



**Perception, Painting, (Motion) Picture: Film Analysis  
of NEVER LOOK AWAY (WERK OHNE AUTOR, D 2018)**

Tristan Lay (Sydney)

ISSN 1470 – 9570

## Perception, Painting, (Motion) Picture: Film Analysis of NEVER LOOK AWAY (WERK OHNE AUTOR, D 2018)

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Films about art and artists are not uncommon. In addition to films about writers and musicians, artist films are among the most popular subgenres of the biopic. Here, too, the life and work of the artists is staged on the big screen in a variety of ways. Based on a film analysis of NEVER LOOK AWAY (WERK OHNE AUTOR, D 2018, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck), this paper contributes numerous points of reference for conversation in GFL teaching.

Filme über Kunst und Künstler stellen keine Seltenheit dar. Neben Schriftsteller- und Musikerfilmen gehören Künstlerfilme zu den am meisten verfilmten Subgenres des Biopics. Auch in diesen Werken wird das Leben und Wirken der Kunstschaffenden auf der großen Leinwand in vielfältiger Weise inszeniert. Der vorliegende Beitrag zeigt anhand einer Filmanalyse zu WERK OHNE AUTOR (D 2018, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck) die vielfältigen Anknüpfungspunkte auf, denen im Kontext des Lehrens und Lernens des Deutschen als Fremdsprache nachgegangen werden kann.

### 1. Introductory remarks: cinematic art rewriting the life of artists

Whether Vincent van Gogh<sup>1</sup> in LUST FOR LIFE, Francisco de Goya<sup>2</sup> in GOYA – ODER DER ARGE WEG DER ERKENNTNIS, Michelangelo in THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY, William Turner in MR. TURNER, ANDREJ RUBLIOW, (Jackson) POLLOCK or BASQUIAT<sup>3</sup>, the memories, reflections, fears, struggles and hopes of (mostly male) artists have been combined on the screen in a roundelay of images and sounds for over half a century. More recent feature films are now increasingly devoted to the lives of famous female artists: e.g. CAMILLE CLAUDEL or Frida Kahlo in FRIDA. Female artists who had long worked in

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<sup>1</sup> Van Gogh's life has been repeatedly represented on the big screen (VINCENT: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF VINCENT VAN GOGH, VINCENT & THEO, VAN GOGH): The most recent adaptation of the Dutch painter's life is AT ETERNITY'S GATE by Julian Schnabel. Here, reference should also be made to the animated movie LOVING VINCENT, which is designed as a crime thriller. In the case of artists whose lives and works have been told several times in cinema, it is possible to discuss and problematize different approaches to biographical films about artists in class.

<sup>2</sup> For a comparative film analysis of GOYA – ODER DER ARGE WEG DER ERKENNTNIS and GOYA EN BURDEOS cf. Hildebrand (2020).

<sup>3</sup> For Pollock and Basquiat see the monograph by Berger (2009).

the shadows were also discovered for cinema, such as Séraphine Louis in *SÉRAPHINE* or Maud Lewis in *MAUDIE*. These works can not only be understood as a kind of projected art history, but they always tell of the life and work of the artists in a difficult environment, while at the same time dealing with the specific motifs of the profession, such as alienation, loneliness, forlornness and the suffering of the artist, lack of success, and the struggle for social recognition. Additionally, personal strokes of fate are part of the canon of topics in artist biopics (for figuration in the genre biopic, see Kuhn 2013: 221-225). The filmed anecdotes all feature a biographical character, are always characterized by a specific point of view and are without exception subject to certain cinematic techniques and narration that need to be explored.

## 2. Film analysis

Through the lens of film analysis, I would like to take a closer look at the first half hour of the three-hour feature film *NEVER LOOK AWAY* (*WERK OHNE AUTOR*), which covers the childhood of the protagonist. I will try not only to shed light on and provide insights into the complexity (incl. factuality and fictionality, representation of historical events with a traumatic quality, and freedom of art as a fundamental right), diversity (incl. mise-en-scène, camera techniques and other parameters), entanglements (incl. intertextual and intermedial references) and the variety of meanings (incl. use of metaphor<sup>4</sup>), but also refer to the foreign language didactic potential inherent in this movie. Additionally, the fact that the film has received predominantly negative reviews in German-speaking countries and has been further criticized<sup>5</sup> due to its depiction of historical images provides additional justification to deal with it in GFL teaching, since here too the ability to reflect and criticize are regarded as central areas of competence.

Eleven years after his feature film debut and (award winning) GDR drama *THE LIVES OF OTHERS*<sup>6</sup> (*DAS LEBEN DER ANDEREN*), Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck presented his film *NEVER LOOK AWAY*, which depicts a journey through three decades of German history, at the 75th Venice (International) Film Festival in 2018. The colorful and opulent

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<sup>4</sup> For metaphors in film cf. Müller & Kappelhoff 2018 or Greifenstein et al. 2018.

<sup>5</sup> For instance in the leading film magazines *epd Film* (<https://www.epd-film.de/filmkritiken/werk-ohne-autor>) and *Filmdienst* (<https://www.filmdienst.de/film/details/551301/werk-ohne-autor#kritik>). All links in this article were accessed on 30.12.2020.

<sup>6</sup> For an anthology about *THE LIVES OF OTHERS* see Cooke (2013), for the GFL context see Arendt (2019) or Koreik (2020).

historical epic is both a classic and strikingly staged biopic, which in terms of aesthetics and form, theme and content is similar to the (family) melodrama, and is clearly reminiscent of the life episodes of the German painter Gerhard Richter (born 9 February 1932 in Dresden; for Richter's biography see Elger 2008). The parallels are blatantly obvious: not only do the timeline and circumstances of the famous contemporary artist provide the rough structure of the plot, individual actors in this pseudo-biopic<sup>7</sup> are also modeled on reality down to the last detail, and are easily recognizable even if they have been extensively fictionalized and renamed throughout.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the paintings that Donnersmarck includes in the film depict analogies reminiscent of those in Richter's work. Both thematically and in their painting technique, they are obviously based on Richter's first photo-paintings, which he created in the mid-1960s: [Aunt Marianne](#) (*Tante Marianne*, CR 87; 1965, 100cmx115cm), [Mr. Heyde](#) (*Herr Heyde*, CR 100; 1965, 55cmx65cm) and [Family at the seaside](#) (*Familie am Meer*, CR 35; 1964, 150cmx200cm). The paintings seen in the film narration, however, primarily serve to bring together the (fictional) life stories and fates presented.

Donnersmarck's NEVER LOOK AWAY describes from the early life up to the artistic breakthrough of the German painter Kurt Barnert (alias Gerhard Richter). This period is presented as exemplary of the artist's life and work. The condensed life stages of the portrayed character are presented against the background of relevant events in contemporary German history: childhood in the Nazi era, a career start in the GDR and a new beginning in West Germany. The broad epic arc that encompasses three German states addresses specific associations and memories of the Holocaust as well as a German-German cultural memory. Thus, in the context of remembrance culture, there is also a relevant topic for GFL lessons to explore (for teaching about the Holocaust see the special issue of *Info DaF* edited by Fornoff et al. 2020).

The central topics of the film (which not only touch on current issues, but are also important in the context of teaching and learning foreign languages and cultures) are already introduced during the exposition: art, empathy, alternative perspectives and finding one's own attitude.

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<sup>7</sup> A pseudo-biopic is a film that takes the form or style of a biopic but does not portray real persons.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, this requires knowledge of the personalities that cannot be expected from foreign language learners, but is worth exploring in GFL lessons.

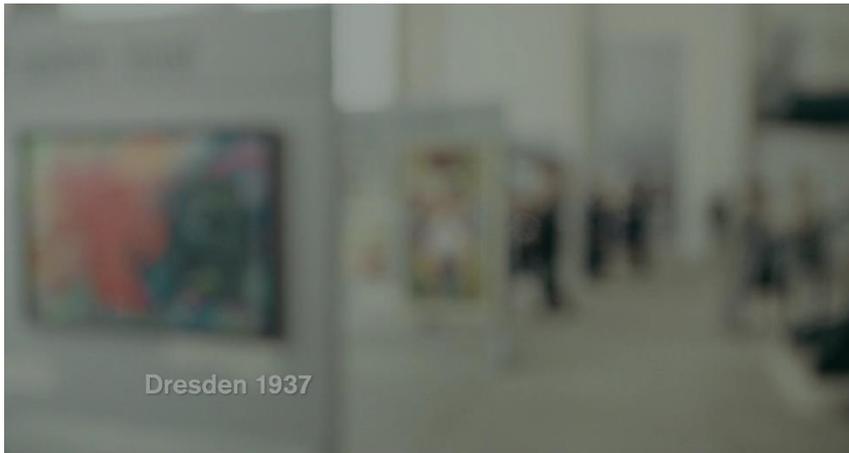


Figure 1: Opening scene NEVER LOOK AWAY

Right at the beginning of the film, the viewer is confronted with a characteristic of Richter's pictorial cosmos: the use of a camera *fade-in* creates an exposed blurring of the establishing shot in the museum and thus addresses something fundamental in our context: the dichotomy of seeing vs. not seeing, which we will later encounter repeatedly on several staging levels. The *dissolve* is a commonly used cinematic technique that mostly marks the beginning of a sequence or a transition between scenes. The blurred effect that causes the uncertain relationship between the viewer and the subject is certainly not a coincidence in NEVER LOOK AWAY, but rather a consideration of the director to implement blur and introduce a visualization of uncertainty at the beginning of the story. The eye of the camera creates not only a phantasmagoric effect for the viewer but also illustrates the relationship of painting, photo and moving picture, which merge here into a single unit. The uncertainty in the visual process that challenges our perception is technically made possible by the delayed focusing of the camera, in which – unlike in Richter's painting – we also perceive vague ('real') movement<sup>9</sup> in the amorphous background of the distinctive *mise-en-scène*, which does not, however, come from the main characters of the film themselves. The *insert* "Dresden 1937" explicitly specifies the place and time and thus also the singular historical context in which we are dealing. Approaching from the right edge we see the face<sup>10</sup> of a polemically trained museum guide (Lars Eidinger) in full-screen modus, who begins his tour in a contemptuous tone with the words "Modern art – yes ...". The Nazis deliberately denounced the art of ostracized

<sup>9</sup> Richter also deals with the representation and visualization of movement in his works.

<sup>10</sup> For the face as "mediales Ereignis" see Barck & Löffler (2005). For a special issue with a focus on face in film cf. Lotman (2004).

modern painters and sculptors through museum exhibitions, and as we shall see a little later, this attitude, with its lack of differentiated perception, empathy and tolerance towards modern art and its creators, also spreads to the majority of the museum visitors.

Little Kurt Barnert (portrayed by Cai Cohrs) accompanies his aunt Elisabeth May (Saskia Rosendahl) to the National Socialist exhibition “Degenerate Art”<sup>11</sup>, which was initiated by Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels. At the latest at TC<sup>12</sup> 00:04:18 this can also be read from the banner, which is entitled “Wanderausstellung Dresden **“Entartete Kunst”**“ (emphasis in the original; “Traveling Exhibition Dresden **“Degenerate Art”**“) and is written in Fraktur (blackletter) script. In this short street scene, not only the font, but also the architectural backdrop, props, costumes, color and sound serve as signals of authenticity. Without going into the numerous interspersed details, it should be briefly emphasized that in the four-minute museum scene, the exhibits of the artists of different modern movements (Expressionism, Impressionism, Dadaism, New Objectivity, Surrealism, Cubism and Fauvism) are equated with the art works and perceptions of mentally handicapped people (in the words of the museum guide: “Mental illness is raised to the principle.” Or: “This is how sick spirits see nature.”), in order to make museum visitors stunned and disgusted as a means of efficient indoctrination.<sup>13</sup> Aunt Elisabeth (alias Marianne Schönfelder), as we will notice a bit later, suffers from schizophrenia and falls into the category of “Life Unworthy of Life” according to the perverse ideas of National Socialist racial hygiene. Due to their inefficiency, these people were considered to be “ballast existences”: their lives were judged to be pointless and useless for the community and should therefore be ended through the euthanasia program “Aktion T4”<sup>14</sup>. In the eyes of the Nazis, they were “parasites in the German national body” because, in their opinion,

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<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the exhibition “Degenerate Art” see Zuschlag (2004).

<sup>12</sup> Timecode according to the DVD: WERK OHNE AUTOR. Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2019. Information is in the format hh:mm:ss.

<sup>13</sup> In the touring exhibition, the Nazis also used photos of deformed people for the purpose of comparison, in order to arouse horror and disgust among the mass audience. At the same time, the Great German Art Exhibition was presented in the Haus der deutschen Kunst (House of Art) in Munich (July 16-15, 1939) to show the public what is meant by “German” art. However, this event was not able to attract an audience of millions. Original recordings can be found in films such as 1937 – KUNST UND MACHT, which are also suitable for comparisons and analysis purposes in the GFL context (from TC 00:08:10).

<sup>14</sup> “T4” is the abbreviation for Tiergartenstraße 4 in Berlin-Mitte, where the official headquarter of the organization was located.

these people diminished the quality of the Aryan race and prevented the higher development of humanity.

As the film continues, Elisabeth and Kurt leave Elbflorenz Dresden via the Augustus Bridge in a bus of the type Mercedes-Benz O 3750. These former omnibuses of the Deutsche Reichspost (Kraftpost) will later make history as “gray buses” and are not insignificant as a metaphorically-laden harbinger in our context. With these converted buses, which were painted gray with tinted windows so that outsiders could not see the helpless victims, up to 75 people were “relocated” to one of the six “sanatoriums” (Grafeneck, Brandenburg, Bernburg, Hartheim near Linz, Sonnenstein or Hadamar). The transport capacity of the gray buses was usually adjusted to the gas chamber capacity of the killing centers.

The act of leaving Dresden in the film finds its equivalent in the move from Dresden to Reichenau (1935 and later Waltersdorf) in Gerhard Richter’s life. The topographies of town and country, which are characteristic for the melodrama<sup>15</sup>, already indicate the wide and narrow living spaces. When they reach the central bus station in Großschönau (Saxony) at dusk, a key scene takes place in the parking lot whose action is not verbally explained to us as viewers; therefore we must infer Elisabeth’s motivation. The “horn concert” of the local bus convoy – which the composer Max Richter accompanies with his *score* – enables Kurt’s aunt to discover absolute beauty in a trance-like moment. The epiphany as a catalyst for a period of further growth and knowledge also becomes relevant in Kurt’s later life.

In the following scene Elisabeth is selected due to her physical qualities to present the Führer (whom we as viewer do not see) with a bouquet of flowers. A little later, however, the “piano scene” unveils her mental illness, which is incompatible with the realization of the Nazi dream of a “master race”. Sitting at the Blüthner piano, she says to her nephew, who lowers his eyes at the sight of his naked aunt: “Don’t look away! Never look away Kurt. ... Everything that is true is beautiful.” This imperative (which is at the same time the film’s engine of action) to “Never Look Away” is taken up in the (English) film title, as well as in the *tagline* of the (German) film poster (“Sieh niemals weg”). In an atmospheric and emotionally loaded central scene, Elisabeth repeats her words as she is led away against her will by employees of the “German Red Cross Zittau” (here, too, the

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<sup>15</sup> For the characteristics of the genre of melodrama see Weber (2013).

lettering “D.R.K. Zittau” is in Fraktur to convey authenticity). She addresses her words to Kurt from the closed window of the ambulance.



Figure 2: Window scene

It is a complex “window scene” in which an outside and an inside are constructed: The window pane allows both an inner view outwards and an outer view inwards (cf. Thiele 2017: 58). Although Elisabeth and her family members’ gazes meet through the window pane, her words no longer penetrate, so that the window pane reinforces the separation of the characters. The (*head and shoulder*) *close-up* chosen here does not simply serve to convey the “snippets of conversation” that only we as viewers can hear. Carl Plantinga points out the following when it comes to close-ups of faces in narrative film:

Narratives elicit varied responses toward characters, including opposition, dislike, sympathy, strong allegiances, and/or the desire to emulate characters and take them as role models. In this regard, the represented face has the capacity not only to communicate but to elicit affects such as mirror responses rooted in affective mimicry, facial feedback, and emotional contagion. What I call “scene of empathy” typically occurs (if at all) well into a narrative, after audiences have had time to develop allegiances to a main character. At a dramatically climactic moment of joy or sorrow, for example, the pace of the scene slows and viewers are shown an extended close-up of the main character’s face in the throes of emotion. [...] The sorts of mirror responses elicited by represented faces are largely automatic and unconscious, though tempered and framed by cognitive perspectives developed over the course of the narrative. (Plantinga 2015: 299)

Moreover, during the close-up of Elisabeth’s face, melodramatic elements in the form of language, gestures, facial expressions, music and noise (slamming of car door) are audiovisually synthesized; word and image also merge into a metaphor for knowledge, with the fears and hopes of that moment in time condensed in Elisabeth’s face framed by the window (TC 00:17:50). Elisabeth expects forced sterilization and later death in the

gas chamber. In this scene, the discrepancy between character and audience knowledge helps to build tension.

The separation from his beloved aunt – who desperately defends herself – represents a moment in which Kurt sees something that he shouldn't see as a little boy. His mother, therefore, holds her hand in front of his face. Kurt repeats this protective gesture with his own hand<sup>16</sup>.



Figure 3 and 4: Deictic hand gesture

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<sup>16</sup> For the hand as a visual eye-catcher and carrier of meaning (in the context of cultural and industrial film production during the Nazi era), see Meyer (2005). The author emphasizes the following: “Es zeigt sich, daß Gestik durch ihre allgemeine Verständlichkeit besticht und deshalb als universale Sprache von beträchtlicher Komplexität definiert wird. Die Hände sind wichtige Zeichen am Menschen, ebenso wichtig wie der Gesichtsausdruck oder die Körperhaltung. Die Vorstellung, daß die Hände dazu geeignet seien, das Innenleben der Menschen sichtbar zu machen, gewinnt man nicht erst in Anbetracht der (Selbst-) Inszenierungen Hitlers, sondern schon in früheren Filmen” (Meyer 2005: 116).

His gaze through the splayed fingers stages a moment that – evoking similarities to Richter’s works – oscillates between looking back and forth, between sharpness and blurring. This deictic hand gesture concentrates the gaze in this scene, but it is by no means to be interpreted as an isolated event in the film. It becomes the fulcrum of the interplay between gaze and hand, alluding, to a certain extent, to the perception of the artist’s hand and thus also serving as a symbolic means of expression for the protagonist’s self-discovery. The recurring symbiotic interaction between hand and gaze creates a contextual frame of reference to the pictorial motif (already anchored as a forerunner in the medium of painting), and this decisive moment burns into the boy’s soul – this trauma will not let go of him later in life. Kurt’s individual, internalized attitude, which differentiates him from his surroundings, is an essential motif that is often taken up in biographical film about artists.

During the Bombing of Dresden<sup>17</sup> (TC 00:29:04) – which Kurt watches from a distance – we can see that he has internalized the words of his aunt after his mother again holds her hand in front of his face and he again pushes it away. The staging of this now-determined expressive gesture is symbolically charged and the scene dispenses with spoken language in favor of silent signs in order to emphasize the meaning and inevitably bring the motif to the fore. The subsequent short sequences condense Kurt’s trauma into one day: through a montage underlaid with music, the death of the bus driver from the beginning of the film, the death of Kurt’s friend Joanna (and her mother) in her children’s room, the death of his uncles<sup>18</sup> on the battlefield and the murder of his aunt (and other patients) in the gas chamber are combined. In particular, the images of the apocalypse in Dresden merged with images from the gas chamber were sharply attacked by German film critics.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Airplanes form their own category in Richter’s oeuvre. This includes not only jet fighters, but also bombers (CR No. 13; 1963, 130cmx180cm), as they can be seen in the movie or as remakes in TC: 02:44:07.

<sup>18</sup> One of the uncles is called “Günther” (Florian Bartholomäi); the first name is derived from the Old High German “gund” (fight) and “heri” (army). It was a quite common German first name at that time and was probably chosen intentionally by Donnersmarck (screenplay). The figure Günther finds its real counterpart in Gerhard Richter’s godfather Rudolf Schönfelder, whom he – like his aunt – was immortalized in 1965 in the grisaille work Uncle Rudi (Onkel Rudi, CR No. 85; 1965, 87cmx50cm); in the movie we see a copied photo-painting (TC: 02:44:05). For the meaning of the title Uncle Rudi, see Ostrowicz (2006).

<sup>19</sup> For example: <https://www.kulturwest.de/inhalt/im-kino-werk-ohne-autor/>. Taboo as an overarching topic can be found in almost all textbooks at B1 or B2 level. This topic can also be deepened at C1 level in the context of film and cultural mediation. For reflections on film

The further plot (“May 8, 1945”, TC 00:32:50) – about which I will not go into detail, given the three-hour length of the film – is still strongly based on Richter’s family history.<sup>20</sup> In his non-fiction book (2005) *Ein Maler aus Deutschland. Gerhard Richter. Das Drama einer Familie* (‘A painter from Germany: Gerhard Richter. The drama of a family’), the German investigative journalist Jürgen Schreiber reveals the political and historical constellations in the family of Richter’s first wife, Marianne Eufinger (“Ema”). The artist Kurt, who is convinced of the idea of painting, is played in adulthood by Tom Schilling. He meets and falls in love with the fashion student Ellie<sup>21</sup> Seeband (alias Marianne Eufinger, portrayed by Paula Beer<sup>22</sup>) at the art college. She is the daughter of the gynecologist Professor Carl Seeband (Sebastian Koch<sup>23</sup>), who – as a typical antagonist and contrasting figure – tries to prevent the relationship with his daughter by all available means. Gerhard Richter’s father-in-law, Heinrich Julius Josef Eufinger, was not only a gynecologist and director of the Dresden-Friedrichstadt Municipal Women’s Clinic, but he was also an SS Ostufaf. Motivated by racial hygiene, he ordered compulsory sterilizations in addition to carrying them out himself. Eufinger was not only involved in the SS but also actively made proposals on racial policy. In his book, Schreiber reconstructs the suffering of Marianne Schönfelder and the career path of Heinrich Eufinger. Their paths in life almost cross; only the fact that Marianne Schönfelder was in poor health prevented Richter’s (former) father-in-law from personally performing the forced sterilization that had been planned for her at Eufinger’s clinic in Dresden.

The extent of Richter’s family tragedy forms the focus of the rest of the film, which culminates in the interweaving of the portraits – and thus the résumés – of Aunt Elisabeth,

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about the legacy of the Holocaust, cf. the contributions in the anthology by Diamond & Sklarew (2019). For the representation, dissemination and revision of historical images with a traumatic character in the context of “fictionalized memory” cf. Kuschel (2019: 23-64) or Werner (2020: 59-100).

<sup>20</sup> Gerhard Richter has distanced himself from Donnersmarck’s cinematic version of his life and the dramatic deterioration in the film narration.

<sup>21</sup> The short form of the name Ellie refers to Kurt’s aunt Elisabeth and thus also to the namesake in reality (Marianne Schönfelder and Marianne Eufinger). The first name of Richter’s second daughter is Ella (Maria).

<sup>22</sup> Paula Beer is the recipient of the “Silver Bear” of the Berlinale 2020, as well as recipient of the European Film Award for Best Actress 2020 for her performance in *UNDINE*. Donnersmarck has been criticized for her casting as a superficial film character in *NEVER LOOK AWAY*.

<sup>23</sup> As a leading head of the euthanasia program, Sebastian Koch has been cast in the role of Dr. Walter Veithausen in *FOG IN AUGUST*.

Dr. Burghart Kroll (alias Werner Heyde<sup>24</sup>) and his father-in-law (TC 02:41:19). At the end of the film we see a recurring scene which frames the movie: This time it is Kurt who – as an acclaimed artist – asks for his “horn concert”.

### 3. Learning with art biopics

Art education tends to focus on traditional arts such as painting and music. In the institutional context, the teaching of art is generally assigned to the subjects of visual art, music and sometimes theater. Dealing with biographical films about artists in the context of teaching and learning foreign languages requires more attention, as challenging teaching models have been developed only marginally so far, and the nexus between foreign language learning and film mediation might evoke a strong deterrent due to the “art of mediation” itself. Similarly, “static” art has been marginalized for similar reasons, as Badstübner-Kizik & Lay (2019: 2) concisely emphasize in their introductory essay to the special issue “Visual Arts in Foreign Language Teaching”:

Während Sprachlehrforschung und Fremdsprachendidaktik sich in den letzten Jahren zunehmend den „bewegten Bildern“ widmeten, blieb die Thematisierung künstlerisch gestalteter „statischer“ Bildarbeiten, und erst recht skulpturaler Werke, in sprachdidaktischen Kontexten im Hintergrund. Dies kann zum einen auf den Umstand zurückzuführen sein, dass ‚Bildende Kunst‘ gerne mit ‚Kunstvermittlung‘ in Verbindung gebracht und diese wiederum häufig dem ‚Kunstunterricht‘ zugeordnet wird. Er wird als vom (Fremd-) Sprachenunterricht getrennt wahrgenommen und Fremdsprachenlehrende fühlen sich oftmals nicht ausreichend darauf vorbereitet, kompetent mit ‚Bildsprache‘ umzugehen und diese didaktisch angemessen zu nutzen – so oder ähnlich lautet der allgemeine Tenor, wenn es um die Verbindung beider Bereiche geht.

For GFL-learners, who hardly come into contact with visual arts from the German-speaking sphere in their everyday life, this means that an important part of the German-speaking cultural scene is left out. This is regrettable insofar as artist biopics mark relevant eras in art production and can also be read as a mirror of society. Through biographical films about artists, young adults can discover a counterpoint to their present audiovisual environment to which they would otherwise have little or no access. Art

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<sup>24</sup> Werner Heyde was not only a professor of psychiatry and neurology at the University of Würzburg, but also the first “T4 senior expert” and, together with two other doctors, head of the medical department of the “euthanasia” center during the Nazi regime. He was therefore significantly involved in the implementation of the National Socialist strategy of segregation and the murder of hundreds of thousands of people. After the end of World War II, Werner Heyde practiced for years in West Germany under the false name Dr. Fritz Sawade as a neurologist and court expert in Flensburg. This was only possible because he was shielded by those around him. Gerhard Richter painted him in the (double) portrait Mr. Heyde (CR No. 100; 1965, 55cmx65cm).

biopics also offer alternatives in that unfamiliar or at least different points of view can be taken into the classroom and a kaleidoscope of perspectives presented in class. Different perspectives and empathy can thus be promoted in the classroom through various tasks and exercises. It should not be forgotten that the intrinsic fate of the characters also offers a social panorama that needs to be explored and reflected in greater depth in cultural studies.

Experience has shown that learners are not just interested in the world of film in general and World Cinema in particular; films are also often the starting point for a cultural interest in German-speaking countries, whereby the art of moving pictures can play an important bridging role. In our case, NEVER LOOK AWAY allows various references to different subjects due to the variety of topics discussed above, creating the potential for both interdisciplinary and collaborative work as well as paving the way for the development of interdisciplinary competence, a skill which is regarded as important within the framework of German Studies.

The practical film guide *Werk ohne Autor* developed by Burkhard Wetekam (2018) takes into account a wide range of learning scenarios and provides didactic-methodical approaches to the subjects of history/politics/social studies, art, German, philosophy/ethics, and media studies; in a slightly modified form these can also be transferred to the context of teaching and learning foreign languages in advanced learner classes at a tertiary level. Therefore, I would like to conclude with some practical activities for advanced learner groups that take on some aspects of the topics of perception, fact and fiction, authenticity, as well as the multiplicity of realities discussed in my film analysis.<sup>25</sup>

Work sheet: The feature film NEVER LOOK AWAY is based on the biography of the German painter Gerhard Richter. In the movie, the borders between fact and fiction become blurred. The following tasks serve to relate the topics addressed to your experiences and prior knowledge, to specifically check the credibility of information, and to raise the awareness for the need to differentiate between information (objectivity) and opinion (subjectivity).

- Discuss in small groups which characters, events and locations you think appear authentic in the film. Justify your thoughts and hypotheses.

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<sup>25</sup> For some more elaborated teaching models, didactic-methodological recommendations and general considerations for working on lessons focusing on Gerhard Richter, cf. Lay (2014, 2017, 2019).

- Discuss which techniques this film and other films use to evoke authenticity for the viewer. In groups, create a table with categories that appear important to you and try to name specific examples based on selected film scenes.
- Analyze the language of the museum guide in the opening scene. Pay particular attention to vocabulary and rhetoric. What political goals are pursued through this use of language?
- Compare the museum scene with some original recordings in the film 1937 – ART AND POWER<sup>26</sup> by Erwin Leiser (Munich TC 00:14:01 – 00:16:58; Dresden: 00:17:00 – 00:18:47). What similarities and differences can you see between the two films (e.g. museum conception in Munich and Dresden, exhibits on display, posture of museum visitors in both films, etc.)?
- Are there scenes in the movie that intentionally influence the emotional state of the audience? How does cinematography evoke moods and emotions in viewers?
- Do you feel or understand what the characters are feeling? Empathy is the ability to sense other people's emotions. Discuss in small groups the importance of empathy and identification in cinema. Do you empathize or identify with characters in the film?
- Read the biographical excerpt [Frühe Jahre](#) (Early Years) on the multilingual homepage of Gerhard Richter; use the other available languages if you face problems or difficulties in understanding (English, French, Italian, Chinese (simplified characters)). Now create a table in which you compare the events in the lives of Kurt Barnert and Gerhard Richter. Which events coincide, and which were invented for what purpose?
- NEVER LOOK AWAY is a so-called “pseudo-biopic”. First, discuss in small groups whether factuality or artistic freedom should have priority. Then form two groups of experts and present your thoughts and views in a dispute (Pro-Contra debate<sup>27</sup>).

#### 4. Conclusion

This article provides an illustrative film analysis of NEVER LOOK AWAY that points out potential topics worth communicating and understanding. In an increasingly complex, mediatized world, in-depth classroom engagement with film communication in the context of teaching and learning foreign languages is proving fruitful in terms of opening up hybrid spaces in dominant narrative lenses. NEVER LOOK AWAY not only problematizes the Nazi past, be it working as an artist in the socialist state or the problems of the capitalist society; it also tells of the complexity and medial intersection of painting, photography and film. In regard to a media-reflective and critical teaching practice, the movie allows foreign language learners various interpretations and offers experiences that

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<sup>26</sup> Available through the Goethe-Institut. The Goethe-Institut's film catalog can be accessed via the following link: [http://www.goethe.de/kue/flm/prj/arc/deindex.htm?wt\\_sc=filmkatalog](http://www.goethe.de/kue/flm/prj/arc/deindex.htm?wt_sc=filmkatalog).

<sup>27</sup> For didactic recommendation see: <https://www.bpb.de/lernen/formate/methoden/46892/pro-contra-debatte>.

are also reflected in our real everyday lives. The family history of Gerhard Richter is – not without pathos – reenacted thoroughly and imagined as a continuous melodramatic *story*. The trend towards fictionalization, and the associated efforts of staging and authenticity on the part of filmmakers, should also be given greater focus in order to make the mediality and multiplicity of realities more tangible for learners of German.

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### **Filmography**

- 1937 – KUNST UND MACHT (ART AND POWER, D 1992, Director: Erwin Leiser)
- ANDREJ RUBLJOW (UdSSR 1966, Director: Andrei Tarkowski)
- AT ETERNITY’S GATE (USA, FR 2018, Director: Julian Schnabel)
- BASQUIAT (USA 1996, Director: Julian Schnabel)
- CAMILLE CLAUDEL (FR 1988, Director: Bruno Nuytten)
- FOG IN AUGUST (NEBEL IM AUGUST, D, A 2016, Director: Kai Wessel)
- FRIDA (USA, CAN, MEX 2002, Director: Julie Taymor)
- GOYA EN BURDEOS (ES, IT 1999, Director: Carlos Saura)
- GOYA OR THE HARD WAY TO ENLIGHTENMENT (GOYA – ODER DER ARGE WEG DER ERKENNTNIS, DDR, SU 1971, Director: Konrad Wolf)
- LOVING VINCENT (PL, GB 2017, Director: Dorota Kobiela & Hugh Welchman)
- LUST FOR LIFE (USA 1956, Director: Vincente Minnelli)
- MAUDIE (CAN, IRL 2016, Director: Aisling Walsh)
- MR. TURNER (GB 2014, Director: Timothy Spall)
- NEVER LOOK AWAY (WERK OHNE AUTOR, D 2018, Director: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck)
- POLLOCK (USA 2000, Director: Ed Harris)
- SÉRAPHINE (FR, BEL 2008, Director: Martin Provost)
- THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY (USA 1965, Director: Carol Reed)
- THE LIVES OF OTHERS (DAS LEBEN DER ANDEREN, D 2007, Director: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck)
- UNDINE (D, FR 2020, Director: Christian Petzold)
- VAN GOGH (FR 1991, Director: Maurice Pialat)
- VINCENT & THEO (NL, GB, FR 1990, Director: Robert Altman)
- VINCENT: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF VINCENT VAN GOGH (AU 1987, Director: Paul Cox)

### **Author’s biography**

Dr Tristan Lay is a lecturer in German Studies at the University of Sydney. His research interests focus on various areas of methodology and didactics of foreign languages, and German as a foreign/second Language (GFL/GSL). They include teaching German with films, visual arts in foreign language education, the German language in Australia and in Taiwan, the development of teaching and learning materials, Erinnerungsorte (lieux de

mémoire), as well as multiple language acquisition and learning. Email: [tristan.lay@sydney.edu.au](mailto:tristan.lay@sydney.edu.au)

### **Keywords**

NEVER LOOK AWAY; WERK OHNE AUTOR; Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck; biographical films about artists; artist biopics; Gerhard Richter; film analysis