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BOOK REVIEWS

Scandalous feminism

Women in dark times, by Jacqueline Rose, London, New York, Delhi, and Sydney, Bloomsbury, 2014, 339 pp., £16.95 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 4088 4540 0

Reviewed by Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo, writer

Jacqueline Rose's *Women in Dark Times* sets feminism the challenge of changing the world not just by claiming women's place in it but by carrying out the more formidable task of 'confront[ing] the subterranean aspects of history and the human mind' (p. ix). To do this, according to Rose, women need to create a new language which can tell a story that dominant political discourses are too afraid to face, let alone tell. Rose argues that what is needed is a scandalous feminism, a feminism that goes into dark, dangerous and painful places. The title of the book is adapted from Hannah Arendt's essay collection on twentieth-century intellectual thinkers, *Men in Dark Times* (1968). Going beyond Arendt, it is Rose's contention that what 'distinguishes' the period in which we now live is a violent hatred of women. It is this contemporary misogyny and its historical roots that Rose analyses in the main sections of her book.

The first section, 'The Stars', examines the lives of three extraordinary women, women who have been seen as victims but who, Rose believes, are heroines who had the courage to face the dark. Rose begins with the political writer and activist Rosa Luxemburg. Living in Poland and then Germany, Luxemburg, a co-founder of the Spartacist League, wrote of revolution and the transformation of society. Rose draws attention to Luxemburg's creativity in her writing, teaching and public speaking. She describes her as a confident, inspiring woman who believed that the truth she told would prevail, and that people would rise up in their own interests against capitalism and oppression. She was reviled as a shrill woman, imprisoned and finally murdered after the Spartacist uprising. Speaking out came at a heavy price for Luxemburg, and Rose claims this is the case for all women. In speaking publicly, a woman threatens men's security and dominance. By drawing attention to her body through speech, she reminds men not only of the materiality and limitation of human life but also of their non-autonomous origins inside a woman's body. In Germany, Luxemburg was an outsider – a woman, a Jew, a foreigner; she also walked with a limp. Rose argues that it was this outsider status that gave her the freedom to think the thoughts that conventional politics found unthinkable. Luxemburg, as she herself wrote, went to the outer limit.

Rose's second subject is the German-Jewish painter Charlotte Salomon, who was murdered in Auschwitz at the age of 26. In her mixed-genre work *Life? or Theatre?*, Salomon combines paintings with words and songs in the tradition of the German musical drama *Singspiel. Life? or Theatre?* is partly born out of Salomon's tragic family history of suicide, including that of her mother. When told of the suicides, Salomon said she would live for those who had died. She did this through making space for them and keeping their voices (and those of others) alive in her work. Afraid that she might have inherited insanity, Salomon had the courage to try to protect herself from this by creating madness in her work, in defiance of what Nazi ideology would see as degeneracy in art. Rose shows how Salomon, against convention, uses vivid colours to reveal darkness. Drawing on the work of the psychoanalyst Marion Milner, Rose insists that the viewer needs to *listen* to the colour in order to understand Salomon's vision.

The third subject, the American actress Marilyn Monroe (shown in the front jacket photograph) stands out in this book in the way that she stood out as exceptional in life. For me, though, the foregrounding of Monroe is a problem. I am not sure whether it would be truer to say that Monroe doesn't quite belong, or that prejudice prevents me from seeing the way she fits in with the book's thesis. For Rose, Monroe reveals how female beauty is used to cover up cruelty, something of which Monroe was herself aware. Rose quotes from Monroe's notebooks and from people who knew her and understood how complicated she was, most notably the writer Bill Weatherby. As a child, Monroe was abused, moving from one foster family to another because of her mother's mental illness. Rose suggests that Monroe always retained a part of this past life whatever the American dream tried to make of her. She understood the lives of the poor and she knew Hollywood's underbelly. Rose effectively demonstrates how those on the margins, such as Weatherby's black male lover Christine, identified with Monroe.

Yet there seems to be a distance between the star working in the Hollywood studio system and the other women celebrated in this book. I am a little uneasy when Rose (provocatively, I think) refers to Luxemburg, Salomon and Monroe collectively as her stars. It is not that Monroe did not suffer enough, but rather that, given that she worked in a commercial industry and was not in control of the films she made, their scripts or how she was directed, our understanding of the relationship between her performances and her life is oblique. Moreover, the American material in this chapter interrupts what, for me, is a central theme of the book, one that is inextricably related to women and sexual difference, that of Europe's relationship to its 'others' – the Jew, the Muslim, the migrant.

In the middle section of the book, 'The Lower Depths', Rose turns to so-called honour killings, to the fate of women whose oppression, as she says, is what is most visible in their lives and deaths. This long chapter demands a great deal of concentration from the reader, who has to assimilate all the details of case studies, reports, personal views and literary representation (in novels by Nadeem Aslam and Elif Shafak) while also following Rose's train of thought. Focusing on the histories of three women, Shafilea Ahmed, Heshu Yones and Fadime Sahindal, each of whom was killed by her father for wanting to choose her own partner, the chapter also ranges widely across other stories and events. Each story raises the question of how women's voices can be heard when men's honour is linked to women's shame. When Sahindal, a Turkish-Kurd living in Sweden, spoke out in media and law courts

against the father and brothers who had threatened her, this public speech resulted in her death. As Rose discusses different ways of understanding why and how these crimes take place – whether they are part of culturally specific practices or general male violence against women – she rightly warns against seeing hatred of women's attempts to control their own sexuality as a feature only of Muslim culture or non-Western societies. With this in mind, she further argues that feminists must avoid the danger of providing support unintentionally for racist or Western hegemonic positions. Crucial here, in my view, is her reference to Tony Judt's representation in *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (Vintage, 2005) of Muslims as living 'others' who remind Europeans of the dead 'others', victims of pogroms, genocide and colonization whom Europe would choose to forget.

The three women artists discussed in the third section of the book, 'Living', delve deeply into recent history and its influence on present-day Europe. The video, photographic and installation art of the Lithuanian-born Jewish artist Esther Shalev-Gerz and the Israeli artist Yael Bartana can be situated in the field of memory work. Rose calls Shalev-Gerz 'the contemporary artist of democracy' (p. 190); she also refers to her as 'the artist of protest in a quiet voice' (p. 196) who captures intimate moments that might otherwise be lost. Her work gives face and voice to holocaust survivors, migrants and women workers through video projections on which they are seen and heard telling their stories. Shalev-Gerz records collective memory through working collaboratively with her subjects, listening to what they say and, through their memories, revealing the personal and political gaps in our understanding of displacement, war and austerity. As her migrant subjects speak freely and spontaneously, their words are a form of resistance to growing anti-immigration rhetoric.

Bartana also explores Europe's lost histories, focusing on the aftermath of the Second World War. Her trilogy of films, *And Europe Will Be Stunned,* envisages the possibility of Jews returning to Poland, but it does so, as Bartana herself has said, through opening the wounds of the past. Rose argues that Bartana creates a new language of intimacy, one in which people find they need those they had previously rejected. The author contrasts this with other, formalized ways in which people are encouraged to work towards reconciliation by recognizing the 'other' but not necessarily living with them. Bartana's work suggests an almost visceral coming together in close proximity.

The last portrait is that of British artist Thérèse Oulton, whose paintings Rose finds simultaneously disturbing and compelling. In *Abstract with Memories*, Oulton wants the viewer to journey into the earth, experiencing the destruction that humans have wrought there by becoming a fragment of what has been destroyed. Her spreading of paint across the canvas in small, individual brushstrokes allows the paint and, by extension, the earth to go their own way without hierarchy or direction. Rose emphasizes the unknowability of Oulton's painting. Rather than showing the light, the paintings leave viewers lost in the darkness, not seeing what they think they see. Her later work, *Territory*, takes the viewer above the earth to see it disintegrating through violence. In this way, Oulton does what Rose suggests women, uniquely, can do; she brings the darkness to the surface. Artist and viewer share a sense of rootlessness, no longer belonging to any one fixed place. This chapter is not easy to follow without knowing Oulton's work well. A small number of reproductions are included, but the reader will want to access Oulton's website, and those of Shalev-Gerz and Bartana, to appreciate more fully Rose's arguments in relation to their work. I felt

some uncertainty as to whether Rose, in her discussion of Oulton, was rounding up by bringing ideas together, or moving in a new direction. Perhaps my uncertainty mirrors the antinomies Rose sees in her own response to Oulton's work.

Rose is a well-established academic who always writes in a scholarly fashion, but in this book she is also polemical, and takes an exhortatory approach. I was struck by the number of times the imperative is used to demand that readers remember a previous comment or an event previously described. Men will and should read this book, but with the understanding that it is women whom Rose addresses. In her use and feminization of the collective first person plural – 'We as women' (p. 259) – she appropriates a form of address that historically has excluded women and strangers. A hostile review in a left-leaning newspaper criticized the book as obtuse. This cannot be right for, far from being unintelligent and insensitive, it is deeply felt, emotionally and intellectually. *Women in Dark Times* is not for the faint-hearted; nor, I think, is it for the uninitiated or unconverted. The implied reader is one who is already at least half familiar with the issues Rose discusses, and broadly in agreement with her. Rose's intention, therefore, is to persuade that reader to go further, to participate in the scandalous feminism which, she argues, causes the hidden to erupt and bring the private and the public together in a disorderly, messy way. The contribution of *Women in Dark Times* to the debate about how we create a better society for women and men lies in the way it convinces the reader that critical thinking is a necessary part of activism, and that the task before us is the urgent one of going beyond the limit, like Rosa Luxemburg, and finding ways of exposing and challenging darkness and of understanding the worst within ourselves.

The space between us

Nomadic theory: the portable Rosi Braidotti, by Rosi Braidotti, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, 416 pp., £15.91 (paperback), ISBN 978-0231151917

Reviewed by Susan Brewer, writer

Engaging closely with Gilles Deleuze's departure from psychoanalysis, while at the same time acknowledging the important insights afforded by psychoanalytic theory in relation to the process of subject formation, Braidotti presents an interpretation of nomadic theory as a process of becoming, always with the potential for transformation. Within this flux, she argues for a politics of affirmation where positive energies become actualized and negative energies do not.

Braidotti's account of nomadic thought rejects the notion of a self, shaped and formed within a single, non-negotiable social constructivist grid, at the mercy of feelings of loss and melancholia. Her essays bring to life an affirmative social landscape that links self and other, the personal and political, within sets of relations or assemblages. Power, here, has the potential to be both productive and restrictive.