

## Independent World Cinema at SOPAC

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## christian Petzold

### b. 14th September 1960, Hilden, North Rhine-Westphalia, German

Christian Petzold

When the Association of German Film Critics named Christian Petzold’s *Barbara* the best feature film of 2012, it affirmed Petzold’s status as the most critically celebrated director of post-1989 Germany. In fact, five of his last eight feature-length works were similarly named the Critics’ best feature (in 2001, 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2012), with no other director winning more than twice since 2000. [(1)](https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2013/great-directors/christianpetzold/#1) His appeal, however, transcends the critical community: Petzold’s breakthrough *Die* *innere Sicherheit*(*The State I Am In*, 2000) won the Federal Film Prize in Gold, the equivalent of a best film prize for its year, an unusual recognition for an art-house film. His 2011 participation, with two other directors, in the three-part *Dreileben*project, has been called the most interesting development in German television in decades.  [(](https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2013/great-directors/christianpetzold/#2) In 2012, his *Barbara*, after winning the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, was Germany’s surprise submission for the foreign-language Oscar. Petzold is also regarded as the ground-breaking and most important of the group of filmmakers known as the Berlin School, which some have dubbed a “German New Wave.” [(3)](https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2013/great-directors/christianpetzold/#3) Although celebrated at international film festivals throughout Europe, his films are still relatively unknown in the Anglophone world, where German cinema is better known for the Nazi-era historical dramas that Petzold and the Berlin School have generally disdained.

Although addressing increasingly diverse topics, Petzold’s films consistently offer characters who find themselves in situations in which they feel compelled, consciously and not, to conceal some fundamental truth about themselves (as in *The State I Am In*, *Toter Mann*(*Something to Remind Me*, 2001), *Yella*(2007), *Jerichow*(2008), *Etwas Besseres Als Der Tod* (*Dreileben: Beats Being Dead*, 2011), and *Barbara*). Such secrets colours both their relationships with others and with themselves, yielding an underlying anxiety as well as paranoia that underpins many of his works. Very often, perhaps more than any other contemporary director’s films, the situations compelling such concealment and paranoia are work-based, scenarios in which individuals have distinct wage-earning expectations and ambitions (as in *Wolfsburg* (2008), *Gespenster*(*Ghosts*, 2005), *Yella*, and *Jerichow*). This tendency links Petzold’s characters to contexts broader than their own psychologies, constellations sometimes historical and always political and economic. Yet, the films usually unfold in dream-like worlds (as in *Cuba Libre*(1996)*, Ghosts*, or *Yella*), where the distinction between (apparent) reality and fantasy is frequently blurred – not a filmic tone usually associated with trenchant analyses of the material world.

This dual interest in the material and fantasy worlds of his characters underscores Petzold’s engagement in transformational change: changes to individuals’ desires, dreams and fantasies amid our neoliberal moment. Individuals are recast at the molecular level as they, as he puts it, “become economic.” [(4)](https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2013/great-directors/christianpetzold/#4) This becoming economic often entails a refashioning and refunctioning of an individuals’ desire in the direction of some material interest. But such refashioned desire does not dwell on some lack – his characters do not sit around pining – but rather becomes in Petzold’s plots disconcertingly productive, both professionally and personally. Beyond the insidious impact such desire has on human relations, which become subsequently mutually exploitative, a central aspect of this desire’s acting productively is the literal movement it initiates. In almost all Petzold’s films, the characters are on the move well before, and well beyond, their coming to terms with their own mobility. The films therein explore the premium that the current socio-economic moment places on mobility and the “flexibility” of people required for it.

Petzold was born and raised near the heart of West Germany’s post-war economic rebirth, near the heavily industrialized Ruhr region. Given its nineteenth and twentieth-century status as the engine of Germany’s industrial power, the Ruhr region was heavily bombed in World War II and then rapidly rebuilt afterward, lending it an industrial and now post-industrial atmosphere that left its mark on many of Petzold’s earlier works (especially *Pilotinnen*(*Pilots*, 1995), *Die Beschlafdiebin* (‘The Sex Thief’, 1998), *Something to Remind Me*, and *Wolfsburg*). On the other hand, Petzold’s parents came from the eastern parts of pre-1945 Germany, were subsequently wartime refugees, and then landed in East Germany. Although they emigrated from East Germany before Petzold was born, they continued to visit there throughout Petzold’s childhood, and his father, Petzold recounts, considered re-emigrating to East Germany as late as the 1970s oil crisis. Many of Petzold’s more recent films have been set in, and contemplate, what East Germany was and what has become of it (*Ghosts*, *Yella*, *Jerichow*, *Dreileben: Beats Being Dead*, and *Barbara*).Part of this perceptible eastward trajectory to Petzold’s films corresponds to his own decision to leave his childhood home not far from the Dutch border to study in the (then) divided city of Berlin, at that time a western border outpost in the heart of East Germany. After finishing a masters degree in German literature at the Free University of Berlin, Petzold enrolled (after an initial rejection) at Berlin’s German Film and Television Academy (DFFB), where he was studying when the Berlin Wall fell (1989) and Germany subsequently reunified (1990). This abrupt end to the Cold War and fundamental transformation of Germany in his immediate presence foreground the kind of historical change that would preoccupy him in films like *State I Am In*, *Ghosts*, *Yella,* and *Jerichow*. An interest in crises and fundamental transformation is one Petzold shares with one of his teachers at the DFFB, Harun Farocki, whom he has credited as a kind of consultant (usually “dramaturgical collaboration”) on his scripts. Farocki has been a key figure in German nonfiction film since the late 1960s, and his work with Petzold is a notable foray into narrative feature film. In their very different kinds of work, Farocki and Petzold both engage moments of crisis and reformulation, those pivotal moments that afford transitional modes of productivity and individualities. In general, both Petzold’s and Farocki’s films underscore how capitalism generates not only new modes of material economy, but also transitional forms of self, thus staging both labour and erotic economies.

**A FIRE**

Early in this entirely engrossing drama from German writer/director [Christian Petzold](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/christian-petzold), Leon, an extremely peevish young novelist played as a kind of encyclopedia of misery by [Thomas Schubert](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/thomas-schubert), asks his friend Felix about a portfolio he’s working on as an application to art school. Leon is pale and lumpish and cheerless; Felix, played with an appealing bounce by the part-Jamaican actor [Langston Uibel](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/langston-uibel), is cheerful (albeit a little clueless; he can’t hear the ping in his car engine before it breaks down and leaves the two almost stranded at the movie’s outset) and open to experience. Aside from their aesthetic leanings, they don’t seem to have much in common. Responding to Leon’s question about the “theme” of his portfolio, Felix says, “[Water](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/water-2006).” Leon responds with a cheerless smirk and shoots his friend down: “Water’s not a theme.”

poking a little fun at himself here. As it happens, “Afire” (its original German title is “Roter Himmel” or “Red Sky”) is the second film of a quartet whose theme will be the elements; Petzold’s last film, “[Undine](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/undine-movie-review-2021),” had water as its defining element. The fire in this film spreads through forests on the German island where Leon and Felix have gone on a work retreat.After their car breaks down and they’re forced to hoof it to a vacation house owned by Felix’s family, Leon and Felix, the precise nature of whose relationship we are never quite sure of, are surprised that there’s another lodger there. The beguiling Nadja is played by the beguiling [Paula Beer](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/paula-beer) in the third of her films with Petzold. (In “Undine,” she played a mermaid. Sort of.) Nadja is heard before she is seen, engaging in enthusiastic sex in the main bedroom of the thin-walled house. This makes Leon silently, seethingly crazy—almost everything makes Leon silently, seethingly crazy—but it turns Felix on a little bit. When finally visible, Nadja is cheerful and open. Soon we meet her sex partner, Devid—the spelling, Felix notes, in “an old GDR quirk”—who’s a rescue swimmer at the beach. As Felix, Devid, and Nadja enjoy the summer, Leon frets over his latest novel. His editor, a kindly older man, is coming to the island to discuss the manuscript of the novel, titled “Club Sandwich.” Shortly after he learns that Nadja spends her days as an ice cream vendor near the island’s deluxe hotel, Nadja asks him to look at the book. He scoffs. A cleaning lady once asked him to read a story of his, and she pronounced it “a little schmaltzy.” If the assessment of a cleaning lady could set off such a paroxysm of self-doubt ... well, Leon doesn’t complete that thought, but we get it. When his editor shows up, Leon is in for a surprise about Nadja that ups the ante in what seems to be a sad-sack come For much of “Afire,” Petzold really drops the hammer down on Leon, and everything that happens to him does nothing to compel him to react with any less petulance. When Felix and Devid start their own sexual affair—which Nadja has no problem with and which Leon observes with a vague exasperation—the dramatic stakes of the movie ascend not unlike the flames that the quartet can see from the roof of their house as it devours forest land.

### Actors:

### Thomas Shubert: Leon

### Paula Beer: Nadja

### Langston Uibel: Felix

### Enno Trebd: David

### Matthias Brandt: Helmut

### Filmography

*Das warme Geld*(*The Warm Money*, 1992)

*Pilotinnen* (*Pilots*, 1995)

*Cuba Libre*(1996)

*Die Beschlafdiebin*(‘The Sex Thief’, 1998)

*Die innere Sicherheit*(*The State I Am In*, 2000)

*Toter Mann*(*Something to Remind Me*, 2001)

*Wolfsburg*(2003)

*Gespenster*(*Ghosts*, 2005,)

*Yella* (2007)

*Jerichow*(2008)

*Dreileben*: *Etwas Besseres Als Der Tod* (*Beats Being Dead*, 2011)

***Most important films:***

***Barbara* (2012)**

**Phoenix (2014)**

**Transit (2019)**

**Contemporary German Filmmakers**:

Wolfgang Becker Farewell Lenin (2003)

Fatih Akin Front-on (2004)

Hans Weingartner The Edukators (2004)

Hans-Christian Schmid Requiem (2006)

Top of Form

Bottom of FormPetzold has been quietly and industriously building one of this century's most consistently impressive filmographies. The compulsively literate (and literary-allusive) dialogue here, combined with the precise but unshowy mise-en-scene and editing, may, for some, call to mind the late, great Èric Rohmer. But Petzold, while not without humor, is a generally graver filmmaker than Rohmer, and the way this film steers into tragedy is wrenching. It leads to a conclusion that in some respects could be called pat, but it also justifies itself well enough—largely due to the exceptional work of the actors, particularly Schubert and Beer—to pass muster. Like all of Petzold’s recent pictures, “Afire” draws you in confidently and prepares its knockout emotional punch with scrupulousness and a vivid sense of surprise.

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck The Lives of Others (2006)

Wim Wenders Pina (2011)

Andreas Dresen Stuck On The Track (2011)

Jan-Ole Gerster A cup Of Coffee in Berlin (2012)

Sebastian Schipper Victoria (2015)

Christian Petzold Barbara (2012)