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## Never Look Away (Werk ohne Autor)

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### **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Never Look Away (Werk ohne Autor)* (2018) directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck.

As academics we live in a world without absolutes, mistrustful of them, preferring -- in fact *needing* – nuance, qualifications, careful distinctions. We're anxious not to be wrong by a single exception. So the absolute “never” scratches my mind when I see the title of Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's third film, *Never Look Away*. Of course, the original title of the film is *Werk ohne Autor* (work without an author) but I hope I can insist that the English title surpasses the original in great part for that stunning *Never*. *Never Look Away*. And if the absolute violates our academic timidity, what an irony it is that those who study religion deal with absolutes frequently and maybe entirely (note the caution of “frequently and maybe”!) – from Exodus's “Thou shalt not” to Kevin Hart's “God is absolute interruption.” It's as though we academic shepherds were herding not sheep but wolves. Von Donnersmarck's film is a wolf in wolf's clothing and exactly as dangerous and valuable as we could want.

Teachers, in fact, play an important role in this movie, and “never look away” is spoken to 10-year-old Kurt Barnert by his first and best teacher, his aunt Elizabeth, when they are visiting a Nazi exhibit of degenerate art. A Nazi docent (our second teacher) denounces the art and his aunt whispers to him that she likes those paintings by Georg Grosz, Paul Klee, Emil Nolde, Franz Marc and others, urging him to look at what the Nazis want to destroy. But Elizabeth is mentally ill, and when she is carried off for sterilization (that there be no more degenerate Germans) and then extermination, struggling as medical personnel force her into a van, Kurt tries to look away, his fingers before his eyes. The scene, after all, is horrible. Her entire family is horrified. And Elizabeth calls to Kurt to look at her, to “never look away” from the horrific.

But there are other, far worse teachers in Kurt's life. The doctor who condemns Elizabeth to death insists on being called Professor Seeband, and he has the stature and confidence to make absolute pronouncements of a very different kind than “never look away.” He preens in his SS

uniform and eagerly volunteers to rid the Reich of the physically and mentally weak. Prof. Seeband personifies the blending of academia and deeply harmful religion – he always looks away – as the professor of the eradication of the ill, even performing an abortion on his own daughter to rid her of an undesirable pregnancy when she has fallen in love with the undesirable Kurt. “Always be the best,” he says, but what that absolute means is that rooms full of those deemed less than the best are simply gassed, as the fetus of Kurt and his daughter is scraped from her uterus.

The film’s third teacher deals with absolutes, as well. He’s the adult Kurt’s art teacher in East Germany, after the War, leading his students to paint the proletariat of Germany and to extinguish their preoccupation with “me, me, me.” Kurt learns well, and is selected to paint an impersonal mural of labor, high on a ladder, far from himself. His father, also a teacher, is banished from the classroom by the East German regime for lack of ideological purity, and, humiliated by being made to wash stairs (for the ascent of those who are more pure than he is). He eliminates himself, committing suicide to look away from his failure. So much looking away. So many reasons for Kurt to hold his fingers in front of his face, looking away.

Kurt’s final teacher is in his third political environment, the German West, and is another art professor, Antonius van Verten. “You’ve seen things,” he tells Kurt, when he favors him with a rare studio visit. This professor has suffered in the War as well, and carries a war wound on his head that is as gruesome in its way as the violence against Kurt’s aunt and Kurt’s father, as horrible as the forced abortion. And van Verten carries it right on his head, the wound that all in this movie carry, and when he bends and doffs his hat for the student to see, Kurt does not look away. And then Kurt finally makes art of his own, with photos of his aunt Elizabeth, and his wife, and her father, the preening SS doctor, and the Nazi who ordered the elimination of the weak. He looks at his murderous personal past. He doesn’t look away.

Is a film about absolutes – the absolute always to destroy weakness, the absolute never to look away from that destruction or from the wounds that we all bear – is such a film always religious? We might try to add nuance, we might qualify and make distinctions. Or we might just say yes. “Never Look Away” is absolutely religious.