

THROUGH ROSA-COLORED GLASSES: ROSA LUXEMBURG AS A FEMINIST
ICON

By

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To My Parents

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This thesis addresses the legacy of the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, whose controversial life and politics have generated interest among Germans since her 1919 murder. Luxemburg's body itself has become a cultural artifact, a battleground on which German identities have repeatedly been contested. One of the most heated battles has been fought over Luxemburg's role as a feminist icon. Because of her assumed "lack of participation" in the women's movements of her own time, Luxemburg was often marginalized by women's history. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that second-wave feminists began to argue that Luxemburg was indeed a feminist icon, not because of her activist role within the women's movement, but because of the example she set in her everyday life. American artist May Stevens and German filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta, with whom this thesis is concerned, are two such feminists.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a sister ... she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. ... [then] the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners ... she will be born.¹

– Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

In 1970 French playwright-in-exile Armand Gatti's "Rosa Collective" was staged in Kassel, Germany.² The free-form theatrical production is set in a television studio and enacts a debate about the legacy of the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. Its participants include: those accused of orchestrating her murder, two *Spartakists* who knew Rosa when she was alive, a group of student activists who want to continue Rosa's struggle, and a group of citizens from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) who consider themselves to be Rosa's "heirs." The revolutionary herself, however, never makes an appearance. The debate's presenter concludes that there can be no single representation of Rosa Luxemburg, since "there are as many possible Rosas as there are people in this studio."³

An East European Jewish revolutionary who immigrated to Germany in 1898, Rosa Luxemburg's acts were and continue to be controversial: her critique of Eduard Bernstein's "Evolutionary Socialism," her enthusiastic support for the 1905 revolution in Russia, her fiery denunciation of the "Great War," her organization of mass strikes

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York, 1929), pp. 124-5.

² Armand Gatti, *Rosa Kollektiv* (Frankfurt am Main, 1974). For more information on Gatti's production, see: Dorothy Knowles, "Facets of Rosa Luxemburg: A Dramatic Character?" in *Armand Gatti in the Theatre: Wild Duck Against the Wind* (London, 1989): 173-88.

³ Knowles, "Facets of Rosa Luxemburg," p. 187.

against factory owners throughout Germany, and her public break with the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) during the November Revolution. Her death was equally (if not more) controversial. The drama surrounding her murder continued to draw the German public's interest. The disappearance of her corpse in the months that followed led to wild speculation regarding its whereabouts (including the theory that Rosa had survived and was in hiding). Moreover, although those responsible for her death attempted to cover it up, their "official" story – that Luxemburg had been killed by a hostile mob – quickly unraveled. The controversy intensified when *Die Rote Fahne* ("The Red Flag") published a story blaming the murder on military units. A widely publicized trial followed, during which a damning photo of the *Freikorps* celebrating in Eden Hotel the night after Luxemburg's murder surfaced. Because of the cover-up and controversy surrounding the crime, no single theory has been accepted regarding the murders.

Rosa Luxemburg's ghost has haunted German cultural history since her 1919 death. Not unlike Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, a figure struck by silence in the wake of historical wreckage, representations of Rosa Luxemburg have been inevitably shaped by teleological visions of the past.⁴ The failed revolution of 1918 was the first of many politically charged dominoes to fall in twentieth-century Germany. With each crisis, the myth of Rosa Luxemburg grew larger and more distorted, her body itself becoming a *lieu de mémoire*.⁵ Her unmistakably Jewish body drew attention to the anti-Semitism that was characteristic of the *Freikorps*, a right-wing paramilitary group that

⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Reflections and Writings*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 2007), p. 257.

⁵ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

would later form the core of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party).⁶ And as a revolutionary, her broken body lived on as a symbol of the division of the German Left, which provided the shaky foundations of Weimar democracy.

According to historian Pierre Nora, *lieux de mémoire* are characterized not only by the attempt to remember, but also by their "capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning."⁷ As myth, Rosa Luxemburg has continually enabled German socialists, communists, and leftists to create a new world from each new situation in twentieth century Germany. The debates over how to best commemorate Luxemburg reveal the degree to which her body has served as a site of contestation. The decision by the SPD Post Minister in 1973 to depict her as one of several famous women on a series of postage stamps, for example, caused such a ruckus within the media and the Bundestag that the Federal Post Office was forced to withdraw it.⁸ Equally contentious were proposals for a monument to mark the location of her and Karl Liebknecht's murders, which were rejected by the Berlin Senate in 1968; their legacy still not deemed suitable for official public memory.⁹ It was not until 1986 that the construction of two memorials was approved, following long and heated debates in the

⁶ Her murder at the hands of the *Freikorps* represented, for many Germans, a sign of the violence to come. In retrospect, however, the fact that the order was given by the earliest Weimar officials serves as a reminder that political violence in Germany occurred long before Hitler's rise to power. On the *Freikorps*, see: Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (Volume I), trans. Stephen Conaway (Minneapolis, 1987).

⁷ Nora, "Between Memory and History," p. 10.

⁸ For more on the story of this uproar, see: Frederik Hetmann, *Rosa L. Die Geschichte der Rosa Luxemburg und ihrer Zeit* (Weinheim, 1976): 9-16.

⁹ Anna Saunders, "The Luxemburg Legacy: Concretizing the Remembrance of a Controversial Heroine?" *German History* 29 (2011): 36-56.

Berlin House of Representatives over the symbolic place of Luxemburg in the contemporary world.

And interest in Rosa Luxemburg has not waned since the fall of communism. The PDS established the *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung* in 1996, which offers monetary grants to persons conducting research on the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg, and Rosa Luxemburg conferences are held annually across Europe. The party continues to organize the annual commemoration celebration, which has remained a place of political protest. In 2000, for example, the march had to be cancelled after a right-wing extremist threatened to shoot bullets into the crowd of participants.¹⁰ The year before that, the most boisterous groups to remember Luxemburg were the Turkish Kurds, who praised the revolutionary as a symbol of their own struggle against oppression by the non-Kurdish Turks.

A Revolutionary Woman

Like other revolutionary women, Rosa Luxemburg was both shaped and confined by the tradition of female revolutionary involvement imposed by her culture. The “historical myths of woman” that Simone de Beauvoir described in *The Second Sex* – mother, sexual vamp, demon, and chaste Virgin – have all been employed to represent Luxemburg.¹¹ Yet she is also somewhat of an anomaly. In contrast to the many women who have had to be rescued from history’s dustbin, she has always held a unique place in the history of European socialism, hailed as the “only woman ever to achieve greatness in politics.” Because of her success, Luxemburg was traditionally portrayed

¹⁰ “Threat Halts Berlin Communist Rally,” *Associated Press*, January 8, 2000.

¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, 1993), pp. 150-1.

as the ruthless politico, motivated by “calculated self-interest.” In the years after her death, the focus shifted to her personal life in an attempt to humanize her. As Hannah Arendt wrote of the revolutionary’s legacy in 1966, this only gave rise to another legend: the sentimentalized image of a more feminine Rosa Luxemburg who loved babies and flowers and wanted a family of her own. Although this effectively killed the propaganda image of the bloodthirsty “Red Rosa,” Arendt explained:

There survived the old cliché of the “quarrelsome female,” a “romantic” who was neither “realistic” nor scientific ... and whose works, especially her great book on imperialism ... were shrugged off ... Her new admirers had no more in common with her than her detractors.¹²

Although Rosa Luxemburg may have been unique by western European standards, it is often forgotten that she hailed from a political culture in which women’s equality in revolutionary action was firmly established. Russian women participated in every part of the nineteenth century radical movements, for example, even taking positions of leadership. This tradition offered Luxemburg both role models as well as the acceptance among men that was the foundation for her early leadership in Polish Social Democracy. That the west has often had difficulty locating Luxemburg within the history of socialism can be explained, in part, by this cultural difference.

Rosa Luxemburg was marginalized not just by history, but by *herstory* as well, criticized for her “lack of participation” in the women’s movements.¹³ It wasn’t until the 1970s and 1980s that an effort was made, particularly by second-wave feminists, to re-

¹² Hannah Arendt, “Rosa Luxemburg: 1871-1919,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York, 1968): 33-56.

¹³ Other than a few short references, for example, Luxemburg is not mentioned in Richard Evans’ *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894-1933* (London, 1976), Jean H. Quataert’s *Reluctant Feminists in German Social Democracy, 1885-1917* (Princeton, 1979), or Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert’s *Socialist Women: European Socialist Feminism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 1978).

evaluate her political treatises.¹⁴ They argued that Luxemburg was a feminist, not because of her activist role within the women's movement, but because of the example she set in her everyday life. May Stevens and Margarethe von Trotta, with whom this thesis is concerned, are two such feminists.

Conversations That Could Only Take Place In Art

Rosa Luxemburg first captured the imaginations of German filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta and American artist May Stevens in the context of the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Stevens became active in the feminist art movement after reading Linda Nochlin's article "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," which argued that it was the structure of a male-dominated society that had kept women artists from functioning at their fullest creative capacity.¹⁵ Deeply committed to social change, she became a founding member of the first cooperative gallery in Soho (*Artists in Residence*) in 1971 and in 1976 joined a group of twenty other women artists to publish *Heresies: A Feminist Publication of Art and Politics*. Margarethe von Trotta similarly participated in the women's film seminars of the early 1970s – which sought to provide "facts and analyses about discrimination against, and oppression of, women in various social spheres" – and joined the "Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen" ("Association of Women Working in the Cinema"), of which she is still a member.¹⁶ Although the two women did not know one

¹⁴ Raya Dunayevskaya, Leon Trotsky's former secretary was one of the first to propose the connection between Rosa Luxemburg and feminism: Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (Chicago, 1981).

¹⁵ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Art and Sexual Politics*, ed. Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker (New York, 1971): p. 6.

¹⁶ Renate Hehr, *Margarethe von Trotta: Filmmaking as Liberation* (Stuttgart, 2000), p. 17.

another personally, there was some interaction between their circles in 1983, when an article about the West German feminist film journal *Frauen und Film* (“Women and Film”) appeared in the sixteenth issue of *Heresies*.¹⁷

The artists’ dialogues with Rosa Luxemburg’s legacy are conversations that, as an art critic once noted about May Stevens artwork, “could only take place in art.”¹⁸ Among the first women in their respective professions, Stevens and von Trotta were compelled to uncover the historical roots of their traditions and identify their “foremothers,” which at times meant imagining them. In this sense, their paintings/films become documents of a revisionist history, one that features women in the center and not just at the margins. Art also presented an opportunity to resolve particularly difficult relationships. Both Stevens and von Trotta were deeply concerned about the growing divisions within the women’s movement and used the opportunity to imagine a most unlikely conversation with Rosa Luxemburg in order to highlight the issues that united all factions: the way that women had been historically silenced, how they had silenced themselves, and how they were able to find their own voices. The almost unanimous rejection of Rosa Luxemburg as a role model by German feminists (in contrast to her easy acceptance by among American feminists) further illustrates the necessity of the conversation taking place “in art.” As feminist and Marxist critic Frigga Haug has since explained, the complete absence of women from the public sphere meant that even the idea of political role models for women was something unimaginable.¹⁹ Although largely

¹⁷ Miriam Hansen, “*Frauen und Film* and Feminist Film Culture in West Germany,” *Heresies* 16 (1983): 30-31.

¹⁸ Ken Shulman, “A Crusader who lets her Heroes be Human,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1999.

¹⁹ Frigga Haug, *Beyond Female Masochism: Memory-Work and Politics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London, 1992), pp. 219-24.

critical, the tremendous response to von Trotta's film signaled an important step for German feminists. The fiery debate about Luxemburg's role in the movement forced them to recognize the invisibility of women role models as a cultural absence (and worse, as an active exclusion).

Finally, the artists' imagined conversations with Rosa Luxemburg provided a way to understand their own personal struggles. According to the model suggested by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, Stevens and von Trotta found in Luxemburg a vehicle for self-expression and self-discovery.²⁰ Many German women writers of the postwar period have attempted to resurrect Rosa Luxemburg in this way. Anne Duden's *Opening of the Mouth* and Christa Wolf's *In the Flesh*, for example, are autobiographically-based accounts of violent attacks, in which the protagonists' battered bodies are compared to the bloated corpse of Luxemburg.²¹ In both cases, the protagonist's death is also the author's rebirth, signified by a shift to first person narration. And this interest extends beyond German literature and even German culture at-large. In American artist Donna Blue Lachman's one-woman show "The Language of Birds: Rosa Luxemburg and Me," Lachman portrays both the revolutionary and an artist.²² The struggling artist, a semi-autobiographical character, wanders into a garden and finds one of Luxemburg's prison letters buried in the soil. As she begins to read she is transported to a small prison cell as Luxemburg. Living the revolutionary's experience

²⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. For more on the feminine muse, see: Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, femininity, and the aesthetic* (Manchester, 1992).

²¹ Anne Duden, *Opening of the Mouth*, trans. Della Couling (London, 1985); Christa Wolf, *In the Flesh*, trans. John S. Barrett (Boston, 2005). Leslie A. Adelson's *Making Bodies, Making History: Feminism & German Identity* provides some background on the significance of bodies to German history, in particular (Lincoln, 1993).

²² Lawrence Brommer, "Political Heroine: A Complex Play That's More Memoire Than Drama ...," *Chicago Tribune*, November 25, 1993.

allows the artist to heal herself of insecurity and self-doubt, at which point she returns to her own time and body.

This thesis's focus on just two individual interpretations of Rosa Luxemburg's legacy is admittedly episodic, but the enormity of the subject demands it. An analysis of Luxemburg's legacy could have been framed in a number of ways. One of the more obvious strategies would have been to examine the ways in which her legacy has been mobilized by various German regimes to create legitimacy. There have been several recent studies addressing the use of her legacy by German leftist groups in the evolution of German socialism and by the SED in the development of an "East German identity," among them Barbara Könczöl's work on the commemoration of Rosa Luxemburg as a socialist martyr.²³ The few attempts to approach Rosa Luxemburg's "official" (state-sponsored) legacy from a comparative perspective – namely, the interest in her role as a "cultural mediator" between East and West Germany in the 1960s and 1970s – have suggested the ways a history of her legacy could prove particularly useful to understanding the road to German reunification.²⁴ Another (related) strategy would

²³ Barbara Könczöl, *Märtyrer des Sozialismus: Die SED und das Gedenken an Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht* (Frankfurt, 2008). On Rosa Luxemburg's reception in Weimar, see: Werner Bramke and Klaus Kinner, "Die Lenin-Lienknecht-Luxemburg-Kampagne der KPD in den Jahren der Weimarer Republik," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 22 (1980): 204-15; Sara Ann Sewell, "Mourning Comrades: Communist Funerary Rituals in Cologne during the Weimar Republic," *German Studies Review* 32 (2009): 527-48; Klaus Kinner, "Die Luxemburg-Rezeption in KPD und Komintern," in *Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes*, ed. Klaus Kinner and Helmut Seidel (Berlin, 2009): 305-17. On Rosa Luxemburg's importance in the GDR, see: Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR: Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR 1945-1989* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992). Also, see: Barbara Könczöl, "Dem Karl Liebknecht haben wir's geschworen, der Rosa Luxemburg reichen wir die Hand,' Der Wandel des 15. Januar als politischer Gedenktag von KPD und SED (1920 bis 1989)," in *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung 2005*, ed. H. Weber, et al. (Berlin, 2005): 171-88.

²⁴ Several East German dissidents' accounts in Dirk Philipsen's *We Were the People: Voices from East Germany's Revolutionary Autumn of 1989* mention reading Luxemburg as part of their own political evolution (Durham, 1993). Giselher Schmidt, *Rosa Luxemburg. Sozialisten zwischen Ost und West* (Göttingen, 1988).

have been to consider the many ways that German citizens challenged the “official” commemoration of Rosa Luxemburg as a means of criticizing authority. This happened most frequently in the GDR, where cultural spheres became important sites of social protest. An analysis of Rosa Luxemburg’s significance within East German theater, in particular, could be useful in this way.

One could also address Rosa Luxemburg’s intellectual legacy: her contributions to economics and political theory.²⁵ Many scholars have pointed to the renewed relevancy of Rosa Luxemburg’s thought in the wake of economic crisis and the “new wars” of the twenty-first century.²⁶ *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg* will make available in English all of her work for the first time: books, pamphlets, essays, articles, letters and manuscripts, many of which have never before been translated from the German, Polish or Russian in which she regularly wrote.²⁷

The circumstances of Luxemburg’s murder and the trial of those responsible have inspired both academic studies as well as artistic commentaries over the years, most recently by German historian Klaus Gietinger.²⁸ A new approach might have been

²⁵ There have been many studies published regarding Luxemburg’s political legacy. See: Paul Le Blanc, *Rosa Luxemburg: Reflections and Writings* (Amherst, NY, 1999); Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (London, 1983).

²⁶ Paul Le Blanc, “The Challenge of Revolutionary Democracy in the Life and Thought of Rosa Luxemburg,” *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society* 9 (September 2006): 361-7; Estrella Trincado, “The Current Relevance of Rosa Luxemburg’s Thought,” *Socialist Studies* 6 (Fall 2010): 141-59. Luxemburg is also increasingly popular with globalization critics: Roberto Veneziani, “Global Capitalism and Imperialism Theory,” *Review of Political Economy* 21 (April 2009): 195-211; R. Bellofiore, “Like a candle burning at both ends: Rosa Luxemburg and the critique of political economy,” *Research in Political Economy* 21 (2004): 279-98; R. Bellofiore, *Rosa Luxemburg and the Critique of Political Economy* (London, 2009); Paul Le Blanc, “Rosa Luxemburg and the Global Violence of Capitalism,” *Socialist Studies* 6 (Fall 2010): 160-72.

²⁷ Only the first volume, *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, has been published so far: Rosa Luxemburg, *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Annelies Laschitzka et al., trans. George Shriver (London 2011).

²⁸ Klaus Gietinger, *Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal: Die Ermordung Rosa Luxemburgs* (Hamburg, 2008). Also see: Elisabeth Hannover-Drück, “Der Mord,” in *Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Kristine von Soden (Berlin,

to consider the legacy of her murder for other women on the left. The suspicious death of West German terrorist Ulrike Meinhof, for example, was frequently compared to Rosa Luxemburg's in the years that followed.²⁹ More recently, Sahra Wagenknecht, Vice-President of the German Left Party, has been compared to Luxemburg. The German press regularly describes her as "Rosa's dopplegänger," and have even taken to calling her "Red Sahra" (after "Red Rosa").³⁰

A study of Luxemburg's legacy, therefore, could easily span the entirety of the twentieth century in multiple countries in the areas of politics, history, art, economics, and so on. The narrow focus of this study, in contrast, has allowed me to conduct close readings that illuminate these women's lives. And because their interest in Rosa Luxemburg – like Lachman's – began by stumbling upon the revolutionary's prison letters, it allowed me to (where possible) include Rosa's voice as well.

The publication of Luxemburg's letters themselves played an important role in the debate over her legacy. The original *Briefe an Freunde* was published in 1920 and was comprised of twenty-two letters and postcards written to Luxemburg's friend Sophie Liebknecht between the years 1916 and 1918. The work has since become legendary

1995): 128-37; Elisabeth Hannover-Drück and Heinrich Hannover, *Der Mord an Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht. Dokumentation eines politischen Verbrechens* (Frankfurt am Main, 1967). For an account of Luxemburg's assassination that takes her gender into consideration, see: Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius, "Terror in Germany 1918-19: Visual Commentaries on Rosa Luxemburg's Assassination," in *Women and Death 2: Warlike Women in the German Literary and Cultural Imagination since 1500*, ed. Sarah Colvin and Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly (Rochester, NY, 2009): 127-66.

²⁹ Of course, the Red Army Faction intentionally courted these associations. On the comparison between Ulrike Meinhof and Rosa Luxemburg, see: Sarah Colvin, "Witch, Amazon, or Joan of Arc?" in *Women and Death 2: Warlike Women in the German Literary and Cultural Imagination since 1500*, ed. Sarah Colvin and Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly (Rochester, NY, 2009): 250-72.

³⁰ Mariam Lau, "Die Neo-Liberale," *Die Zeit*, October 20, 2011. Wagenknecht has also received press for her love affair with Left politician Oskar Lafontaine. The two are being called the "strongest power couple of the left since Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht." For example, see: Felix Müller, "Sahra und Oskar auf den Spuren von Karl und Rosa," *Die Welt*, November 19, 2011.

and has been expanded and republished countless times, including during the 1960s and 1970s, when von Trotta and Stevens first encountered them. Luxemburg was a prolific writer. She wrote several letters a day in four different languages, and about a wide range of topics, from her political views to her interest in German classical music. For this reason, her letters carry serious autobiographical weight, still the greatest source of information on Luxemburg's life.

As many of Rosa Luxemburg's biographers have noted, the revolutionary took on many different personae in her prison correspondence, depending on the addressee.³¹ In her letters to Sophie Liebknecht (wife of Luxemburg's political partner, Karl Liebknecht) she often played the role of mentor and confidante. As Liebknecht explains in the introduction to one edition of these letters:

[T]he story of that portion of my life's path which I walked jointly with Rosa— I should almost say hand in hand with her - ... meant the fulfillment in a certain degree of the terms of a legacy and the squaring of an old account of gratitude. For my whole being, yes, the whole content of my life has been immensely enriched by my connection and friendship with Rosa Luxemburg.³²

Liebknecht describes feeling as though she were acting on Rosa's behalf by publishing the letters, writing: "the more I became engrossed in the content of the letters, the more life-like did the figure of my deceased friend rise before me."³³ The tone of these letters undoubtedly had a significant impact on the women who read them. Stevens and von Trotta describe themselves "in conversation" with Rosa Luxemburg in a similar way, and

³¹ Elżbieta Ettinger, *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life* (Boston, 1986), p. 199.

³² Rosa Luxemburg, *Briefe aus dem Gefängnis* (Berlin, 1920), pp. 2-3.

³³ Luxemburg, *Briefe aus dem Gefängnis*, p. 3.

ultimately reproduce these conversations in their work with *direct quotations from Luxemburg's letters*.

Both artists' engagements with Rosa Luxemburg were well-received, advanced their careers, and ultimately created new opportunities for other women in their fields as well. Although Luxemburg continues to make appearances in May Stevens' work, Margarethe von Trotta has since moved on to address the lives of many other female figures, most recently Hannah Arendt. Both women also inspired interest in Rosa Luxemburg among their own circles. May Stevens' friend, American poet Jane Cooper, for example, wrote *Threads from Prison*, an epic poem based on Luxemburg's prison letters.³⁴ And Austrian writer Ingeborg Kaiser cites von Trotta's film on Rosa Luxemburg as the inspiration for her *Rosa and the Wolves: Biographical Investigation into the Case of Rosa Luxemburg*.³⁵

³⁴ Jane Cooper, *Threads from Prison*. Also see May Stevens' discussion of the poem: May Stevens, "May Stevens on Jane Cooper on Rosa Luxemburg," in *Voices of Women: 3 critics on 3 poets on 3 heroines*, ed. Cynthia Navaretta (New York, 1980): 37-40.

³⁵ Ingeborg Kaiser, *Rosa and the Wolves: Biographical Investigation into the Case of Rosa Luxemburg*, trans. Patricia H. Stanley (New York, 2008).

CHAPTER 2
MARGARETHE VON TROTТА'S *DIE GEDULD DER ROSA LUXEMBURG*

In 1968 during the student upheaval, Rosa Luxemburg was carried as a poster through the demonstrations in Germany, the only woman among Ho Chi Minh, Mao Tse Tsung, 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.³⁶

-Margarethe von Trotta

In June of 1982 Rainer Werner Fassbinder, prodigy of the New German Cinema, died from a lethal combination of sleeping pills and cocaine. The notes for his new project, a film titled *Rosa L.*, were found next to his body. The screenplay landed in the hands of Margarethe von Trotta, an up-and-coming filmmaker who had initially encouraged Fassbinder's project. Von Trotta had been interested in making a film about the revolutionary for years, but had always considered it too overwhelming to attempt a portrait of "such a woman." She accepted the project but refused to use Fassbinder's screenplay, complaining that omitted the "dimension of her life as a woman" and used none of Luxemburg's writing.³⁷ After spending several months researching the revolutionary at the Institute for Marxism-Leninism in East Germany, von Trotta decided to base her new screenplay on the 2500 letters of Luxemburg's personal correspondence:

I read the letters five times without making notes and decided that the things I remembered would be the things that mattered. And from the letters, which were often very personal and very warm, I found the person who was not only a political person. Of course I had to invent the scenes that show the Rosa I discovered.³⁸

³⁶ Regina Janes, "Feminism and Fear of Mind: Margarethe von Trotta's Rosa Luxemburg," *Salmagundi* 164-165 (2009), p. 225.

³⁷ Amy Taubin, "Von Trotta, Wanting it All," *The Voice*, May 12, 1987, p. 78.

³⁸ Qtd in Judy Stone, "Rosa Luxemburg – Revolutionary Legend Inspires Film Maker," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 24, 1987.

It is not difficult to see how the Rosa she found, who “wanted all that a woman can experience,” resonated with von Trotta. She had struggled to juggle love and career in her own life. When von Trotta first saw Luxemburg’s portrait in 1968 she was an aspiring actress, a new mother, and a woman just beginning to become interested in politics under the influence of her first husband, journalist Jürgen Moeller. Von Trotta’s description of the portrait as “lonely,” “very subtle and fine and intelligent and rather sad” perhaps revealed more about her own presence at the protest than it did Luxemburg’s. She had just accepted her first movie role, but the success was bittersweet. Although Moeller had always been supportive of her work in the theatre, he disapproved of her transition to cinema (primarily because he did not share her passion for it). With her opportunities in theatre limited, von Trotta began to view her marriage as a serious threat to her creative development. She divorced Moeller not long after, a decision she viewed as an act of emancipation.

Von Trotta would have also related to Rosa Luxemburg’s struggle to find success in a career dominated by men. Although her ultimate goal had always been to direct, there was still no place in German cinema for a woman director. As von Trotta explains, “It was beyond my reach, really, as a woman then.”³⁹ She first came into contact with the Munich film group later referred to as the New German Cinema when Volker Schlöndorff cast her to play opposite Fassbinder in the film *Baal*. She began to work regularly with the group but particularly with Schlöndorff, whom she married in 1971. Their close collaboration allowed von Trotta to gain experience, not only as an actress, but as a scriptwriter, assistant director, and eventually co-director. During their work on *Der*

³⁹ Anna K. Kuhn, “A Heroine for Our Time: Margarethe von Trotta’s Rosa Luxemburg,” in *Gender and German Cinema: German Film History/German History as Film*, ed. Sandra Frieden et al. (Providence, 1993), p. 176.

verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum (The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum), artistic tensions developed between the married couple. As von Trotta has explained, “I would like to have done another kind of film, focusing more on the woman but I couldn’t force Volker.”⁴⁰ After ten years of apprenticeship, von Trotta cut professional ties with Schlöndorff to embark on a filmmaking career of her own.

Rosa Luxemburg’s personal correspondence is incorporated into von Trotta’s film in several ways. As demonstrated by the film’s opening sequence, the revolutionary’s epistolary voice is frequently identified as such. In these instances, shots of Barbara Sukowa (as Rosa Luxemburg) writing are accompanied by a voiceover, in which the actress recites excerpts from the letters verbatim. More often, however, von Trotta dramatizes the content of the letters, extracting quotations from Luxemburg and imagining the response of the addressee. In these instances, von Trotta focuses on re-creating the emotion – rather than the documentary facts – of the letters. The result is an intimate portrait of Luxemburg that is often true to the subject even when it strays from the historical record.⁴¹ Together, the voiceovers and dramatizations permit Margarethe von Trotta to construct Rosa’s life in a way that her previous biographers have not. J.P. Netti’s two-volume *Rosa Luxemburg* (still considered the definitive biography), for example, claims to be a comprehensive account, but is limited by its sources.⁴² Without much of Luxemburg’s correspondence, Netti is often forced to rely on the revolutionary’s relationships with her male comrades to catch glimpses of her “private” life. Because von Trotta’s film presents Rosa Luxemburg in her own words, in contrast, the revolutionary is basically alone – in prison, in her apartment, etc. – for the majority of the film. Moreover,

⁴⁰ Qtd, in “Transcending the Genres,” *New German Filmmakers*, ed. K. Phillips (New York, 1984), p. 285.

⁴¹ For more on the use of Luxemburg’s letters in the film, see: Kuhn, “A Heroine for Our Time.”

⁴² J.P. Netti, *Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996).

as biographer, Netti himself stood in the way of this view of Luxemburg. His interpretations of Luxemburg's personality – beautifully written but overly confident – leave the reader with the illusion of having “mastered” Luxemburg. Von Trotta, who belongs more to the “we-can-imagine-young-Rosa” school of biographers, creates a Rosa that the audience can converse with.⁴³ She resuscitates her.

Refocusing History

Almost any film about Rosa Luxemburg released in 1986 would have been controversial. Her legacy had been mobilized on both sides of the Berlin Wall in provocative ways. Luxemburg was more firmly identified with the GDR, where her public memorials were located and her memory was appropriated (or often, misappropriated) to help legitimize party-rule. Her reception was more varied in the FRG. The West German government was reminded of how controversial she still was in 1974, when the attempts to issue a Rosa Luxemburg commemorative stamp met with widespread resistance.⁴⁴ She was unpopular in her native Poland because of her position against nationalist politics, and even more so in the Soviet Union because of her criticism of the Communist Party dictatorship.⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, then, *Rosa Luxemburg* opened to mixed reviews.

East German audiences generally applauded von Trotta's hagiographic portrait of Rosa Luxemburg, which resonated with their own interpretations of the revolutionary as a heroic martyr.⁴⁶ West German audiences, on the other hand, were largely critical of von Trotta's film. The fact that West German cinema had been anxiously anticipating the

⁴³ Elżbieta Ettinger's treatment of Rosa Luxemburg is similar: *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life* (Boston, 1986).

⁴⁴ Manfred Sharrer, “Ein Denkmal für Rosa Luxemburg,” *Die Tageszeitung*, March 25, 1987.

⁴⁵ In fact, von Trotta initially wanted to cast a Polish actress in the title role, but she refused to play a “communist.”

⁴⁶ Irene Dölling, Klaus Kändler, et al., “Für und Wider,” Reviews of *Rosa Luxemburg*, *Weimarer Beiträge* 33 (1987): 632-48.

film's completion throughout its four years of production helps to explain the disappointment when it failed to meet expectations. Fiery debate erupted over the historical accuracy of *Rosa Luxemburg* almost immediately after its release.⁴⁷ In interviews, von Trotta repeatedly defended herself against these allegations, asserting:

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 had to bring in a few personalities from the chapter titles of history. But only where they affected Rosa's private life.⁴⁸

Most cited a number of troubling omissions, including the mention of Luxemburg's Jewishness and the figure of Lenin himself. Writing for *Die Welt*, Peter Boris argued that a film entitled "Rosa Luxemburg" without any qualifiers had a responsibility to stick to historical truths.⁴⁹ And although the narrative contained re-enactments of some historical events, critics noted that they were only included to contextualize Luxemburg's letters. Ironically, American historians were the only reviewers who did not take issue with the film's historical exactness. In the *American Historical Review*, for example, Geoff Eley found von Trotta's use of artistic license appropriate, noting that the portrayal of actual events was "remarkably faithful to the record" when it mattered.⁵⁰ Many, including Eley, praised von Trotta's portrayal of the SPD. In this case, as Eley suggested, the factual

⁴⁷ Hellmuth Kasarek, "In kitschigem Rosa," *Der Spiegel*, 1986, 255; Cora Stephen, "Der widerspenstigen Zähmung," *Der Spiegel*, 1986, 245-55; Gertrud Koch, "Die Internationale tanzt," *Konkret*, 1986, 72-6; Siegfried Schober, "Margarethe von Trotta's düster-feministische *Rosa Luxemburg*. Jenseits von Rosa," Review of *Rosa Luxemburg*, *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), April 18, 1986; Alice Schwarzer, "Margarethes Rosa," Review of *Rosa Luxemburg*, *Emma* (1986): 14.

⁴⁸ Karen Jaehne and Lenny Rubinstein, "A Great Woman Theory of History: An Interview with Margarethe von Trotta," *Cineaste* (1987): 25; Also see "Margarethe von Trotta: Making Films," *Salmagundi* (2009/2010); 'The Personal and the Political: Interview with Margarethe von Trotta,' in *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*, eds. Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis, and Valerie Raoul, 78-84 (New York: Routledge, 2003); Judy Stone, "'Rosa Luxemburg' – Revolutionary Legend Inspires Film Maker – Margarethe von Trotta's drama on 'the first Jewish victim of Nazis'," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 24, 1987.

⁴⁹ Peter Boris, "Der arme Büffel und der Klassenfeind," *Die Welt*, April 15, 1986.

⁵⁰ Geoff Eley, Review of *Rosa Luxemburg*, *American Historical Review* 94 (1989): 1039-41.

details were less important than the film's ability to communicate the culture, ethics, and spirit of the German socialist movement.

As many reviewers noted, the film's interpretation of Rosa Luxemburg's life was refracted through Margarethe von Trotta's experience in the student movements of 1968. Luxemburg became a cult figure to left-wing West German student radicals in the 1960s, who viewed themselves as the revolutionary's political heirs. The renewed interest in Rosa Luxemburg emerged out of a public scandal involving one of her assassins, Waldemar Papst. In a 1962 interview in *Der Spiegel*, Papst announced that he was responsible for the capture of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in January 1919. Although he continually denied responsibility for their murders, he insinuated otherwise on several occasions. After further persistence by his interviewers, an infuriated Papst finally blurted out that they had to be killed and "everyone in Germany knew why."⁵¹ The scandal had some unforeseen consequences. Communists and other leftists had long argued that high-ranking SPD officials had ordered the murders. With Papst's confession (he was not an SPD member), some of the animosity toward the party faded, preparing the way for the party's new emergence in West German politics.

The left invoked Rosa Luxemburg's memory again several years later to criticize the SPD for what was considered a betrayal of its own character and mission. The 1966 Great Coalition aligned the SPD with the Christian Democrats (CDU) and elected Kurt Kiesinger (a former Nazi) as Chancellor, demonstrating for some the moral bankruptcy of the Federal Republic's only leftist party.⁵² These suspicions seemed to be confirmed in

⁵¹ *Der Spiegel* 6, no. 16 (April 18, 1962).

⁵² Kuhn, "A Heroine for Our Times," p. 168.

1968, when the SPD's support enabled the passage of the Emergency Acts.⁵³ Although it quickly became a cliché that "Bonn is not Weimar," many continued to warn that West Germany's newfound stability could still prove to be as deceptive as Weimar's had been.⁵⁴

It was Luxemburg's pacifist politics that had resonance in the 1980s, as the peace movements began to gather momentum and divided Germany approached the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II. As historian Geoff Eley has noted, war is the film's predominant theme, and the First World War the "central destructive experience of Luxemburg's life."⁵⁵ The narrative is constructed around Luxemburg's imprisonment for anti-war activities and the plot propelled by the devastating effects of the war on her personal life (her lover dies in battle) and her political career (driving the divisions that will eventually cripple the German Left). The film also emphasizes Luxemburg's pacifism, incorporating many of the revolutionary's speeches attacking militarism and nationalism, and offering the revolutionary as the penultimate example of socialist utopia.

As von Trotta has explained, she intended to find the Rosa that existed between the lines of history, between the clichés of the monstrous "Red Rosa" and Rosa, the martyr: "my task was to show her much more as a person than someone in a historical

⁵³ The Emergency Acts (*Notstandgesetze*) added clauses to ensure that the government could act in crises such as natural disasters, uprisings, or war. It faced opposition because of its similarity to Article 48, the provision of the Weimar Constitution that had ultimately enabled Hitler to assume power legally.

⁵⁴ In her last article "Order Reigns in Berlin," published in *Die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag) after the brutal suppression of the Spartacist uprising in January 1919, Luxemburg took issue with the bourgeois presses' reiteration of the government's statement that order had been reestablished. The famous concluding paragraph, which von Trotta incorporated into her film, reads: "'Order Reigns in Berlin!' You stupid lackeys! Your 'order' is build on sand. The revolution will 'raise itself up again clashing,' and to your horror it will proclaim to the sound of trumpets: I was, I am, I shall be. Rosa Luxemburg." *Selected Political Writings*, ed. Dick Howard (New York, 1971), p. 415.

⁵⁵ Eley, *Rosa Luxemburg*.

analysis.”⁵⁶ Part of this project for von Trotta involves revealing the very process of myth making itself. For example, viewers witness the evolution of the “Red Rosa” myth, most notably in a scene depicting Luxemburg’s trial for anti-war activities, during which the prosecutor reminds the jury that, “it isn’t for nothing that she is called ‘Red Rosa’,” and that she would be punished for her past transgressions as well as “a very hostile state of mind.”⁵⁷ Von Trotta also accomplishes this by re-creating historic moments, such as Luxemburg’s appearance at a 1914 party rally in Frankfurt. Film critic Anna Kuhn has observed that the scene – in which the revolutionary appears center stage flanked by images of Marx and Lasalle – reflects the reception of Luxemburg by the ‘68ers as a representative of authentic socialism in Germany.⁵⁸ However, by recreating the scene as depicted in the actual historical photograph of the rally, von Trotta also draws attention to the very act of interpretation.

If the re-creation of historic scenes calls attention to the film as a cinematic construction, von Trotta’s frequent use of documentary footage unapologetically flaunts it. In several instances, documentary footage is used in order to connect an imprisoned Luxemburg to events outside the prison’s walls. After Luxemburg receives word that Kostja Zetkin has died in the war, for example, short, chaotic clips of fighting in the trenches and of women grieving for their sons and husbands is inserted amongst shots of Luxemburg crying in her cell. Here, the footage is used to suggest a connection between Luxemburg and the suffering of other German women.⁵⁹ Other instances involve the

⁵⁶ Stone, “Rosa Luxemburg – Revolutionary Legend.”

⁵⁷ von Trotta and Ensslin, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 60.

⁵⁸ Kuhn, “A Heroine for our Time,” p. 173.

⁵⁹ This is similar to the film’s juxtaposition of Luxemburg and the suffering buffalo. Just as the voiceover suggests that Luxemburg cries the buffalo’s tears in empathy, the juxtaposition of cinematic and

crosscutting of documentary footage and fictional diegesis over a longer period of time. In a sequence depicting the beginning of the revolution, for example, documentary footage of street fighting is interpolated into shots re-creating Karl Liebknecht's famous speech in Berlin's Tiergarten. In another sequence depicting the suppression of the revolution, documentary footage of the *Freikorps* clashing with workers in the streets is interspersed with shots Luxemburg and Liebknecht in hiding. Both sequences establish a strong relationship between the historical and fictional discourses. However, while Liebknecht's speech seems to be "leading" the street mobs in the first sequence, it is clear in the second that the revolution's leaders are on the run.

Scholars have offered several explanations for von Trotta's use of documentary footage. Anna Kuhn has suggested that the historical footage is meant to distance viewers, therefore enhancing their identification with the film's protagonist.⁶⁰ Antonia Lant has argued that the footage of street fighting serves as von Trotta's evidence that the violent Germany capable of Nazi atrocities was born *after* Luxemburg's time.⁶¹ Finally, Joan Dagle has argued that the juxtaposition of the two is used to maintain a tension between the discourses of history and cinema (since the documentary footage looks more "real" and the cinematic re-constructions more "fictional" when they are placed side by side), suggesting that "contradiction and incompleteness [are] the necessary outcomes of cinematic and historical inquiry."⁶²

documentary footage in this scene suggests that Luxemburg grieves, not only for Kostja, but for all of the war's victims.

⁶⁰ Kuhn, "A Heroine for Our Time," p. 179n.

⁶¹ Lant, "Incarcerated Spaces," p. 116.

⁶² Dagle, "Cinema/History/Feminism," p. 32.

The film had a significant impact on the reassessment of Rosa Luxemburg in both East and West Germany. In West Germany, the film unquestionably contributed to a new interest in honoring “Red Rosa” with an official monument. In the final years of the GDR, access to previously-censored aspects of Luxemburg’s private life motivated East German citizens to challenge the state-sanctioned view of her.

Woman With A Movie Camera

Two years after the release of *Rosa Luxemburg*, the American film critic Barbara Quart applauded Margarethe von Trotta for her “woman-centered” approach, which she defined as “women looked at with intensity and love by the woman behind the camera, by one another on the screen, and by women like oneself in the audience.”⁶³ From behind the camera, von Trotta used Luxemburg’s personal letters to convey the revolutionary’s psychological and emotional experiences, recover her female relationships, and reveal the personal roots of her political thought.

In a 1983 interview von Trotta described the differences between films made by men and those made by women, most important of which was the refusal to separate the private and political spheres or public and personal life. According to von Trotta, this was “a virtue and it is precisely this virtue which might lead to a new aesthetics.”⁶⁴ Her *Rosa Luxemburg* features a protagonist who continually struggles against and challenges these dichotomies. In Luxemburg’s love life, it is her comrade and lover Leo Jogiches who demands that she choose between being a “mother or revolutionary.” Although Rosa refuses to sacrifice one for the other, it seems as though Leo makes the choice for her

⁶³ Barbara Koenig Quart, *Women Directors: The Emergence of a New Cinema* (New York, 1988), p. 93.

⁶⁴ H.B. Moeller, “West German Women’s Cinema: The case of Margarethe von Trotta,” *Film Criticism* XI. 1-2 (1987): 111-26. (qtd on p. 113).

anyway, explaining, “Your duty is to bring ideas into the world Rosa, not children.”⁶⁵ It was an easy decision for Jogiches. As expressed at length in Luxemburg’s letters and accurately reflected in von Trotta’s film, his entire life was preoccupied with revolution, placing it before all else, including Luxemburg. As a result, Jogiches is unable to see her as little more than his “student”: he is politically supportive (and remained so until the end of their lives) but unaware of (or simply unconcerned with) her needs as his female lover. He regularly rejects Luxemburg’s flirtatious advances, dismissing her pleas for attention as female hysteria, and denouncing her dream to one day build a “normal” domestic life as a selfish distraction from the serious demands of the political struggle. On one occasion, for example, Luxemburg asks him to carry her in his arms around through the apartment, to which Jogiches answers, “you are too heavy, Rosa.”⁶⁶

Von Trotta’s Rosa breaks up with Jogiches after learning that he has had an affair with one of their Polish comrades. He explains to Rosa that his affair couldn’t possibly compare to his relationship with her, which is “something completely different.” Rosa asks, “Because we also work together? ... You only know how to love through your work.”⁶⁷ She realizes that she will never find personal happiness with Jogiches and kicks him out of the apartment. He returns several scenes later and reads Rosa excerpts from her letters, hoping to remind her of her feelings for him. She finally stands up for herself, and instead reprimands him for years of emotional abuse: “Do you remember what you wrote back? Pages of reports on the work of the party ...When did we actually live? We only ever really talked about it.”⁶⁸ Luxemburg stands her ground and the two remain

⁶⁵ Von Trotta and Ensslin, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 38.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

estranged for the rest of the film, which is continually emphasized by her switch to the formal “Sie” with Jogiches.

Luxemburg faced even greater discrimination in her political career. As Elżbieta Ettinger has explained, “if there were many accomplished women in the German metropolis, they were not members of the Social Democratic Party.”⁶⁹ It was Luxemburg’s policy to ignore any sign of male chauvinism, as she had learned to do with the underlying anti-Semitism of the Party. She never made an issue of it, even when her bitter polemic against Karl Kautsky unleashed a wave of virulent male chauvinism that permeated the entire party, involving even August Bebel (whose *Women and Socialism* became one of the foundational texts of the socialist women’s movement).⁷⁰ In one scene depicting a luncheon at the Kautskys, the conversation illustrates the constant attempts of male SPD members to relegate Luxemburg to women’s issues. Throughout the meal, Luxemburg defends her position on the mass strike against Bebel, Kautsky, and Auer. Clara interjects to bring up the issue of women’s suffrage. Luxemburg politely reminds her that this not at all related to the discussion at hand, but Bebel explains, “Clara is absolutely right. I have always told you to take care of more women’s issues. Such an intelligent and argumentative woman should devote herself to her sex.”⁷¹ Her increasingly troubled relationship with the party mimics her relationship with Jogiches. A parallel emerges between Rosa’s inability to assert herself in her relationship with Jogiches and an incident at the International Congress (in Brussels). Just as she realizes that she will

⁶⁹ Ettinger, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 76.

⁷⁰ August Bebel, *Women under Socialism*, trans. Daniel de Leon (New York, 1904). It is somewhat shocking that this fact did not change the interpretation of Bebel’s *Women and Socialism*, which went through many editions in the years that followed. Luxemburg’s politics, on the other hand, continued to be questioned.

⁷¹ Von Trotta and Ensslin, *Rosa Luxemburg*, pp. 50-1.

not find personal happiness with Jogiches, she realizes that, despite all of her efforts, there is nothing she can do to stop the coming of war. As the overpowering voice of French socialist Jen Jaurès commands the screen, Luxemburg is unable to speak. Relating the incident to Leo and Mathilde Jacob in the following scene, Luxemburg explains, “War is going to come. The majority of the socialists will march along. I know it. Was I supposed to pretend to believe in the future?”⁷²

Although von Trotta focuses on Luxemburg’s personal life, the film does not diminish the revolutionary’s political role. In accordance with the feminist maxim “the personal is political,” von Trotta demonstrates that Luxemburg’s private life is just as politically important as her public life. Most of her conversations with personal friends address political issues. Moreover, her personal conversations with her male comrades have political consequences. In a 1906 party speech, for example, Luxemburg’s comments about August Bebel refer back to a conversation from a dinner at the Kautskys (in the previous scene). Finally, seemingly personal interactions often themselves cleverly hint at political meaning. For example, during the New Years’ Eve ball, Rosa turns down an offer to dance with Eduard Bernstein, her political opponent at the time.

Many of von Trotta’s critics argued that the film trivialized the revolutionary’s genuine interest in the natural world to accentuate the contrast between her personal and political life. Indeed, the safety Luxemburg feels while bird watching, tending to her prison garden, and playing with her cat Mimi is contrasted in the film with the unpredictable world of politics. But von Trotta’s intent is to reveal how Luxemburg’s respect for nature complements – not contradicts – her politics: “I wanted to show that this woman had a human morality in politics, and she had it not only in public but in her private life. There

⁷² Ibid., p. 66.

was no split between what she was saying and what she was doing.”⁷³ In one voiceover, for example, Luxemburg expresses empathy for a pair of buffalo pulling a wagon through the prison:

Tears were running down my face – they were his [the buffalo’s] tears. I quivered in my impotence at his silent suffering ... Oh my poor buffalo, my poor beloved brother, we are both standing here so silently and are joined only in pain, in impotence, in longing.⁷⁴

The wagon, as Luxemburg explains in her letter, carried old military uniforms that were to be mended by the female inmates. This connection between the plight of the buffalo and the inevitable involvement of the female inmates in the war (as seamstresses) suggests the psychological basis of Luxemburg’s activism: her ability to empathize with the suffering of others drives her commitment to improving their situation.

Whether maintained by writing letters or conversing in person, Luxemburg’s female relationships served several important functions. First, they offer Luxemburg a space to question and define her own identity. Her friendship with Luise Kautsky (the wife of her frequent rival, the reformist Karl Kautsky), for example, allows her to consider the needs that are unmet by her political role as a socialist revolutionary, namely her femininity and her desire to be a wife and mother. In her letters to Sonja Liebknecht, whose husband was frequently also imprisoned, Luxemburg reflects on the contradictions between her inner self and the cause to which she had dedicated her life:

I feel so much more at home even in a scrap of garden like the one here, and still more in the meadows when the grass is humming with bees than – at one of our party congresses ... You know that I really hope to die at my post, in a street fight or in prison. But my innermost personality belongs more to my tomtits than to the comrades.⁷⁵

⁷³ Stone, “Rosa Luxemburg – Revolutionary Legend.”

⁷⁴ Von Trotta and Ensslin, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 85.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Her friendships also provided an emotional outlet in times of stress. She seeks support from many of her female friends throughout the film, turning to Luise Kautsky to vent about her disagreements with Luise's husband, to Sonja Liebknecht when she begins to lose spirit in prison, and to Clara Zetkin about her relationship with Clara's son, Kostja.

Although many critics have complained that these female relationships appeared superficial and were primarily personal, the film actually offers many examples of women's solidarity in the political sphere. The importance of this solidarity is revealed in one scene in particular, in which von Trotta expresses the tension between the men and women visually. Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin arrive late to a luncheon at the Kautskys, explaining that they were lost and had stumbled upon military artillery practice. The men joke that they could have been killed and begin to compose suitable eulogies for the women, only to be upstaged by Luxemburg who suggests: "Why not simply – here lie the last two men of German social democracy?"⁷⁶ The juxtaposition of two shots reveal that, while the women clearly appreciate Luxemburg's joke, the men are offended by the assault to their masculinity. As the luncheon continues, the leading male members of the SDP begin to criticize Luxemburg for her position on the mass strike. Bebel encourages Luxemburg to pay more attention to women's issues, arguing that, "such an intelligent and argumentative woman should devote herself to her sex."⁷⁷ Zetkin interjects to stand up for Luxemburg, joking "and leave the great politics to the men?"⁷⁸ Luise Kautsky also jumps in, defending Luxemburg's stance against aligning herself solely with the suffragists. The women express their loyalty to Rosa on other occasions as well.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 50-1.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Luxemburg is also often a mentor to women in the film, suggesting suitable reading for Luise Kautsky and Elisabeth, a female prison guard whom she befriends.

Although the German women's movement did not rally around Rosa Luxemburg as von Trotta had hoped, the project of "reviving Rosa" ultimately cemented the filmmaker's own circle of women peers. Many had worked with von Trotta previously, but signed on to assist with *Rosa Luxemburg* because of their own personal interests in the historical figure. Margit Czenki, the real-life Christa Klages (one of von Trotta's earlier films), had a small part in *Marianne and Juliane* and was hired as an assistant director for *Rosa Luxemburg*. Christiane Ensslin, the real-life Juliane, volunteered to co-author *Rosa Luxemburg. Das Buch zum Film*, which suggests parallels between Ensslin's sister, West German terrorist Gudrun Ensslin, and Rosa Luxemburg. Interestingly, actress Barbara Sukowa, with whom von Trotta has continued to work with regularly, played both characters (Gudrun Ensslin and Rosa Luxemburg). It is often suggested that von Trotta's films offer such moving portraits of controversial women because of the filmmaker's personal mentorship of the actresses (of course, drawing on her own experience). As Barbara Sukowa has explained, "with von Trotta ... I work closely; she teaches me about films. With Fassbinder, I was just an actress."⁷⁹

Requiem For Rosa Luxemburg

In retrieving Rosa Luxemburg from the Landwehr Canal, Margarethe von Trotta confirms her personal commitment to carry on the revolutionary's message. Although initially the filmmaker was concerned about creating a character that did justice to "such a woman," she soon grew nervous about her own role in re-creating the revolutionary's death. According to von Trotta, Rosa Luxemburg's ghost haunted her throughout the

⁷⁹ Scott, "Pacifist Inspires."

film's production; figuratively, of course, but literally as well, since Sukowa's Rosa becomes paler and less "present" as she grows to accept her own impending death. The quick pace leading up to the revolutionary's murder leads viewers to a similar feeling of relief and acceptance once the deed is done. In the days before shooting the death scene, von Trotta also grew increasingly apprehensive about "[killing] her a second time," explaining: "Of course, it was a puppet that was thrown in the water, but nevertheless, in reality it was her. The reality plunged right inside of you, the fact that she really was killed this way."⁸⁰ This sense of foreboding can be felt from the first flashbacks of the film, an interrogation and mock execution that foreshadow Luxemburg's own 1919 interrogation and murder. In these moments, as film scholar Antonia Lant has explained, von Trotta's hand-held camera emerges as a parallel to Luxemburg's leg disability: "as the shot lurches along the prison boundary and later down a prison corridor, it replicates the limp of Sukowa's Rosa-walk."⁸¹

Margarethe von Trotta's cinematic eulogy comes to an abrupt end as her protagonist is bludgeoned with the butt of a rifle, shoved into the back of a car, shot, driven to the Lichtenstein Bridge in Berlin's Tiergarten. The camera follows Luxemburg's body as it is unceremoniously tossed over the side, dropping down to the surface of the Landwehr Canal to watch the ripples slowly disappear from the silent, dark water.

⁸⁰ Von Trotta and Ensslin, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 109.

⁸¹ Lant, "Incarcerated Space," p. 113.

CHAPTER 3
MAY STEVENS' ORDINARY/EXTRAORDINARY

Simone de Beauvoir said no woman ever thought she could change the world. Rosa Luxemburg knew we could and did."¹

- May Stevens

In 1976, May Stevens joined with a group of women artists and critics to publish *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*.² For the first issue, Stevens contributed a two-page spread of black-and-white collages that featured the lives of the revolutionary leader, Rosa Luxemburg, and the artist's own mother, Alice Stevens. The first, *Tribute to Rosa Luxemburg*, pieced together photographs and texts from the revolutionary's biography and letters to highlight her political thought, imprisonment, and subsequent murder. The second, *Two Women*, juxtaposed the lives of Rosa and Alice in parallel triptychs of photographs representing the women at age twelve, at maturity, and at death (or dying).³ These collages marked the beginning of May Stevens' series *Ordinary/Extraordinary*, which explores the complex relationships between the artist, Rosa, and Alice.

Stevens was first introduced to Rosa Luxemburg's writing in the 1970s by friends Lucy Lippard and Alan Wallach. She began to read everything she could about the revolutionary, including J.P. Nettl's biography and any other biography she could find. She became even more enamored with Rosa after reading her letters. As Stevens

¹ Qtd in May Stevens, "Ordinary. Extraordinary.," in *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers and Artists Write about Their Work on Women*, ed. Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo, Sara Ruddick (Boston, 1984), p. 275.

² For a recent film on the *Heresies* collective and the feminist art movement, see: *The Heretics*, DVD. Directed by Joan Braderman (New York, 2009).

³ The possible confusion between Alice and May Stevens necessitates this mode of reference. Critics discussing the series also typically adopt this shorthand.

explains, “She became very real to me, like a friend. I felt like I knew her, understood her and shared her passion for social justice.”⁴ Stevens, an artist who had been an active participant in the women’s movement, had a lot in common with the revolutionary. Both Stevens and Luxemburg understood women’s emancipation in terms of a working-class movement. As Luxemburg wrote in “Women’s Voting Rights and the Class Struggle”: “Women’s suffrage is the goal. But the mass movement to bring it about is not a job for women alone, but it is a common class concern for women and men of the proletariat.”⁵

The goal of Stevens’ *Heresies* spread was similar, tailored to fit the new publication’s socialist-feminist point-of view. Of course, this was the artist’s point-of-view as well. In the first issue of *Heresies*, Stevens considers, “What kind of socialist-feminist-artist am I?”:

Feminism without socialism can create only utopian pockets. And the lifespan of a collective is approximately two years. Socialism without feminism is still patriarchy. But more smug. Try to imagine a classless society run by men.⁶

Stevens also admired Rosa’s revolutionary commitment to socialism “with a human face.” As she explained, “Certainly very few women think they can change the world. Rosa thought she could, and ... gave her life to that belief.”⁷ Stevens expresses pride in her own sense of duty. Comparing the attempt to be a part of a collective to being a “chameleon on plaid,” Stevens confesses, “I may split apart before I get the pattern

⁴ Qtd in “A Conversation with May Stevens and Barbara Stern Shapiro,” in *May Stevens: Images of Women Near and Far*, exh. cat. (New York: Mary Ryan Gallery 1999), p. 8.

⁵ May Stevens, “Ordinary/Extraordinary,” *Artist’s Book* (New York, 1980).

⁶ “From the First Issue Collective,” *Heresies* 1 (1977), p. 2.

⁷ “A Conversation with May Stevens and Barbara Stern Shapiro,” p. 8.

right. But somehow it seems worth the pain, because ... I believe every woman's life is a little better because of what we're doing."⁸

The *Heresies* collages were also intended to address the growing class split in the women's movement. As a woman from a working-class background, who believed that feminism had something to offer every woman, it bothered Stevens that, "women who did stay home to raise families and keep house believed ... [that they] were looked down upon by feminists. This was upsetting because, for me, the women's movement was about expanding women's issues."⁹

Mysteries And Politics

Only a year after her spread in *Heresies*, May Stevens combined Rosa and Alice again in *Mysteries and Politics*. The third in a series of "history paintings," *Mysteries and Politics* depicts a gathering of eight artists, two art historians, one anthropologist and three babies, along with images of the artist's mother, Alice Stevens, and Rosa Luxemburg. The individual figures are constructed using a variety of colors and techniques, emphasizing the diversity of women belonging to this imagined community. The images of Alice, depicted as a young mother, and Rosa, whose oversized head floats in the painting's background, appear as "ghostly" in comparison. The black-and-white figures, which were lifted directly from the *Two Women* collage in *Heresies*, add a sense of history to the scene. Alice is an important part of the artist's personal history, while Rosa's life is a documented part of political history. On a symbolic level, Alice and Rosa represent the opposing pull of family versus intellectual life that was expressed by

⁸ "From the First Issue Collective," p. 2.

⁹ Qtd in "A Conversation with May Stevens and Barbara Stern Shapiro," p. 8.

many women. An adult image of May Stevens turns toward the center of the canvas, where the two impulses meet. In a 1994 interview, she explained the role of Rosa and Alice as godmothers in *Mysteries and Politics*:

It is about mind-body division. Alice is mother and not intellectually or politically active, but devoted to family and children. And Rosa represents the intellectual life. She affects the world on the public scale in a powerful way. Both of these realms are valuable. It is possible to bring them together, but also problematical.¹⁰

Stevens also explores the attempt to bring these two realms together within the life of a single figure, Rosa Luxemburg. At first glance, *A Tribute to Rosa Luxemburg* appears to suggest the life of a public figure. Its components are clipped from Rosa Luxemburg's biography and refer primarily to her political career: a formal portrait, a picture of her cell at Wronke Prison, and a picture of her murderers. However, the collage also includes the texts of two personal letters. The first is a "secret letter" to Rosa's friend Fanny, which was written in urine and smuggled out of prison on a page of French poetry. The second is handwritten across the surface of the collage by Stevens. Although this is one of Rosa's political letters, the passage Stevens chooses is anything but, instead recalling the poetics of a cornfield outside Berlin.

Ordinary. Extraordinary.

Despite the vast differences between Rosa, the "revolutionary leader and theoretician, murder victim," and Alice, "housewife, mother, washer and ironer, inmate of hospitals and nursing homes," *Ordinary/Extraordinary* should not be interpreted as a dualistic opposition of the two. In fact, Stevens intended for the words "ordinary" and

¹⁰ Qtd in Patricia Hill, *May Stevens* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2005), p. 75.

“extraordinary” to describe both women. Alice, for example, is unique and impressive, “extraordinary” in her own way. As Stevens explains, she was,

soft and pliant, with a gift for language, more than that, a quickness, an aptness, a kind of brilliance in crossing categories, a way of thinking and knowing that poets and originals have. She was not like the others, even before the madness came.¹¹

Rosa Luxemburg, the celebrated political theorist and activist, on the other hand, is described as “ordinary.” According to Stevens, the revolutionary would have been envious of Alice’s private life as a mother and housewife, which she secretly desired. In one of Rosa’s letters to her lover, Leo Jogiches, for example, the revolutionary complained, “When I open your letters and see six sheets covered with debates about the Polish Socialist party and not a single word about ... ordinary life, I feel faint.”¹²

More often, Stevens considers the similarities of the two women’s seemingly incompatible lives. The most obvious of these is their desire to communicate. Stevens emphasizes the connection between the causes and consequences of Alice Stevens’ private silence (institutionalization) and Rosa Luxemburg’s public voice (imprisonment and assassination). For many years, May Stevens blamed her prejudiced father for crippling her mother, who was later diagnosed with Schizophrenia and committed to a mental institution. However, with her involvement in the women’s movement, Stevens came to discover that Alice’s situation was not unique, and was attributed to even larger forces of oppression:

Poverty (class) ground her down from the beginning ... and used male dominance to do it ... and religion to sanctify the arrangement and squelch her own desire. She was taught to be good. She was a good student. She

¹¹ Lucy R. Lippard, “Masses and Meetings,” in *Ordinary Extraordinary, A Summation*, exh. cat. (Boston University Art Gallery, 1984).

¹² Stevens, “Ordinary/Extraordinary.”

was always good – until she painted the kitchen red in the middle of the night and screamed at passing cars.”¹³

Although her mother was expressive in her youth, May Stevens explains that, over time, what she wanted to say became “too big to be sayable,” or as Alice described it “too big to put your tongue around.”¹⁴ She slowly retreated from the world and lost the ability to speak. Although she re-gained it several years later, Stevens laments that she had already “lost a life to speak *of*.”¹⁵ Alice’s own words, from her correspondence with her daughter, paint a bleak picture of her life, which she watched gradually slip away from isolation:

I haven’t got much news. Played bingo yesterday, won a cupcake. Mrs. Moore isn’t much better. She suffers with pain in her toes. I haven’t heard from Mary nor anybody. I could use some ivory soap. I haven’t any cards. I hope you like this paper. I do. Mother.¹⁶

Rosa Luxemburg, in contrast, spoke eloquently and forcefully. She was outspoken, known as “cantankerous and feisty,” and was always confident. But she too was eventually silenced, murdered by those who were threatened by her words.

May Stevens’ 1988 installation, *One Plus or Minus One*, addresses the patriarchal order that Rosa infiltrated but could not overcome. The installation consisted of three texts and two large photomurals depicting scenes inspired by documentary photos. The first mural, *Rosa Luxemburg Attends the Second International*, is a formal portrait of the delegates at the 1904 Congress on World Socialism. Despite the

¹³ Qtd in Melissa Dabakis, “Re-Imagining Women’s History,” in *Rosa, Alice: May Stevens Ordinary, Extraordinary*, eds. Melissa Dabakis and Janis Bell, exh. cat. (Gambier, OH: Olin Gallery, 1988), p. 21.

¹⁴ Qtd in Mara R. Witzling, “May Stevens,” in *Voicing Today’s Visions: Writing by Contemporary Women Artists* (New York, 1994), p. 80.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Stevens, “Ordinary/Extraordinary.”

overpowering presence of the male leaders, the viewer is still equally drawn to Rosa, whose white blouse stands out against the sea of dark suits. She is only suggested in the second mural, *Eden Hotel*, a more chaotic grouping of men from the German *Freikorps* celebrating the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The soldiers, who are depicted with nightmarish skeletal features and whose heads are oddly sized and out of perspective, are far more menacing than the unified and orderly men of the first mural. The texts accompanying the photomurals also reveal the oppression the revolutionary faced in her lifetime. “The Second International,” for example, reveals the opposition Rosa faced not only from the German government, who imprisoned her for her anti-war activities, but even among her socialist comrades. “Eden Hotel,” on the other hand, reminds viewers just how easily the revolutionary’s murder was dismissed, her murderers unconcerned about the charges against them, even when they are brought before a military tribunal:

At the court martial, the Presiding Magistrate, Paul Jorns ... asks: Was this photograph (of the company present at the table with the waitress bringing wine) meant to give the impression of a celebration?

Defense witness Krause: Certainly not. Defendant Runge laughs.

Presiding Magistrate: Defendant Runge, behave yourself. This is no laughing matter.¹⁷

After receiving a grant to publish her artist’s book *Ordinary. Extraordinary.* in 1980, Stevens began the process of adapting her earlier collages to a page-size format. She quickly realized that this new format would mean a new audience as well, who would be not just would be not just viewers, but “readers.” In response, Stevens began incorporating more of Rosa and Alice’s own words in her collages.

¹⁷ May Stevens, “Eden Hotel.”

In Stevens' artist's book, selections from Rosa's personal letters and political works were thoughtfully chosen and copied in the artist's own handwriting. The excerpts express many different emotions, address many different issues – both personal and political – and complement or contradict the images in interesting ways. Although Rosa's physical presence is the most predominant in Stevens' artist's book, many of Rosa's words express the revolutionary's inability to speak, most notably in an excerpt from one of her letters to Leo Jogiches:

It might seem irrational to you, even absurd, that I'm writing this letter – we live only 10 steps apart and meet 3 times a day ... Why am I writing you instead of talking to you? Because I'm uneasy, hesitant to talk about certain things.¹⁸

Imprisonment seems to have had a similar influence on Rosa that institutionalization did on Alice. For example, Rosa wrote to Sonja Liebkecht from Breslau prison: "It has been such a terribly long time since I last wrote, but you have often been on my mind. One thing or another seems to take away my wish to write."¹⁹ The selections also reveal Rosa's more optimistic thoughts. She relates a humorous encounter that occurred after one of her speeches, describes her love of writing, and reassures Sonja Liebkecht that she is keeping in good spirits: "I lie here alone and in silence, enveloped in the manifold black wrappings of darkness, tedium, unfreedom and winter – and yet my heart beats with an immeasurable and incomprehensible inner joy." Alice also has optimistic moments. In one of her letters to May Stevens, for example, she writes:

¹⁸ Stevens, "Ordinary/Extraordinary."

¹⁹ Ibid.

I'm glad you arrived o.k. The doughnuts sound good. You make me hungry. I'm glad you feel well and happy. The sun is shining, looks beautiful, good. I washed my blouse this morning. Mrs. Moore is some better. Your letter was nice and long.²⁰

Rosa's letters to Leo Jogiches – Stevens' artist's book reproduces excerpts from a handful of them – accurately reflect the turbulent relationship between the two. In one letter, Rosa merely runs through her "typical" day in a Berlin prison. The others, however, express a variety of emotions: Rosa's optimism that her and Jogiches will end up happy, her frustration that he refuses to talk about "ordinary life," her anger when he talks down to her, her irritability when he insists on underlining every last word in his letters, etc.

Voices

After her artist's book, Stevens began a group of large-scale paintings. In a series depicting Rosa Luxemburg's commemoration – which include the paintings *Demonstration* (1982), *Voices* (1983), and *Procession* (1983) – the revolutionary's legacy lives on in her last words: "I was, I am, I will be." In the first painting, *Demonstration*, her words and image are carried by marchers. Stevens worked from a Xerox of a photo (instead of the original) in order to create the painting's faded appearance. This fading distances the viewer from Rosa so that she is seen "as history has recorded her." Rosa's face, however, remains present and lively, highlighted in whites against the dark background. Stevens described *Demonstration* in 1984: "The consciousness in the painting is Rosa's. Karl is impassive, a pictured face. Rosa's look

²⁰ Ibid.

is alive, it charges the scene. She looks beyond the picture edge and plane.”²¹ The next painting, *Voices*, depicts Luxemburg and Liebknecht’s 1919 funeral procession.

Luxemburg’s image is gone, but her presence is still suggested by her coffin, highlighted in the same whites as her image in *Demonstration*. Her now-famous final words jump off the banner and fill the visual space above the revolutionaries’ coffins:

Overhead Rosa’s last words ... pile up, turn and fall and rise. They are like sounds. They make a vaulted space or a series of vaultings for the sound to resonate in ...²²

Here her words are woven into the background of *Voices*, etched into the paint itself. In the final painting of the trilogy, *Procession* (1983), the street marchers have returned, but with a greater sense of movement and agitation.²³ It is now the crowd that is highlighted in white, suggesting that they are propelled by the revolutionary’s words and memory. The artist seeks to extend this influence into her contemporary time, describing *Procession* as representative of “all the peace marches and demonstrations I ever went to.”²⁴ Stevens used Rosa Luxemburg’s legacy to inspire political activism again with her installation *One Plus or Minus One*, although this time references a particular contemporary struggle:

Rosa Luxemburg flared across the European dark like a meteor, an aberration. Her murder restores the usual dark. The waitress brings her

²¹ Qtd in Jan Abbott, “Synthesis of the Personal and the Political in the Works of May Stevens,” (PhD diss., University of Texas, 1998), p. 71.

²² Qtd in Janis Bell, “Conversations with May Stevens,” in *Rosa, Alice: May Stevens Ordinary, Extraordinary*, eds. Melissa Dabakis and Janis Bell, exhibition catalogue (Gambier, OH: Olin Gallery, Kenyon College, 1988), p. 40.

²³ Dabakis, “Re-imagining Women’s History,” p. 24.

²⁴ Hill, *May Stevens*, p. 76.

tray. The usual faces look out. Order is restored. In Berlin. In Chile. In El Salvador.²⁵

Although her mother did not speak often, May Stevens has explained, she had very expressive hands. It is those hands that live on in Stevens' *Go Gentle and Fore River*, in which Alice's gestures appear as letters or sign language. In *Fore River*, Stevens presents two images of Alice, old, dazed, and gesticulating frantically, as if to make her point before disappearing into complete oblivion. A similar sense of urgency characterizes *Go Gentle*, which is a sort of condensed biography of Alice. On the left side of the painting, Alice appears in a billowy dress and hat. In the center of the painting is the formal grouping of her and her siblings. The right half of the painting presents Alice in old age, seated on her stool, mute and frightened. She raises her hands and claws at the air almost in anger, an attempt to articulate words that she cannot form. This piece has been described as one of Stevens' most powerful, and "one that has caused more than one visitor to pause and weep."²⁶

Forming The Fifth International

As one art critic wrote in 1999, May Stevens' painting *Forming the Fifth International* depicted the "type of meeting that could only take place in art."²⁷ On the left of the picture sits Rosa Luxemburg, who gazes contemplatively at the viewer. On the right sits Alice Stevens, who warily looks the revolutionary over, squinting at the unfamiliar woman from behind her glasses. Aside from the painting's rich, green background, these women have nothing in common. First of all, the two appear as

²⁵ William Olander, *One Plus or Minus One*, exh. cat. (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989).

²⁶ Shulman, "A Crusader Who Lets Her Heroes Be Human."

²⁷ Ibid.

though they are from different realms: Rosa is in black and white, as if cut out of an old photograph, while Alice is in muted pinks and peaches. Their juxtaposition is almost like a film that combines animated characters with live actors. Moreover, while Rosa appears relaxed, one arm casually draped over the park bench, Alice uncomfortably scratches her leg, looking as though she is about to jump out of her skin. It is a classic confrontation of intellectual social martyr and practical elderly woman: the former has very little to do with the mundane details of everyday life, and the latter has little to do with anything *but* those details.

By combining the life of Rosa Luxemburg and the life of Alice Stevens, from one end of the social class spectrum to the other, May Stevens hoped to embrace all women in between:

Alice and Rosa talking together as equals represent the value of each human life, the complementarity of intellect and instinct, the symbolic joining of body and mind, form to content. The still-great distance (in color, in time) between them admits no easy solution but holds out, tenuously, promise and necessity.²⁸

Depicted alongside Alice, a working-class woman, Stevens offers a Rosa that is tangible and accessible to all classes of women. Alice also seems more real, since the painting suggests that she might have had potential, “if only she had the words to express what has happened.”²⁹ Stevens admits that this is a difficult relationship, but the fact that they are trying is the important thing.

Although May Stevens’ series on Rosa Luxemburg’s commemoration outwardly expressed the public memory of a political figure, *Demonstration*, *Voices*, and

²⁸ Qtd in Abbott, “The Synthesis of the Personal and the Political,” p.; 77.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Procession had a deep personal significance for the artist. Stevens used these paintings to express her own feelings of grief over the tragic and unexpected loss of her only son, Steven Baranik. Stevens' friend Reese Williams has described the artist's grieving as a "third presence" in these pieces, a source of creativity evident in her livelier-than-usual brushstrokes. The artist described this grieving process many years later:

By the time I got to '83, when these three large paintings were done, I had full access to all my feelings; I was all the way home. There were friends who saw my Rosa Luxemburg funeral paintings for the first time and put their arms around me and wept with me because they understood the genesis of the powerful feeling that made them.³⁰

According to Williams, this creativity permitted Stevens to reconsider her mother, Alice, who was at that time in the hospital and nearing the end of her life. For the first time in the *Ordinary/Extraordinary* series, Alice's physicality is depicted. In *Go Gentle*, for example, her knees jut out awkwardly toward the viewer and the veins in her arms bulge as she gestures. By allowing her mother to express her frustration with her situation, Williams suggests, Stevens eases her mother (and perhaps herself) towards the idea of death. As many art historians and critics have noted, the very colors of *Go Gentle* – tones of browns, purples, and blues – suggest Alice Stevens' imminent death, referred to as "bruise-like colors." Stevens herself was fond of this notion, considering that "one always remembers the way the colors of a bruise change and go from their blue-purples to brown and yellow before they eventually vanish."³¹

³⁰ Qtd in Hill, *May Stevens*, 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

Writing On Water

Stevens could not let go of her mother completely until she passed away in 1985. Afterwards, she began to slowly fade from May Stevens' works. In her 1988-1989 painting *Green Field*, a lone silhouette stands in the upper left hand corner of an endless, grassy field. The figure is thinly painted in a chalky white that fades into the green behind it. The figure is Alice. She has donned her hat and picked up her cane, as if ready to depart. Stevens' 24-foot painting, *Alice in the Garden*, completed around the same time, also poses Alice Stevens against this background. In the final of four images of Alice, May Stevens enters the painting to pin a dandelion on her mother's shirt, as though a send-off.

By restoring her mother's voice, May Stevens was able to reclaim what she had previously shunned in her mother. One reason the photograph of Alice had been "too terrible" to deal with was because May Stevens recognized herself in her mother. By reinvesting Alice with her own identity, Stevens was able to express her love for this woman, not only in her art, but in poems that she wrote during the period:

Hold up your head on its hawkcords
Hood with your eyes the dark you see
ahead of me. Scratch your nose a little.
Tuck in your mouth over the drowsy gullet.
Suck in the places your skin falls to dream
under the jutting bone.

There is great beauty.³²

³² "You Can Go" by May Stevens (1985): Qtd in Witzling, "May Stevens," pp. 82-3.

Rosa was also slowly fading away. As Stevens explained of Rosa's presence in *Voices*: "Rosa has gotten smaller in these paintings – and finally disappeared here. Her meaning has become absorbed into the painting, into the context and resonance of her life. She is her afterimage."³³ Although she stopped painting Rosa Luxemburg as a figure, May Stevens continued to explore the meaning of her death. In *Fore River*, the artist focuses on Rosa's death site, the Landwehr Canal where her body was dumped. Stevens had already completed several smaller studies of the canal and Lichtenstein Bridge, but when she began to work on *Fore River*, the piece seemed to her to be "too empty." She drew on *Go Gentle* once more to get things moving, bringing in two large figures of Alice to flank the Landwehr Canal's bridge. Stevens began playing with the silvery tones of the painting's center until the bridge had disappeared entirely. She described this as a process of discovery, of watching the bridge fade out and the painting come to life, remarking "even now, the presence of the fall of silver in the center seems to me more mysterious and compelling than I can say."³⁴ As art historian Josephine Withers has argued, the Landwehr Canal's rushing water becomes a "powerful void," a metaphor for the birth canal.³⁵

The artist appears twice in *Fore River*. In many interviews, Stevens has mentioned that the Lichtenstein Bridge can still be seen as a reflection in the void between Alice figures. For Stevens, the reflection represented her desire to "bridge" the lives of Rosa and Alice, "part of a political intention of the erasing of class, of

³³ Qtd in Dabakis, "Re-Imagining Women's History," p. 24.

³⁴ Bell, "Conversations with May Stevens," p. 39; Josephine Withers, "Revisioning our Foremothers: Reflections on the 'Ordinary Extraordinary' Art of May Stevens," *Feminist Studies* 13 (1987), p. 492.

³⁵ Withers, "Revisioning our Foremothers."

differences.”³⁶ The artist appears a second time in the lower right corner, where her hand can be seen still finishing the painting.

The Landwehr Canal became a theme of much of May Stevens’ later work. The artist has described many of the paintings from her more recent series, *Women, Words, and Water*, as an attempt to “drown” Rosa. Her painting *Missing Persons*, for example, which depicts two rowboats, began as an attempt to paint Rosa’s profile into the water. During 1990 she returned to work on an earlier painting of Rosa Luxemburg disappearing into the water, a painting that would eventually be called *But That Was in Another Country*. As art historian Patricia Hills has explained:

In the early stages of the painting, which I saw on the wall of her studio at the Bunting Institute in 1989, Luxemburg’s feet and skirt, as her body sinks into the canal, were not mere suggestions but specifically articulated. ... After reworking the final version ... only the whirlpool of dark water remains to suggest the brief turbulence created by “the purple blossom of her skirt billowing in the water.”³⁷

³⁶ Qtd in Withers, “Revisioning our Foremothers,” p. 492.

³⁷ Qtd in Hill, *May Stevens*, p. 79.

CHAPTER 4 EPITAPH

Red Rosa has also now disappeared/ Where she lies is unknown/ Because she told the truth to the poor/ The rich have hunted her out of the world.¹¹⁹

Perhaps the most frequently cited artistic tribute to Rosa Luxemburg is Bertolt Brecht's commemorative poem *Epitaph*, which begins by announcing: "Red Rosa has also now disappeared/Where she lies is unknown." Although these lines echo the preoccupation that many in Berlin had with the disappearance of Rosa Luxemburg's body in 1919, Brecht wrote them in 1929, ten years after Rosa Luxemburg's body had resurfaced, was hauled out of the Landwehr Canal, and buried in Berlin's *Friedrichsfelde* cemetery. Ruth J. Owen, whose work on contemporary German poetry has often featured the tradition of Rosa Luxemburg commemorative poetry, has recently suggested that Brecht's *Epitaph* is offered as a cenotaph: a "grave monument without a body."¹²⁰

Brecht's eagerness to forget about Luxemburg's burial is not surprising. In, the earliest Rosa Luxemburg tributes - the poetry, artwork, and personal eulogies released while her corpse was indeed still missing – consistently focused not on her body, but her spirit.¹²¹ Artists, comrades, and friends, interested in casting a favorable light on Rosa Luxemburg, often portrayed the revolutionary ascending to heaven as a Christ-

¹¹⁹ Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke in zwanzig Bänden. Gedichte*, ed. Suhrkamp (Frankfurt am Main, 1967). Original German text can be found in appendix 4.

¹²⁰ Owen's latest article, "Roses Are Red: The Peculiar Remembrance of Rosa Luxemburg in Lyric Poetry," is her first to deal directly with the figure of Luxemburg: Ruth J. Owen, "Roses Are Red: The Peculiar Remembrance of Rosa Luxemburg in Lyric Poetry," *seminar* 48 (2012): 127-45.

¹²¹ Owen calls this a "spirit-body dichotomy", "Roses Are Red," p. 130.

figure, “mother” of Communism, or the spirit of revolution itself.¹²² Although the use of religious imagery and Christian motifs is, for the most part, unique to the Weimar depictions of her murder, the emphasis on Rosa Luxemburg’s disembodied body has become a definitive feature of the Rosa myth. Thanks, in part, to Luxemburg’s early biographers, it has even become characteristic of scholarly works on the figure. In the epilogue of his 1939 *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Work*, for example, pioneer Luxemburg biographer Paul Frölich proclaims: “When the triumphal procession of barbarism reaches its limits – and it will do so – the Acheron will begin to move again, and victors will spring from the spirit of Rosa Luxemburg.”¹²³ German communists were also eager to exploit portraits of Rosa Luxemburg as the quintessential communist martyr to resuscitate the revolutionary spirit of 1918. Invoking Christian rhetoric about the afterlife, communists urged others to seize the revolutionary mantle:

[A proletarian revolution] was the goal [...] for which Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and the murdered of the Revolution strove. We must carry on in the spirit of the murdered.¹²⁴

In fact, the act of forgetting in Brecht’s “Epitaph” is the rule – not the exception – in the corpus of Rosa Luxemburg commemorative works. It is disturbingly easy to overlook the revolutionary’s absence from the many accounts of her own assassination, which often

¹²² Johannes R. Becher, “Hymne auf Rosa,” in *An Alle!: neue Gedichte* (Berlin, 1919): 24-6; Conrad Felixmüller, *Menschen über der Welt* (People Above the World), lithograph, 69 cm. x 50 cm., 1919, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett / DDR Nationalgalerie.

¹²³ Paul Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Work* (New York, 1972), pp. 302-3.

¹²⁴ “Gedächtniskundgebung in Wahn,” *Sozialistische Republik*, September 12, 1927. Also see Sara Ann Sewell’s “Mourning Comrades: Communist Funerary Rituals in Cologne during the Weimar Republic,” *German Studies Review* 32 (2009): 527-48. Sewell argues that the funerals and subsequent commemorations for Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg established a “prototype of mourning” that was deployed thereafter to motivate, discipline, and militarize.

focus on the events leading up to the murder or its aftermath but seldom reveal the deed itself. Heiner Müller's *Germania: Tod in Berlin*, for example, a play that considers the horrific consequences of Luxemburg's (and therefore the German Revolution's) death, begins in the streets of Berlin in 1919 as the revolutionary is escorted *offstage* by her executioners.¹²⁵ Another striking example is the West German television movie *Der Fall Liebkecht/Luxemburg. Darstellung eines Offiziers-Komplett* ("The Case of Liebkecht Luxemburg: Account of an Officer's Conspiracy"), which recreates the events of January 15, 1919 and the trial of those involved by State Prosecutor Paul Jorns but fails to recreate the crime.¹²⁶

Descriptions of Rosa Luxemburg as a lifeless corpse have also typically been avoided. Even those accounts that suggest the violence of her murder, for example, tend to describe her not as a "floating" but a "swimming" body.¹²⁷ Many German-language poets, as Owen notes, denied the fact of Luxemburg's death by entwining her with the beloved of the love poem tradition. Although many of these poems do focus on the revolutionary's corpse, she is not described as decaying, but instead becomes an object of desire and adoration.¹²⁸ The lyric subject of Otto Pankok's poem "An Rosa Luxemburg," for example, decorates the revolutionary's body with roses, lilies, violets, and lilacs, while feverishly recounting its many parts: "temples, throat, breast, and hair,

¹²⁵ Heiner Müller, *Germania Tod in Berlin* (Berlin, 1977).

¹²⁶ *Der Fall Liebkecht Luxemburg. Darstellung eines Offiziers-Komplett*, directed by Dieter Ertel (Stuttgart, 1969).

¹²⁷ Ergon Erwin Kisch, "Rettungsring an einer kleinen Brücke," *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* 7 (1928): 4-5.

¹²⁸ Ruth J. Owen, "The Body as Art in Early-Twentieth-Century German Poetry," *Monatshefte* 96 (2004): 503-20.

an erotic presence cut to pieces.”¹²⁹ Johannes Becher’s lyric subject in “Hymne auf Rosa Luxemburg” speaks in a similar desperate, half-mad voice as he takes Luxemburg’s crucified body down from its cross and fantasizes about touching her hand with his and her mouth with his “once more.”¹³⁰ These romantic attempts to immortalize Luxemburg are highly problematic, however. In drawing on the tradition of the European love lyric, poets such as Pankok and Becher ultimately dissociated the revolutionary from her historical context, depoliticizing a very political crime.

The depictions of Rosa Luxemburg’s murder that are exceptional are revealing in a number of ways.¹³¹ Perhaps one of the best examples of such an exception is Max Beckmann’s 1919 portfolio of lithographs, *Die Hölle* (“Hell”). While other responses tried to avoid lingering on the violence of Luxemburg’s murder, Max Beckmann is completely preoccupied with it, forcing the viewer to become a witness to her suffering in the fourth plate of the series, *Martyrium* (“Martyrdom”). Luxemburg’s battered body, which is being dragged out of Berlin’s Eden Hotel, stretches across the entire canvas in a pose reminiscent of crucifixion. Unlike Conrad Felixmüller’s portrait, in which the revolutionary’s heroic decision to willingly give her life implies strength of character, Beckmann’s Luxemburg is completely powerless. Her rifle-toting assassins surround her on all sides, and her frail, emaciated appearance suggests that she will not be able to fight them off. To add to her humiliation, Beckmann’s portrayal sexualizes the murder,

¹²⁹ Owen, “Roses Are Red,” p. 140.

¹³⁰ Becher, “Hymne auf Rosa Luxemburg”; Owen, “Roses Are Red.”

¹³¹ As Owen points out, many of the examples of accounts that don’t avoid the crime itself come from the tradition of German lyric poetry. However, these examples can be found in most forms of art represented in the larger tradition of “Rosa myth” (even if less frequently) and their deviation from the rest of the accounts cannot be attributed to the conventions of German literature alone.

offering a barely-dressed Luxemburg (despite the fact that she was murdered in the middle of January). The items of clothing she does wear – the stockings that hang around her ankles, torn underwear and a slip that has been pushed up to expose her naked and bruised body – are evidence of a sexual assault. And the soldiers grabbing at her naked body are not the only perpetrators. The grinning hotel manager holds Luxemburg's legs apart, reaching for a bottle of liquor with one hand and Luxemburg's exposed crotch with the other.

Although Beckmann's contribution treats Luxemburg's body as an object of desire (as some of the German poets attempted to do), *Martyrium* never forgets that Luxemburg's is a *political* murder. The anti-military sentiment expressed in *Martyrium* is echoed in another of the series' lithographs, *Die Ermordung* ("The Murder"), a jarring portrait of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg's jumbled body parts aside another remnant of the struggle: a military helmet.

Even more important to Beckmann's 1919 lithographs than the critique of the growing militarism is his bitter indictment of ordinary Germans and their own growing complacency. Although the menacing military figures in *Martyrium* take center-stage, Beckmann is equally critical of the civilian onlookers, including two working-class men who don't actively participate but appear unmoved by the gruesome scene, and allow it to unfold in front of them. Finally, Beckmann himself appears in the foreground, frantically working to capture the scene but also unwilling to intervene. His *Martyrium* reveals sympathy for Luxemburg, who struggles against and ultimately becomes a victim of the same growing militarism and nationalism that haunts the artist's present and Germany's future. At the same time, as many scholars have pointed out, by

unleashing his own built-up aggression on Luxemburg's female body, Beckmann is acknowledging his own complicity with those forces.¹³²

The nature of German guilt and responsibility became a common theme in depictions of Luxemburg's death – particularly after 1945 – but Beckmann's attempt to confront it in his 1919 lithographs is uniquely honest in this way. Beckmann's depiction and Brecht's "Epitaph" reveal something essential that most of the commemorative works conceal and to which mourning rituals plead ignorance: namely, that Rosa Luxemburg's symbolic significance to German culture lies not in her remembrance, but in the violent mutilation of her corpse and the desecration of her grave.¹³³ Her burial site and monuments have been frequently defaced or destroyed, most memorably in 1935 when Mies van der Rohe's *Revolutionsdenkmal* ("monument to the revolution") was razed to the ground by the Nazis.¹³⁴ Although a provisional version of the monument was reconstructed in 1946, its destruction had a lasting impact on Luxemburg's legacy, symbolically "martyring" the revolutionary for a second time.

And Germans have remained shy about "concretizing" Rosa Luxemburg's memory in the same way they have with other prominent figures. It seems particularly significant that this was true even in the GDR, where there was a preoccupation with iconic statues for other figures (Lenin, Ernst Thälmann, etc.).¹³⁵ Most of Berlin's

¹³² Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, 1995).

¹³³ See: Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, femininity and the aesthetic* (Manchester, 1992), p. 321.

¹³⁴ Anna Saunders, "The Luxemburg Legacy: Concretizing the Remembrance of a Controversial Heroine?," *German History* 29 (2011): 36-56; Although the memorial was built to commemorate a larger group of revolutionary martyrs, it quickly became associated with Rosa Luxemburg in particular: construction began on the fifth anniversary of her burial, was completed and inaugurated on the seventh, and Luxemburg's own often-cited last words ("I was, I am, I will be") were chosen to flank the memorial.

¹³⁵ A Rosa Luxemburg monument was proposed in 1974 but, for whatever reason, was never realized.

monuments for Rosa Luxemburg emphasize the revolutionary's words and not her image: for example, the cast iron plate of her name that emerges from the water of the Landwehr Canal to mark the spot where her body was dumped. Hans Haacke's monument, which was completed in 2006, is a continuation of this tradition, compiling various Luxemburg quotations across Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. And although these memorials have been generally accepted by Berlin's citizens, their proposal, conception, and construction provoked continual and intense debates over the revolutionary's suitability for such public remembrance.

The revolutionary's body made a brief and controversial reappearance in May of 2009, when a nameless, headless torso was discovered in the basement of Berlin's Charité Hospital that bore "striking similarities with the real Rosa Luxemburg."¹³⁶ The hospital's chief forensic pathologist Michael Tsokos announced his own long-held suspicion: that Rosa Luxemburg had spent the last ninety years preserved in wax and lying in a glass display case for students to examine as the typical example of a "female floater."

Over the next few weeks, the German public was more focused on Rosa Luxemburg's "body" than they had been since the 1919 autopsy.¹³⁷ Doctors began by

¹³⁶ Frank Thadeusz, "Leiche im Keller," *Der Spiegel* 23 (2009): 106-8. Also see: Frank Thadeusz, "Hinweis auf Hunger," *Der Spiegel* 53 (2009): 116; "Rätsel um angebliche Rosa-Luxemburg-Leiche könnte gelöst werden," *Der Spiegel*, May 30, 2009; Sandra Dassler, Hannes Heine and Adelheid Müller-Lissner, "Die Unbekannte von der Charité," *Der Tagesspiegel*, May 30, 2009; Thomas Loy and Jost Müller-Neuhof, "Wem gehört Rosa Luxemburg?," *Der Tagesspiegel*, May 31, 2009; Elisabeth von Thadden, "Es wäre Zeit für ein Grab," *Die Zeit*, June 4, 2009; "Keine Spur von Rosa Luxemburg," *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 7, 2009; "Tote Rosa lässt Forschern keine Ruhe Wissenschaftler stritten um unbekannte Leiche," *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 8, 2010; "Die Leiche im Keller bleibt namenlos," *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 7, 2010; Dagny Lüdemann, "Die 2007 an der Charité entdeckte Frauenleiche wird bestattet," *Die Zeit*, January 9, 2010. For an interview with Michael Tsokos from *Die Zeit*, see: Dagny Lüdemann, "'Rosa Luxemburg wurde nie begraben,'" *Die Zeit*, May 29, 2009.

¹³⁷ I have placed "body" in quotations, because it has yet to be identified.

looking for evidence of Luxemburg's well-documented hip deformation, agreeing that the torso did indeed belong to a woman who suffered from osteoarthritis at the time of her death and had legs of different lengths. They also examined the unidentified woman's wounds and determined that they were consistent with the events of Luxemburg's murder. Eyewitness accounts claiming that weights were tied to the revolutionary's ankles and wrists before she was thrown into the Landwehr Canal seemed to explain the corpse's missing limbs, which could have easily been severed during the months spent under water. Although there was no clear explanation for the torso's missing head, Tsokos speculated that if the corpse's head was still attached when it was discovered, it was likely pickled in formaldehyde somewhere in the hospital's collection.¹³⁸ Tsokos even sent the body for a series of elaborate tests, such as carbon dating and computer tomography, which confirmed that it was from the same period as Rosa Luxemburg.

As the details of Tsokos' investigation into the "mystery corpse" were published, he began to receive leads and suggestions from readers all over the world. The possibility that Luxemburg had never been buried troubled some, who urged the German Government to clear up the mystery and "finally lay Rosa Luxemburg's corpse to rest." The German Left was particularly anxious for Tsokos to make a positive identification: perhaps they could insist on a full state funeral, an interesting twist of fate in an election year. Of course, the prospect of a state-financed funeral for a controversial communist figure like Rosa Luxemburg stirred those on the Right as well, revealing familiar German fault lines and confirming that the revolutionary's ashes were

¹³⁸ This rumor had been floating around the hospital for years, one of the older employees insisting to Tsokos that he had seen the preserved head in Hamburg in the 1970s.

still too hot to handle. The author of one letter to the editor of the conservative newspaper, *Die Welt*, for example, wrote: “Let’s hope it’s not her. [Her grave] would just become another pilgrimage site for old communists and political diehards. Of course, while they’re at it they might as well shovel out a grave for those guys too.”¹³⁹

In the end, Tsokos was unable to prove that the torso belonged to Rosa Luxemburg. Although some of Tsokos colleagues have since dismissed the investigation as a “desperate publicity stunt” (at the time, Tsokos had a forthcoming book on “amazing forensic cases”), it would be difficult for them to claim that it was a successful one. Despite the interest and even personal involvement in the “hunt for Rosa Luxemburg,” once the still-nameless woman was buried in Neue St. Michael Cemetery Germans almost immediately lost interest in the story. At this point, it is doubtful that the identity of the bodies will ever be proven. The headless torso has no hands or feet (and thus no fingerprints), the body that was buried in 1919 has been missing since the desecration of Luxemburg’s grave in 1935, and Germans seem more than willing to return Rosa Luxemburg’s body to the “unknown.”

¹³⁹ Alan Nothnagle, “A cold case heats up: The mystery of Rosa Luxemburg,” *Lost in Berlin*, July 25, 2009.

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