Christian Petzold's cinema of haunted figures

Film historian and filmmaker Dr Claudia Sandberg explores the work of Christian Petzold, the most exciting auteur to emerge from the '90s Berlin School
Ahead of our Christian Petzold film season, film historian and filmmaker Dr Claudia Sandberg examines how the director’s characters are often caught in ‘dead’ spaces and haunted by choices made earlier in their lives.

Betrayed lovers, unfulfilled desires and second chances are ingredients in Petzold’s thoughtful cinema that comments on the human condition in the political calamities which have destroyed, divided and reunited German society in more than half a century.

Over the course of a career that started with his graduation film at the German Film and Television Academy Berlin, Pilotinnen (Pilots, 1995), Christian Petzold (born in 1960) has emerged as one of the most critical voices of German film. To date, he has made sixteen films for television and cinema that have garnered important national and international prizes.

Petzold’s feature films deal with the afterlife of terrorism (Die innere Sicherheit/The State I am in, 2000), East Germany and post-reunification issues (Yella 2007, Jerichow 2008; Barbara, 2012), and lately, the heritage of WWII and the Holocaust (Phoenix, 2014, Transit 2018). The collaboratively made thriller trilogy Dreileben (Three Lives) was the TV highlight of the year 2011. Where fellow German directors reanimate life in the Weimar Republic and continue to mystify the East in ever more opulent pictures, Petzold’s films stimulate spectators to look for meaning in the symbolic world of his concentrated images and otherworldly soundscapes. Films such as Yella or Wolfsburg (2003) undo the rationalities of fast-paced life in urban settings, expose the tricks of tastefully dressed venture capitalists, and examine the facets of a materialistic society. Petzold’s characters are often caught in ‘dead’ spaces and haunted by choices made earlier in their lives.

Richy Müller in The State I Am In (2000)

The name of the director is closely associated with that of the Berlin School, a filmmaking tendency that was praised by film scholars and critics to fill in for the New German cinema, as ‘a coming to terms’ with the problems of contemporary Germany. Aside from Petzold, the films of Christoph Hochhäusler, Angela Schanelec or Ulrich Köhler indeed present an
updated version of a socio-critical cinema that considers the preoccupations and desires of current generations in technically sleek formulas.

Petzold’s *The State I Am In* could be read as a sequel to the 1978 omnibus film, *Germany in Autumn* (comprised of episodes directed by filmmakers including Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Alexander Kluge). Petzold's film re-evaluates the goals behind the German student movement and its radicalisation in the 1970s as the idealist baggage of an ageing generation. Hans (Richy Müller) and Clara’s (Barbara Auer) terrorist activities have strapped them to a clandestine existence for more than twenty years, changing identities as they hide in the outer margins of Europe, while most of their former friends, who once stood with them for a more just anti-capitalist society, are now comfortably adjusted to the luxury of market capitalism. Of the agitation that once had driven the couple remains the conviction to hold on to the virtues of a simple life. But the film focuses on their adolescent daughter, Jeanne, (Julia Hummer) who, having grown up rootless and with a prescribed suspicion of consumerism, suddenly rebels against her conditions, desiring friends, love and clothes.

Like Jeanne, *Barbara* (Nina Hoss), in Petzold’s film of the same name, re-evaluates her plans to escape from a life that limits her. Trained as a doctor, Barbara had held a position at the prestigious clinic Charité in the capital Berlin. Having declared her wish to emigrate from the GDR, she becomes relegated to work in a provincial hospital in the rural north of the country, where she is given a small flat in a dilapidated building. Initially showing a cynical and disdainful attitude towards her environment, something in her comes alive when she rides her bicycle in the windswept landscape close to the sea and breathes in the cool air of its forests. The colours, sounds and smells create an affective memory of this space as *Heimat* (home); sensual experiences that contribute to Barbara’s reluctant warming to the people around her, including her growing attraction to colleague Thomas (Roland Zehrfeld). *Barbara* rectifies monolithic views of the GDR that are stubbornly alive even on the eve of the 30th anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall. The film, having won a Silver Bear at the 2012 Berlin Film Festival and multiple other German film prizes, is one of the few films to shed light on the GDR as a place where desperation, stagnation and hope co-existed.

The efficient style of Petzold’s films relies on collaboration with a crew that has accompanied him in most of his films; contributors such as photographer Hans Fromm, editor Bettina Köhler, and composer Stefan Will. Until his death in 2014, former teacher, experimental filmmaker and friend Harun Farocki co-developed and co-scripted many of Petzold’s projects. Actress Nina Hoss has become a regular in his films, a symbiosis that began with the feature film *Wolfsburg*, in which Hoss plays a mother who falls in love with a car salesman who accidentally runs over her young child. Since then, she has had the lead in five more films by the director.

In *Phoenix*, paired up again with Zehrfeld (aka Thomas in *Barbara*), Hoss’s mesmerizing face is the locus of a melodrama set in the early post-war years. In the role of Jewish-German Nelly, she returns to the man who betrayed her a broken woman. Presumed dead and after having undergone facial surgery, Johnny does not recognise his former wife. It is due to Petzold’s choice to frame his story as a film noir and Hoss’s restrained performance that we accept Nelly as a concentration camp survivor who is transformed into an elegantly dressed, seductive figure. *Phoenix*’s play of illusion, manipulation and guilt borrows from Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). Where James Stewart wants his new partner to mirror his dead lover but does not recognize her, Johnny plans to use Nelly as her doppelgänger to cash in on her money.
Keeping doubts alive as to whether Johnny knows Nelly’s truth until the very end, Petzold’s film delves into the darkest depths of German history and psyche.

After having made two historical films, *Barbara* and *Phoenix*, *Transit* is a forceful return to Germany in present day Europe. The flagship of the current ACMI film series dedicated to Petzold, *Transit* is a film of strange beauty populated by characters caught in a ‘no-place’ who walk around as mere shadows of themselves. Based on the novel by Jewish-German writer Anna Seghers – who spent time in Marseille before emigrating to Mexico via New York with her Jewish husband in 1941 – Petzold’s adaptation locates the story of a looming escape from Nazi-occupied France in a contemporary setting.

The temporally ambiguous spaces of the film highlight current issues and make historical issues pressingly acute. In the blurring of past and present into one imagined physical reality, the film eloquently demonstrates that Europe has always been a place of departure for some and a port of arrival for others.

After a narrow escape in Paris, Georg (Franz Rogowski) visits the family of his colleague Heinz, who occupy a shabby apartment in the outer suburbs of Marseille. These scenes are an unmistakable reference to the current refugee crisis in Europe. Ships acquire a symbolic value again, as they cruise the Mediterranean seas, carrying desperate and penniless passengers.

In the agonies of waiting, Petzold gives his protagonists time to rethink their escape plans and to see beyond their own predicament: when Georg or Barbara finally decide to give away their tickets to freedom, this becomes an act of solidarity and commitment. And in their sudden mobilisation after a long hiatus, love plays a bigger part than they may want to give it credit for.

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https://www.acmi.net.au/ideas/read/christian-petzolds-cinema-haunted-figures/