

# Kurzfilm in the German Studies Classroom

## Aesthetics, Landeskunde, Pedagogy

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This specimen of student scholarship by Leona-Maike Wenning is of value in its own right—for the film it introduces and the pedagogical strategies it recommends—but also as an example of a transatlantic endeavor of my own in which she participated so generously.

Following an invitation from Rolf Parr, I taught a block seminar at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) during the Summer 2022 semester that was in some respects a transplant of one I like to teach at home at the University of Notre Dame (USA). I adapted my »Great German Short Films« seminar to the UDE setting by prefacing it first with a number of sessions comparing US and German higher education, and then by contrasting the practice of interdisciplinary German Studies with the more traditional, philological *Germanistik* (admittedly not neatly separable by nation, since the German Studies model has expanded, albeit at various rates and to varying degrees, across the globe). Then, at long last, we got down to the matter of short films themselves. The goal in both versions of the course is to combine aesthetics with *Landeskunde* and (language) pedagogy. I hope to have inculcated the basics of film analysis while treating accessible works that resonate with salient cultural challenges.

Students—both in the US and in Germany—were asked to develop a film handbook as their final course project. As a rule, my undergraduate students at Notre Dame are not, in contrast to most of the master's students I taught in Essen, planning to become teachers. But the film handbook, which includes an array of teaching strategies and specific didactic exercises, has not only a pragmatic, but also a broader humanistic goal. Research shows that students learn far better, and become substantially more active learners, when they are asked to reflect explicitly on their own learning process. What better way to incorporate this phase of meta-reflection than to ask them to play the role of teacher—not just briefly during a class presentation, as is usually the case—but in a more protracted and systematic manner, by requiring them to develop a set of resources and classroom activities to enhance the teaching of a film they find particularly striking? My students at the UDE had the additional burden of cross-cultural transfer, that is of adapting their *Handbuch* to

the US-American college setting. On top of finding a short film that »works,« that captures in a concentrated manner a topic of larger cultural interest, they had to ask themselves how to »translate« the material to meet the needs of American students, and to demonstrate this sensitivity with actual course materials.

Though given some leeway, students were asked to foreground and cultivate an awareness of how the respective film is constructed, that is, to document specific aspects of film narratology (e.g. camera placement, lighting, etc.) *before* leaping into interpretation. To this end Wenning supplies an abbreviated shot-analysis chart which, if reproduced in its entirety, would of course be much longer and more detailed. At this stage *ekphrastic* description of key scenes is paramount. The goal is not to quickly »decode« some hidden message, but rather to carefully observe which codes are being deployed, and precisely how. It is valuable to elicit broad consensus on *what* one is seeing and *how* it is composed before launching into speculation on what it all might *mean*. This is an irreplaceable phase and doing it well usually ensures a richer discussion. Students can in my experience tolerate a breadth of divergent meaning so long as they are not being asked to assent to something they simply do not see.

Therefore, they were asked, secondly, to create activities that would encourage their students (the ones for whom the handbook is devised) to link form to meaning. This ensures that observation of camera angle, to take just one example, is integrated into interpretation, rather than left dangling as some kind of extraneous observation. Finally, students were asked to honor the respective film as a work of art that both programs and invites viewers' responses. It is undeniable that a number of these films possess an identifiable didactic intention. But to the extent that they are also works of art, they possess moments of openness, ambiguity, elasticity and elusiveness. At these junctures especially meaning arises in the interaction with the film's viewers. How can one honor both– the film's intention to »enlighten,« but also its invitation to negotiate meaning with its viewership? It is far easier to fall back upon a rigid and traditional pedagogy that already possesses the answer it is allegedly seeking to elicit from students. It treats film (or any work of art) as a riddle to which the teacher already has the answer. The only real lesson here is to avoid art altogether, or to view it as the preserve of the cognoscenti.

One of the central points of the UDE seminar was to insist that teachers need to reflect on aesthetics, not simply relay canonical interpretations of »experts« gleaned from the standard *Lehrbücher*. (Which is another reason why they were writing their own *Lehrbuch*!) And if we can all agree that rigorous attentiveness to the film (established via *ekphrastic* praxis described above) is somehow to be balanced with the viewer's freedom to respond, then the pedagogy one chooses must exhibit and model that very mix. They are very well accustomed to guiding their students toward particular conclusions; that I could see very clearly. The challenge, I argued, is to de-

velop a pedagogy respecting that requisite quantum of freedom and preserving the delight of discovery.

To actually explore *with* students, to be surprised and puzzled with them, to be open to altering one's own prior opinion in light of their valid observations and associations, rather than to authoritatively interpret for them—all this is a tall order indeed. And it is one that Wenning, in her contribution below, fulfills in an exemplary manner. Even for those students who do not wish to become teachers or to pursue film studies further—which is the majority of my Notre Dame undergraduates—this exercise may hold substantial value in inculcating life-long social and analytical skills. For thinking carefully about how one learns, about how to take the observations of others into account, and how to engage ambiguity (in art and elsewhere) will surely be of use long after graduation day.

