

# KÄTHE KOLLWITZ: A LIFE IN ART



By Seán Allan

Writing in 1937, the radical German dramatist Ernst Toller observed: “If ever an artist can be called an artist of the people, it is Käthe Kollwitz.”<sup>1</sup> Kollwitz’s early work—above all her series of etchings and lithographs depicting the Silesian weavers’ uprising in the early nineteenth century (*Ein Weberaufstand, Weaver’s Revolt*, 1893-97) and the suffering of the German peasants during the wars of Reformation (*Bauernkrieg, The Peasant War*, 1901-08)—make her a pivotal figure in the history of German art in the early twentieth century. However, the works of Kollwitz (1867-1945)—like those of her near contemporary, the German Expressionist Ernst Barlach (1870-1938), whom she so admired—have always proved unsettling for those who seek to exploit it for crude ideological purposes. Although Kollwitz’s life and work were celebrated in a number of East German DEFA documentaries and newsreels from the late 1940s on, Ralf Kirsten’s film, *Käthe Kollwitz – Bilder eines Lebens (Käthe Kollwitz: Images of a Life)*, released in April 1987, just two years before the GDR’s collapse, serves as a reminder of just how provocative her oeuvre remained even long after her death in 1945. Indeed the enduring quality of Kollwitz’s art and its capacity to transcend the ideological divisions of the Cold War were a key factor in the installation of her Pietà (*Mutter mit dem toten Sohn, Mother with Her Dead Son*, 1937-39) as the centerpiece of the Neue Wache, the remodeled Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Victims of War and Dictatorship in post-unification Berlin.

Born in 1867 in what was then the Prussian city of Königsberg (present day Kaliningrad, Russia), the young Käthe Schmidt’s talents as an artist were recognized at an early stage by her father. Since at this time women were barred from studying at the main art academy in Berlin, the Hochschule für die bildenden Künste, her father arranged for her to be trained instead at a college catering exclusively to female artists, the Damenakademie of the Verein der Berliner Künstlerinnen und Kunstfreundinnen. In 1891, Käthe married her fiancé, Karl Kollwitz, a doctor and committed supporter of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and moved to the working class district of Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, where the two of them set up home in what was then Weißenburger Street (now named Kollwitz Street in her memory). In 1892 her first son Hans was born, and four years later Peter, the son whose death in the very first year of World War I marks one of the pivotal moments in Kirsten’s film.

By the late 1890s, Kollwitz’s artistic talents were widely recognized and acknowledged by many members of the Berlin Secession, a group of avant-garde artists that included the likes of Max Liebermann, Walter Leistikow and, later, Lovis Corinth, and whose penchant for formal experimentation inevitably brought them into conflict with the more orthodox approach of the academy. Kollwitz’s six-part print series *Weaver’s Revolt* was displayed at the 1889 Große Berliner Kunstausstellung (Great Berlin Exhibition of Art) and was inspired, in part, by the revolutionary drama of the same name by the naturalist playwright Gerhart Hauptmann. When Hauptmann’s play had premiered in Berlin at the Deutsches Theater four years earlier, the German Emperor Wilhelm II had been so horrified that he cancelled his subscription. Although the Weavers’ Revolt featured in both Hauptmann’s drama and Kollwitz’s print cycle ostensibly referred back to an historical event of 1844, the plight of lowly-paid manual laborers was once again high on the political agenda of the 1890s, as the late, but rapid industrialization of Imperial Germany led to a worsening of their living conditions and prompted them to petition the government for support. Accordingly, the radical subject matter of Kollwitz’s prints had an unmistakably contemporary resonance. The quality of her essentially naturalistic prints did not pass unnoticed and, in his capacity as a member of the group responsible for organizing the exhibition, the painter Max Liebermann nominated Kollwitz for one of the annual prizes, the so-called “small gold medal.” However, these prizes had to be approved by Wilhelm II, in his capacity as Prussian King. As the advice of his Minister of Culture Robert Bosse makes clear, Kollwitz’s work did not meet with universal approval: “The technical competence of her work,” Bosse writes, “as well as its forceful, energetic expressiveness may seem to justify the decision of the jury from a purely

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Toller, “Tribute to this great figure in German art, delivered by Ernst Toller, playwright and author, at the distinguished special preview of Kollwitz prints held Sunday evening, June 5, in Zeitlin bookshop and gallery, under the auspices of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League for the Defense of American Democracy.” In: *Ernst Toller. Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Ausgabe*. Eds. Martin Gerstenbräu, Michael Pilz, Gerhard Scholz, and Irene Zanol et al., 6 Vols. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014. Vol. 4.1 (“Publizistik und Reden”). 583-585, especially 583.

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artistic standpoint. But in view of the subject of the work, and of its naturalistic execution, entirely lacking in mitigating or conciliatory elements, I do not believe I can recommend it for explicit recognition by the state.”<sup>2</sup>

Although Kollwitz won an award the following year in Dresden, where the Prussian King’s jurisdiction had no influence, the episode underlines the extent to which her naturalistic style was at odds with the prevailing concept of conservative aesthetics in Wilhelmine Germany. This aesthetic is perhaps most clearly expounded in Wilhelm II’s essay “Wahre Kunst” (True Art) of 1901:

Art should assist in educating the public. By way of its ideals, it should also offer [members of] the lower classes the opportunity—after a day of strenuous work and effort—to refresh and strengthen themselves. [...] However, if art does no more than portray misery—as happens so often today—in an even more dreadful light than that in which it is already cast, then it sins against the German people. [...] If culture is to fully fulfill its duty, it must penetrate the lowest levels of society. Art can only do this [however] when it offers its hand, when it *elevates, when it does not lower itself into the gutter instead.*<sup>3</sup>

Kollwitz’s art may have “sinned” in terms of the Emperor’s rigid concept of aesthetics; but her career was well and truly launched. In the years that followed, Kollwitz not only worked on *The Peasant War*, a new cycle of revolutionary etchings, but also spent two months in 1904 at the Académie Julian in Paris, where she studied techniques of sculpture and had an opportunity to visit the celebrated artist Auguste Rodin in his studio and view his work.

Like many other radical artists and writers of the last decades of the nineteenth century, Kollwitz’s art drew on naturalistic aesthetics as a way of portraying the predicament of the poor. Raised as a child in a politically liberal household and married to an active supporter of the SPD, it is perhaps hardly surprising that she worked as an illustrator for the left-wing satirical magazine *Simplicissimus*. Yet at the outbreak of World War I both Kollwitz and the editors of *Simplicissimus* found themselves confronted with a conflict—namely the feeling that political opposition to the war was untenable in the face of an overwhelming tide of patriotism. On the political stage, one of the few members of the SPD to vote against the bill approving war credits was the radical socialist and subsequent founder of the German Communist Party (KPD), Karl Liebknecht. Most members of the SPD were caught up in the initial enthusiasm for the war. This is alluded to at the start of Kirsten’s film, *Käthe Kollwitz: Images of a Life*, when Kollwitz’s younger son, Peter, expresses his intention to enlist as an underage volunteer while challenging his (reluctant) parents: “You all agreed to this war—your party did.” While his father’s opposition to the war is articulated quite unambiguously, ultimately his mother’s intervention prompts her husband to give his written consent. At this point in her development, Kollwitz appears politically naïve and overcome by a misplaced sense of loyalty to her son and his ill-conceived fantasy of heroic self-sacrifice. As Kirsten’s film reminds us, Peter’s death in the very first months of the conflict is both an emotional and aesthetic turning point in the artist’s life. Nonetheless, it is striking that the political underpinning of Kollwitz’ change of heart remains at best blurred. As she sketches Liebknecht’s corpse in the mortuary, following the communist leader’s brutal death in January 1919 at the hands of the paramilitary organization known as the Freikorps, she sees the tragic events in essentially personal—rather than political—terms, saying: “There must have been a mother and hope for a gentle death.”

Although Ralf Kirsten’s film draws extensively on diaries and letters by Kollwitz that, at the time of production, had not been published, *Käthe Kollwitz: Images of a Life* does not make any attempt to offer the viewer a straightforward, chronologically structured account of the artist’s life. Instead, its treatment of Kollwitz’s biography is structured around what might be described as four “movements” covering the three decades of her life from 1914 to her death in 1945. The film’s complex temporal structure is further disrupted by the inclusion of multiple flashbacks and a series of sequences set in the GDR of the mid-1980s, in which we see the East German actress Jutta Wachowiak developing her understanding of the character she is about to play and visiting a number of key sites of memory as she traces the stations of the artist’s life: the cemetery in Berlin-Friedrichsfelde where the graves of not only Kollwitz, but also Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Robert Bosse to Wilhelm II, May 23, 1897, and the Emperor’s agreement, Zentrales Staatsarchiv [ZSta], Dienststelle Merseburg. Königliches Geheimes Civil-Cabinet, Rep. 2.2.1, Nr. 20564. 200-202.

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm II. “Die wahre Kunst” (December 18, 1901). *Reden des Kaisers: Ansprachen, Predigten und Trinksprüche Wilhelms II.* Ed. Ernst Johann. Munich: dtv, 1996. 99-103, especially 103. [Emphasis in the original] A section of the essay (in English translation) is available on the website of the Deutsches Historisches Museum (DHM): [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=720](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=720) (Accessed on November 9, 2015)

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are to be found; in Paris, Heinrich Heine's grave in the district of Montmartre and Rodin's sculpture of *Le Penseur* (*The Thinker*) outside the Panthéon; the Vladslo German War Cemetery (near Diksmuide) in Belgium, where the grave of Kollwitz's son is now located, as is her memorial *Die trauernden Eltern* (*The Grieving Parents*); and finally, the Bildgiesserei Hermann Noack (Fine Art Foundry) in West Berlin, in which a new cast of the sculpture *Mutter mit Zwillingen* (*Mother with Twins*) is being prepared.<sup>4</sup>

The episodes set in the GDR frame the four main phases in Kollwitz's life that the film explores in detail. The first of these focuses on the catastrophe of Peter's death in Flanders—an event that is presented as the key emotional and aesthetic trigger in Kollwitz's artistic development—and features her citing Goethe ("Seed corn should not be ground") in her public repudiation of the appeal made by the lyrical poet Richard Dehmel for yet more young volunteers to join the war effort. The second phase of the film covers the period 1917-1919, including the death of Liebknecht following the unsuccessful Spartacist uprising in Berlin; here we see Kollwitz preparing the drawing that would eventually underpin the woodcut *Gedenkblatt für Karl Liebknecht* (*In Memoriam Karl Liebknecht*). The third section of the film is, in terms of its temporal structure, the most complex. Set in 1932, it begins with a shot of Käthe and Karl Kollwitz ascending the stairway of Berlin's Nationalgalerie (National Gallery, now the Alte Nationalgalerie). When they find themselves locked in the building by mistake, they embark on an extended reverie about the decades of their married life together, during which we see: tensions in the early days of their marriage and Käthe's departure for Paris; outings in the woods with their two young sons; a conversation with a young Bolshevik admirer (in 1921 Kollwitz had produced a series of posters encouraging donations to relieve the catastrophic famine in Russia) at a secret meeting in her studio involving the Communist Youth International; and Käthe receiving the award of the medal *Pour le mérite* for her contribution to arts and sciences in 1929.<sup>5</sup> In the final part of this extended sequence we see Kollwitz at an exhibition of her work (organized by her patron, the Jewish art dealer Paul Cassirer), where she defends the difference between her artistic approach and that of contemporaries Otto Dix and Georg Grosz and is attacked by a visitor to the exhibition on account of the allegedly "un-German" character of her work. Just before the couple emerge from their reverie and exit the museum, we are brought up to date with a glimpse of carnivalesque celebrations in honor of her sixtieth birthday in 1927.

The final part of Kollwitz's life upon which Kirsten's film focuses is the period from 1932 to 1945, the year of her death. During this section of the film we are offered an insight into Kollwitz's friendship with the painter Otto Nagel (1894-1967), who was responsible for organizing some of the earliest exhibitions of her work in the GDR and in 1963 published one of the most important studies of her work.<sup>6</sup> Although Kollwitz was a staunch supporter of socialism, she never became an actual member of any political party; nonetheless, the film goes out of its way to show her persuading her husband to join her in signing the 1932 *Dringender Appell für die Einheit* (*Urgent Call to Unity*), which demanded that the center-left SPD and the more radical KPD join forces in an attempt to resist the rise of Hitler. Her obvious sympathy for the Soviet Union (expressed in a 1936 interview with the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia*) is also highlighted during the sequence in which the Gestapo interrogates her in her studio. Although Kollwitz's works were never actually destroyed by the Nazis and did not feature in the infamous Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937 in Munich, two years earlier a number of them had been removed from the Academy of Arts in Berlin, an act that amounted to an outright ban of her oeuvre in all but name. In 1937, an exhibition that was to be staged at Berlin's Galerie Nierendorf had been prohibited; accordingly, when Kollwitz's distant admirer Herr Sander (played by the West German actor Gerd Baltus) finally turns up at her home on the occasion of her seventieth birthday, the only works he can see by the artist he has so long revered are those tucked away in her improvised studio.

In the final sections of *Käthe Kollwitz: Images of a Life*, Kirsten also reminds the viewer of the strong affinity between Käthe Kollwitz and the German Expressionist sculptor Ernst Barlach, as we watch her at work sketching his dead body in his studio in Güstrow. As the film underlines, death is a perennial theme in Kollwitz's work; and when she

<sup>4</sup> The East German film team received financial support from Allianz Film in West Berlin, part of which was used to support their travel to the renowned Noack foundry in Berlin-Charlottenburg, where Kollwitz's figures were cast in the pre-war era. For a discussion (in German) of the history of the Noack foundry, see Herbold, Astrid. "Anfassen erlaubt." *Das Magazin*, January 2015: 56-60.

<sup>5</sup> Kollwitz was the first woman to receive this award, just as in 1919 she had been the first female member of the Preußische Akademie der Künste (Prussian Academy of Art).

<sup>6</sup> Otto Nagel, *Käthe Kollwitz*, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1963. [In translation: Otto Nagel, *Käthe Kollwitz* (trans. Stella Humphries), Greenwich, Conn: New York Graphic Society, 1971].

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is criticized for her alleged failure to depict “the enemy”—bourgeois capitalists and representatives of the military—in the way that Otto Dix and Georg Grosz did in their work, her response is to remind her interlocutor that for the individuals portrayed in her work the enemy “has no face—for ultimately it is death itself.” As we are presented with images of Moritzburg Castle near Dresden, where in 1944 Prince Heinrich of Saxony offered Kollwitz refuge during the last year of her life, we are reminded that the artist’s own death is imminent. With the passing of Barlach in 1938, the death of her husband Karl in 1940, and the death of her grandson on the Eastern Front in Russia in 1945, Kollwitz ended her life an isolated figure. The film itself concludes with a selection of some of her best-known self-portraits—“images of a life” as the film’s subtitle would have it—beginning with herself as an old woman and ending as a young girl.

Kollwitz’s reputation as an artist rests, above all, on the capacity of her work to evoke a deep sense of compassion. Even before the division of Germany in 1949, Kollwitz was regarded in both East and West as a key figure for the reconstruction of post-war society—an artist in whose work the legacy of German classical humanism was combined with the progressive aesthetic traditions of pre-war Germany. Her works were among the very first to be exhibited in the immediate aftermath of World War II; in October 1945 an exhibition devoted exclusively to her work was staged in Berlin’s Museum für Naturkunde (Natural History Museum), and from August through October 1946 a number of her works were on show in the Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstausstellung (German Art Exhibition) in Dresden. Writing in the catalog for that exhibition, Soviet cultural officer Alexander Dymshitz remarked that “The defeat of Nazism is a victory for humanist ethics. That is why the new German art will reflect humanist values.”<sup>7</sup> Three years later, however, in his 1948 essay “Über die formalistische Richtung in der deutschen Malerei” (On the Formalist Trend in German Painting), Dymshitz began to sound a note of caution. In his attack on the modernist tendencies of certain post-war schools of European painting, he contrasts the experimental (and often bleakly existentialist) character of such works with a national tradition of German painting which, in his words, “places a high premium on the content and ideas embodied in a work of art and was renowned for the articulation of progressive social ideals. Classical German painting—Dürer and Grünewald, Bosch and Cranach, and so on right up to Heinrich Zille and Käthe Kollwitz—embodies an attitude to art that is inspired by a passion for ideas.”<sup>8</sup>

The re-modeling of the GDR’s Socialist Unity Party (SED) into an explicitly Stalinist organization towards the end of 1949, however, was accompanied by a much more hardline approach in the sphere of cultural politics, grounded in a narrowly defined concept of realist aesthetics. Perhaps the most striking example of this tendency was the publication on January 20-21, 1951 of a highly polemical essay in the GDR’s Soviet-sponsored newspaper, the *Tägliche Rundschau*. Written by a certain “N. Orlov” (a pseudonym for the dogmatic Soviet cultural theorist Vladimir Semenov), the essay “Wege und Irrwege der modernen Kunst” (“Methods and Mistakes of Modern Art”) launched a full-scale attack on so-called formalist tendencies in art that were seen as running counter to the prevailing doctrine of socialist realism. While the term socialist realism dated back to a 1933 essay by Maxim Gorky, the concept was revitalized by the Soviet politician Andrei Zhdanov in 1946 and from that point on came to dominate cultural policy in the Soviet Union and its satellite states. Despite its name, socialist realism was anything but realistic; essentially, it was an idealist aesthetic underpinned by a simplistic system of ethics and a correspondingly reductive approach to character psychology. Negative depictions of the proletariat and depictions of psychological complexity were both seen as incompatible with a utopian narrative of historical progress, in which positive socialist heroes led the working classes to a future in which class conflict would finally be overcome.

In Orlov’s essay, subheadings such as “Die Krise des Häßlichen” (“A Crisis of Ugliness”) underlined the new attitude of intolerance towards modernist art. Those modernists who claimed that their aesthetics of “ugliness” had its roots in a tradition dating back to Kollwitz were singled out for criticism: “First, there is a huge gulf between the achievements of Käthe Kollwitz and the amateurish splotches masquerading as art executed by her so-called imitators in Germany today.” At the same time, the essay also called into question Kollwitz’s supposed reputation as the founder of

<sup>7</sup> Catalog: *Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstausstellung Dresden 1946*. Dresden: Sachsenverlag, 1946.

<sup>8</sup> Dymshitz, Alexander. “Über die formalistische Richtung in der deutschen Malerei.” *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED*. Ed. Elimar Schubbe. Stuttgart: Seewald, 1972. 97-103, especially 101. Originally published in *Tägliche Rundschau*, November 19 & 24, 1948.



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proletarian art; Orlov continues,

Käthe Kollwitz saw only the *suffering* of the working classes. In only a very small number of her works (such as, for example, *The Weavers*), was she able to distance herself from such a perspective. In the meantime, as every schoolboy knows, the working classes are actively leading all proletarians in the struggle to emancipate society from the chains of imperialism. [...] That is something that Käthe Kollwitz failed to grasp. Perhaps it was not possible for her in the age she lived through to understand the great historical mission of the working classes. That was her misfortune.<sup>9</sup>

While it is perhaps understandable that the author did not wish to deny Kollwitz's key role in the construction of a socialist canon of art altogether, it is nonetheless striking that in the early 1950s the aesthetic embodied in her work is portrayed as one to be overcome rather than emulated.

Although the history of cultural politics in East Germany can be seen, at least in part, as a protracted debate about the complex relationship between socialism, socialist realism, and modernist aesthetics, it soon became clear that there was little to be gained from marginalizing Kollwitz's work. Throughout the GDR's existence, there were thus a number of exhibitions of her work and several important documentaries made about her life and work. Götz Oelschlägel's 1959 documentary *Kämpfende Kunst (Art as a Weapon)* features three key antifascist artists: Otto Dix, Käthe Kollwitz, and Otto Nagel. In it Kollwitz's art—"it was Käthe Kollwitz who portrayed the strength of ordinary people," the voice-over tells us—is portrayed as linking the pre-1949 antifascist art of Dix with the post-1949 proletarian art of Nagel and the cultural politics of the contemporary GDR. While in *Art as a Weapon* Kollwitz is seen as a transitional figure who bridges pre- and post-war art, Kurt Tetzlaff's 1967 documentary *Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden (Seed Corn Should Not Be Ground)* focuses on her initial "error" and subsequent journey to a position of greater political awareness. The "error" referred to in the short documentary is essentially her willingness to allow her son to be caught up in the catastrophe of World War I, resulting in the subsequent years of remorse she must endure as she strives to produce a monument adequate to his memory.

*Käthe Kollwitz: Images of a Life* does not represent the first time Ralf Kirsten engaged with the plight of German artists in the early twentieth century. His film *Der verlorene Engel (The Lost Angel)*, made in 1966 but not widely released until 1971, focuses on a day in the life of Kollwitz's friend and contemporary, Ernst Barlach.<sup>10</sup> In this earlier film, the Nazi removal of Barlach's allegedly "degenerate" sculpture *Der schwebende Engel (The Hovering Angel, 1927)* from the Güstrow Cathedral on August 24, 1937<sup>11</sup> prompts its creator to reflect upon the artist's social responsibility and his relationship to those around him. In 1951-52, an exhibition of Barlach's work at East Berlin's Academy of Arts had proved very controversial on account of the sculptor's supposedly "formalist" tendencies. Based on a novella by the East German writer Franz Fühmann, Kirsten's film sought to rehabilitate Barlach's standing in the GDR and make a case for modernist aesthetics in the service of an antifascist agenda. In 1965-66, however, a renewed attempt to suppress modernist aesthetics followed the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the SED's Central Committee. Kirsten's *The Lost Angel* was just one of a number of films banned, and it was not until 1971—a period marked by a more liberal approach to cultural politics—that a screenable copy of the film was released (and then only at the explicit request of the Soviet Union) to mark the centenary of Barlach's birth.

Nearly twenty years lie between the making of *The Lost Angel* and *Käthe Kollwitz: Images of a Life*. Nonetheless, Kirsten's 1986 film contains a number of clear-cut references to his earlier film about Barlach.<sup>12</sup> This is perhaps most obviously the case as Kollwitz sketches Barlach lying in his coffin and we see her face in the background as a bronze relief on the studio wall—a tacit reference to Barlach's *Hovering Angel*, whose face was modeled on Kollwitz herself. While *Käthe Kollwitz: Images of a Life* does not perhaps have quite the same radical agenda as Kirsten's earlier film—Barlach was always a much more controversial figure in the GDR than Kollwitz—through its complex temporal structure it seeks to provoke the viewer/spectator into an active contemplation of its subject matter. By choosing to eschew a straightforward,

<sup>9</sup> N. Orlov [Vladimir Semenov], "Wege und Irrwege der modernen Kunst." *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED*. Ed. Elimar Schubbe. Stuttgart: Seewald, 1972: 159-170 (especially 165-166). [Originally published in *Tägliche Rundschau*, January 20-21, 1951.]

<sup>10</sup> *The Lost Angel*—on DVD with educational bonus features—is also available from the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

<sup>11</sup> Editor's Note: This date is mentioned in Ernst Barlach's diaries.

<sup>12</sup> The films are also linked via the actor Fred Düren who plays Ernst Barlach in *Der verlorene Engel (The Lost Angel)* and Kollwitz's husband, Karl, in Kirsten's later film.

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chronological account of Kollwitz's life, Kirsten's film strove to open up a new perspective on an artist who, over the years, had been gradually assimilated into the GDR canon of socialist art. As Kirsten himself put it in an interview of 1986, "The images of her memories are like the pieces of a mosaic that the viewer has to reassemble in his or her own mind."<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the contemporary sequences—which were far more extensive in the original script than in the completed film—are an invitation to the viewer to reflect on the role of Kollwitz's work, in particular, and of art, in general, in the present. The resulting aesthetics of alienation (in the Brechtian sense of the term) is further heightened by Peter Gotthardt's unconventional soundtrack, which consists of popular songs of the historical period in which the film is set, punctuated by stretches of avant-garde electronic music.

When Kirsten's Kollwitz film was released in 1986, it met with a mixed reception in both East and West Germany. While Horst Knietzsch, writing in the mainstream East German daily *Neues Deutschland*, praised the film on account of its subtlety,<sup>14</sup> others were less forgiving; Detlef Friedrich, for example, writing in the *Berliner Zeitung*, saw Kirsten's filmic collage as a sign of indecision in handling biographical material, and felt that the sequences revolving around the actress playing the part of Kollwitz were unnecessary and should have been left out.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Heinz Kersten's review for the West Berlin broadsheet *Der Tagesspiegel*, "Im Material ertrunken" ("Drowning in Material"), pointed out that anyone without a detailed knowledge of Kollwitz's biography would struggle to put together the pieces of Kirsten's mosaic-like work.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most interestingly, Kirsten's exploration of Kollwitz's life and work prompted comparisons with the New German Cinema of the Federal Republic of Germany and underlined the extent to which East German tastes were increasingly being shaped by developments over the border; for example, in her regular column "Kino-Eule," the GDR journalist Renate Holland-Moritz suggested that there were lessons Kirsten could learn from the film *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986) by the West German director Margarethe von Trotta.<sup>17</sup> Some thirty years after its release, *Käthe Kollwitz: Images of a Life* remains a complex film, and its (often oblique) allusions to figures and events from the 1920s and 1930s are, if anything, more difficult to decode today than at the time of its release. Even so, it remains a key document not only regarding Kollwitz's reception in the GDR, but also for understanding the history of socialist art generally, both in the GDR and beyond.

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<sup>13</sup> "Käthe Kollwitz. Bilder eines Lebens. Ralf Kirsten im Gespräch mit Dieter Wolf." *Film und Fernsehen*, 4/1987: 2-6, especially 4.

<sup>14</sup> Knietzsch, Horst. "Subtiler Versuch der Annäherung an ein Leben und eine Epoche. Jutta Wachowiak, Fred Düren, Carmen-Maja Antoni in den Hauptrollen einer DEFA-Produktion des Regisseurs Ralf Kirsten." *Neues Deutschland*, April 25, 1987.

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich, Detlef. "Das Film-Heil aus dem Essayistischen? Zum DEFA-Spielfilm *Käthe Kollwitz – Bilder eines Lebens*." *Berliner Zeitung*, April 25, 1987.

<sup>16</sup> Kersten, Heinz. "Im Material ertrunken. Ralf Kirstens DEFA-Film über Käthe Kollwitz zum Berlin-Jubiläum." *Der Tagesspiegel*, May 10, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Holland-Moritz, Renate. "Kino-Eule: *Käthe Kollwitz – Bilder eines Lebens*." *Eulenspiegel*, May 29, 1987.