



**The Lives of Others: Using the Allure of their Fame in
Biopic Trailers to Expand Vocabulary and Cultural
Knowledge**

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The popular appeal of the biopic has often been subsumed into the broader “mainstream entertainment cinema” category, identifying a critical neglect to consider its attraction as an authentic cultural artefact for the instruction of language and cultural knowledge. This chapter suggests that the biopic’s long history of almost universal appeal throughout its production is an undervalued consideration in the foreign language classroom. The lives of others, be they famed musicians, politicians, sports stars, intellectuals, or members of underrepresented or persecuted minorities, construct a world of persistent draw to the screen for a broad audience. This includes learners of German as a Foreign Language. The different biopic genres featured as teaching models here (music, intellectual history, sports) showcase the capacity of popular cinema and contemporary media consumption habits to satisfy the interests of a diverse learner cohort, which is an increasing reality in modern language teaching. The didacticization of the short trailers adds to a growing resource pool of transnational German pop culture and contemporary German film-making.

Die Beliebtheit von Biopics beim Filmpublikum wird häufig dem reinen Unterhaltungskino zugeschrieben, wobei das Genre jedoch auch insbesondere für den Sprach- und Kulturunterricht mit authentischen Lehr- und Lernmaterialien dienen kann. So üben biographische Filme, die das Leben berühmter Personen darstellen, seit ihrer frühesten Entstehungsgeschichte eine ungebrochene Anziehungskraft auf Kinogänger*innen aus. Dieses Potential wird jedoch, wie in diesem Beitrag argumentiert wird, im Fremdsprachenunterricht bislang nur unzureichend ausgeschöpft. Diesen Umstand mache ich mir hier zunutze, um einfach verfügbare Filmtrailer von Biopics auf YouTube didaktisch einzubetten. Lernende werden durch die Angebotsvielfalt der Trailer motiviert, da es hier für alle in Bezug auf Bild, Ton, Thema oder Historie etwas Passendes gibt und so die unmittelbare Anbindung an ihre lebensweltlichen Erfahrungen gelingt.

1. Biographical pictures: the allure of cinematic life stories

The allure of the biopic owes much to the fact that it constructs public consciousness. Political celebrity, intellectual resistance, or musical fame, just to give a few examples, have inspired a wealth of filmic productions. They depict lives like that of notoriously corrupt U.S. president Richard Nixon (NIXON), of the Indian revolutionary Mahatma Gandhi (GANDHI), or the iconic French singer Édith Piaf (LA MÔME/LA VIE EN ROSE).

For obviously very different reasons, these lives have become human metaphors in the public imaginary. With that important quality of meaningful representation, as George Frederick Custen reminds us, “the biopic played a powerful part in creating and sustaining public history” (Custen 1992: 2). Films about the lives of others have been released with increasing regularity from the start of studio-run cinema until today. They suggest that the first-hand experience of a real life that viewers see is the version that is true. Or at least is more truthful than information about celebrities and famous persons provided by popular gossip television and yellow press publications. The latter, as Lucy Fischer details by example of Marlene Dietrich’s life in moving images, explains at least in part the fanatic love that the genre has inspired the world over for nearly a century (Fischer 2002: 193).

What is however more important is reciprocity between genre and viewer. Ivone Margulies claims with a view to performance of human life in these films that the audience consumes the biopic genre with an awareness of replication. The lives on screen are being re-told for the viewers’ pleasure. The viewers of biopics watch them, knowing that this is mediated life with the purpose to entertain. One can argue that there is indeed a terrific desire for this life mediation in our posthumanism era, today more so than ever before. Viewers realise that they witness a life story that is being re-performed for the moviegoer’s curious gaze (Margulies 2019: 77). In this act, the notion of exaggeration, summary, or third-party editing is not just implied. It is blatantly obvious. So are crucial notions of imitability and adaptability. Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia note based on their case study of the reception of the biopic genre in Great Britain that modern viewers (Minier & Pennacchia 2016: 1-2) think of biopics as lives relived for the big screen. Indeed, biopics perform so well at the box office because viewers have learned to appropriate larger-than-life stories through their own eyes and in their specific cultural moments. So why would language instructors not capitalize productively on this popular habit in modern media culture?

Millions of tickets sold at the box office prove that biopics do very well with viewers of all ages and places. Local audiences love to imagine themselves as part of global celebrity narratives by watching the biographical enactments of real lives lived with great consequence for human culture (Minier & Pennacchia 2016). Yet, this circumstance does not negate the viewers’ lived realities in specific places and times. Without question, the audience knows that its position as viewership matters in the exchange

between screen life and real life. It is the primordial mechanism of translocal pop culture consumption: entertainment escapism by media proxy. We watch and let the lives of others spirit us away. While the idea may appear trite at first glance, it is an astoundingly lasting formula. The genre of the Hollywood biopic has pursued it ever since studios made hundreds of biopics during the classical biographical motion picture period, from 1927-1960 (Custen 1992: 3).

For the purpose of teaching language and culture, the ongoing allure of the biopic is vital. It means that the biopic genre presents a mass-cultured learning platform that is ideally suited to keep even the most diverse learner cohorts engaged – regardless of age, gender, or other differences in identity or language ability or learning progression or cultural background. After all, biopics reproduce the central ideology of transnational pop culture, which asserts an enduring authority. Namely, that popular cinema is a big, broad church. One may talk about it by using phrases like universal appeal or transnational consumer culture. Lee Marshall and Isabel Kongsgaard confirm this approach in their critical discussion of popular music biopics and music stardom since the 1960s. Every biopic, they argue, harks back to a tried-and-tested model of biographical narrative that builds a big tent for all kinds of viewers to gather under. Perhaps surprisingly, despite a myriad of biopic offshoots, the specific sub-genre matters less than one may assume. Take, for instance, the example of music biopics as explained in relation to other biopic subjects:

In relation to biopics, this means that although the popular music star may seem to provide a distinctive subject for biopics, popular music biopics actually adopt many of the conventions of biopics of other subjects, such as entertainers and artists. In particular, the significance of family in providing a refuge from the trials of fame (often presented as a conflict between domesticity and public career which is resolved by the end of the film) is a staple of popular music biopics. (Marshall & Kongsgaard 2012: 350).

Silke Borgstedt adds here that the triad of rise, fall, and redemption of music stars plays out in the most fascinating ways, too, as the spectrum of music glory and fan image can mean lasting idolisation or short-lived one-hit-wonders (Borgstedt 2008: 106). As such, the biopic genre commands as much complex diversity as generic structure. In contemporary cinema, the life narrative has become a ubiquitous vehicle for certain stories, which may have been classed as niche or obscure at one point. Today, however, biopics have become synonymous with popular culture and the filmic accolades to go with it. There is also the star power that has come to the genre and its many sub-genres. Attendant market benefits have been drawing actors of rank and file to parts of real-life

figures and historical moments, with Hollywood again leading the charge in the biopic areas of music, intellectual and social history, gender, politics, and sports (Vidal 2013).

2. LINDENBERG! MACH DEIN DING, HANNAH ARENDT, and MAX SCHEMLING – EINE DEUTSCHE LEGENDE¹: three biopic trailers, their sub-genres, and persons featured



The most important aspect of the typical relationship between the general biopic structure and biopic sub-genres is the fact that the distinct foci function as an instantaneous expression of types. One may think of it as cinematic branding or a well-rehearsed aesthetic of theme and style. What follows is a brief overview to point to the need for careful classification and historical contextualisation of biopic materials on the part of instructors. This is a crucial step, as the specific teaching tasks and pedagogical reflections revolve around the three selected biopic trailers' celebrated persons and the distinct type of sub-genre associated with them. The goal is to embed cultural and linguistic knowledge competently and accurately with an awareness of popular culture.

¹ Trailers are easy to use in GFL settings for various reasons: 1) they are generally available without copyright restrictions, 2) they are available via YouTube or many other online video streaming sites, 3) they be subtitled or can be subtitled with ease as they are short, and 4) they may present attractive pathways to classroom teaching scenarios that include the full-length film they advertise as learners progress from less to more advanced language users with increasing cultural expertise.

² The film posters are part of 'copyright-free', international press kits. If not substantially altered, they can be reproduced if not for commercial purpose according to fair use principles such as teaching.

A1. The music biopic: UDO LINDENBERG, LINDENBERG! MACH DEIN DING, 2020³, directed by Hermine Huntgeburth

The music or musical biopic has strong affinities with the pop performer and rock music biopic (Schlotterbeck 2008: 83). Roy Shuker associates it with the popular music film movement that rose to fame with big Hollywood musical cinema as early as the 1940s. To Shuker, the music biopic presents the viewer with “a biography presented as a film or television feature but differing from a documentary in that it is aimed at a popular audience and will balance reliability and accuracy against commercial considerations and the need to entertain” (Shuker 2016: 148). He largely agrees with Ian Inglis in that a music biopic tells both the story of a famous musician and that of their music. This will oftentimes include the impact of the music on the larger public, outlining the innovative quality or the newness of its sound in the day of the artist. Specifically, as Ian Inglis writes, a music biopic is about “a film which purports to tell, in part or in full, the biography of a musical performer (living or dead), and which contains a significant part of his or her music” (Inglis 2007: 77). Some versions blend actual documentary footage with staged performances by actors cast into the roles of the original artist. Where the artist or artists, or band, is still alive and well, the music biopic may blend fiction and documentary styles together and reproduce earlier performances of the musician or band while present-day performances feature the actual musician or band.

The subjects for music biopics are found in a variety of established music genres. They include, but are of course not limited to, funk, pop, rock, soul, blues, jazz, techno, country, metal, synth, trans, house, punk, folk, and classical music and composers. Some examples for German music biopics are:

- THE WALTZ KING/DER WALZERKÖNIG (1930, person featured: Johann Strauss)
- SCHUBERT’S DREAM OF SPRING/SCHUBERTS FRÜHLINGSTRAUM (1931, person featured: Franz Schubert)
- WHOM THE GODS LOVE/WEN DIE GÖTTER LIEBEN (1942, person featured: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart)
- THE TRAPP FAMILY IN AMERICA/DIE TRAPP-FAMILIE IN AMERICA (1958, persons featured: The Trapp Family)
- JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1985, person featured: Johann Sebastian Bach)
- COMEDIAN HARMONISTS (1997, band featured: Comedian Harmonists)

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDpFfseEG1E&ab_channel=DCM (via YouTube, accessed 3 December 2020, 1.3 million views).

- NINA HAGEN = PUNK + GLORY (1999, person featured: Nina Hagen).

In addition to traditional feature film markets, music biopics also regularly feature on television as multi-part mini-series. While most music biopics are on well-known performers and performances, there are some that focus more on the music industry, famous producers, or even fans of a certain music star. At times, there are difficulties for production companies with obtaining the rights to include a performer's or a band's music, which can drastically alter or change the impact of the biopic. This explains in part why music biopics usually come to life in close collaboration between performers, bands, or their estates and production studios that hold the license rights to well-known song material. Here, again, Marshall and Kongsgaard remind us with some urgency that the music biopic is perhaps the genre to hold the most ambiguous relationship with the truth as it seeks to replicate or in part explain the myth surrounding an artist or a famous band:

On the one hand, the biopic must continually assert its truthfulness in order to gain the authority that a biopic needs to be believable and a source of audience pleasure. On the other hand, however, the biopic can never be a 'real truth' as it is constrained by both the conventions of cinematic realism and broader ideologies of popular music stardom. (Marshall & Kongsgaard 2012: 346)

Academic analysis of the music biopic has focussed on the construction of the performers as larger-than-life characters of fame, prompting audience adoration and idolisation. The associated role of the viewer is that of fan, cultivated over years or perhaps even decades through the artist's or the band's record sales, live concerts, or televised performances and a ubiquitous social media presence.

A2. Person featured: Udo Lindenberg

Udo Lindenberg was born in the German city of Gronau (West Germany, North-Rhine Westphalia) in 1946. He started his musical career as a drummer and founded his first band, Free Orbit, in 1969. Lindenberg cut his teeth during the early days as a musician on studio music gigs and on low-paid guest appearances. His first LP album, *Lindenberg* (1971, sung in English), appeared with little commercial success. It was only when Lindberg switched back to German lyrics that mainstream success hit all across the German music landscape. He landed a major radio hit in 1973 with the album *Andrea Doria* and the singles "Alles klar auf der Andrea Doria" and "Cello". He was signed almost on the spot with over 100.000 copies sold and received the biggest record deal of

any German-language musician up to that time. Lindenberg's outlandish style, both musically and in appearance, together with his brash tone, earned him a special place in the new German-language music of the 1970s. He positioned himself as a curious novum between English-oriented Krautrock and mainstream pop like Schlager music. His apolitical German-language rock turned into the sound of a generation, ensuring his famed band, the Panikorchester, a place in German music's hall of fame.

A3. Summary of trailer (2m12s)

The trailer starts out by introducing the protagonist, Lindenberg, in his early twenties as a young man. After indicating to the viewer that this is the musician at the start of his career, a fast-paced collage of scenes related to his life as a rock star follows. The diegetic sounds of the scenes are intercut with music from Lindenberg's first and second album, which supports the logic of this biopic that is the story of how he rose to fame. Emphasis is placed on the novelty value of Lindenberg. His trademark dark sunglasses and black hat feature prominently as well. The trailer indicates that music and setting will be distinct characters in the film. This aspect makes it easy for learners with little to now knowledge of German to relate to the plotline immediate and speculate on the origin story that the short clip constructs.

B1. The intellectual history biopic: Hannah Arendt, HANNAH ARENDT, 2013⁴, directed by Margarethe von Trotta

The intellectual history biopic, and more precisely the post-feminist biopic that is relevant here given the subject, awards according to Bronwyn Polaschek centrality to political philosophy in an intellectual's life (Polaschek 2013). While this genre of life story is not always done in a very sympathetic manner as may be the norm in Hollywood film's lucrative world of family entertainment, it is a delicate and deliberate strategy on part of the director and the producers. The goal, as Robert Kusek details with a view to art history and critical theory, is to complicate the autobiographical presentation of a famed thinker's work (Kusek 2020: 288). It is part of the strategy of cinematic *détournement*, "an essentially avant-garde act of the hijacking of dominant words and images to create insubordinate, counter messages" (Kusek 2020: 288). In light of a critical revisiting of thoughts and attitudes that shaped our world, the narrative

structure and the filmic relation of the intellectual history biopic aims to promote critical interrogation. Sometimes there are even radical acts of distortion and the manipulation of factual truth.

That being said, *HANNAH ARENDT* presents somewhat of a deviation from this classification and its pertinent features. For one, this is due to Margarethe von Trotta's larger concern with political feminism over the course of her directorial career. The depiction of Arendt's life forms part of a larger albeit loose feminist trilogy with von Trotta's 1975 debut, *THE LOST HONOUR OF KATHARINA BLUM*, and her 1986 film *ROSA LUXEMBURG*. The central tenet of von Trotta's work as one of Germany's great feminist film auteurs contains a sense of immediacy. It brings forth a sense of human struggle in her subjects, which is all the more of a formidable intellectual and historical feat in portraying the political theorist and intellectual heavyweight that Arendt was.

Though according to a more general understanding of the intellectual history biopic, there may as well be summaries of long histories and the replacement of factual realities with imaginary, at times more cinematically palatable, ones (e.g., settings, dialogue, physical appearance, costume, etc.). These elements are part and parcel of pragmatic criteria and objectives that have been ascribed to the sub-genre of intellectual history. Where it features women thinkers and women philosophers of great consequence, the intellectual history biopic frequently, albeit not in von Trotta's film, takes on a feminist agenda that turns on the dichotomy of real mind and body and the imagined persona on screen. Scenes carefully tease out this contrast by dramatizing the thinker's achievements rather than their conventional, mainly physical, attributes. It is also common for this act of critical biographical reflection to turn into melodrama in the process (Polaschek 2013).

Subjects for intellectual history biopics are in the main organised by a concern with intellectual innovation; a revolution of thought that goes hand in hand with norms of gender, race, or sexuality; or a critical movement as expressed through societal change or a radical reformulation of artistic/creative expression to arrive at a new cultural framework. With female protagonists, themes such as gender revolution or similarly great caesura in the hegemonic order or patriarchal logic of society dominate. Some examples for German intellectual history biopics are:

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhW-D2g7dcY&ab_channel=MoviepilotTrailer (via

- ELISABETH OF AUSTRIA/ELISABETH VON ÖSTERREICH (1931, person featured: Empress Elisabeth of Austria)
- JOHANNES KEPLER (1974, persons featured: Johannes Kepler)
- ROSA LUXEMBURG (1986, persons featured: Rosa Luxemburg)
- YOUNG GOETHE IN LOVE/GOETHE! (2010, persons featured: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)
- BELOVED SISTERS/DIE GELIEBTEN SCHWESTERN (2014, persons featured: Caroline and Charlotte von Lengefeld)

That the female intellectual biopic is its own kind of contemporary media puzzle becomes clear with researchers' attempts to define its treatment of women in plural rather than singular terms. The biopic aspects Dennis Bingham describes suggest that the nature of the female intellectual biopic is contradictory, if not at best conflicted. The female biopic, Bingham notes in detail,

narrates, exhibits and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate or question [their] importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person. (Bingham 2010: 10).

B2. Person featured: Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt ranks as one of Germany's most important thinkers of the 20th century. Born in 1906 in Hanover, Arendt was trained in philosophical thought and critical theory. At Marburg University, she studied with Martin Heidegger with whom she had a brief but intense love affair. As an outspoken member of the Jewish German community, she had to move to Paris in 1933 to escape the Nazi Holocaust. After eight years of living in France and working there for various Jewish refugee organizations, she resettled to America and soon become a prominent member of the intellectual elite on the East Coast. She died in 1975 in New York.

Arendt is best known for philosophical works that had a major impact both within and outside the academic community. The first was *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951. This study of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes generated a wide-ranging debate on the nature and historical antecedents of the totalitarian phenomenon. The second book, *The Human Condition*, was published in 1958. It was an original philosophical study that investigated the fundamental categories of life as

YouTube, accessed 3 December, 122.000 views).

labour, work, and action. In addition to these two important works, Arendt published many influential essays on topics such as the nature of revolution, freedom, authority, tradition, and the modern age. Her commentary on the infamous court trial of Adolf Eichmann (Israel, April to December 1961; the death penalty for Eichmann was the only death sentence ever imposed by the Israeli state) proved highly controversial. Her work on the architect of the deportation of European Jews led Arendt to publish her thoughts in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963).

B3. Summary of trailer (2m21s)

This trailer is a complex arrangement of philosophical and intellectual questions that Arendt had to deal with all her life as a German Jew who had fled to America from Nazi tyranny. What motivated the Nazis to commit such abominable acts? What is evil? What is the role of Jewish thinkers in the history of the Holocaust? These questions are raised either directly via textual overlay or implicitly via montage of dramatic scenes. The pace of the trailer is slow and adds a soft orchestral theme to the transient fade ins and outs as we see Arendt in America, in Israel at the Eichmann trial, and finally back in New York. There, she gives the lecture of a lifetime by speculating on the banality of evil. The challenges she faced are depicted as intermittent moments of dialogue with Jewish Germans and Jewish Americans, who seem stunned by her opinions on Eichmann's guilt. As the trailer features a significant amount of dialogue and jumps widely across the film's narrative timeline, a good sense of historical and intellectual knowledge is required along with some grammatical and lexical items to prepare the learners.

C1. The sports biopic: Max Schmeling, MAX SCHMELING - EINE DEUTSCHE

LEGENDE, 2010⁵, directed by Uwe Boll

The sports biopic is one of the most beloved and widely received sub-genres of biographical films. Aaron Baker insists it vividly demonstrates "that the symbiosis between sports and movies is ideological as well as economic" (Baker 2003: 11). This connection goes hand in hand with a bias that privileges stories of a certain kind of

sports stars and iconic players, which is mostly white cis-het men. Their sports fame is an important part of a Hollywood version of history that caters to individual characters and gives the greatest “recognition to star performance regardless of any gestures they might make to teamwork, fair play, and fan communities” (Baker 2003: 11). Nonetheless, the sports biopic fits squarely within the larger cultural consciousness. It inhabits a central role within the traditional national mythology of many countries that champion sports as unifiers for their diverse communities and their complex historical dealings between majority and minority groups.

Of course, despite these benefits for larger representation, some groups are still disadvantaged. The recent growth of women’s sports, for instance, is a good thing. But the self-reliant identity of the sports biopic star is still strongly associated with masculinity. Filmic biographies about athletes, with few exceptions, depict women only as support characters for male self-definition. They will often serve as supportive mothers, helpful wives, cheerful girlfriends, or adoring female fans. The emphasis on male sports stars and the frequency with which male sports icon appear in sports biopics are longstanding manifestations of this issue. And while this representational imbalance undermines the utopian promise of sports that the athletic contest is the great equaliser, the popularity of the male-centred sports biopic seems largely unphased by calls of fans for more recent productions to take this into account. Ultimately, too, the “individualist mythology” of life in sports culture (Bauer & Delsahut 2020) reconstructs a stark model of Darwinism. The athlete must endure regardless of team membership or country loyalties, even when teamwork or historical national contexts figure prominently in narratives about the lives of global sport superstars. Although much of the plot is usually dedicated to thematic emphasis on team, country, and community, the sports biopic’s climatic finale clearly favours the individual heroism of a game- or match- or event-winning goal, punch, score, or lap. A few examples for this genre drawn from German film history are:

- LESSONS OF A DREAM/DER GANZ GROßE TRAUM (2011, person featured: Konrad Koch)
- PLAYOFF (2011, person featured: Ralph Klein)
- GIBSY/GIBSY-RUKELI TROLLMANN’S KAMPF UMS LEBEN (2012, person featured: Rukeli Trollmann)

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqqE8ffHkho&ab_channel=vipmagazin (via YouTube, accessed 3 December, 59.000 views).

- THE KEEPER/TRAUTMANN (2018, person featured: Bert Trautmann)

C2. Person featured: Max Schmeling

Max Schmeling first became acquainted with boxing as a teenager, when his father took him to watch a film recording of the heavyweight championship match between Jack Dempsey and Georges Carpentier. Impressed by the athleticism of the event, Schmeling began boxing in amateur competitions and, by 1924, won national amateur in Germany's light heavyweight division. Born in 1905 in rural Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Schmeling made history for winning the European championship by beating Fernand Delarge in the first-ever box fight broadcast live in Germany on television. After defending his titles in Germany, he went on to pursue bigger fights in the United States. Returning to Germany after much success abroad, the Nazi party took an interest in Schmeling's popularity with working- and middle-class sports fans. When he was matched with the undefeated Black American box sensation Joe Louis in 1936, the sports press in both countries made no secret of their alignment with international political tensions at the time. The rematch between Schmeling and Louis in 1938 thus rose to classic fame and was quickly termed the Battle of the Century, good versus evil, Nazis against the leaders of the free world. When Schmeling lost that fight and returned to Germany, he was shunned by the Nazis. He died in 2005 at the age of 99.

The fading memories of Schmeling as heavyweight champion and Nazi darling usually have it that he was a willing model for Adolf Hitler and The Third Reich, the self-proclaimed Aryan Superman. Schmeling may indeed have lunched with Hitler and had lengthy conversations with Goebbels, master propagandist of the Nazi regime. His tale is far more complex than it first appears, though. Purportedly during the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938, he saved the lives of two young Jewish brothers named Lewin.

C3. Summary of trailer (2m31s)

This trailer may offer the most accessible imagery to learners out of all three biopic trailers discussed here. The scenes are a collage of close-up shots of Schmeling's athletic body and his face. There is some commentary from other characters on his identity and motivation, framing the plot while the camera shows him boxing at training camps or professional matches. Movement and athleticism are crucial for these montage

elements, as there is little or no non-diegetic music to support the emotional message that the trailers for *LINDENBERG!* (fun, joy, positivity) or *HANNAH ARENDT* (contemplation, pause, sadness) convey. In the film, Schmeling is played by Henry Maske, a German boxing star of the 90s and early 2000s in his own right. This casting choice is deliberate, as Maske would be known to most sports fans or boxing aficionados at the very least. The tropes of Nazi Germany, Swastikas and uniforms, and an overall subdued colour pallet, make it easy for the learners to place the video clip in a specific point in time. There is very little dialogue. Most of the meaning transpires through the use of loaded symbolism, such as the Nazi flag, the American flag, and the professional boxing ring that is dramatically lit like a theatre stage.

D. The biopic trailer: a brief structure

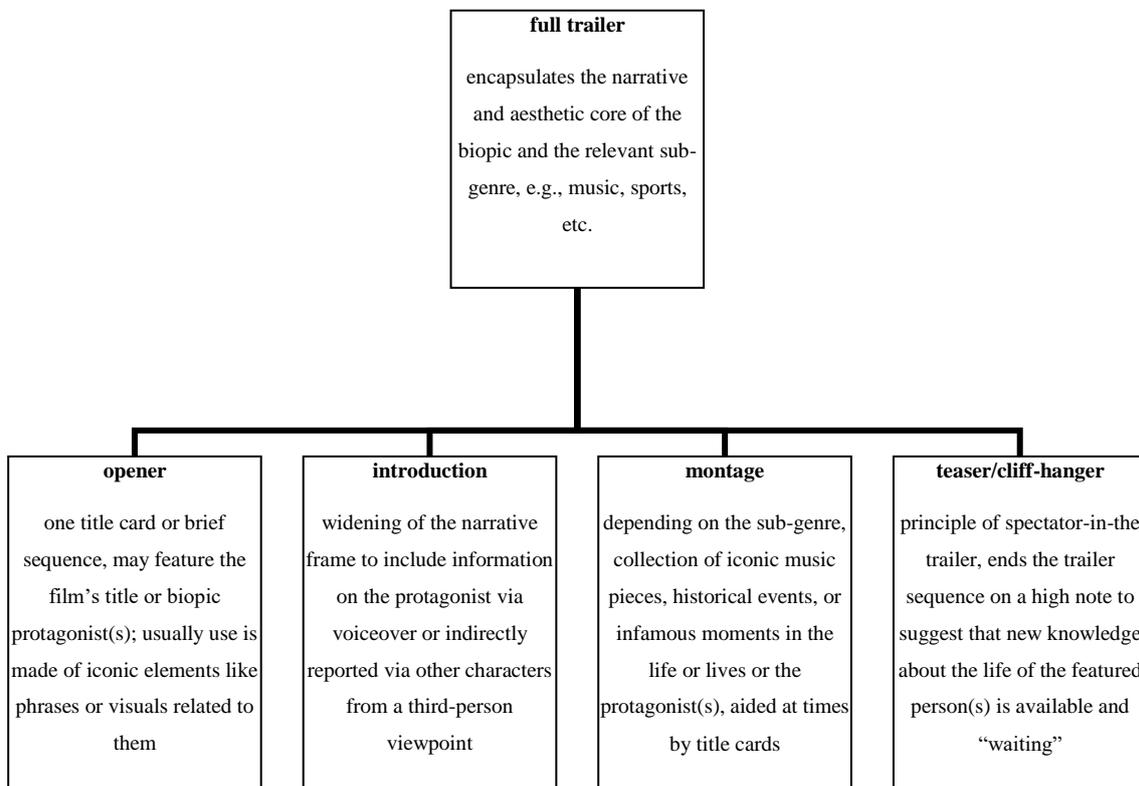


Fig. 1: structure of a biopic trailer (Nickl, based on the design of film trailers as promotional texts, cf. Kern 2009)

In general, biopic trailers are shorter than regular feature film trailers, running between 140 to 150 seconds. Their structure, as indicated in Fig. 1, is also simple and straightforward. For learners of German, as discussed in the next section with practical teaching tasks, these structural features facilitate access to the full-length biopics that the students may tackle at a later stage in their learning progression as advanced

learners. Intimate familiarity with the biopic genre adds more motivation. This is vital as learners here are asked to work in depth on biopic trailers to dissect specific linguistic and contextual elements to increase their vocabulary and cultural competence.

3. Pedagogy notes: teaching with German biopic trailers

The following list contains the didactic context for the three biopic trailers assembled here. Screenshots (left to right) are from the trailers in order of the chronological sequenced the images occur in the clips.

Teaching context (general framework)

- Age: teenagers/young adults
- Level: upper intermediate (B2)
- Time: 45 minutes per task (+30 minutes for an optional web-quest task based on YouTube comment section)
- Activity: with the suggested tasks, students will
 - learn, revise, and expand vocabulary for describing different types of biopic film settings, characters, and different types of cinematic life stories
 - provide oral practice for describing and commenting
 - improve listening and understanding of authentic German from biopic film trailers on YouTube
 - do online research and practice interactive activities on inspirational, real-life people and the utilise new language from the lessons to present the findings to peer learners
- Language focus: speaking, listening, vocabulary extension, word formation
- Genre focus/social purpose: comment, compare, reflect, speculate
- Materials: ‘copyright-free’ biopic trailers on YouTube, downloadable, shareable, including automatic subtitles in German for accessibility, online access, computer access

Teaching tasks (short description, with variations for each trailer)

A. *Lindenberg! Mach dein Ding*





A1. Task 1, step 1: *First impressions*. Watch the trailer at least three times. Each time you watch, write down as many qualities as possible related to the person you think is the protagonist. You can use adjectives, nouns, phrases, or any kind of detail you remember about that person if you already know them.

Task 1, step 2: *Making categories*. Try to organise all the associated items according to certain categories. They should be about the kind of film you think this is. E.g. ‘rock star’---‘taking drugs’ or ‘performance’ or ‘celebrity’.

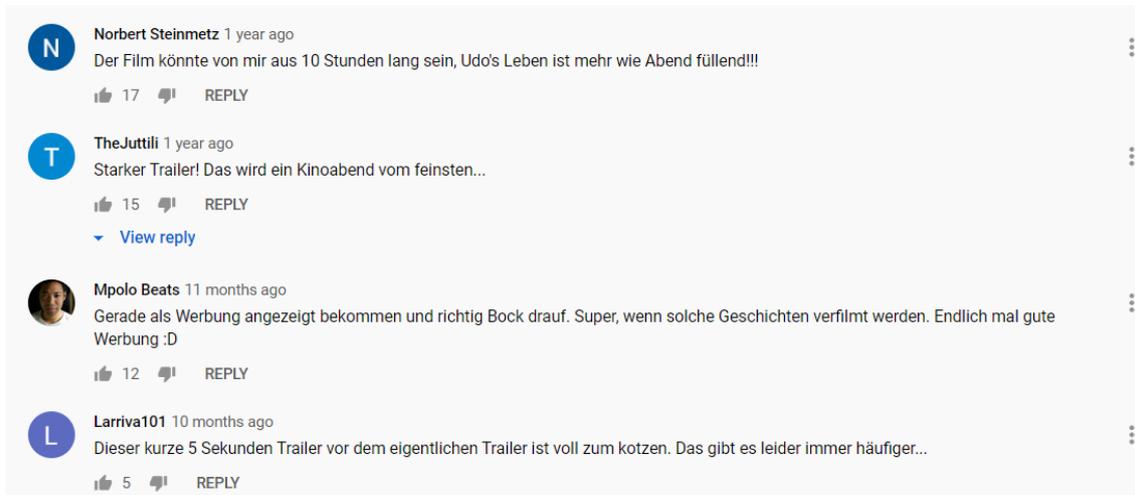
Task 1, step 3: *Connecting lists and genre knowledge*. This is a music biopic. Which words or phrases that you associated with the trailer in step 1 are closely related with that genre of film? In collaboration with a partner, try to add your categories to the ones the other person found.

Task 1, step 4: *The life of Udo Lindenberg*. Use the four-part structure of the biopic trailer (see screenshot examples here) to divide this trailer into four parts and label each part with a word or phrase you found. Then write one sentence for each screenshot so we get a short summary of the trailer in writing.

Here, learners use the trailer to build up language content by carrying out an associative exercise first. This exercise is followed by more reflective tasks and ends with an activity that asks learners to reflect and recreate biopic knowledge in combination with verbal and cultural knowledge about the protagonist. This is a lesson that can play on the allure of the rock star’s celebrity status in modern society, which will prompt learners to activate prior knowledge. Then, they can connect this knowledge from their cultural or even a global perspective to the German context. Such a lesson concept presents a combination of lexico-grammatical and cultural transfer activities that ensure each learner brings enough knowledge to the table to participate in each task as a competent and motivated contributor.

A2. *Optional web-quest task*. YouTube comment section: Find another German music biopic trailer and post at least 1 original comment to it in German and reply to as many

original comments as you like. You can use the examples here to formulate a positive (like, thumbs up) or a negative (dislike, thumbs down) comment.



B. Hannah Arendt



B1. Task 1, step 1: *First impressions, limited input*. Watch the trailer without sound the first time. Pause and screenshot every time you think the trailer shows a crucial moment in the life of Arendt, but don't take more than 3 screenshots. Then try to describe each screenshot in as much detail as possible to a partner and see if you agree on the importance of those moments. Alternatively: Task 1, step 1. Watch the trailer, sound only for the first time. Perform the same activity but this time try to listen for the three most crucial words or phrases.

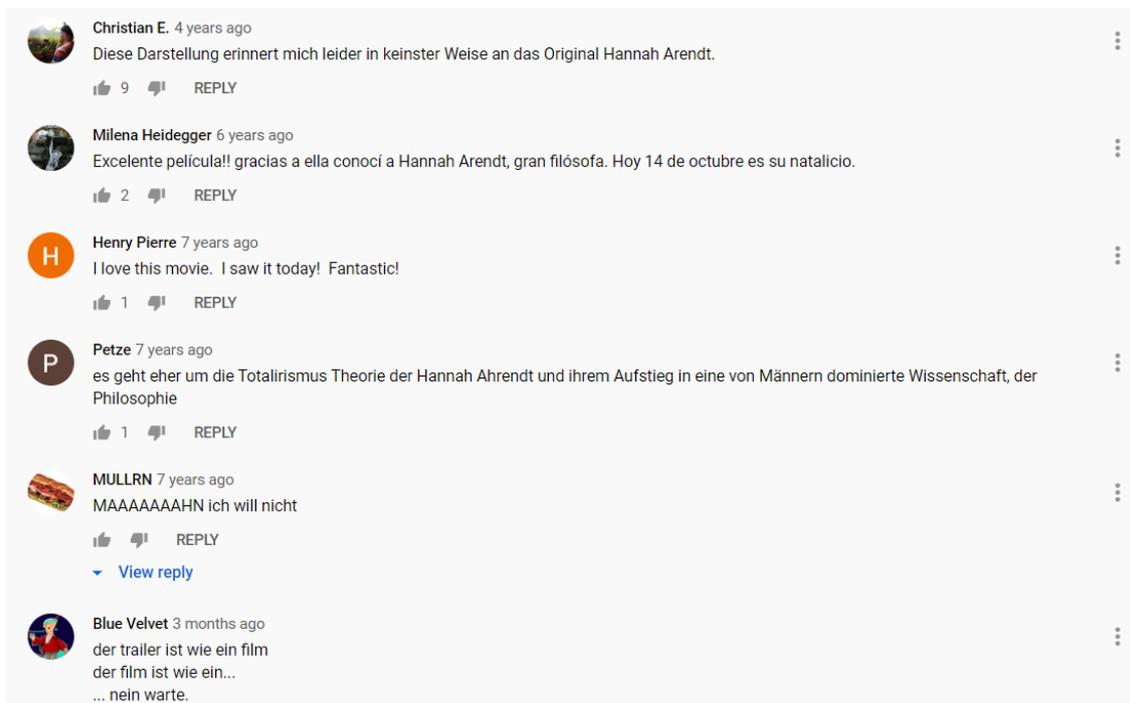
Task 1, step 2: *Ranking impressions*. Try to relate the important moments you gathered to the life of an intellectual Jewish women after the Holocaust. Try and rank them from least to most important or do the same with the words or phrases you heard. Here, an online ranking app like Mentimeter or a mind-map or interactive word cloud can

produce a visual representation to show just how much difference of opinion a short trailer can produce.

Task 1, step 3: *The Life of Hannah Arendt*. Now watch or listen to the whole trailer again with both sound and image available to you. Then go online and try to find authentic footage of Hannah Arendt in real life. Which differences can you see in the way the trailer depicts her and how Arendt appeared to be and talk like in real life? Which images, words or phrases should be changed in the trailer to make it more authentic?

Here, learners use the loaded imagery and soundscape of the biopic trailer to start with a close viewing or close listening exercise, respectively. The descriptive tasks related to close listening and viewing are followed by a comparative research task that leads to an evaluative and a creative activity. This is a lesson that can focus predominantly on the image of intellectual and female thinkers in society as well as the historical context of the Holocaust that complicates both identities in no small measure. Arendt's depiction in the biopic may lend itself to discuss broader issues around the uses of biopic productions in foreign language classrooms that the students would be heavily engaged in by comparing and contrasting with examples from other or their immediate cultural contexts.

B2. *Optional web-quest task*. YouTube comment section: Regardless of the language of the comments, try to find all adjectives and phrases that the commenters use to express their opinion on the *Hannah Arendt* life story and see if you can group those in film review categories of 1 star, 2 stars, 3 stars, etc. Is there language used for very positive or very negative reviews?



C. Max Schmeling – Eine deutsche Legende



C1. Task 1, step 1: *First impressions, making memes*. Before all learners in class watch the trailer, only one half of the students watch it first. These students screenshot 4 key scenes per trailer structure (in their opinion related to 1) opener, 2) introduction, 3) montage, 4) teaser/cliff-hanger). Then, they give those screenshots to a partner from the other half who didn't watch the trailer. Those students' job is to turn the screenshots into memes using a meme generator such as Imgflip or Clipchamp (app on phone or online).

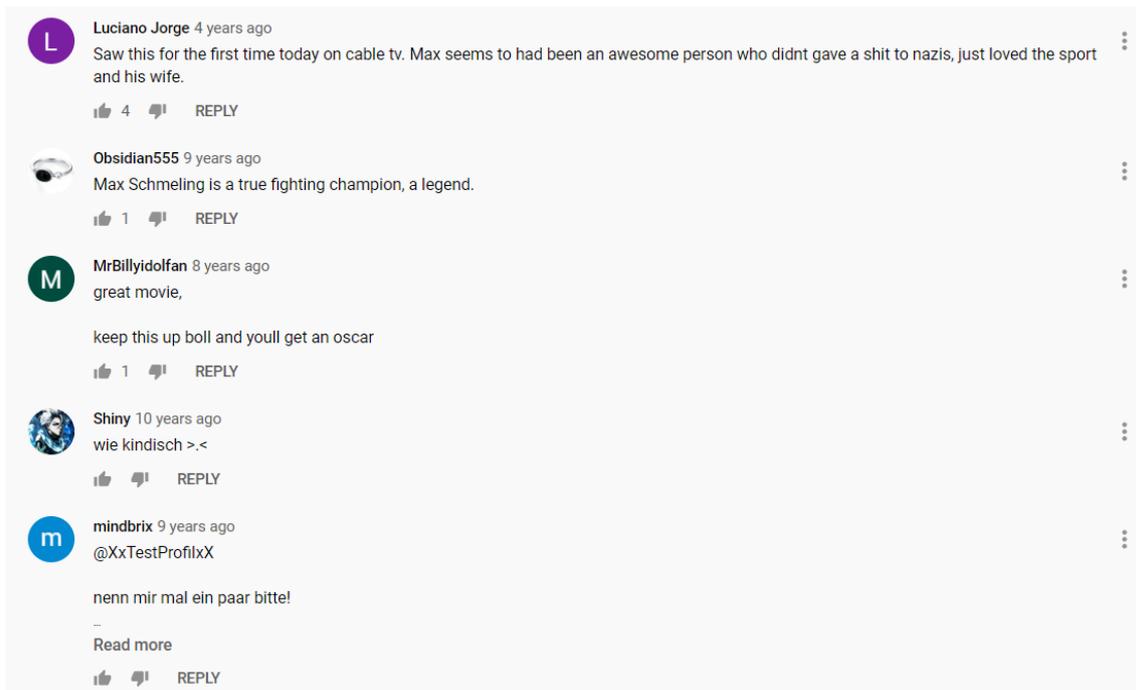
Task 1, step 2: *Comparing and contrasting*. The class now collects all memes in each of the four structure categories. In pairs, students now label them in relation to vocabulary

that is relevant to the sports biopic, the sub-genre of the boxer biopic. The instructor should encourage funny composita nouns as descriptors to tease out the creative humour in this task.

Task 1, step 3: *The life of Max Schmeling*. Based on the previous tasks, learners create their own *Max Schmeling* biopic trailer by enacting the key scenes of the trailers and filming themselves. They can use the language from the original trailer or write their own character dialogue or voiceover script and title cards.

Here, learners use the biopic trailer as a creative resource to work in different ways with the genre of the life story. Transferring the trailer into other media genres emphasizes the underlying concept of using a global entertainment genre, which is that learners do possess a vast pool of skill and content knowledge that they can bring to the language and culture classroom. This is a lesson that turns on a playful engagement with the biopic trailer as a staple of modern internet culture. The trailers, as are memes or full-length biopics and user-made film content, are circulated via platforms like YouTube. To turn the place and mode of German media consumption in an interactive site of media production should incentivise the learners to see themselves and the other learners as skilled learning groups in this specific learning context.

C2. *Optional web-quest task*. YouTube comment section: Try to find other sources on the life of Max Schmeling online. Try to find at least 5 different sources that you can post as non-fictional sources into the comment section to engage with views on the film that you think are incorrect or simply missing the point.



4. Conclusion: mediated biographies

Cinematic life narratives, or biographical life stories on film, are an omnipresent media reality in 2020. Simply put, they are everywhere. The genre dominates nearly every popular entertainment product, especially on television and the big screen, streaming and on-demand video platforms. Even with social media, feeds are dominated by more or less elaborate biographical representations. There is quite literally a constant feeding that allows the media consumer of popular culture today to consume hundreds of hours of lived life content through visual media: stories, reels, post, and short clips. Capturing slices of lived reality and consuming the cinematic life stories of stars and celebrated personalities vicariously through screens is an undeniable reality of our time. This generation is trained more than any that came before it to be “life story competent”. No matter which corner of the world the learners hail from, popular culture has already trained them to be ready to work with biopics. The German as foreign language classroom has many things to gain by benefitting from this circumstance.

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Filmography

- BELOVED SISTERS (DIE GELIEBTEN SCHWESTERN, D 2014, Director: Dominik Graf)
- COMEDIAN HARMONISTS (D 1997, Director: Joseph Vilismaier)
- ELISABETH OF AUSTRIA (ELISABETH VON ÖSTERREICH, D/A 1931, Director: Adolf Trotz)
- GANDHI (UK 1982, Director: Richard Attenborough)
- GIBSY/GIBSY (RUKELI TROLLMANN'S KAMPF UMS LEBEN, D 2012, Director: Eike Besuden)
- HANNAH ARENDT (D 2013, Director: Margarethe von Trotta)
- JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (GDR 1985, Director: Lothar Bellag)

JOHANNES KEPLER (D 1974, Director: Frank Vogel)
LA MÔME (LA VIE EN ROSE, F 2007, Director: Olivier Dahan)
LESSONS OF A DREAM (DER GANZ GROBE TRAUM, D 2011, Director: Sebastian Grobler)
LINDENBERG! MACH DEIN DING (D 2020, Director: Hermine Huntgeburth)
MAX SCHMELING – EINE DEUTSCHE LEGENDE (D 2010, Director: Uwe Boll)
NINA HAGEN = PUNK + GLORY (D 1999, Director: Sempel)
NIXON (USA 1995, Director: Oliver Stone)
PLAYOFF (D/IL 2011, Director: Eran Riklis)
ROSA LUXEMBURG (D 1986, Director: Margarethe von Trotta)
SCHUBERT'S DREAM OF SPRING (SCHUBERTS FRÜHLINGSTRAUM, D 1931, Director:
Richard Oswald)
THE KEEPER (TRAUTMANN, D/UK 2018, Director: Marcus H. Rosenmüller)
THE LOST HONOUR OF KATHARINA BLUM (DIE VERLORENE EHRE DER KATHATRINA
BLUM, D 1975, Director: Margarethe von Trotta)
THE TRAPP FAMILY IN AMERICA (DIE TRAPP-FAMILIE IN AMERIKA, D/USA 1958,
Director: Wolfgang Liebeneiner)
THE WALTZ KING (DER WALZERKÖNIG, D 1930, Director: Manfred Noa)
WHOM THE GODS LOVE (WEN DIE GÖTTER LIEBEN, D/A 1942, Director: Karl Hartl)
YOUNG GOETHE IN LOVE (GOETHE!, D 2010, Director: Philipp Stölzl)

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