CHRISTIAN PETZOLD'S GHOST STORIES

The German auteur made his name with a series of haunting psychological thrillers. His new film, "Miroirs No. 3," was shaped by losses of his own.

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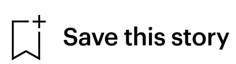
Photograph by Julia Sellmann



The first time the German writer-director Christian Petzold had a movie première at the Venice Film Festival, he knew that his future in the medium was at stake. It was September, 2000, two weeks before his fortieth birthday; "The State I Am In," about a pair of fugitive left-wing militants and their daughter, would be both his theatrical début and his last chance. He'd spent three years raising the funds to shoot it and, with two young children at home, had sworn to become a postman if it failed. To soothe his nerves before the screening, he went down to the hotel bar, where he overheard an interview taking place at the next table. There, smoking a cigar, was Claude Chabrol, the celebrated co-founder of the French New Wave. Petzold dragged his chair a little closer to listen. The journalist asked Chabrol why all his greatest protagonists were women. The seventy-year-old filmmaker took a puff of his cigar and smiled. "Because men are living, and women are surviving," he said. "Cinema is about surviving."

This idea stayed with Petzold for the rest of his life. He already gravitated toward female leads himself: the protagonist of "The State I Am In" is the militants' fifteen-year-old daughter, Jeanne, who struggles to square her parents' life-or-death insistence on anonymity with her own longing for a normal adolescence. An unconventional coming-of-age story, "The State I Am In" is violent, austere, and blackly comic, qualities that would carry through the eleven features he's made since. The film premièred to great acclaim, enabling him to secure not only the funding for his next project but also a production team and ensemble that he's maintained for nearly three decades. His longtime muse, the German actress Nina Hoss, has anchored six of them, playing a frigid but talented East German doctor in "Barbara" (2012)—the film that would earn Petzold his first Silver Bear for directing at the Berlinale—and starring in its successor, "Phoenix" (2014), about an Auschwitz survivor who, after facial reconstructive surgery for a bullet wound, returns home to a husband who does not recognize her.

Such cerebral, stealthily political dramas have made Petzold an auteur's auteur, beloved by the likes of Claire Denis and Brady Corbet. (In 2023, the *Times* hailed him, a bit backhandedly, as "the best German filmmaker you've never heard of.")

Twenty years after "The State I Am In," Petzold returned to Venice not as a competitor but as a jury member. He was presented, somewhat ridiculously, with the "Women in Cinema" award, for his sensitive, varied, and often difficult portrayals of the opposite sex.

The cost of survival has been his pet theme from the beginning. "The State I Am In" was the first installment of Petzold's "Ghosts" trilogy, in which characters encounter their dead as phantoms, the living are trailed by vultures, and doppelgängers abound. These hauntings are not of the traditional sort. Petzold, a materialist at heart, is focussed on the *methodology* of the bereaved—the helter-skelter trials by which one attempts to recover what one has lost. He told me recently that he conceives of each of his movies as either "a house or a boat": a group of people, confronting a wreckage, forced to figure out how to construct a shared future, or keep one another afloat.

His new film, "Miroirs No. 3," is a boat. (It steals the name of the flurried third movement in Maurice Ravel's piano suite, also known as "Une Barque Sur L'Océan," for this reason.) It also marks the first time since "The State I Am In" that Petzold has dealt, explicitly, with the nuclear family. Laura, a piano student from Berlin, played with arresting ambivalence by Paula Beer, narrowly survives a car wreck that kills her boyfriend. A mysterious older woman named Betty agrees to take Laura in and care for her as she convalesces—but Betty is concealing a loss of her own. Partway through the film, it emerges that she had a daughter who died before Laura's arrival, and that Betty's despair has driven away her husband and son. Petzold cast Barbara Auer, who, decades earlier, played one of the doomed parents in "The State I Am In," offering her another chance at motherhood.

"This city is full of scars," Petzold said, leading me across a patchy, brown garden in the increasingly gentrified artists' neighborhood of Kreuzberg, where he has lived for forty-three years. It was late January, and Berlin was freezing and gray. Bundled in a long black coat and a beanie, he was taking me to see one of his favorite places—the ruins of a church that had been bombed during the Second World War. Most of the roof was gone, leaving the massive nave exposed to the elements. A towering brick façade, topped by an angel wielding a cross, stood disconnected from the rear like a piece of driftwood. "I love it here," Petzold said,

gleefully. He fixates on things that are left over and left behind. The area wasn't all detritus, though. A nearby lake had frozen over, and hundreds of people were ice skating. Petzold marvelled at the incongruities. On one side, he noted, there was a union building, originally designed by the modernist architect Bruno Taut just before he fled the Nazis. "And over there," he added, pointing to smokestacks in the distance, "is where my daughter goes to the club."

At sixty-five, Petzold, with light-hazel eyes and dark hair only just beginning to silver, still wields a boyish charisma. He swears often and laughs easily, but beneath his dry humor lurks the Cold War-kid severity of a man who watched the Berlin Wall come down from the window of a party. He is encyclopedic about the history of film and undiscriminating in his appetites, referencing obscure foreign marginalia and recent Hollywood blockbusters in the same breath. The first date he took his wife on (when they were in their twenties, and she still had another boyfriend) was a midnight double feature of Walter Hill's "Southern Comfort" and John Boorman's "Deliverance," decisively unsexy wilderness thrillers. When Petzold was directing an adaptation of Anna Seghers's Second World War novel "Transit," about the German occupation of France, he showed his cast "The Graduate," a lascivious Mike Nichols rom-com that has almost nothing to do, as far as I can tell, with fascism. But, as Petzold explained to me, Nichols—born Mikhail Peschkowsky, of Russian Jewish descent—had fled Berlin in '39, and "his humor and his intelligence had left Germany." By exploring the circumstances that led to the cultural exodus, he was hoping to bring some of it back.

Christian Petzold and Harun Farocki, in 1998, at work on the script for "The State I Am In." Photograph by Christian Petzold

Petzold was born in West Germany in 1960, one year before Nikita Khrushchev authorized the construction of the Berlin Wall. His parents were working-class refugees from the East. When his mother, Waltraud Maria, a chemist, married his God-fearing father, Dietrich, an electrician, she was forced to sacrifice her Catholicism and her career in science to become a Protestant housewife. The couple raised Christian and his two brothers in Haan, a small, conservative town. The Protestant tenets of discipline and duty terrified Christian into a fussy diligence from a young age. He was an excellent student and voracious reader, but unmoved by much of what he encountered in school or at church. When he was nine, he saw Walt Disney's "The Jungle Book," and its mesmerizing colors and musical numbers offered him a portal to another world. From then on he only wanted to be in one place: at the movies. His family did not understand their aesthete firstborn. "My father thought, There must have been a mistake. I'm not his son," Petzold told me.

Christian spent as little time at home as he could. The local theatres that had been his refuge all closed the year he turned thirteen, and he began to spend every day

at the library instead. He would sit in front of a large window, which he described as being "a little bit like a cinema," and devour every book about film that he could find. Until he was old enough to take the bus into the city and actually see them for himself, he pieced together the sights and sounds of the silver screen—Alain Resnais, Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, Jean-Luc Godard—based solely on their descriptions on the page. It was his first brush with directing. In his mind, he was making movies.

Just before Christian started high school, Dietrich lost his job. He started drinking, and soon the money ran out. "He was broken," his son recalled. Before long, after a lifetime of single-minded devotion, he disavowed God. (He would never step foot in a church again; even years later, when his cousin, whom Christian described as a second father, died, Dietrich spent the funeral in the parking lot.) "I would come home from school and see him at the end of the street in his car, drinking. . . . He was not the father anymore," Petzold said. "Protestants have an identity when they are working. Without work, you *have* no identity." Dietrich died in 2007, of liver failure.

Remembering this period, Petzold went quiet for a moment, studying the air behind me as if someone might materialize there. Then he said, "This is why I like ghost stories. I saw my father for three and a half years becoming a ghost."

Petzold escaped home as swiftly as he could, but he didn't go straight to making movies. He'd wanted to emulate Jean-Luc Godard, who released his first feature, "Breathless," when he was twenty-nine, and held that a person can't tell a real story until at least that age: they haven't experienced enough of life yet. "I know what he means," Petzold told me. "I wanted to make films, but I didn't know anything about love, about desire."

He went to college, then to graduate school for literature. By twenty-six, he couldn't wait any longer. When he was still finishing his dissertation, he matriculated at one of Germany's most prestigious film schools, the German Film and Television Academy Berlin, or the D.F.F.B. But it was, as Godard had foreseen, too early for creation. Petzold had arrived arrogant and entitled; confronted by the technical ability and imagination of his peers, he was humbled, then stultified. For two and a half years, he didn't make anything at all. He devoted forty hours a week to sitting in screening rooms and editing labs, giving

himself over entirely to the work of others. "I didn't know who I was," he said. He fell into a deep depression. In "Miroirs," a creative block in her piano studies forces Laura into the same position. She has lost the spark of creativity, and with it, her sense of self. Petzold framed the tragedy at the start of the film as an opportunity: "When her boyfriend dies, the whole accident, it's kind of the possibility to start life again." He told me, of his own block, "This was the best time in my life. The time of crisis is the best time—if you find an out." And he did.

His savior was the experimental documentarian Harun Farocki, famous for provocative works that skewered bourgeois complacency. Petzold begged to audit his oversubscribed craft seminar; Farocki, who had left high school without a diploma, was at first unimpressed by his over-academized pupil, but they shared a preference for precisely orchestrated images. One day, Farocki showed the class "The Outfit," John Flynn's mobster classic from 1973, starring Robert Duvall. Then he laid out the reels for its first fifteen minutes across the editing table, and asked his students to dissect each frame. When he was satisfied, he brought the filmstock into the screening room and showed them the opening again. "I realized, it became rich," Petzold said. "It was not destroyed by analyzing." His ambition returned. With his scholarly inclinations, he would be a filmmaker of the mind.

He and his professor grew closer, becoming routine creative collaborators, then best friends. Under the tutelage of his Marxist mentor, Petzold produced a sequence of disruptive, innovative works. "Ostwärts," from 1991, comprised interviews with three residents about their plans for economic sustainment after reunification—his first and only documentary. Next came the wry, black-and-white short "Das Warme Geld," which follows a broke academic and her roommate who, to fill their empty refrigerator, resort to robbing men in bars. (Heike: *I've sold everything, even the TV and the books*. Vera: *I thought you were just being fashionable.*) He and Farocki co-wrote five scripts for television, Petzold's Venice breakout "The State I Am In," and half a dozen more features together.

Labor, be it sex work, surgery, or car sales, was always central to their project. In 2012, Petzold and Farocki saw István Szabó's "Confidence"—a film about two strangers in Nazi-occupied Hungary who pretend to be husband and wife in order

to survive, then slowly fall in love—and became obsessed with its premise. “Confidence” made plain something they had always known but never articulated: “From pretending comes reality,” Petzold explained. “From a false situation, real feeling starts. This is art.”

The story of “Confidence,” inverted, became “Phoenix.” In the film, Nelly allows her husband to instruct her on impersonating his wife, whom he believes to be dead. He outfits her in his wife’s shoes, gives her lessons on his wife’s handwriting, how she did her makeup and hair, how she walked. She labors through these exercises with the consternation of someone who is failing to become the person they once were. “It’s the *how*,” Petzold told me. “These movies are about work. Work on identity.” But they are, of course, also about work *as* identity. You are what you do, not only vocationally but literally.

Farocki died in 2014, the year of “Phoenix” ’s release, at age seventy. Up until his passing, he and Petzold had approached screenwriting as a kind of long conversation. They would take meandering walks around Kreuzberg—he had guided me along the same route—and rhapsodize over dinner about their fears, their ambitions, their opinions on art and politics, and their lives. What emerged was a series of intricate, heady features whose ideas often came through more clearly than their sentiments. Five weeks after Farocki’s death, Petzold told a journalist, “In the future when I’m writing, I’m going to go to his grave like in ‘Young Mr. Lincoln.’ There is no other collaboration.”

But in the work Petzold has produced since, some of that steely erudition has given way to surprising warmth and whimsy: “Undine” (2020), “Afire” (2023), and “Miroirs” feel almost like fairy tales. Even the colors are more vivid. Paula Beer, who has starred in all three, took notice of the shift. “I do feel that he’s needing something else,” she told me. “He’s looking for—not more drama, but more of something from the heart, that *goes* to the heart.” Her first collaboration with Petzold was “Transit,” which he had initially conceived with Farocki. It took him at least three years to make, including what he described to me as “two years of grief.” Beer, in an interview from that time, said, “After Harun passed away, he couldn’t continue working on the script.” To move forward, he had to renovate it completely—to clear the ghosts away. He set the adaptation in present-day France, and hasn’t made a period piece since.

Petzold's work with Farocki hinged on substitutions and decoys—in "Ghosts," from 2005, a mother becomes convinced that a young orphan is her long-lost daughter; two years later in "Yella," a woman meets a stranger who eerily resembles her abusive, estranged husband, presumed dead—and tended to end abruptly, depriving the bereaved of resolution. After Farocki's death, the structure of these stories changed: characters stuck around long enough to begin tending to the wounds that left them searching in the first place. Petzold's fixation with replacement gave way to an interest in repair.

A you-are-what-you-do transmutation akin to the one in "Phoenix" also unfolds in "Miroirs." This time, Petzold addresses its limitations. Betty, attempting to paper over her unthinkable loss, dresses Laura in her daughter's clothes, gives her her daughter's place at family meals, has her daughter's bike fixed to Laura's height. In a climactic sequence, she encourages her to play her daughter's piano. Laura settles in with the secondhand sheet music: Chopin's Prelude in E Minor, the bare, brooding requiem that was played at the composer's funeral. The family, reunited, is situated around the living room like a painting, mother and father seated side by side on the couch; brother slouched against the doorjamb; daughter with her back to them, facing the wall as her fingers glide across the keys. In the dead girl's clothes, her face obscured, Laura is, for a moment, not herself. Then, the repetitive descending melody is interrupted and restarts; in this musical rupture the trance is broken. She is not their daughter. Auer, as Betty, offers a fleet, brutal portrait of a mother moving through grief, weepily passing from denial to acceptance. At last, the family is mourning together. The final emotional marking on Chopin's score is *smorzando*—dying away.

Petzold has a home, as he had always dreamt, full of art. He and his wife, the political documentarian Aysun Bademsoy, have written countless movies and raised two children there. The furniture in his study is mid-century modern, all brown and black leather, offering the room the sleekly urbane feel of an analyst's office. (Petzold himself has tried therapy only once but was "so bored I decided to live on with panic attacks.") The walls are outfitted with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, which store thousands of scrupulously alphabetized books—critical theory, Taschens, biographies, and fiction, dominated by translated English novels, Henry James, Patricia Highsmith, Cormac McCarthy, as he thinks "America has the best literature"—as well as a robust physical media collection of

CDs, vinyl records, and DVDs.

He had prepared for my arrival by arranging an elaborate charcuterie spread across his kitchen table. When he learned that I didn't eat meat or dairy, he darted to the refrigerator. "My daughter is vegan!" he said, producing a jar of artisanal apricot preserves. He sliced a baguette for me, gingerly running his finger around the edge of the plate to tidy the crumbs into a neat pile.

His well-kept household is a stark contrast to Betty's in "Miroirs," which—an objective correlative of her grief—has fallen into dysfunction. Flies collect on the furniture, the fence needs painting, the appliances are broken. Laura's arrival heralds an overhaul. She weeds the overgrown herb garden and paints the fence white. She enlists Betty's son and husband to fix the dishwasher. Suddenly, the home is renewed. But, Petzold told me, "it is only the *dream* of a repaired world."

Initially, he allowed this fantasy to hold. Three months after "Miroirs" wrapped, he realized he had made a terrible mistake. He called his producer: they needed to reshoot the ending. In the original script, Laura, despite becoming aware of the twisted role into which she's been cast, decides to stay with Betty's family. It was too pat, a happy ending that betrayed the complexity and ambiguity of the narrative. I asked Beer why she thought Petzold might have devised something so contrary to his style. "Sometimes you want things that aren't the best for yourself or for everyone else—you stick to a picture that you grew up with," she told me. "It was a wish he had, that they become a family again."

Petzold, Beer, and the crew came back together to shoot the new scene. The Ravel composition for which the film is named plays over a black screen, then fades into birdsong. It's springtime. Laura returns to the Berlin apartment that we have seen her in only once, when she was a shell of herself in the film's opening minutes. It's a simple shot, fewer than thirty seconds. She walks in the door, looks around at the life she's created, golden light from the window shining on her face—and smiles. "The happy end for Laura, and for the story, is that they *don't* need each other. They needed each other for a certain amount of time," Beer went on. "It was important that they met, to free themselves, and help each other to be free." As Petzold had come to understand, the only way to survive is to build something new. ♦