

“A Bit of a Complex Situation”. The Round Table and the German Revolution

By Regine Prange

In her two-channel video *A Bit of a Complex Situation*, Elske Rosenfeld works with documentary footage of the first “Central Round Table” of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) on December 7, 1989. In doing so, she revisits a historically well-researched yet publicly little-remembered phase of German-German history, which is often overly reduced to a mere prelude to reunification through terms like “the Wende” (the turning point) or the “fall of the Wall.” Her video work recalls the moment of uprising initiated by the civil rights movement towards a reformed “second GDR.” Freed from the power apparatus of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), this new GDR was envisioned as an autonomous democratic state that, at least for a time, would coexist alongside the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). The dialogue between the old and new forces of the GDR at the Round Table was intended, as an extraparliamentary institution, to help overcome the state’s crisis, which had been brought to the brink of collapse by mass protests and mass flight following the opening of the border. It was meant to prepare the new state structure until the Volkskammer elections in the spring of 1990, not least by drafting a new constitution.

The Round Table was thus, on the one hand, a platform for the opposition and its demands—mainly the dissolution of the Office for National Security (the successor to the Office for State Security) and the creation of a new electoral law. On the other hand, it allowed (reform-minded) representatives of the SED and former bloc parties to inscribe themselves into the new order. By unanimous opinion, the Round Table ensured the maintenance of order in the face of the threat of anarchy, though critics argue that its compromising stance distanced it from the true revolution of the streets. The opposition did not consider taking power, despite 500,000 people demonstrating for democratic reform of the GDR on November 4. The ambivalence of that historical moment, in which revolution and restoration intertwined, is the central theme of Rosenfeld’s work.

To understand the critical ambition of her video analysis, it is first necessary to consider the specific conditions surrounding the event. Only after the SED, in response to the pressure of the demonstrations, relinquished its claim to leadership was there a chance for the realization of a meeting, a proposal that had long been advocated for by the opposition. However, it was only through the initiative of the Protestant Church—whose invitation the government parties could hardly refuse—that the meeting became a reality. Representatives of the Protestant Church thus acted as leaders, hosts, and moderators of the Round Table, whose first (and second) session took place in the church hall of the Dietrich-Bonhoeffer-Haus, under a large Moravian Advent star. Photographs show the table, unlike its round and oval counterparts in Poland and Hungary, as being rectangular in shape. Seated around it were 15 representatives from new political groups, including the *Democratic Beginning*, *Democracy Now (DN)*, the *Green Party*, the *New Forum (NF)*, and the *Social Democratic Party (SDP)*. Opposite them, and at an angle at one of the shorter sides, were 15 representatives of the old political forces, including the SED and former bloc parties like the

Christian Democratic Union (East Germany). These photographs reveal that the Round Table was a media event. In the empty center of the rectangular setup, a phalanx of microphones can be seen, while in the tightly packed crowd behind the participants, numerous photographers and cameramen are visible.

Rosenfeld's artistic material is constituted in the image and sound of the video recording by documentary filmmaker Klaus Freimuth of the *New Forum*. However, Rosenfeld avoids the reproductive photographic realism typical of the documentary film genre. In line with Brechtian aesthetics of estrangement, to which materially-oriented contemporary filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard and Alexander Kluge are also committed, she disrupts our expectation of narration. The interruption of scenographic continuity is a fundamental principle of a construction process that perceives historical reality as something that must first be produced. As Brecht wrote in his studies on film: "So there is indeed 'something to construct', something 'artificial', 'invented'. Hence, there is in fact a need for art. But the old concept of art, derived from experience, is obsolete. For those who show only the experiential aspect of reality do not reproduce reality itself."¹

Rosenfeld follows Brecht's rejection of the unity postulate of conventional reproductive realism by questioning the totality of the cinematic image through the dissociation of its elements—image, sound, camera movement, and editing. A pan initially moving from the opposition side to the right and then back to the left hardly serves as an orienting establishing shot. Likewise, the numerous following camera pans only partially fulfill their usual function of dramatically focusing on a significant moment in a continuous event, as if through an eye movement. The feeling of "being there" does not arise, already due to the splitting of the image. From Freimuth's video film, Rosenfeld excerpts two different partial views, which are played side by side, separated by a narrow space, and occasionally, without apparent logic, briefly unite for a fraction of a second into an almost complete image, which then immediately disintegrates again. From time to time, one of the two screens is switched off and then back on again. Dialogue and background noise swell and fade; repetitions, slow motion, and even brief rewinds extend the event, sometimes transforming the discussion into a silent, slightly blurred tableau of gestures and glances. In medium or close-up shots, we often see, in profile and heavily foreshortened, as if pressed into one plane by the telephoto lens, individuals or groups at the table with their utensils—glasses, documents, writing instruments—on the white tablecloth.

The critical form of interruption structurally provides a level of commentary, or rather, it is a kind of doubling of that interruption which becomes the topic of discussion during the session itself; and in all these moments, it can be understood as a metaphor for revolution, in which time stands still. Rosenfeld chooses a short section of the recorded conversation in which this moment is invoked, albeit in the form of a farce. A demonstration march on Friedrichstraße makes itself loudly known. Following the press spokesperson's report that "a very large crowd with drums, whistles, and shouts

¹Bertolt Brecht, "The *Three Penny Lawsuit*", in: *Brecht on Film and Radio*, London 2000, p. 164-165.

of 'Stasi out' is standing outside the door," possibly about to enter, and "under pressure of people's high expectations," a nervous discussion unfolds about whether a delegation should be sent out, and if so, with what explanation, since no decision had yet been reached. Before the panelists come to a decision, the demonstrators have already moved on. Relieved, they return to business as usual.

Rosenfeld's work reproduces the complete wording of the Round Table's reaction to the demonstration, recorded as Top 11. Visually, the events are concentrated on just a few actors. Those clearly shown as speakers include Ulrike Poppe, Wolfgang Ullmann (DN), Gregor Gysy (SED), and the moderator Karl-Heinz Ducke, as well as the reporters coming from outside. Up until the interruption of the session, the attendees had laboriously practiced democratic decision-making on procedural matters, as can be read in the transcript. From the very beginning, the Round Table engaged with the problem of its questionable legitimacy; and it is no coincidence that Rosenfeld reveals its evident overstrain, even a grotesque dysfunction, the laconic humor of which is reminiscent of Alexander Kluge's short stories. Before our eyes, and under the observation of the media representatives, the discussion dissolves into gestures of communication that fail to find their counterpart. The course of the conversation is fragmented into an "archive of gestures," which, in their isolation and suspension, reveal historical reality, both on the level of what is depicted and on the level of the depicting medium: Camera work and editing are also constantly presented as socially rehearsed gestures of showing, in the tradition of Dziga Vertov. A transfer of Brecht's theory of the theatrical gesture to the "amateur actors" of the documentary film can be seen in the fact that Rosenfeld dissects their gestures, as well as the image frame, and thereby "de-anecdotalizes" them. Within the given framework of the ritualistic-functional body language of moderators and media representatives, the gestures of the discussion participants disintegrate and, through the described estrangement techniques, are broken down into different moments of time and meaning.

The invisible rebels of the street - one such large-scale demonstration took place on the 7th of every month - are the actual protagonists of the civil movement, they are "the people", yet they do not achieve visual representation. In a way, Rosenfeld radicalizes Brecht's critique of photography by attempting to make the media's act of making things visible understandable as both an act of suppression and documentation. Just as the camera does not focus on the newly arrived protesters, the participants at the Round Table also increasingly shut themselves off from the noisy exterior. The opposition, especially Poppe and Ullmann, initially wants to issue a statement in support of the demonstrators to dissolve the Office for National Security. However, the moderator has no time to record statements, as he is desperately trying to prevent individual contacts with the outside. The recurring hieratic frontal view of the churchmen with the statuesque, regulatively gesturing Ducke in the middle seems like a refrain of the entire sequence. The only consensus of the group, that peace and order should be maintained, is embodied by the raised index fingers of the opposition members who speak up in front of the altar-like constellation of the moderator's table.

Even though the colorful and lively expression of the new opposition sympathetically stands out against the uniformity of the old powers and the ceremonial habitus of the priests and spokespersons, this opposition does not develop sharpness or urgency. Rosenfeld allows their statements to dissolve into abstract whip pans or slow-motion shots of resigned or fearful faces and postures. The spark of revolutionary anger that is breaking out in the streets is reduced to a simmer. Anger, especially amongst themselves, manifests in rocking on the chair, in glances perplexed or glaring sideways. The moderator's statement that no decision could be communicated is accepted without objection. Ingrid Köppe's (*NF*) proposal to at least inform the demonstrators that they were discussing the Stasi issue is graciously accepted. Yet even against this contentless remark by the assembly, objections are raised, including from Ibrahim Böhme, the SDP representative, who speaks from off-screen. He largely attributes the demonstrators to his own party and is perhaps looking for the best strategy in light of the hoped-for election victory in the spring. An inconsistency of statements and a retreat from the initial proposals can also be observed in other opposition members.

The opposing side speaks with just one, yet all the more distinct, voice—that of Gregor Gysi. As a member of the SED (of which he became the leader the next day, and which was shortly after renamed SED-PDS), he, together with his neighbor to the left, Wolfgang Berghofer (“Bergatschow”), is closest to the Modrow government. Ullmann, to the amusement of his neighbor Poppe, mistakenly addresses the two in a plea for help, referring to them as the “responsible representatives of the government” after Gysi had defended the Stasi employees. Gysi maintains this stance throughout the discussion. He firmly declares that the Round Table must not allow itself to be pressured by those “outside.” Rosenfeld's diptych first focuses on the clasped hands of the pastors and the coolly composed Gysi, waiting for his moment to speak. Close-ups of his speaking mouth, followed later by shots of his eyes seeking approval, create the portrait of a sharp-minded yet pragmatic rhetorician. Unlike the opposition members, who are either reflective or agitated, Gysi bases his speech on a careful observation of the situation.

The “complicated question” diagnosed by the moderator and confirmed by Gysi is resolved outside the room, namely by the demonstrators, who decide to leave. The further historical process, as suggested by Rosenfeld's choice to focus on the interruption of the session, would also be decided by the citizens in the streets, who remain invisible in the video. Their clear, action-oriented language—unlike the Round Table's careful, legalistic formulation—triumphed. The “Stasi out” call, which the members of the opposition did not take up, was to be unleashed in January 1990 in the storming of the Office for State Security. In the period that followed, the Round Table had no choice but to join the majority's desire for a rapid reunification. The first and last free Volkskammer election of the GDR was disappointing for the opposition groups. Lothar de Maizière's victory (Gysi and Berghofer's seatmate) was, in fact, not his own, but rather a victory for

Helmuth Kohl's CDU. The draft constitution prepared by the Round Table was not forwarded to the government.

Rosenfeld's treatment of Freimuth's video recording, which is both poetic and critical, follows the notion of the historical materialist as presented by Brecht's friend Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Film as historical research does not mean recognizing "how it actually was." Rosenfeld explicitly denies the eyewitness ideology of classical documentary film through the duality of the image, which is further emphasized by the temporary isolation or fusion. The flow of images is fragmented, slowed down, and thinned out, so that the flitting "true image of the past" can be captured. It is true when the present recognizes itself "as intended in that image."²

transl. by Steffen Andrae and Anna T. Gregor

²Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", in: *Selected Writings Vol. 4*, Harvard 2003, p. 391.