

## 'Being useful is a form of willing slavery...'

Lucy Reynolds

It is Juliane, the principal figure in Margarethe von Trotta's film *The German Sisters* (*Die Bleierne Zeit*) (1981), who makes this barbed riposte to her sister Marianne, when the latter, committed to revolutionary violence, shares her fervent wish to 'serve mankind'. Juliane's remark appears double-edged: she means to talk sense into a zealous younger sister bent on futile sacrifice to a cause, but she also alludes to the role she sees as destined for herself, where to be useful is to be caught within the domestic bondage of the affective labour of family and childcare. Based on the model of her restrictive religious family, this is something Juliane hopes to avoid. But her words also hold extra-diegetic significance for the viewer of this compelling film. Through these sibling protagonists, von Trotta explores female experience in nuanced and often shocking ways. She reflects not only on feminism in West Germany at the beginning of the 1980s, but also on the country's heightened political activism and unrest during the 1970s.

The two sisters are a thinly veiled fictionalisation of the lives of Gudrun and Christiane Ensslin. Gudrun Ensslin was one of the leaders of the Red Army Faction, also known as the Baader-Meinhof group, whose apparent suicide while inside the notorious Stammheim Prison was subject to a long battle of contestation by her sister. *The German Sisters* developed from von Trotta's conversations with Christiane about her sister, and the violent context of terrorism and imprisonment with which she was involved. This story of two women caught at a potent moment of post-war German history enabled von Trotta to address the complex, and often conflicting, political allegiances of her generation:

*I realised that this was an issue I could use to be provocative by presenting Germany with two opposing views of so-called revolution: the extreme view that leads to terrorism because it has no patience for what we used to call the 'long march through the institutions', and the other perspective, which sees violence as a crime.<sup>1</sup>*

Through her study of the fraught emotional bonds of a sibling relationship, von Trotta explores the dilemmas facing the West German left and addresses not only its internal conflicts but also the ambiguous place of feminism within it. Who will serve the needs of the one who wishes to 'serve mankind'? Through the dilemmas faced by the sisters, the film explores how women's rights can be compromised in the wider struggle for political emancipation.

*The German Sisters* is the second of three films in which von Trotta positions sisters as her central protagonists, *Sisters, or the Balance of Happiness* (1979) and *Sheer Madness* (1983) being the others. A former actor and collaborator with her husband, the filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff, von Trotta is often associated with the New German Cinema movement of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders. But as one of the founders of the Verband der Filmarbeiterinnen (the Association of Women Filmmakers), she brings an acutely feminist perspective to the post-war malaise reflected in its cinema. And like her contemporaries in feminist

counter-cinema, such as Jackie Raynal, Helke Sanders, or Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, she deploys narratives concerning female experience. However, unlike Mulvey/Wollen and other so-called feminist 'new talkies' of the period, she does not experiment with narrative form, but works within its conventions. There are hints of film noir in *The German Sisters*' frequent use of flashback, and the dualities set in play between the two sisters create a psycho-dramatic tension evocative of Hitchcock, in which the troubled Marianne functions as a dark reflection of the 'good' sister Juliane. But, as E. Ann Kaplan has contended, von Trotta's narrative causalities afford their protagonists an agency often missing from patriarchal cinema: 'If her heroines fall into masochism, it is as a result of a choice arising out of a particular political and personal context; von Trotta reveals how this position has been externally constructed, as against presenting it as "natural" or "inevitable", as in Hollywood films.'<sup>2</sup>

Von Trotta's close attention to the minutiae of sibling dynamics has led to criticism of the film for creating a reductive picture of the political complexities of terrorism against which their relationship is set. Barton Byg, for example, accuses von Trotta of the 'manipulation of history in the service of her narrative'.<sup>3</sup> But this is to miss the point. It is precisely the prism of individualised female experience that enables von Trotta to examine with depth and subtlety the historical upheavals to which her characters bear witness. Rather than manipulation, the temporal and spatial flexibility of narrative fiction allows her to take liberties and reach back farther to earlier, unresolved traumas of the German past. The film's German title translates as *The Leaden Time*, taken from a poem by Hölderlin referring to the 'continuing weight of the past in the present'.<sup>4</sup> This past is chillingly presented in flashback, as a younger Marianne and Juliane watch a film of graphic intensity depicting the liberation of Nazi concentration camps. In one of the film's many double meanings, we might thus extend Juliane's reference to 'willing slavery' beyond the travails of female labour and apply it to the work of atonement undertaken by von Trotta's generation, as they sought to understand and assimilate the legacy of National Socialism.

Protest and incarceration take a different turn in the Canadian painter and filmmaker Joyce Wieland's short film *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1968). In Wieland's allegorical tale, the wily rodents escape 'political prison', under the watchful scrutiny of two cats, to begin a new life organic gardening in Canada. Although Wieland's film was made over ten years earlier than von Trotta's, both examine the same question of how the revolutionary resistance of their generation is co-opted and silenced by the apparatus of state control. Opposition to the Vietnam War motivated the Red Army Faction to commit the arson that led to their imprisonment, while Wieland's fleeing rats refer to the exodus of US draft dodgers to Canada. Wieland was also thinking of her own return home, after years spent at the apex of independent film culture in 1960s New York, where she was at the vanguard of new experimental film forms with a conceptual bent, using repetition, text and sound to interrogate the underlying structures and effects of film language. But unlike the more austere film works of contemporaries such as Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton, her films encompass the messy encroachments of life often deemed too excessive for structural film subject matter – such as rats and cats.

Like her other short films *Peggy's Blue Skylight* (1964–66), *Catfood* (1969) and *Water Sark* (1965), *Rat Life* was made on Wieland's kitchen table. Its small scale and make-shift qualities are informed by this domestic horizon, where props are teacups and cherries. There is a clear political intent, as well as expediency, in her determined use of her table; as she told Frampton, 'I was trying to make a point about housewife art and wife art and woman's art. I realised it after seven acid trips.'<sup>5</sup> In contrast to von Trotta, Wieland's disengagement from cinema's models of patriarchal professionalism is contained in the accentuated amateurism that she projects through her cast of creatures, precarious camera work and hallucinogenic creative aids. Yet this is not to underestimate the political message of *Rat Life*. While the manner of making may be modest, Wieland's concerns are of the same magnitude as those of von Trotta. For all its disarming humour and the beady-eyed charm of its cast, a newsprint image of Che Guevara's dead body repeats between flashes of text that warn of the CIA and DDT. No longer the elegant wordplay of earlier films such as *Sailboat* and *1933* (both 1967), Wieland's allegory conveys a clear message.

Poles apart, both films in this programme ask the same questions: How might a revolutionary life be led in violent times? And how might the personal prism of feminist filmmaking offer ways to understand it?

#### Notes

1. Erica Carter, 'Margarethe von Trotta: "Becoming a director was always the real goal,"' *Sight & Sound*, 18 January 2019, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/newsopinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/margarethe-von-trotta-career-interview-personal-political-tour-searching-ingmar-bergman>.
2. E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London: Routledge, 1983), 106.
3. Barton Byg, 'German History and Cinematic Convention Harmonized in Margarethe von Trotta's *Marianne and Juliane*,' *Gender and German Cinema: Feminist Interventions, Volume 2: German Film History/ German History on Film*, ed. Sandra Frieden, et al. (Providence and Oxford: Berg, 1993), 264.
4. Magarethe von Trotta quoted in Lisa DiCaprio, 'Marianne and Juliane/The German Sisters: Baader-Meinhof Fictionalized,' *Jump Cut* 29 (February 1984), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC29folder/GermanSisters.html>.
5. Hollis Frampton and Joyce Wieland, 'I Don't Even Know about the Second Stanza,' *The Films of Joyce Wieland*, ed. Kathryn Elder (Toronto: Cinematheque Ontario, 1999), 172.