

## Rosa Porten in the Tradition of Asta Nielsen

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If Rosa Porten in today's film history is treated as the lesser known sister of the German silent film star Henny Porten, this was not the case in the 1910s. At the time, they were both esteemed for their work in the field: Henny Porten as one of the first pre-eminent film stars, Rosa Porten as a script-writer, an actress and a director. Even as actresses, each of them was distinguished and appreciated for their own merits. In film history, however, the career of the six years younger sister has almost completely overshadowed the career of the older one. This historical discrepancy not only prompts research into the career and oeuvre of Rosa Porten, but also invites reflection on the factors which have contributed to obscurity of her work for such a long time.

Key information about Rosa Porten's career and films we owe to the website of the German Film Institute, where Gerlinde Waz and Gabriëlle Hansch have published their research about German women film pioneers in 2002.<sup>i</sup> She made her debut as a film actress together with her sister in a film directed by her father, Franz Porten, an opera-singer who made so-called "Tonbilder" [sound-images] for the Messter-Projektion-GmbH. In 1910 she sold her first scenario to Messter, and suggested her sister should play the lead, with which she created the latter's first dramatic role. According to Waz and Hansch, Rosa Porten was one of the first scenarists in Germany. Exact numbers are as yet unavailable, but when Porten quit the industry in 1927, dozens of her scripts had been filmed.

Rosa Porten wrote alternately comedies and dramas in the 1910s, some of them for Henny Porten and Asta Nielsen, and several for Wanda Treumann, Ralph Nordeck and Paul Heidemann. Between 1916 and 1920, she also played the leading parts in comedies and dramas she had written and which she co-directed together with her husband using the pseudonym Dr. R. Portegg. These films were produced by the Treumann-Larssen-Vertriebs GmbH, the production company of the actors Wanda Treumann and Viggo Larssen. Rosa Porten also wrote novels and texts about the film world after 1919. In the early 1920s, Porten and her husband Franz Eckstein worked for the National-Film AG in Berlin, she as a scenarist and actress, he as a director. In 1926 and '27, three scenarios of Porten were filmed, the last one of which she co-directed. In sum total she had contributed to at least fifty films between 1908 and 1927.

Today, alarmingly scant traces of this versatile and prolific career are known to be extant. To my knowledge, prints of only six films by and/or with Rosa Porten are held in the archives. To date, it is unclear for which ones of these she has written the scenario, and of none of these films reviews have appeared in contemporary trade papers. I have only found advertisements in which they were listed among the films which the production company offered. On the basis of the extant films in combination with some reviews of films which are presumed lost, however, preliminary conclusions can be drawn about the significance of Rosa Porten's oeuvre and career in the German silent cinema.

One reason why to date not more films by Rosa Porten have been rediscovered or identified, may be the use of the pseudonym. Archives often are not aware that Dr. R. Portegg is a pseudonym. This was at least the case in the Amsterdam Eye Film Institute, where it was known that they had in addition to WANDA'S TRICK a second film, DIE LANDPOMERANZE [The Unwieldy Country Woman], by Dr. R. Portegg, but not whom it concerned. Only the wonderful revelation by Waz and Hansch made it possible to identify Rosa Porten and Franz Eckstein as their directors. And although the print of DIE

LANDPOMERANZE is incomplete and misses the last reel, it is the only film that I have seen in which Rosa Porten plays the leading part as well.

Apart from that, the identity of Dr. R. Portegg was neither addressed in the contemporary press. To be sure, the name was usually mentioned, and most often favorably so, but without any further reference. This fact leads me to the speculation that the trade and the press were informed about the identity of the directors, but did wish to reveal it as little as Porten and Eckstein did. Rosa Porten herself usually did not mention the pseudonym, nor point out her function as a co-director: the emphasis in portraits and reviews is on her scenarios and acting, which she signed with her real name. Nor did I find publications about Franz Eckstein during the couple's most prolific period, the years 1916-1919 - which would have been likely if the invisibility of a female director would have been the problem. Rosa Porten was neither the first female director in the German silent cinema nor the only woman film pioneer who combined film direction with acting and or script writing. The fact that Porten used the pseudonym and kept her function of co-director veiled, then, was neither a coincidence nor imposed on her. As I shall argue, it followed from the kind of cinema and parts which she chose and with the relations between the acting, the direction, the camera and the spectators which they required.

Two of the extant films by Dr. R. Portegg belong to the so-called Wanda Treumann-series 1917/1918, a third to the Rosa Porten-series of the same season. Unlike in the American or French cinema, where the caption "series" indicated a genre such as crime-series or adventure-series, which were released in about thirty minutes' episodes and told continuous stories with one protagonist, in German cinema the caption just referred to a group of separate feature length films which shared the star in the leading part and were offered in one season. It was the peak of the star cult which had started with Asta Nielsen and Henny Porten in 1911 and which dominated the marketing strategies until the end of the decade. The series named after Wanda Treumann and Rosa Porten comprised both dramas and comedies, each of about 45 minutes' length, with an own plot and a different female protagonist. About half of the thirty-six films produced in these series between 1916 and 1919, were directed by Dr. R. Portegg and most likely written by Rosa Porten. It was suggested at the time, that Rosa Porten had been persuaded by the managing director of the Treumann-Larssen film production company, Wanda Treumann's husband Carl, to play the leading parts in the films for which she had written the scenarios. The company thus stimulated Rosa Porten to make the most of her versatile talents. The contemporary press only applauded the initiative.

Many titles of films which Rosa Porten wrote and co-directed in those years, indicate that a female figure was central to the plot. Apart from WANDA'S TRICK (1918) and DIE LANDPOMERANZE (1917), there were comedies such as DIE WÄSCHER-RESL (1917, Laundry-Resl), DIE BACCHANTIN (1917, The Bacchante), DER NEUESTE STERN VOM VARIÉTÉ (1917, The Latest Star from Vaudeville), DAS MUSIKANTENMÄDEL (1918, The Girl Musician) or DIE FILM-KATHI (1918), and dramas such as DAS OPFER DER YELLA ROGESIUS (1917, The Sacrifice of Yella Rogesius), GRÄFIN MARUSCHKA (1917, Countess Marushka), EINE UNGLÜCKLICHE (1918, A Troubled Woman), DIE AUGEN DER SCHWESTER (1918, The Sister's Eyes) or IHR JUNGE (1918, Her Boy). The emphasis on the femininity of the protagonists is striking in its ubiquity. In addition, recurrent themes are social differences, often in the form of a woman or girl from the lower classes or the world of entertainment who desires a man from a higher class and the conflicts such a wish brings about. Wanda proposes marriage to the director of the factory where she works as a cigarette-maker, Yella works as an acrobatic horsewoman in a circus before she becomes the wife of Stefan, a descendant from a rich family, and Maruschka is the daughter of a farmer who becomes countess by marriage but who is nonetheless not accepted in the noble family and circles. Around such basically serious and topical themes, Rosa Porten created comedies with quite intrepid and creative heroines and dramas with women who indeed suffer but also know how to pragmatically solve the problems, most notably if money is the problem. Wanda,

for instance, saves the cigarette-factory from bankruptcy through a clever marketing trick, Yella wins the horse race which Stefan was not able to ride because of drunkenness, and Maruschka saves her gambling, dependent and unfaithful count from ruin and disgrace through providing him with the money to pay off his debts. Of course, in doing so the women save the men also for themselves, but their ingenuity and their loyalty - whether represented in the comic or the dramatic mode - effectively contrasts with the weakness, lack of ideas and the indolence which characterizes these well-to-do men.

The extant films and a comprehensive synopsis of GRÄFIN MARUSCHKA justify the assumption that the stories indeed were told from the perspectives of these female figures. Another indication for this may be derived from the title DAS OPFER DER YELLA ROGESIUS (The Sacrifice of Yella Rogesius). The scenario drew from a novel by Lo Berger, *Die Ehre des Stefan Rogesius* (The Honour of Stefan Rogesius), but Rosa Porten shifted the perspective to the woman's part and focused upon the sacrifice which she made to solve their problems.

The synopsis of GRÄFIN MARUSCHKA likewise suggests that the perspective of the female protagonist is the prevailing one.<sup>ii</sup> She is the one who prevents the desperate count from committing suicide and offers him a wholesome stay at her father's farm house. After he has fallen back into his gambling habit and has also become unfaithful to her, she eventually wins him back through once again solving his problems - as a proof of her unremitting love. Both in theme and perspective, DAS OPFER DER YELLA ROGESIUS is a kindred story, although it ends tragically for the heroine. However, she is fully aware of the risk she takes and accepts that her death may be her fate.

The intolerance of the higher class towards a circus girl is represented with subtlety in this film. Seemingly, the love and marriage of Yella and Stefan are accepted by his family and well-to-do friends, but beneath the surface things are brewing. For instance, a friend of Stefan thinks that he can harass Yella just like that, and when she resists him, he takes revenge through getting Stefan drunk so that he impossibly can ride the horse race. Although badly ill, Yella decides to take over the ride and wins it, but dies from the exhaustion. This is the sacrifice made by the former circus horsewoman. Jane Gaines believes that she saves the man with her action,<sup>iii</sup> but in my view she rather unmasks him as a spoiled misfit who is incapable of caring for his family.

In the comedy WANDA'S TRICK is the woman's perspective equally prominent, but is the female protagonist's agency more consistent than in the dramas. Right at the first time that the managing director invites Wanda for a stroll, she proposes that he marry her. When he turns her down, she just walks away. Then she wins the lottery and the director, who is in need of money for his languishing factory, approaches her. Now she turns him down. Instead of snapping at his proposal, she comes up with a marketing strategy, so that the director appoints her associate director of the factory. The strategy turns out successful and the factory is saved, but it simultaneously turns out that an error had occurred: her lottery ticket was not the winning one. Still, the managing director now accepts her not only as his associate, but as his wife as well. The comic mode obviously inspired Rosa Porten to an almost utopian-feminist story, which allowed this working girl to prove herself a smart business woman as well as the ideal wife of the factory director.

Similarly dauntless is DIE LANDPOMERANZE, even though it is unknown how the story ends. Isa, daughter of a landowner, has no intention whatsoever to marry the man her father fancies for her, because he thinks all country women are unwieldy. Of course, she acts as unwieldy as possible when he pays them a visit. In order to get definitely rid of him, she concocts a plan to marry him off to the 'financial lady' he considers, if only her mother were not so terrible. For this purpose, Isa cross-dresses and lands a job as the man's servant. First thing she does - and her last action in incomplete print - is to invite the financial lady and her mother to the man's home, without his knowledge.

Decisive for the prominence of the female perspective in these films is certainly how Wanda Treumann and Rosa Porten acted their parts. They were the stars who shaped these figures beyond the production (Treumann), the scenario and direction (Porten), that is to say precisely as actresses and their relationship with the camera. This is already hinted at in the prologues of these films, in which the leading lady is introduced to us. Wanda Treumann as Yella Rogesius, for instance, is seen against a black background while seated on a chair hidden beneath her wide skirt and while playing around with a whip. She looks simultaneously into the camera and slightly nods towards spectators, as if she wished to greet and encourage us. As Wanda, in *WANDA'S TRICK*, she is likewise seated, but on a kind of stool, which makes her pose more active. She smokes a cigarette and looks into the camera with a knowing smile. Then she starts throwing cigarette packets left and right from the camera and follows them with her eyes as if she would like to know where they land. Rosa Porten continuously looks into the camera in her prologue in *DIE LANDPOMERANZE*, first as if she were asking: "Somebody there?", then with a seductive smile and a welcoming nod.

Also Jörg Schweinitz ascribes the prologue of a cigarette packages throwing Wanda to the conventions of star representation.<sup>iv</sup> He points out two further functions: cinematic self-reflexivity and the emblematic function of anticipating the role, the narrative and the genre. The gaze into the camera is in Schweinitz' analysis a moment of cinematic self-reflexivity, because of its direct address to spectators, but I would like to suggest that it has an additional component in these three films. It anticipates not only the role, but also the central perspective of the narration, which will be the one of the female protagonist. Heide Schlüpmann has repeatedly argued that actresses in the social drama of the 1910s through playing with the camera were able to create a woman's narrative perspective.<sup>v</sup> This was possible thanks to the self-reflexivity of the actress, which in my view likewise determines the performances of Wanda Treumann and Rosa Porten in the films mentioned here. Both utilize theatre conventions in which they often play towards the camera instead of towards their cast members and have themselves shot almost frontally. Wanda Treumann employs the gaze into the camera furthermore within the diegesis. This acting style, however, has by no means a histrionic effect, but effectively supports the developing female narrative perspective and addresses the female spectator. I will give one example from each film to demonstrate how this functions (- that is to say, in my final version of the text!).

Last, I would like to point out that these films have in common the fact that they, just like Asta Nielsen's films of the 1910s, were shot in realist settings and on-location: in the streets, in the park, in a tenement, on the race track, in the circus, in a café etc. This shooting on location enhances the impression of social realism in both the dramas and the comedies. This social realism together with the direct address to the female spectator create the impression that Rosa Porten's cinema continued the tradition of the social dramas and comedies, of which Asta Nielsen was the exponent - not the tradition of the melodrama of which her sister Henny Porten had become the icon. Schlüpmann has argued, that Asta Nielsen's cinema was an actresses' cinema - not an author's or a director's cinema. This may explain Rosa Porten's use of the pseudonym when she co-directed.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/f\\_films/biographien/f\\_porten.bio.htm](http://www.deutsches-filminstitut.de/f_films/biographien/f_porten.bio.htm).

<sup>ii</sup> Anonymous, "Gräfin Maruschka. Drama in drei Akten von Rosa Porten," *Illustrierte Filmwoche*, nr 39/40 (1917), p. 184.

<sup>iii</sup> Jane Gaines, "Sad Songs of Nitrate. Women's Work in the Silent Film Archive," *Camera Obscura*, nr. 66 (2003), p. 176.

<sup>iv</sup> Jörg Schweinitz, "Die rauchende Wanda. Visuelle Prologe im frühen Spielfilm," *montage/av*, nr. 2 (2003), p. 91-102.

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<sup>v</sup> Heide Schlüpmann, *Die Unheimlichkeit des Blicks. Das Drama des frühen Deutschen Kinos*, Basel/Frankfurt am Main, 1990; Heide Schlüpmann a.o. (eds), *Unmögliche Liebe. Asta Nielsen, ihr Kino*, Wien 2009.