

Things will not go well

In 2018, German screenwriter and director Christian Petzold was invited to be a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, yet his work couldn't be less Hollywood

BY URSULA SCHEER

When Christian Petzold thinks of cinema, the image that comes to his mind is *Angelus Novus*, a print created by the Swiss-German avant-garde artist Paul Klee two years after the end of World War I. Klee's image depicts what philosopher Walter Benjamin referred to as "the angel of history" with spread wings and its eyes and mouth wide open. In an essay touching on this heavenly messenger, Benjamin writes that the angel – who is propelled into the future but whose face is steadily "turned toward the past" – is compelled to behold the ceaseless catastrophes of history hurled at his feet.

Christian Petzold would argue that the same applies to cinema. As the director and screenwriter explained in a recent interview with the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* for his latest film, *Transit* (2018): "Precisely because it looks back, cinema feels that which lies before us." *Transit* is an adaption of the "exile novel" of the same name by German author Anna Seghers, who fled the Nazis in 1934 but returned to Germany after World War II to become one of the GDR's most important authors. Petzold's film blends and superimposes the past and the present, and the result is a timeless story about people on the run: characters that have escaped from 1940s German fascism and are now in Marseilles, where they hope to find safe passage.

Film critics have been fascinated by the way in which Petzold jumps back and forth in time in what they call his "picture puzzle," which premiered at the Berlin Film Festival. Indeed, ever since Petzold's breakthrough film *The State I Am In* (2000) – which revolves around the daughter of former RAF terrorists seeking to free herself from her parents' criminal legacy – his works have almost always elicited unanimous admiration from critics. His films are invited to international competitions and showered with prizes, including the Berlinale's Silver Bear for Best Director, the German Film Award and the



A scene from *Transit*: Anna Seghers' novel, on which the film is based, was originally published in 1944. Paula Beer and Franz Rogowski star in the 2018 adaptation.

German Television Film Prize, to name a few.

In 2018, Petzold, who was born in West Germany in 1960, received yet another honor. He was among a new group of film professionals from 59 countries invited to join the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, in his case for his work as a screenwriter. This group of fresh faces has been called to Hollywood in an attempt by the Academy to foster diversity among the ranks of its Oscar voters. And if anyone is curious as to which perspectives Petzold will bring to his new role at the Academy, *Transit* provides many clues.

Petzold conceived *Transit* with his long-time co-author Harun Farocki, who died in 2014, and it is the last film the two worked on together. For Petzold, the film marks the bringing-together of all the life themes that have accompanied him since the beginning of his career. Indeed, in many of his films, we encounter characters mired in a spiritual, personal and political no-man's-land. We watch them as they seek a path between life and death, between the past and the future, between salvation and destruction and between bourgeois existence and underground survival. Their identity is ambiguous, they have nowhere to call home and

their situation is undetermined. We watch them struggle with guilt and shame in a world in which good and evil combine, creating infinite shades of gray.

Bleak chapters of German history create the backdrops against which events are condensed into tragedies, many of which are permeated by elements of horror and the fantastical. Petzold's characters are invariably trying to assert themselves against family constellations and social systems. But their chances of success are always doubtful.

As Petzold himself notes, almost all his characters are "refugees, that is, people who have fallen out of this world, individuals who are forced to re-learn their present." In fact, he argues that everything is a journey, and that he and Farocki "only ever shot travel films." Petzold, who lives with his wife and two adult children in Berlin, has always drawn inspiration from his own family history: His parents fled to the West from the GDR in the 1950s and their son was born and grew up in North Rhine-Westphalia, but the family still paid regular visits to relatives on the other side of the Iron Curtain. This perhaps explains the filmmaker's fascination with existences between here and there. After studying at the Free Uni-

versity Berlin and the German Film and Television Academy, he started out as a documentary and short-film maker, preferring to work together with close friends and colleagues.

Petzold's go-to actor for the leading role in many of the dramas and melodramas he's shot for cinema, but also for TV, is the incomparable Nina Hoss. In *Something to Remind Me*, she plays a woman looking to avenge the murder of her sister; in *Wolfsburg*, she plays a murderous mother in mourning; and in *Yella*, she plays an East German risk capitalist.



Star line-up: Actors Ronald Zehrfeld, Nina Kunzendorf, Nina Hoss and director Christian Petzold at the 2014 premiere of *Phoenix* in Berlin.

In *Jerichow*, we see the actress bristling with intellectual coolness and restraint as a woman involved in a fatal love triangle centering on a soldier returned from Afghanistan; in *Barbara*, she embodies an East German doctor contemplating fleeing to the West; and, finally, in *Phoenix*, she is the Holocaust survivor who tries to find her way back into her old life with a face that has been altered by the deadly abuse she was subjected to in the camps – and becomes re-acquainted with her husband in a horrific way.

Actors Ronald Zehrfeld, Benno Fürmann and Barbara Auer are among the other members of Petzold's regular team. His work on *Transit* brought him to discover Paula Beer and Franz Rogowski, two artists with whom he wants to work again. Bettina Böhler is his trusted editor, and Hans Fromm his cinematographer of choice.

This team acts as the guarantor of the characteristic look and feel of every Petzold film. For example, there's not much talking, and the music is used sparingly but effectively. Images are clearly delineated, and each backdrop and setting selected in a corresponding manner. Everything is precisely choreographed. This is why Petzold is often considered one of the main repre-

sentatives of the Berlin School, a group of filmmakers inspired by the aesthetics and socio-critical approach of the German *Autorenfilme* (author films) of the 1960s and 1970s.

All that Petzold does is calculated and meticulously thought-through. His work often contains allusions to classics, such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Mike Nichols' *The Graduate*. He also likes to organize his films into trilogies: *The State I Am In*, *Yella* and *Jerichow* compose his "ghost trilogy," while *Barbara*, *Phoenix* and *Transit* make up his "history trilogy."

Petzold directed three episodes of the German TV series *Polizeiruf 110*, starring Matthias Brandt as a melancholic commissioner. The show is a prestige project in the world of German television. He was also involved in the crime trilogy *Dreileben*, a collaborative miniseries experiment in which three different directors portrayed the hunt for a murderer from three different perspectives. Petzold was not satisfied with the result of the experiment and soon insisted that TV series were not for him, no matter how popular the genre. His foray into the world of theater at Berlin's Deutsches Theater was also short-lived. Soon thereafter, he told the *Berliner Zeitung* in no uncertain terms: "I consider cinema to be completely superior to the theater."

In other words, Petzold's creative affection belongs to the big screen alone. His priority now is to explore and portray enmeshed webs of human relationships, rather than individual characters. Up next is *Undine*, a love fairytale for adults. The title of the film is taken from the water nymph that captivates and seduces men in a number of mythological tales. She is, of course, an elemental being, existing somewhere between land and water. So, we can be pretty sure of one thing: it will not go well.

Ursula Scheer is a television critic and arts editor for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

Hitting a blow note

The German harmonica and African-American blues culture may be an odd couple. But they have come a long way together

BY HERBERT QUELLE

After the voice and the guitar, the harmonica – or mouth organ, or just harp – which was first sold in Vienna in the 1820s, is the most characteristic instrument of the blues. And the first harps African-American used to make music must have come from places that lie today in Germany, Austria or the Czech Republic. In other words, all people employed in harmonica production at the time spoke German. This mutually beneficial relationship between a German industrial product and African-American culture is a fascinating story.

During the wave of German immigration to the US in the mid 1800s, Swabians from what is today the federal state of Baden-Württemberg will most likely have carried with them harmonicas produced by Hotz, a company that was founded around 1830 in Knittlingen, northwest of Stuttgart, and stayed in business for 100 years. From 1857 on, they

could have been harmonicas made by Hohner, a firm that still exists. Saxons would most likely have toted instruments produced by Rauner-Seydel-Böhm in Klingenthal, founded in 1829 and in business until 1933, or by C. A. Seydel, founded in 1847 and still going. Hundreds of other manufacturers have long been forgotten.

First and random meetings between the instrument and African-American players may have happened as early as the 1850s. Even in the South, social contacts between African-Americans and recent German immigrants could have been facilitated by a broad abolitionist sentiment among the German speaking population.

In late 1870, with the start of industrial mass production of the harmonica at various German sites, large-scale exports to the US began. Julius Berthold of Klingenthal patented his reed-milling machine in 1878, which greatly accelerated the production process. Between 1893 and 1916, exporting was facilitated by a US consular agency in Markneukirchen, Saxony. With the estab-



lishment of American mail order companies in the 1870s, new distribution channels made the cheap harmonica easily accessible, even in rural and remote areas of the US. This is confirmed by W. C. Handy, born in November 1873 in Florence, Alabama, who observed that as a child he owned a "French harp," which he used to mimic trains and fox hunts. The archaeologist Charles Peabody from Harvard corroborates Handy's observations about the emergence of the blues toward the end of the 19th century.

Around one hundred million German harmonicas have been imported to the US since 1860. This estimate is based mainly on the total production of Hohner – the largest German producer

– which passed 1 billion in 1986, and for whom the US share was traditionally high. The US market accounted for 96 percent of Hohner's entire turnover in 1890, 45 percent in 1905 and 33 percent in 1913, when Germany exported 3.5 million harmonicas to the US, half of which were made by Hohner. The peak of German harmonica imports was in the 1920s, with 21 million in 1926, the same in 1927 and 16 million in 1928. In 1937 the total dipped to 8.4 million. From about 1890 to 2000, with a few exceptions during World War I and II, the US imported at least 1 million harmonicas per year.

If we take the first recording of a blues song with harmonica in 1924 as final proof of the successful marriage of the instrument

with the musical genre, what happened in the interval since Peabody and Handy had first encountered them

together? Were there preferred keys, possibly based on the various levels of prowess of the accompanying guitarists? When did German manufacturers become aware of the new note-bending techniques practiced on their harps? When did they learn there was such thing as a blues scale, which could easily be produced on the harp by focusing on the draw notes rather than the blow notes? What kind of harmonica music did African-American soldiers play when fighting in the trenches of World War I? Reliable answers to questions pertaining to the first decades of the proven coexistence of the blues and the harp are meager at best.

Just as the harp migrated to America from German lands, African-Americans took the harp

and their blues with them on the Great Migration north. By the end of the 1920s, Hohner had proved to be the most successful German harmonica manufacturer. In the US, a Hohner became almost a synonym for harp. Seydel, the oldest harmonica manufacturer in the world, was at a disadvantage between the end of World War II and German unification, as it lay in the GDR, and access to US markets was never easy for an East German company. Today, their harps again enjoy a proud reputation.

With the blues having earned its standing in the musical heritage of the world, it is safe to say that the blues would not be the blues without the harmonica – and the harp would not enjoy the same popularity without the blues.

Herbert Quelle is a diplomat and Germany's principal officer in Chicago. In 2017, he published the novella *Monika's Blues*, about the first meeting between the instrument and players of the blues.