

LOVELY RITA

by Jessica Hausner

Drama | AUT, GER | 2001 | 80 min

SELECTION FESTIVALS / AWARDS

Festival de Cannes 2001: Sélection Officielle – Un Certain Regard

International Film Festival Viennale 2001: FIPRESCI – Special Mention, Vienna Film Award

CREW

Director Jessica Hausner

Script Jessica Hausner

DoP Martin Gschlacht

Sound Thomas Schmidt-Gentner

Editing Karin Hartusch

Artdirection Katharina Wöppermann

Costume Tanja Hausner

Producers Antonin Svoboda, Heinz Stussak, Philippe Bober

Production coop99, Prisma Film, Essential Film

CAST

Barbara Osika

Christoph Bauer

Peter Fiala

Wolfgang Kostal

Karina Brandlmayer

u.a.

Synopsis:

Rita is an outcast teenager in suburban Austria, misunderstood both at school, where she's disdained by classmates, and at home, where her staunchly religious mother and temperamental father bemoan her inability to fit in with their comfortable bourgeois life. When Rita sets out to seduce her school bus driver, she sets in motion a series of events that changes everyone's lives irrevocably.

Jessica Hausner on LOVELY RITA

Some time ago I read about a case involving a young girl from a good family. In the report, she was asked about her relationship to her parents, to her classmates, to men. Her answers were typical of a girl strongly influenced by puberty, with feelings of anger, self-loathing, and hatred for the outside world, represented, in this case, by her authoritarian father, who had wanted to bend the girl to his will. Thousands of other teenagers have these troubles, but they do not kill their parents because of them - which is what this girl did. Why did she, of all people, do so? Her answer was simple: she saw the gun lying on the kitchen counter, took it and shot her mother, then her father. We can now define a multitude of coincidences and events that finally led to the chance circumstance occurring and subsequently to the murder. Without disregarding or denying these explanations - my interest in this story lies above all in the coincidences that senselessly and unpredictably defined her destiny. The murder is frightening in how arbitrary it is. An arbitrariness that lacks both compassion and mercy.

Things happen as they happen. This point of view defines the narrative style of the film: events develop along certain trajectories, sometimes things happen very abruptly, without warning or explanation. The same goes for the characters: the "soul" of the characters is not asserted as much, instead, we see things from the outside, we see only the visible; some things remain only hinted at, an inkling of what lies behind the seen (the secrets of a person, of an event), some things remain completely unclear. We only get close to the characters very gradually - and we finally feel sympathy for Rita's wish to express herself. But all in all, Rita is as much a perpetrator as a victim - or rather, these terms become meaningless: beyond intention and morality, events happen.... they simply happen.

I lean towards two tendencies, realism and stylization, that together create the above-described effect. By realism I mean an almost documentary approach - in the sense that I create a multi-faceted reality, with clear gaps (see above: some situations or people, and their words or gestures, remain ambiguous). A reality that has its mysteries, that is erratic and ambiguous, is formed of many shades of grey. By "stylization" I mean gaps, interruptions: this influences the camera, the editing, and the narration. Thanks to these gaps, we can ask ourselves: what lies beyond the shown, beyond the visible? This is the crucial question that the film raises, and it is presented to the viewer right at the end through Rita's gaze. The "stylization" gives the film the ability to make a general statement that goes beyond the here and now. Both realism and stylization work together to give an account of being apart, of being alone in the world, of silence (without words), of an indifference that is funny and sad at the same time, good and bad, true and false - two sides of the same coin.

Interview:

What was the idea that served as a base for writing the script?

I was attracted by the idea of a person who seems harmless but acts radically: The main character is a very young girl, clumsy and an outsider. But precisely because she stands aside from everything, she is not at all intimidated by norms. She simply crosses boundaries, does things that one "doesn't really do" at her age, in her position.

In your earlier work, the main characters were also young women or girls, about to take action in some way or another. What interests you about such ambivalent, perhaps only partially lovable characters?

The outsider is a placeholder. So, if you like, the outsider serves as a dramaturgical device to concisely narrate a certain condition: it's all about loneliness. Actually, that's what all my films are about: "Flora", "Inter-View" and "Lovely Rita". The characters are outsiders who have something that we all have within ourselves: the feeling of being alone. And beyond that, the longing to make contact with other people and to exchange ideas, to be close to someone and to experience sympathy. Sometimes all this becomes possible, but only for a short amount of time.

Do you think that people of the same age as the character can identify with her, or would want to do so? Do you think about how your film would be understood by the young people who go to the Apollo Cinema (in Vienna), for example?

I do think about it. I am very curious to see how audiences will react. Especially young people, as being "cool" also means having lots of friends, being integrated into a group. I think it's a total taboo to admit that you're lonely. Maybe the film will just get on some people's nerves because they don't want to think about it.

What means did you use to create your concept of reality in this film?

An important point here is coincidence. And that is again linked to the fact that I worked with non-professionals. Shooting with non-professionals creates a certain image of reality. They are in a way less disciplined when they act because they have no experience in perfecting and disciplining themselves. They create this strange "shimmer" stemming from the fact that a person can be both pleasant and unpleasant at the same time. In fact, the film is told in a very detached way. It keeps its distance from Rita and everyone else. When we watch it, we also, in a way, get this feeling of "being on the outside." We are not given the possibility to glimpse all the way at the "soul," for instance through close-up shots. Nonetheless, there are quite a few close-ups in the film. There's a lot of zooming in, for example – it's like "zooming in on the soul" - but we don't see more than a face. Only the surface remains. There are some radical ellipses in the narrative. If the narrator was not "there" at the time - too bad, it just didn't happen then. To me it is enough that the individual scenes are credible in themselves. Every moment simply has to be completely captured, which puts the viewer in the position of having to cooperate. The last image, when Rita looks straight into the camera, represents a big question. It's the moment when she addresses the viewer who has to see for himself what he thinks of the question.

You spent four months casting at Viennese schools. What characteristics were you searching for for your Rita - and what made you choose Barbara Osika in the end?

She came to the audition and had this calm face and was, in a way, absorbed in her own world.... On the other hand, she had these big eyes. She is very charismatic, on the surface there is this refusal and this clumsiness, but at the same time you have the feeling that there is something bubbling under the surface. And that was it. It was completely based on feelings.

Did you rehearse the scenes a lot beforehand? Or did you let the actors try out a lot themselves?

In the scenes where several actors were involved, for example, the "kamikaze" scene, which was very exciting for me, I only explained roughly, who should stand where and when depending on the camera movement. I didn't explain too much, and simply said "please go ahead". Since we were shooting on video, we always had the camera rolling from the first take. However, we often needed up to thirty takes.

What are some differences in directing short films and now your first full-length feature film?

That's difficult to say because I didn't choose a classic dramatic composition. The film does not develop over 80 or 90 minutes with various ups and downs, but it works in a similar way to my short films – full of ellipses, short sequences, and episodes strung together in staccato. My principle with "Lovely Rita", as with my short films, was to dive into every moment. Every scene had to be authentic, no scene carries the weight of what happened in the scene before. So, in this sense it was similar to directing short films, because I didn't want to make a classic psychological drama.

In "Lovely Rita", certain retro elements stand out: the polyester anoraks or flower stickers. Are these included merely because retro is currently generally speaking a trend, or do they have a specific meaning?

The whole thing is actually a conglomeration, a stylistic device that tries not to pin the story down to a specific era. Ultimately, it's an assortment of things that come together to create a timeless impression. This also has to do with the stylization, with the zooming in and out, and the multiple-camera setup.

You are often considered to be part of this group of female film school graduates (Ruth Mader, Valeska Grisebach, Barbara Albert and others). Is that just the impression we get from the outside, or is there a real sense of cohesion/collaboration between you?

There is - somehow, I get the feeling that a kind of "hour of glory" occurred at the Film Academy. It simply happened that people who really had things in common came together. It's definitely the case that we encourage each other and engage with each other. I spent the last year in Berlin, where I had a lot to do with "Mein Stern" (note: Valeska Grisebach's feature film debut) and I even lived with Valeska. We used to visit each other in the editing room. I find it so important. For example, she is one of the people whose opinion I value immensely. The same goes for Antonin Svoboda, Barbara Albert, Martin Gschlacht, Valentin Hitz or Kathrin Resetarits. We show each other our scripts and talk about them. Recently, in connection with the

discussions at the Diagonale, we talked again about how strange it is that Austrian politics don't seem to understand that an Austrian film identity could be created, or to put it another way, that it already exists.

In a first association, your film reminded me of two filmmakers: on the one hand of Claude Chabrol, for example his "La ceremonie" and on the other hand, of Michael Haneke.

I'm glad you also mention Chabrol. I actually appreciate Chabrol very much and also studied him in depth a year ago. I think "Le Boucher" is particularly great. The good thing about French cinema is that they don't have this gap between art and commerce. That Chabrol's crime films are philosophical films at the same time. "Le Boucher", like "Silence of the Lambs", is about a psycho killer, but he never has to be psychiatrically dissected. He's just a "psycho" in a love story – who cares what his motives are: the tragic element lies in something completely different. This preserves the mystery and the depth within each person. That's why a film made thirty years ago is still so topical now. Of course, I'm also very interested in Haneke. What I like about his films is that they tell stories in a non-psychological way. Haneke confronts the viewer with facts that one has to come to terms with, instead of explaining them, making them plausible and emotional. This is very much in line with my own perception of reality.

Maya McKechney in conversation with the director. This interview appeared in the May issue of "RAY Cinema Magazine".