

KÄTHE KOLLWITZ: IMAGES OF A LIFE



This conversation between director Ralf Kirsten and dramaturg Dieter Wolf was originally published in German in the film journal Film und Fernsehen 4/1987.

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You have made twenty movies by now. Three of these are historical-biographical works. You worked on the Käthe Kollwitz movie right after the Zetkin movie. Is there perhaps a growing tendency towards this genre?

Even if I am interested in other historic personalities, what appeals to me is not the similarity of the genres, but rather the distinctiveness of the respective choice of the hero. So, Clara Zetkin's life and struggle are directly tied to the politics of that time. It was about a concrete situation, the eve of the Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass)—about ten days of her life. With Kollwitz we decided to cover more than three decades, from the start of WWI to the end of WWII. She rarely intervened directly in the course of history. Instead, she took a stand with her artistic work. This all has an effect on the dramaturgy. The Kollwitz character is directed in a far more muted way than the Zetkin character. My image of her was not only shaped by her work, but was also influenced strongly by her diaries and innumerable letters and recollections of people who knew her. Still, despite all efforts for authenticity, she is a fictional character with whom we have to deal in the movie.

Kollwitz did not see herself as a public political personality, and she probably judged the extent of her popularity and impact skeptically rather than overrating it.

She entrusted her thoughts on politics, on people and on events to her diary, some things only to it. Courage born of despair emanates from the "Dringender Appell" ("Urgent Call") poster announcements for the antifascist unity front that she had signed together with Karl Kollwitz, Heinrich Mann, and other personalities after January 30, 1933. In her work, she always reacts to contemporary events influenced by the social experience of living for fifty years in the eastern part of Berlin, constantly in contact with her husband's medical practice for the poor. She, however, also faced the current political mandate. While she very arduously and for a long time worked on some graphic arts—at times even for years—she also executed some commissioned works overnight, if necessary. A phone call by a charitable organization to help the starving Viennese children with a poster appeal sufficed. This is how artistically relevant solidarity appeals were created; for example, there are the lithographies *Helft Rußland (Help Russia)* and *Deutschlands Kinder hungern (Germany's Children Are Starving)* on commission by the IAH (Internationale Arbeiterhilfe, International Workers' Welfare).

When did the idea for the Kollwitz project come about? How did it develop?

During the preparation for the Barlach film *Der verlorene Engel (The Lost Angel)*, I also dealt with Kollwitz's life. One finds her high appreciation of Barlach's woodcuts and sculptures in her diaries—a perfection that she felt she could never attain. Inspired by Barlach, she adopts the woodcut technique, and not coincidentally in her engagement with the Liebknecht theme.

Serious considerations for the movie first developed in 1980. During a lengthy hospital stay I met Theo Balden,¹ whom I owed much for my Barlach project. The medically prescribed walks gave us a welcome opportunity to exchange our ideas about the life and work of Kollwitz. Soon after, I contacted the Kollwitz heirs. That is how I got access to the diaries

¹ Editor's Note: Theo Balden (1904-1995) was a German sculptor and graphic artist. He studied with László Moholy-Nagy and Oskar Schlemmer at the Bauhaus in Weimar. Balden settled in East Berlin after WWII. In 1968, he became the head of a newly founded workgroup responsible for fostering Ernst Barlach's work at the Kulturbund der DDR (Cultural Association of the GDR).

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and letters in the Kollwitz archive in the Academy of Arts in West Berlin. Until then, only fragments had been published. But I only started to work seriously on the project after the Zetkin movie *Wo andere schweigen* (*Where Others Keep Silent*), and I already had Jutta Wachowiak in mind as the main lead.

The cinematic history of DEFA is not lacking in works about visual artists. One could go back to Tilman Riemenschneider (1958). Besides Barlach, on the screen we saw Goya and Jörg Ratgeb, a (fictitious) contemporary sculptor (Der nackte Mann auf dem Sportplatz, The Naked Man on the Athletic Field), and recently, van Gogh. Do you see yourself thus, as auteur standing in a thematic or artistic and stylistic tradition owing to the interpretation of historians and journalists?

We watched these movies once more, long before we went into production. And again, I was fascinated by many sequences of the *Goya* film and envied Konrad Wolf of the opportunity to be able to cover such a life in two film parts. The large time span of the biography in the Kollwitz film tends toward epic broadness. However, producing the film in multiple parts seemed inappropriate in the current cinematic situation. The impending excessive length accompanied us as a working problem all the way into the editing room. The critics will have to decide if our idea for finding a concentration has proven successful and was not realized at the expense of atmosphere and emotionality.

Did the impulses for the movie come from the biographical material or did Kollwitz's oeuvre already convey such impulses previously?

I found the approach to Kollwitz primarily through her work in the 1950s. There was only a small amount of literature available about her for a long time, and even fewer published personal documents. Otto Nagel² contributed greatly to her popularization. Only much later, when I approached the movie consciously, did I acquaint myself with her personal circumstances, how she felt about herself, and how she was seen by others.

In order to turn her work into images, literary and scenic comprehensibility and a gestural and mimetic performance were the decisive premises for the feature film.

Are there any key motifs in your personal Kollwitz perception that are especially moving to you? Many of her topics are recurring.

From youth to old age, she dealt with the big questions of life and death. She also personalized her depiction of Death. There is, for example, the self-portrait *Der Ruf des Todes* (*Call of Death*) from 1935, in which his hand gently touches her shoulder. Here, Death is a welcome friend. In her youth and middle age she hated him and fought against him, which is depicted in the social misery of the proletariat. This partisanship is typical for her collaboration at the satirical magazine, *Simplicissimus*. There is the accusatory drawing of the pregnant woman who wants to drown herself and her two children in the Spree River. Here Death stands outside of the picture, as he does in many others, but these are variations of several themes: poverty, privation, social misery and war. The months in Moritzburg near Dresden (and before that in Nordhausen), to where she had fled to be away from the bombing attacks on Berlin, were defined by a waiting for death.

The subheading reads Bilder eines Lebens (Images of a Life). What is connected stylistically and artistically with this? Which associations should this line trigger?

The problems with the biography lay in finding a structure that could capture the crucial moments of this life in the span of several decades. I decided to show this period in four major blocks that are both connected and separated by some level of the present. I looked for ideational connections in order to avoid the constraints of a strict chronology. That's why I like the ambiguity of the subheading. It is about the concrete images that she creates, but also about those we talk about—in

² Editor's Note: Otto Nagel (1894-1967) was a German painter. He was very active in the Berlin art scene in the 1920s and was a close friend to Käthe Kollwitz. Especially in his later position as president of the East German Academy of Arts, he helped to promote Kollwitz's art.

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situations and in episodes. We see in this a possible way for the audience to accept the unusual structure of the movie. The idea of using the level of our present time did not spring from the dictates of the structure. The feature film must lift the real existing character onto a fictional level without infringing on the true life of the authentic model. We wanted to openly acknowledge to the audience that here a contemporary actress is using her art to embody a woman and artist, who is committed to a sensually quite different artistic and creative statement. At the same time, this conveys an impression of the actress's working process and her approach to the historic figure.

How did the cooperation between you and Jutta Wachowiak work out in practice? And what, besides the necessary physical and/or physiognomic appropriateness, led you to this actress?

I had already worked with Jutta Wachowiak on occasion. I like her due to her outstanding acting talents, her versatility, and her ability to communicate deep inner mental conflicts and emotional contradictions to the audience via facial expressions, her eyes, her hands and body language. I see one of her particular strengths especially in her wordless acting. If an actress of her age group assumes the role of someone between fifty and eighty, she is aware that the art of the make-up artist can help only to a limited extent. Here the actress has to take into her own body the process of maturation and aging—up to the smallest and almost hidden physical expressions. I involved Jutta Wachowiak very early on in my deliberations about the project. She knew Kollwitz's diaries and letters just like I did. And still, there was a necessary process of conceptual convergence. My view of the character was not identical with her wishes and ideas. Each of us had our own image of Kollwitz. However, my concept became more precise during these debates until we finally were able to proceed to the first day of shooting with the necessary common mindset.

But why did you choose the flashback montage—or rather the associative memory images? Which reasons argue against using a chronology, which is more popular?

The desire to tell the film from Kollwitz's perspective, and as subjectively as possible, was crucial. I finally decided to go with this structure when it became clear to me that there were intense emotional highs in her seemingly undramatic life. I found them in her shock about the far too early death of her youngest son during WWI, and in the controversy with Karl Liebknecht, although they hardly knew each other personally. For a long time, she sided with the socialist majority and really only appreciated Liebknecht's greatness after his assassination, and she held on to him in her wood cut. After that there are again very succinct situations in her confrontation with fascism, but in between there were longer quiet periods. So, we make use of a specific moment in her life. For example, the day she receives the death notice of her son from Flanders, in order to make her ponder the problem of her supposed or actual complicity in his untimely death.

The images of remembrance are supposed to come together as a mosaic for the audience.

By specifically and deliberately applying the tool of a voice expressing Kollwitz's thoughts, you adhered strongly to the authentic texts of her diaries and letters. Could we say that you had in mind some kind of filmic self-portrait of Kollwitz?

Yes, maybe it also derives from the fact that all her life Kollwitz spent her time on self-portraits. She even gave other figures, like female workers, her own facial features. The preoccupation with her face was for her the means of examining the passage of time. She senses aging in the self-portrayal and she anticipates it. The comparison with photos makes this quite clear. And still, this long series of portraits is free of narcissistic self-reflection. She was very critical of herself. On the other hand, such frequent attention to the self certainly indicated an introverted trait in her nature. One also finds her listening to herself and looking at herself in the diaries. She repeatedly deplores her inability to react quickly and properly to external factors, also in political matters. She needed days for deliberation and discussions with her husband before she could form her own opinion. She needed to deal with external factors in her inner being before she could find a solution, also in terms of her art. In my opinion, all this is part of the distinct character sketch of this woman.

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Surely one sees here an essential feature of her profession and her talent to find a very personal connection to her figures and to her life's difficulties.

I also see this in her intense identification with her surroundings, with people from the proletariat. If one compares her path of development with Zille's³, with whom she was friends, one notices a distinct divergence. Zille stayed true to his *Berliner Miljö* (Berlin milieu), the brats, characters from the lumpen proletariat, and he remained in "his Berlin" and clung to it. One finds in Kollwitz's artistic development how she loosens the ties to this milieu more and more vigorously without becoming atemporal or socially diffused, but rather by pressing larger questions. Her work does not merely appeal to Berlin; it is also generally understood outside of Germany. Indeed, already during her lifetime her influence reaches as far as China. In those countries where the fundamental class conflict continues to produce social misery, her vivid broad statements are instantly comprehensible without any explanation or commentary. A simultaneous accusation and appeal.

There are Kollwitz interpretations that explain her work especially in light of her proximity to her husband's medical practice for the poor. How does the movie respond to this?

Certainly she studied her husband's patients with open eyes and she knew about the horrible conditions in the Berlin tenements. However, it is a terrible simplification that she should have found her subjects and models only in the medical practice. Already at the beginning of her conscious life she carried in herself a large, intellectual concept of art, which was shaped not least of all through upbringing, education, and artistic studies. She increasingly saw herself as a political artist on the side of the proletariat and with an active connection to global cultures and world literatures. Just remember the famous cycles on the Weavers' Revolt and the Peasants' War that were created early in her career. She was aware of the importance of such personalities as Rolland, Barbusse, or Gorky, and she was close to them.

We were only able to allude to her Paris experience in the movie. There were already two big exhibitions in the Soviet Union during her lifetime. She and her husband accepted an invitation to the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution. The exhibition of her works there was simultaneously also an acknowledgment of her 60th birthday. She was celebrated as an artist and as a friend of revolutionary Russia, and she was deeply impressed.

Numerous friendships and acquaintanceships point to this evocativeness. The diaries and letters give some indication of it. A feature film of normal length faces challenges because it can only catch moments of such overabundance. From which point of view did you carry out the necessary limitation to only a few figures and their immediate surroundings?

The episodic structure meant that there were only two other characters for the audience, who (besides her) appear throughout the movie: her husband, Dr. Karl Kollwitz, with whom she is connected in a deep, life-long relationship that is not without problems. With all restraint, Fred Düren plays the severe, selfless physician with great dignity and human integrity. And then there is Miss Lina, who advances from housemaid to housekeeper and even to head of household, entirely in line with Käthe and Karl, who gladly relinquished the household to her since they were too wrapped up in their own work. Carmen-Maja Antoni lovingly interprets this role. All other characters have only episodic encounters with Kollwitz.

I found a great willingness of talented and well-known actors to play in supportive roles. For example, Rolf Ludwig as a Gestapo officer, who looks for Kollwitz in her master studio in order to keep track of an interview that she had given to *Izvestia*. Casting such small yet very important roles with well-known actors was a key requirement in order to fill the narrative structure with life and with distinctive faces. There were Lotte Loebinger and Marion van de Kamp, Marga Legal, Hans-Peter Minetti, and many more. All these characters, except for the doctor-patient-relationships, are brought face-to-face with Kollwitz. An aesthetic and dramaturgical problem arose from the fact that the partners are scenically active while Kollwitz plays a more observing and reflective role—a difficult task for Jutta Wachowiak, who is often relegated to do silent yet eloquent acting. I hope that the audience appreciates this style-defining principle as an achievement of this actress.

³ Editor's Note: Heinrich Zille (1858-1929) was a German illustrator and became best known for his illustration of typical Berlin characters.

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How did the casting of foreign actors come about—among them an actor from West Germany cast again after a considerable time—and how was the cooperation?

The production was supported by a West Berlin film company. The filming in Belgium, Paris, and West Berlin (Art Foundry Noack) would not have been possible without its help. That is how we cast Gerd Baltus in the part of the candle maker. He was based on an authentic figure, a distant friend of Kollwitz, who mails her candles throughout her life, but who is too shy to approach her personally in deference to her works. I created this part freely—a man about whom one speaks frequently in the movie and who only meets her in her hour of death. Pavel, the delegate from the young Soviet state who co-founds the Communist Youth International in Berlin, is played by Igor Yankovsky from Moscow. Kollwitz had provided her studio for this conspiratorial meeting. This delegate from Lenin lived at her place. Lex Goudsmit came from Holland. In a present-day sequence he leads Wachowiak over the Flemish WWI graveyards, also to Roggevelde, where the two famous Kollwitz sculptures for the son, the father and mother figure stand today.

A complicated problem in a movie about artists and art exists in visualizing the other genres, the other medium respectively. You were after the interaction of life and art, not after completeness or the false ambition to show how a work took shape under her hands. Isn't her work short-changed by that?

I refrained from the beginning to imitate, to entice the actress to produce like Kollwitz or—as in some movies about composers or pianists—to cut in the able hands of a professional. The hint of a personal correction is performed in only two scenes: the work on the Liebknecht sketch and the work on the bas-relief for the Barlach memorial. The element of the present-day also gives the audience the opportunity to understand through the actress's approach to the role the encounter with some of the works, offered somewhat as composed montages of graphic works. This is also an invitation to the audience to go to her rich oeuvre and to explore it for themselves more thoroughly beyond the few fleeting images the movie can offer.

You used the artistic work to some extent on two different visual levels. Graphic and plastic works appear during various phases of their creation and in addition to this, important and beautiful works are presented directly to the audience without any distraction through the filmic process. Which formal principle did you pursue in doing this and how does it correspond to the stated intentions?

The intensity of the impact of some of the works was important to me, not the general view of the entire oeuvre. I also limited myself to only a few of the self-portraits. The preliminary studies for the Liebknecht topic played a more important role. Various works dealing with the Peasants' War and the Weavers' Revolt could be inserted into the reconstruction of an exhibit by the art dealer Cassirer—more as a scenic background than for the arguments around the emotive word "German art." What is German art? This is a question to which fascism had an amateurish, nationalistic and narrow-minded answer. The biographically themed blocks are framed by montages, in which individual works are not spliced together one after the other on the full screen, but which appear instead in a soft dissolve. This way we avoid strange statics for this movie. The modified sections and the dissolve of images and forms are associated with Kollwitz's stream of memories in the mind's eye.

Kollwitz's grandchildren live in West Berlin and West Germany. Conceptual and legal consent were prerequisites for the development of the project and the realization of the movie...

When the joint heirs gave their consent to the project, it was a quite factual agreement, fixed in the general framework of a relevant contract provision. An amicable relationship developed during the years of preparation for the literary work and the filming. This provided us intimate access to the person Kollwitz that cannot be conveyed through any legal document. The gratitude for this can hardly be expressed through a sparse sentence during the opening credits.

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It is very rare for a set designer to have such an opportunity but also the difficult task of handling the works of a great colleague for his own material.

Without the creative impetus of Hans Poppe, the movie could never have achieved this form. The family apartment in the Weißenburger Street, today Kollwitz Street, is the central setting. She lived there for five decades. Käthe had her studio and Karl his medical office one floor below. And it was not only about a contemporarily faithful, socially precise, and very personal environment. Fifty years of a life needed to be told in this interior space. This stretches from the once newly moved-in modernly furnished apartment of the last century up to the traces of the first bombings of WWII. This has been thought out and realized by Hans Poppe with prowess, accuracy and meticulousness. Great praise goes to the architects, artisans in the studio workshops, artists, sculptors and prop men, who implemented all this, often only going off of photos. A special commendation goes to Marianne Poppe-Willmann, who was responsible for acquiring and reproducing all graphic works during the entire filming and even long before. With the permission by the community of heirs some of these movie props can now be viewed at the memorial site at Moritzburg near Dresden, less an advertisement for the movie than a bow before the great artist Käthe Kollwitz.

Translated by Sigrit Schütz.

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