

Christian Petzold's *Transit*: The condition of refugees as hell on earth

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Written and directed by Christian Petzold, based on the novel by Anna Seghers

A number of films at this year's Berlin Film Festival dealt with the plight of refugees.

Forced to abandon their homelands—and everything familiar to them—to escape war, famine or the lack of any economic prospects, refugees are rendered stateless for at least the period of their flight. In transit they are deprived of the rights due to them as citizens of a nation. They are at the mercy of the state or maritime waters they are crossing, and are then equally at the mercy of the state they have chosen as their new home, and its repressive apparatus. They also run the risk of becoming the targets of right-wing demagogues seeking to divert attention from the disastrous state of life under capitalism.

The fate of refugees is the subject of the latest film by German director Christian Petzold, *Transit*, which screened at the Berlinale and is now on public release in Germany. This is Petzold's third historical film, following *Barbara* (2012), set in East Germany in 1980, and *Phoenix* (2014), about a concentration camp survivor in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Born in 1960, Petzold has made eight feature films in total since 2000. One of his mentors was Harun Farocki, the left-wing German filmmaker and theorist.

Transit is based on the novel of the same title by German author Anna Seghers (1900-83). Seghers joined the German Communist Party (KPD) in 1928. Her novels were subsequently burned by pro-Nazi students in the notorious action in the middle of Berlin in May 1933. Like many other left-wing intellectuals, Seghers was forced to leave National Socialist Germany and fled with her family through several countries. Her novel *Transit* appeared in 1944 and mirrors her own flight from the Nazis through France to

Marseilles and then eventually on to Mexico.

In her book, Seghers describes the refugee's feeling of helplessness and frustration with bureaucracy: "Everything was on the move, everything was temporary, but we didn't know whether this state would last until tomorrow, a few weeks, years or even our entire lives." The fictional character in the novel wonders if the Nazis in Paris "a tough and dreadful enemy (...) were in fact better than this invisible, almost mysterious evil, these rumours, this corruption and fraud."

Petzold decided to locate his film adaptation of *Transit* in the present day. Germany is run by Nazis, who have also overrun most of France. The main character, Georg (Franz Rogowski), a Communist, is sent by a comrade with an important letter to the writer Weidel. In a hotel, Georg finds a few belongings of the writer who has killed himself. Georg takes the papers of the deceased, including visas and a ship's passage to Mexico, and travels to Marseilles.

In Marseilles, he encounters and becomes friendly with a small boy and his mother. Having assumed the identity of the dead writer, Georg begins the laborious process of securing his passage to South America. At the embassy, he chances to meet and is captivated by an enigmatic woman, Marie (Paula Beer), who is waiting for her husband. She proves to be the wife (or widow) of the very man whose identity Georg has assumed. Trapped between states, she is also unable to choose between the husband she left behind, her current companion, Richard (Godehard Giese), or her new acquaintance, Georg.

There are moments in both film and novel that recall Franz Kafka's novels, *The Castle* and *The Trial*—flight and transit as a permanent, meaningless, incomprehensible state. In one memorable section of

her novel, Seghers writes: “He waited in the hereafter to learn what the Lord had decided about him. He waited and waited, one year, ten years, one hundred years. Then he finally begged for the decision. He was told: ‘What are you waiting for? You’ve already been in hell for some time.’”

While Seghers essentially preserves the historical context of the massive exodus from Nazi-dominated Europe, Petzold unsettles the viewer with abrupt changes of perspective and mysterious encounters (and failures to encounter).

In his film *Barbara*, Petzold effectively portrayed the oppressive nature of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany). His *Phoenix* dealt with the consequences of the fascist mass murder of the Jews. Nazi rule in *Transit* remains nebulous, but Petzold’s film transmits the coldness and cruelty of the French bureaucracy, which insists that all protocols are adhered to before further passage is possible.

Observing the growing disorientation and despondency of *Transit*’s central characters, one is reminded of the fate of Austrian writer Stefan Zweig—who committed suicide with his wife in 1942 after reaching South America—and that of German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin who—convinced he was in danger of immediate arrest by the Gestapo—killed himself on the French-Spanish border in 1940.

Petzold was motivated to make his new film by his sympathy for the plight of refugees and uneasiness at the growth of far-right radicalism in Germany and Europe. In an interview, the writer-director noted that he played badminton regularly in a sports hall close to the large refugee camp in Berlin that features in the documentary film *Central Airport THF* (2018, directed by Karim Aïnouz).

Transit is clearly an attempt to provide some context for the dire situation confronting refugees in Germany and Europe today. At the same time, it points to the real dangers of the re-emergence of fascist movements in Europe. Far-right governments and coalitions involving neo-fascist forces are already in power in Poland, Hungary and now Austria.

In a recent interview with the *Berliner Zeitung*, Petzold made a number of interesting and correct points regarding the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD),

which emerged at the last general election as the main opposition party in the German parliament.

Commenting on the organisation, Petzold countered those who argue that the racist AfD reflects the views of ordinary workers. He said: “I don’t think the AfD can be regarded as a party of the working class. It is also not a party of the betrayed working class, as some people say.... There are judges and former CDU [Christian Democratic Union] members in it.” Petzold went on to refute claims that the party has its base in regions of heavy working class representation. Instead, he notes: “The AfD stems from the petty bourgeoisie and the professional middle class.”

Petzold is undoubtedly one of the most significant directors active in Germany today and *Transit* is well worth viewing. At the same time, his new film lacks the same degree of urgency and concrete immediacy that characterised a number of other films at the Berlinale dealing with refugees, such as *Styx* and *El Dorado*.

The weakness of Petzold’s approach was indicated by a comment he made in another recent interview in which he described flight “as a normal condition.”

The problem with this is that the flight of refugees today, and at any time, is *not* normal. Flight is not some sort of existential dilemma affecting all of humanity. Rather millions of people have been forced to flee their homes and often their own families in past years due to poverty, hunger and wars fueled by unparalleled levels of economic and political inequality, as well as definite government policies. The rottenness of the official “left” in Europe and elsewhere, which has facilitated or led the anti-refugee campaign, is at the heart of this situation.

If flight and its consequences are viewed as a universal characteristic of the human condition, then we can do little about them. This is not Petzold’s position, but the disorientation of the characters in his film, combined with a passive readiness to accept their fate, leaves open the door for those seeking to interpret the current refugee crisis as an irresolvable, inevitable state of affairs.



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