the absolute possibility of transparently representing the “real” and the “truth”. For Tom, she's enviable in her performance, one that he translates into an engulfing sexuality (“I've been wondering what it would be like to be inside all that energy.”)

Put this way it sounds as if the film “places” the female character according to what the male characters want of her. On one level it does only it's redeemed by the diversity of these wants and her centrality to the narrative. Each occupies a different arena according to what they offer Jane — she desires Tom, while Aaron is a friend and partner at work. Jane's dilemma is therefore not simply a choice of men, but of self-definition. She is playing out a drama of feminine identity; how to reconcile the sexual and the social. On another level, because Tom is set up as a problematic object of Jane's desire (he stands for everything she despises), he becomes the mysterious “other” who must, somehow, be dealt with by the film. We do not only follow Aaron's yearning look at Jane: it is relayed through her to Tom. He becomes the centre of visual fascination and object of investigation.

Tom's success is offered as a token of television's superficiality and decadence and, charted against Aaron's demise, despite the latter's greater knowledge and skill. As a comment on news production values, though, it cannot escape this structure of desire or the production values of the film. Tom becomes the centre of desire not only for Jane, but for us, too. In a film where there's glaring absence of designer attics and warehouses, sci-fi streets and couture fashions, the presence of William Hurt as Tom fills the gap of spectacle, providing aquiline contours, squared shoulders and a smooth back to his jacket. We glimpse all the outfits and see him put it all together. He's a living doll — clothed meticulously, he's an identikit fantasy.

As Jane becomes enthralled, Aaron solidifies in his suspicion. And the power of his dislike of Tom is itself enjoyable enough to take us with him — almost. It is he who breaks the pattern of universal acclaim of Tom and eventually reveals to Jane his unethical work practices and emotional duplicity. Through Aaron, the message the film purveys, that stars are taking over the news to the detriment of “truth”, is voiced. And Tom is the evil he identifies. But even this cannot dent the spellbinding effect of Hurt on screen. As soon as Tom gives his splay-footed waddle or tries to eat a boiled egg, he breaks that spell, but framed as a news anchor or dressed in a tuxedo, once more, and each time, he takes the film over.

The film relies for its effect as social commentary in the belief that knowledge on its own will change people. It's a kind of sub-text to what the characters say, but also of the way the narrative “shows up” the media and its values. Tell it like it is and we'll understand. But here the star is more enticing than the “truth” about him or her. And that knowledge cannot dispel the persistent memory of Jane's desire, however the object of it is devalued. Instead, we are left with a grief produced by the endurance of her desire and the impossibility of its finding an object.

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Rosa By Any Other Name


In 1898, Rosa Luxemburg entered into a marriage of convenience in order to obtain a German passport. Through a process of selection and omission, von Trotta completes this process of “naturalisation”. In doing so, she sacrifices much of the cultural complexity of Luxemburg's development in favour of a too-beautiful cinematic equilibrium.

As in other of von Trotta's films, Rosa Luxemburg brings together the broadly socio-political with the intimately psychological. Connections and contradictions are made within and between Luxemburg's private and public characters. Believing in the “spontaneity of the masses”, yet arguing that the dialectic “takes time”, enduring long periods of imprisonment and yet dismissing her lover on the instant for infidelity, Rosa was an able and powerful theoretician and activist of international socialism who longed to have children and a committed relationship. She was a pacifist in every sense of the word, from her empathy with the natural world to her belief in bloodless revolution.

She cultivated a garden in the midst of her imprisonment and friendships in the midst of political differences. The film pays ample tribute to Rosa's clarity, integrity and bravery, and imitates these qualities in its own form — which makes all the more jarring some of its significant absences. One is her twenty-year political comradeship and literary correspondence with Lenin, which survived their later disagreements over the relevance or otherwise of armed struggle. Another is her Jewish origins and their influence on her life.

Born Rosa Lukenberg into a profoundly and orthodox religious Jewish family, she modified her name to distance herself from family disapproval. Indeed, her death in 1919 at the hands of the far-right
Boystown


Shame is a powerful and empowering film. Its subject is rape — rape committed by "normal" men with the connivance of authority and the sanction of conventional prejudice, and the backing of physical terror and economic coercion.

Its heroes are a woman, and women: women as victims but also women in resistance. It tells some painful home truths about our society and, for men, our selves. And it does its work without the faintest tinge of propagandism.

Shame unfolds in Ginborek, a Western Australian country town where rape and sexual harassment are the standard amusement of the local lads. This is excused as "boys doing what comes naturally"; and as something that women bring on themselves through a combination of bad morals and bad management. And mostly it goes unreported; the few women who seek redress meet with malign indifference from the local cop, ostracism in the local community, and (the bottom line in Ginborek) the threat of losing their jobs at the local meatworks.

Into this rides a self-contained, wryly humorous female barrister, Asta Cadell, who has been forced to make an unscheduled stopover in Ginborek for motorbike repairs. Asta is doing well for herself. Her impressive legal knowledge and even more impressive physical skills serve her well against the local hooligans (in and out of uniform). But while Asta’s defensive efforts don’t go unnoticed, this sister is doing it for herself. Once she’s fixed the bike, she can ride away from the town and its problems; for the women of Ginborek, there is no such individual solution and, seemingly, no hope.

But Asta’s compassion is aroused by Lizzie Curtis, daughter of Asta’s reluctant hosts at the garage. Pack-raped on the night of Asta’s arrival, Lizzie finds unlooked-for support and understanding from the older woman. Their friendship develops: Lizzie’s need, and their shared womanhood, draws a commitment from Asta. She engages with Ginborek’s women and their plight, and they appreciate it. Lizzie’s father, too, comes to terms with his complicity in his daughter’s situation. With Asta’s help, the wheels of justice, rusty from disuse, start turning again; and Ginborek’s women come to realise that they don’t deserve and needn’t put up with the sexual terror that is the town’s shame.

The silence, and the chains, are breaking, and the men don’t like it — “Something’s up with these women!” Ginborek explodes into violence (and counter-violence, led by Asta), but the town begins to be cleansed. There is no happy ending, no facile triumph: just a new, difficult beginning. But something has changed forever in the lives of the women on Ginborek. And Asta Cadell, too, is changed.

Shame’s message is all the more powerful because of its universality. Ginborek could be any town or suburb; its meatworks any workplace in Australia. Its characters are all familiar people — even the admirable Asta is a character of human dimensions and capabilities. And Ginborek’s men are all men I have known; men not so different, perhaps, from this reviewer.

Deborra-Lee Furness is in a class of her own as she brings to life a memorable character: the cynical and compassionate, threatening and endearing, gentle and powerful woman called Asta Cadell. She’ll change lives outside of Ginborek.

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