

Never Look Away

German artist Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) may not be a household name in the US, but he is renowned in the art world and has been called “the greatest living artist,” conducting, over a 65-year period, an amazingly protean career in every aspect of the visual arts. The beginnings of that career are the inspiration for a new movie, “Never Look Away,” made by director Florian von Donnersmarck. The filmmaker achieved renown with first film “The Lives of Others” (2006) which earned him, at age 33, an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, a category for which he is nominated again this year. An open question for moviegoers approaching von Donnersmarck’s film (which he also wrote) is how much does one need to know about the real Richter to appreciate and assess the fictionalized version?

The story, a complex one, begins in 1937 with a young Kurt Barnert (standing in for Richter) observing, with a beloved aunt, Elisabeth (Saskia Rosendahl), an exhibition of “degenerate art” mounted by the Nazis in Dresden. However, Elisabeth, a smart and sensitive sort, admires the modernistic works, passing along her taste to her nephew. Later, she is sterilized and killed by the Nazis because she is deemed schizophrenic. Her sterilization is carried out by Professor Carl Seeband (Sebastian Koch), an obstetrician and member of the SS.

Switch to post-war Dresden where the young Kurt (Tom Schilling) begins to study painting at the city’s art school and meets and falls for Ellie Seeband (Paula Beer), daughter of the infamous doctor (unknown to Kurt) who has survived the war and become a dutiful, and successful, communist in East Germany. Kurt excels at the art school but chafes under a regime preaching social realism. He eventually meets Seeband, who sees him as unworthy of his daughter, and, when Ellie gets pregnant, the doctor performs a cruel abortion.

Kurt, undaunted, marries Ellie, and the two flee to the West, where Seeband and his wife have already settled. Kurt is able to get into the modern art Academy in Dusseldorf, but he flails a bit finding his own personal style. Inspiration comes when he comes upon a newspaper photograph of a captured Nazi doctor (a colleague of his father-in-law), enlarges it to produce an oil painting likeness, and ultimately creates his first “blur” paintings of common photographic images (just like Richter did) which launch his career.

Barnert’s odyssey is told by von Donnersmarck in unhurried and elegant sequences (note the three hours plus run time) which allow enough time to show Kurt’s personal and artistic development. Schilling’s performance might be seen as stolid, but it makes sense for a man whose emotions have been stifled by his East German upbringing and who must struggle to find his muse. Instead, the emotion in his life is fully expressed with his winsome wife Ellie (an endearing Beer), supportive at every turn. Dr. Seeband is appropriately rigid and severe, a born authoritarian. For Koch, his work represents an impressive turnabout from the role he played in von Donnersmarck’s first film, where he impersonated an enlightened, accomplished playwright. The glorious cinematography comes courtesy of Caleb Deschanel, the 74-year-old American, now nominated for six Oscars, including this film.

So what of my initial question: how much do you need to know of Richter to appreciate this film? Let's say that it is rich enough in historic reference, narrative complexity, and striking imagery for any discerning filmgoer to appreciate it.

However, the more one knows of Gerhard Richter and his work, the more resonance it will have. For any reader who may remember a major retrospective of Richter's work that filled DC's Hirschhorn Museum in 2002, they will recall his striking "blur" paintings—and so many other artworks that followed. Von Donnersmarck does create Kurt's own backstory, but he constantly echoes the world of Richter, too. A wonderful example of how he plays with Richter's past is shown with one of Kurt's teachers, an idiosyncratic Prof. van Verten (Oliver Masucci), who is a clever facsimile of another noted German artist, Joseph Beuys, who was, indeed, an instructor at the Dusseldorf school.

For this reviewer, "Never Look Away" comes as close as anyone has in feature films to show how the creative imagination really works. A filmic "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man."

(The film is rated "R" and runs 188 mins.)

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