

Nick Davis  
Film Discussion Group  
September 2015

## *Phoenix* (dir. Christian Petzold, 2014)

### On Camera

Nelly / “Esther”      Nina Hoss: *A Woman in Berlin* (08), *Barbara* (12), *A Most Wanted Man* (14)  
Johnny / Johannes      Ronald Zehrfeld: *Barbara* (12), *The People vs. Fritz Bauer* (15)  
Lene                      Nina Kunzendorf: *Rosenstrasse* (03), small role in *Woman in Gold* (15)  
Elisabeth (servant)      Imogen Kogge: demon-possession story *Requiem* (06), lots of German TV  
Landlady at Inn        Kirsten Block: *The Reader* (08), *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (08)

### Off Camera

Director/Writer      Christian Petzold: *Yella* (07), *Jerichow* (08), *Barbara* (12), all with Nina Hoss  
Co-Screenwriter      Harun Farocki: Major filmmaker of German-Indian descent, with 70+ features  
Cinematography      Hans Fromm: all of Petzold’s features, recent doc *The Green Prince* (14)  
Costume Design:      Anette Guther: regular work with Petzold, a few American indies  
Original Score:      Stefan Will: regular work with Petzold, as well as several horror movies  
Film Editing:        Bettina Böhler: regular work with Petzold, plus some documentaries

### Previous features from writer-director Christian Petzold

*Yella* (2007) – surreal mystery-drama about a financial officer trying to escape her abusive husband; they have a car accident early on, and we’re never sure if what follows is real  
*Jerichow* (2008) – German remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, with the added twist that the husband the lovers are conspiring to kill is a Turkish immigrant to Germany  
*Barbara* (2012) – similar to *The Lives of Others* (07), story of a female doctor in East Germany who hopes to relocate to the West and may be under pressure to spy at home for the Stasi; winner of the Best Director prize at Berlin Film Festival; Petzold’s biggest hit pre-*Phoenix*

### If you liked *Phoenix*...

*Vertigo* (1958) – Hitchcock’s famous tale of a man who crafts an ingénue’s appearance and behavior into a copy of a mysterious dead woman, not realizing they are the same person  
*That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) – Surrealist classic where two separate actresses play the same character—a maid, much desired by her employer—who never notices the difference  
*A Woman in Berlin* (2008) – Based on a famous German memoir about women surviving WWII  
*The Skin I Live In* (2011) – Disturbing Pedro Almodóvar mystery-thriller about a woman abducted and heavily bandaged by a mad cosmetic surgeon with a secret (Antonio Banderas)  
*Ida* (2014) – Last year’s Oscar winner as Best Foreign Language Film; a Polish drama about a young nun who only learns of her Jewish heritage on the eve of committing to the convent

### Facts about *Phoenix* you may appreciate...

The source novel, *Return from the Ashes*, was a French crime thriller published in 1963 and made into an English-language MGM movie by that name in 1965. The novel, set in France, features many additional convolutions preceding and following the major events of *Phoenix*.

Petzold is the most visible and successful leader of what is often called the “Berlin School” of contemporary German cinema, bringing an un-flashy but meticulous style to narratively and politically complex stories that a wide audience can nonetheless follow easily. Nina Hoss, the star of *Phoenix*, has starred in all of his most famous features, and was paired with the male lead of *Phoenix* in their previous outing, *Barbara*, where we rooted for their love.

Petzold maintains almost all the same behind-the-scenes collaborators from movie to movie, partly to refine a kind of collective “brand,” although the genres and tones of their films have been fairly varied. *Barbara* and *Phoenix* might be the most similar of all of them.

*Phoenix* debuted over a year ago at the 2014 Toronto Film Festival, along with Oscar contenders like *The Imitation Game* and *The Theory of Everything*. The movie earned some “best of the fest” reviews and other, more modest reactions. It opened commercially in Germany that same month but played dozens of fests around the world before debuting in the U.S. in July.

*Phoenix* has been a bigger hit than its U.S. distributor, Sundance Selects, seems to have anticipated, earning double the box-office already of Petzold and Hoss’s last film, the even better-reviewed *Barbara*. Similar to last year’s *Ida*, *Phoenix* was booked in a lot of quieter venues for cinema diehards (like the Music Box) rather than several AMC- or Landmark-style theaters that often exhibit foreign-language films that show some promise as hits. The movie is about to surpass *Wild Tales* as the year’s second-biggest foreign-language hit.

### Broad conversation topics...

**The Elephant in the Room:** *Why doesn’t she just tell him who she is?* Surely no viewer makes it through *Phoenix* without posing this question. What explanations did you come up with?

**Subdued Style:** Premises this far-fetched and melodramas this elaborate tend to coax high-style treatments from filmmakers. Looking at the list of comparable titles on the first page of this sheet, you notice right away that Petzold never intends anything close to Hitchcock’s morbid but swoony romanticism, or Almodóvar’s outrageousness, or even the conspicuous elegance of *Ida*’s haunting black and white. What is the effect of *Phoenix* playing things so straight?

**Metaphor and Resonance:** Nelly’s predicament and choices suggest so many themes related to marriage, money, gender, antisemitism, post-traumatic recovery, the reconstruction of Germany and Europe after World War II, etc., etc. Which ideas resonated most for you?

**Music:** Beyond Nelly’s career as a cabaret singer and its centrality to the final scene, *Phoenix* showcases several forms of music rather pointedly, from symphonic strings to plucky jazz basses. Beyond the overall demand that Nelly “perform” as herself, how else might this aspect of the film—ranging from heavy orchestration to improvisation—echo its themes?

Specific touches worth contemplating...

**Opening:** Lene, having found Nelly and brought her home, is the first character on screen and is the visual point of focus of several scenes that follow. Partly this has to do with Nelly being so heavily bandaged and the film building to a revelation of her face, but what other themes or affinities does *Phoenix* suggest by emphasizing Lene's point of view at the beginning?

**Score:** The light jazz over the opening scene is one of those unexpected musical cues in which *Phoenix* often specializes—not at all what we'd expect from the heavy plot about to unfold, or from this pitch-black, immediately tense drive and border-check. How do you explain it?

**Focus:** *Phoenix* continues the slow build-up to revealing Nelly's face by keeping her very blurry in the background of some early shots of Lene, and by holding on the border patrol's reaction when he demands she remove her bandages rather than cutting to her appearance. Even once her face has been revealed, though, *Phoenix* resorts often to uneven focus in many of its shots, making one character clearly visible and another very blurry, even when they are seated very close together. What sense might this visual motif make, given the storylines?



**Points of Reference:** Pictured left is Zarah Leander, the Swedish singer and popular star of German films whom Nelly's surgeon says is the woman most facial-reconstruction patients want to look like. A controversial figure then and now—a Swede who professed to hate the Nazis, but who worked for Germany's film studio throughout the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, but was also reported decades later to have been a possible anti-Nazi spy for the Soviets—she makes for a very telling and complicated figure for postwar adoration. She also reminds us, as Nelly's story might, that people's political and moral choices were much cloudier than we'd now like to believe.

**Culture:** The surgeon's quick allusion to the American idea of a “countdown” backward from ten, even though he insists they stole it from a German idea, is just one quick instance of *Phoenix* alluding to language, music, culture, and politics in postwar Germany as an utter hodgepodge of cross-cultural influences, especially between the US and Germany. In a way, the nation, like Nelly, has been rebuilt to look and sound like itself, but something is off...

**Color:** What we think is a flashback to Nelly's memory of life in the camp (she's wearing the prisoner's uniform) and soon reveals itself as a dream about Johnny is in much richer, brighter color than any of the present day scenes. Movies usually render scenes like this as drab, even colorless, to underscore the tragedy and misery. Why the reversal here?

**Costumes:** Lene favors white, black, and dark teal tones in her clothes throughout the film, so we notice her major departure during a meal with Nelly, having set her up in their apartment and enticed her with the idea of moving together to Palestine. Everything in the scene, including Nelly, blends together in the white-blue-black palette except for Lene herself, wearing a bright red top. She's assembled a perfect environment for herself and Nelly but outfitted herself as the one element that doesn't fit—a foreshadowing of later developments.

**Props:** Even in the photographs that Lene has given the doctor to help restore Nelly's face, her likeness is often hidden by her hair, or by her turning away from the camera. This is tactical on the film's part—it avoids inviting us to compare her “before” and “after” guises too directly—but also suggests that even in Nelly's earlier, “happier” life, she was a somewhat inscrutable or furtive figure, impossible to get a fix on. How does this serve the story?

**More Reconstruction:** During Lene's speech about the Jewish State that will be assembled in Palestine, *Phoenix* offers an early, very rare instance of Nelly's new face: *this* imperfect “re-creation” is what we're seeing as Lene describes the prospective birth of Israel. Is the film suggesting that Jewish culture will be rebuilt but will never match what it previously was? Is the very idea of creating a new nation being likened to an act of impossible reconstruction?

**Title:** How does it inform your sense of the film that the “Phoenix” is the name of a German cabaret that now largely caters to American G.I.s—with showgirls whose bodies are flaunted (though the camera refuses to go in close), and with Cole Porter songs sung in German?

**Props:** The camera and script make big deals about Nelly being warned not to go out at night without a gun, of Lene giving her a pistol, and of Nelly having the gun later as Johnny forces her through the last stages of his plan. We'd be forgiven for awaiting the moment when a weapon is inevitably fired—but the only important gunshot happens offscreen, to a different character. What sense did you make of this unfulfilled threat of violence?

**Characterization:** Johnny wastes no time articulating his scheme to “Esther” once he meets her, and already has a number of details worked out. The implication is that he has been looking for a woman to entice into this plot for a while, *not* that spotting Nelly gave him the idea. What does this in itself tell us about Johnny? How does this detail inform our sense of why he never pauses to consider Esther might *be* Nelly, or at least might be a camp survivor?

**Editing:** “You saw him,” Lene discerns right away, after Nelly returns from Johnny's apartment. “What happened?” she asks, and the film cuts immediately, rather than clarifying what Nelly does or does not tell her straightaway about this encounter, or about Johnny's plan. What was your response to being purposefully denied this character-revealing information?

**Sound:** Even aside from the music, *Phoenix* regularly impresses me with its use of sound: often filling Johnny's apartment, for example, with the footsteps and muffled talk of people upstairs, so we know how modest a space this is and how easily discovered Nelly might be, or letting us hear Johnny pick up the broken knife even before he enters the room where Nelly is sleeping, so that we're alerted to danger before that encounter begins. When else, for you, did sonic details play a major role in how you followed or interpreted the movie?

**Script:** When “Esther” finally wears one of Nelly's dresses, we might expect the *Vertigo* moment where Johnny is taken aback by her exact congruence to the dead woman—but instead he is repulsed by how fully she *fails* to look like Nelly. The dress doesn't fit (did you agree that it didn't?), the hair's the wrong color, the walk isn't the same. Even later, when she dyes her hair, dons makeup, and saunters up to Johnny in full “Nelly” guise, he says she hasn't got it right. What do these repeated scenes of Johnny failing to *see* Nelly imply?

**Lighting:** Repeatedly, shots in *Phoenix* are set up such that one bright light is emanating from a single source, whether natural (a window in the side of the set) or unnatural (an inexplicable glow at the center of the dining table), casting a harsh, bright light on one part of the shot and consigning the rest to dark colors and shadow. How does this visual motif fit the story?

**Movies:** When Johnny needs to make Esther look more like Nelly, he offers her a film magazine, as an emblem of misleading but attractive illusion. Does *Phoenix* think of movies in terms of artifice and escapism? What comment does it seem to offer about itself in presenting film as a world of illusion? Does it matter that *this* film seems, superficially, so stylistically plain?

**Sound:** As “Esther” offers her one example of the kind of concentration-camp memory she thinks everyone will expect from her—only to find out repeatedly that nobody ever asks—we hear the sounds of the streetcars outside Johnny’s apartment. Or is she *remembering* those sounds of the trains that brought Jews to the camp, still the most infamous icon of the Shoah? This is one example where sound blurs the line between actual reality and Nelly’s headspace.

**Production Design:** Living in a basement apartment probably helps Johnny hide “Esther,” but it also allows for shots where he watches her approach in the street, or vice versa, through narrow slits in the window, from below ground level, as if they are in a wartime bunker.

**Forgiveness, Motivation, and Desire:** Lene expresses her disgust not only that Germans gassed so many Jews who “wrote, sang, and slaved” for them, who even fought for Germany, and now Jewish survivors like Nelly show a willingness to forgive. Remember, this was the character whose point of view the film stressed so much at the outset. “I thought you’d shot him and needed my help” are her final words. Does the film seem to endorse Lene’s disgust, or step back from it? Did you believe this was her primary or exclusive reason for disdaining Nelly’s reunion with Johnny? To what extent did her barely-disguised desire for Nelly seem to drive her choices, including her final one? Was Nelly trying not to recognize this desire?

**Camera Distance:** This is not the kind of movie where we start out distant from the characters and gradually grow closer to them. The trip to the inn where Johnny and Nelly previously hid from the Nazis is a perfect example of how faraway *Phoenix*’s camera often remains from its characters, and how often it plants them in wide, empty spaces. Why, do you think?

**Invented Narratives:** On the bicycle ride from the inn, Nelly actually weaves her own story of why and how Johnny acted in relation to Nelly, both denying that he betrayed his wife (i.e., her) and stipulating that it “wasn’t a real betrayal” even if he did. When he won’t answer her direct questions, she simply spins a tale she believes, or wants to believe. Later, in advance of Nelly’s artificial “return” from the camps, Johnny describes in painstaking detail which of their friends will approach her in which order, what each will say, and how they will collectively handle the surprise of her return. None of these narratives, Nelly’s or Johnny’s, unfold exactly as they describe, though they’re not completely off, either. What does *Phoenix* seem to say about people’s ability to recognize others and predict their behavior?

**Music:** Here we go again: as Nelly reads the heartbreaking final letter from Lene, the film scores Lene’s voiceover not with emotional strings but with light, jazzy bass and piano. Why?

**Contracts:** Different viewers may agree or disagree, but *Phoenix* allows us to interpret *either* that the divorce contract finally puts Nelly over the edge because it offers incontrovertible proof that Johnny deserted and betrayed her to the Nazis *or* that his breaking the marriage contract upsets her more than breaking a general moral contract with humanity. I suppose you could maintain both. Which interpretation was yours? What made you think so? These questions keep spiraling outward: do you imagine, for example, that Nelly would have allowed Johnny to inflict a physical scar indicating a removed tattoo, if she hadn't learned in time about the divorce? Does she draw the line there, or is she drawing it for other reasons?

**Images:** Just as the camera remains unusually aloof from its characters even as the film continues, opting for fewer close-ups and more long shots than many movies would allow, *Phoenix* never stops shooting Nelly in silhouette, from behind, or through frosted panes of glass—as when she locks Johnny out of the bedroom, after their fight about the tattoo. What does it mean that *Phoenix* remains so committed to making Nelly unknowable, half-seen?

**Costumes:** Johnny continually makes a big deal about Nelly wearing a red dress *from Paris* as her “entrance costume” upon debarking the train. She expresses more than once that surely nobody thinks a camp survivor would be so glamorously outfitted. Alongside that moral error, note that Johnny remains wedded to a notion of Paris as a capital of glamour and sophistication, and not remotely attuned to Paris’s own fate under the Nazi regime.

**Camera Angle:** As Nelly and Johnny prepare their recital of “Speak Low,” the camera depicts their friends from a very rigid, straight-on angle, all seated in a row, as though they really are the audience at a theatrical event, rather than a group of intimates settling in for a humane moment with their long-lost friend. What does that tell us about these characters, or the film’s view of what is going on for them in this sequence?

**Music:** Here are the lyrics to “Speak Low,” the song that surfaces over and over in *Phoenix*, and never more pointedly than at the end. What are all the different resonances we might find in these words for the storylines and psychological dynamics the film has unfolded for us? (The song was co-written by Kurt Weill, the famous German composer of music-hall tunes and mordant, character-specific stage numbers, and Ogden Nash, a U.S. poet of comic verse.)

Speak low when you speak, love  
Our summer day withers away too soon, too soon  
Speak low when you speak, love  
Our moment is swift, like ships adrift, we're swept apart, too soon  
Speak low, darling, speak low  
Love is a spark, lost in the dark too soon, too soon  
I feel wherever I go that tomorrow is near, tomorrow is here and always too soon  
Time is so old and love so brief  
Love is pure gold and time a thief  
We're late, darling, we're late  
The curtain descends, ev'rything ends too soon, too soon  
I wait, darling, I wait  
Will you speak low to me, speak love to me and soon