the Berlin Wall was supplied by companies from the West.

The film *Rosa Luxemburg* makes the case that genuine democracy is only made possible by people like Rosa. It must be based on the independent mass movement of the working-class population politically enlightened by an international socialist movement. Accused by a prosecutor of being a public enemy, Luxemburg defends herself in one scene by stating that only the people, not the government, can decide on the question of war or peace: "No war against our will."

Von Trotta also pays tribute to the powerful resolve of ordinary people in her film *Rosenstrasse* (2003), which deals with the struggle of courageous women to obtain the release of their husbands who had been arrested by the Nazis during World War II.

*Rosa Luxemburg* is undoubtedly von Trotta's most important film. Luxemburg's life and writings confirm that humanity is not predestined to remain trapped in time or at its present stage of social development. This is an issue von Trotta has followed ever since her first film. Knowledge and science are the preconditions for progress. Von Trotta remains fascinated by enlightened, courageous personalities. Her films, with whatever limitations, are always serious engagements with history and the social process.

[1] Speech by Rosa Luxemburg in Frankfurt, 1913, in *Rosa Luxemburg—Das Buch zum Film von Margarethe von Trotta und Christiane Ensslin*, Greno Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 1986, 59

[2] Speech by Karl Liebknecht in Tiergarten, Berlin, Winter 1918, *ibid* 93



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**