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Memory and Responsibility: An Interview with Margarethe von Trotta on Rosenstrasse

Abstract

Rosenstrasse was Germany's official entry for Best Foreign Film consideration for 2003. This interview was conducted September 11, 2003 at the Toronto International Film Festival.

Introduction

Margarethe von Trotta, born in Berlin in 1942, is one of Germany's premiere filmmakers. In addition to directing, her film career has included acting roles in films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Volker Schlöndorff, with whom she co-directed her first feature film, *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, in 1975. Her 1981 film *Marianne and Julianne* won the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival. Other significant films include *Sisters*, or the *Balance of Happiness* (1979), *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986), *The Long Silence* (1993), and *The Promise* (1994). Von Trotta's work is known for its insightful treatment of family relationships and for its uncompromising political complexity.

Rosenstrasse finds its inspiration in a little known event that took place in Nazi Germany in 1943. Hundreds of determined German women protested the arrest and threatened deportation of their Jewish husbands and fathers by the SS and, astoundingly, eventually managed to secure their release. Up until the winter of 1943, most of these so-called "protected" Jews had avoided deportation. However, during the "final roundup" many were taken to a detention centre on the Rosenstrasse, a street in Berlin. Over the course of a two-week protest, their wives and children risked their own lives demanding their release.

Director von Trotta uses a flashback structure to tell this multi-layered story, starting in present-day New York City and travelling to Berlin, past and present. As the film opens, New Yorker Ruth Weinstein (Jutta Lampe) is sitting shiva, having just buried her husband. Ruth's daughter Hanna watches as her mother enacts some Jewish traditions she had never previously observed. The arrival of a distant cousin provokes the perplexed Hanna to try to uncover her mother's past, long kept a dark family secret. More difficult still is Ruth's disapproval of Hanna's upcoming marriage to South American Luis (Fedja van Huêt). Hanna travels to Berlin to interview 90-year old Lena Fischer (Doris Schade), her mother's adoptive mother and learn the truth about her suffering under Nazi rule. As a young woman, Lena had come across the little girl called Ruth on the Rosenstrasse where she along with many other wives had gathered to demonstrate against the deportation of their husbands, who were imprisoned there at the Jewish Welfare Office.

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Marty Fairbairn (MF):

You open the film with a single headstone, a father's or a mother's and then you pull back to reveal more and more headstones, row on row. It occurred

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to me that not just people are buried there but stories are buried there. In the larger context of the whole film, what does it mean to you to 'witness?'

Margarette von Trotta (MvT):

Let us speak about these stones. My procedure was first to show father and husband because in the film father and husband are dead in the present. And then to go to this enormous cemetery and it's like from one story comes the whole story of the Holocaust and with it remembering all the victims, all the dead. And then when I go to the town, the skyline is like the gravestones; it's the same architecture. There we go from the largest to the smallest; we go up to the windows of the building, we see only a facade, then we go into the apartment and there is this one woman lighting the candle of memory. For me, this is like the ghosts of the dead going into the town.

Then it starts on the candle. In the Jewish ritual sitting Shiva, you have to keep a candle burning for one year, lighting another one when the first one is just about done and so on. Three or four times in the film we see candles burning. But its significance grows later on. In the beginning, it's for Ruth's husband; but then she puts it out always for another person.

MF:

Yes; it's more than just a linking device. It made me curious about what you would consider to be our 'debt to the dead', as some have called it, notably Emmanuel Levinas.

MvT:

You asked me about witnessing, about testimony. I tried to describe two different ways of remembering. Ruth tried to repress her memory because it was too painful for her to bring to mind. It was just unbearable because when you lose as a child two mothers, first her own Jewish mother and then her saviour mother, the one who rescues her from Rosenstrasse. You have to repress these painful memories just to go on living. Just as so many Jewish survivors had to repress their past just to go living. But then when her husband dies, her memories come flooding back to her. She is so vulnerable to her unconscious memories by the wound of her present grief which comes to her like a shock, the first images that come over her like a flash - boom. She doesn't want to remember but she can't help it. But her surrogate mother, Lena, remembers with an open mind, with joy because she enjoyed a small victory at the time, even if it was only a small ray of light in all this darkness. But she did something and she got her husband back, so for her she lives with her memories. And she saved the little girl [Ruth] as well, so she immediately accepts that Hannah is coming to visit

her, she speaks with her, but Hannah's pleas to her mother to tell her about her experiences fall on deaf ears.

MF:

The covering of the mirror was an interesting image on a couple of different levels. Obviously, as a part of the Jewish ritual but also as a metaphor for denial. It only becomes clear later as the film unfolds what the significance of the covering of the mirror really is. It seems you're suggesting that Ruth is refusing to look at herself. Was that a conscious choice on your part and also, is it an actual part of the ritual?

MvT:

Yes, absolutely, it is a part of the Jewish ritual. You have to cover all reflective surfaces, not only mirrors themselves but also television screens that reflect the room. So, we see her doing this and just for a moment, she looks at herself, but she is so full of pain that she immediately covers the mirror. It's as if she doesn't want to look at herself exposed, so it's the ritual but the real significance is that [Ruth's refusal to look at herself] for me. And when she goes to cover the mirror, the first shot is directly into her face. She takes a dark veil and covers her face with it, but it's only when

the camera jumps to the other side that we understand what she is doing, covering the mirror. Then as she covers the mirror, we only see her shadow.

MF:

That leads me to ask you about guilt and redemption. It seems to me that the dynamic between guilt and redemption is central to your work. For example, in *Rosenstrasse*, you seem to imply at one point that husbands who divorced Jewish wives were not particularly blameworthy but rather just weak. Is that your view?

MvT:

No. I would blame them very strongly. No, that's the voice of Lena. First, she said there were husbands doing this terrible thing, putting their wives at the mercy of the Gestapo by divorcing them. But this is not my opinion. Remember, Lena is an old woman by this time.

MF:

Denial is interesting both psychologically and culturally and I think you're suggesting both here. Why is it that the effort to forget remains so strong? Is it simple denial or does it have a darker side? This is particularly apt perhaps on September 11th. Granted that suppression of traumatic

memory is unhealthy but so is getting 'stuck' in the past. For example, Maria in *Sisters*, or the *Balance of Happiness* (1979) desperately trying to recreate Anna using a surrogate. Do you believe that a culture can become unhealthy if it suppresses painful memories, particularly I am thinking of Germany.

MvT:

You have to defer in order to make a difference because suppression of memory is the same in a sense for both the victims and the murderers. They both had to repress in order to survive. I read a lot about the psychological phenomenon of memory repression, particularly a book by an Israeli psychoanalyst who dealt with the children of survivors. Often, these children are given the names of all the dead people without knowing that they have them because the parents don't speak about it. And they feel that they are living candles. They speak of themselves as memory candles, living memory candles. This psychoanalyst treated a whole group of people who suffered from the repression of memory of their parents. Indeed, those who thought about it every day, those who couldn't forget, died. So, to survive they had to forget, or repress. That, I understand and I don't blame them.

But for the German people to have repressed with a certain zeal, almost, our economic miracle of the nineteen fifties, for example, that was based on this mass repression of guilt. So, we had to be very active. If you're very active, then you can forget much easier. So, that was our generation's rebellion, the so called '68 generation. That was the reproach of our generation to our parents' generation. There's a very famous book in Germany by another psychoanalyst, Alexander Mitscherlich called the *Inability to Mourn* [Alexander Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: principles of collective behaviour* (New York: Grove Press, 1975)], where he describes the German peoples' inability to mourn for what they had done because that would be recognizing the guilt. And you can only overcome your guilt when you mourn deeply for what you have done. It's only when you go deep into your regret that you are able to overcome it, perhaps.

MF:

I see, so there's a sense in which the mourning never happened; it was put off, deferred.

MvT:

Yes.

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MF:

I'd like to ask a question about how the central conflict in the film is resolved. Which part is fact and which fiction? It seems in the film as if resolution happens as a result of an intervention by the aristocratic family directly with Goebbels.

MvT:

No. That was a total fabrication. However, they tried get to him through his interest in women and he had the power. She attracts his attention with her beauty, then leads him to a conversation with someone about the situation on the Rosenstrasse. But this doesn't work because Goebbels is more interested in her than he is in the situation that concerns her. So, they both fail to make headway. Later when she is taking off her red dress, she cries because she humiliated herself for nothing. It was not because she went to bed with him. But Goebbels heard about this woman; it was in his diary. It became something of a scandal and he didn't want a scandal. There were even Nazi party officials' wives there on the street. But he says in his diary that once the scandal settles down, he will get them all back, one by one. So, he was not willing to free them for good. Besides, by then the war had turned against them, the bombing of Berlin had become

heavy and there were fewer police interested in finding Jews so that people could hide for longer periods of time. And then also Stalingrad happened just before the protests at Rosenstrasse began, which was the first major defeat of the German army. People were not so convinced after that that Germany was going to win the war. So, therefore you couldn't just shoot innocent women. They had to be a little bit more careful with public opinion.

MF:

This brings me to the next point I would like to raise. You mention in your interview that appears with the press kit that at the time of Hitler's rise to power in Germany, you say that women surrendered to him like a bridegroom, just like religious women in the middle ages who worshipped Jesus as their bridegroom. You suggest that it was largely the women's vote that brought Hitler to power. This struck me as ironic; the very thing that brought Hitler to power was now turned against him in the streets of Berlin. What you call the age old German virtue of loyalty, particularly of a woman for her husband, was now turned right against Hitler's will.

This brings me to the question of idolatry. One of the great unanswered questions is just how a thing like this could happen. It seems

that one of the keys may lie here. You can't have idolatry without a willing handing over of power. To the extent that you're willing to give it, they will take it. Not a very positive view of the human soul, perhaps, but it's probably true. This seems to strike right at the heart of how he was able to consolidate his power. Indeed, he cultivated this image. For example, Lini Reifenstahl's famous shot from *Triumph of the Will* that has Hitler's plane descending from the heavens.

MvT:

Absolutely, this was why he kept his relationship with Eva Braun secret and didn't marry her until near the end. But they had a relationship from the beginning that she had to hide because he wanted to be the man for every woman. If someone is married, it doesn't work.

MF:

There's something fundamentally unhealthy about that level of idolatry and I wonder if you think so too.

MvT:

Well, at these times, many of the most powerful men's reputations was based on idolatry. Before it was the Kaiser; until 1918 there was still a

Kaiser. But there was still this image of the Emperor. But afterwards there was a very short time of democracy, which was quite dysfunctional. And then Hitler came and was regarded as the new Kaiser in a way. However, today it could not function the way it did then because now we have had 50 years of democracy already in our country. I don't think it's as easy today for one man to come along and make a whole country bow down before him.

MF:

People still talk about a flaw or taint in the German character that caused this kind of absolute reign and all the abuses and so forth but I get the sense from reading your remarks that you think that it's more of a flaw in the human character, like a genetic predisposition towards elevating a normal human being to God-like status and what follows from that is disaster.

MvT:

Yes, but I think that since Hitler nobody has managed it. We don't go to war. We still have the trauma in us. But now we are blamed because we don't want to go to war [in Iraq]. I see that very positively. The Americans blamed us because we didn't want to go to Iraq with President

Bush. We had widespread demonstrations in our country, so Schroeder said no, we don't want to go and that sentiment came out of our past.

MF:

Yes, we got blamed for the same thing. Canadians were tarred with the same brush because we didn't want to go either.

MvT:

Yes, but we have this trauma which you do not have. You just have a reasonable mind.

MF:

Cultural memory seems important, then. And one of the things that you mentioned to Wil Aitken when you were here in 1987 was that you didn't believe at that time that a film could change the world much less just a culture. I'm wondering if you've changed your mind about that because this seems like a film that tries to redress a wrong, or better fill in gap in the historical record. And that seems to be a cultural enterprise, rewriting history, if you like.

MvT:

Yes, it is a cultural enterprise. But I'm still not convinced that the world is changeable through culture. We really had a great culture in our country and nevertheless it happened, so culture is not able to prevent disaster or to save people from it. So, how could I think that my films could change something?

MF:

Yes, indeed, the whole history of philosophy would be impoverished were it not for Germany; Hegel, Kant, Husserl, Heidegger.

MvT:

Yes, in fact Heidegger was very much attracted to Hitler in the beginning, as you know. He was seduced as well.

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