

-Söyleşi.Interview-

Interview with Christian Petzold

Serdar Öztürk and Eda Arısoy

Hello Mr. Christian Petzold. First of all, it is an honor for us to be able to have an interview with you. Thank you for taking your precious time to meet the Journal of Sinefilozofi. You have many followers and fans in Turkey. We hope it will be a bilateral conversation for them as well. Looking at your filmography, we see that you have many productions that will be talked about at length and this is really impressive.

Eda ARISOY: Of course, they are all important works, but I think *Phoenix* (2014), *Undine* (2020), *Transit* (2018), *Barbara* (2012), *Ghosts* (2005) are at the forefront as controversial films. I want to start with the movie *Undine*, which raises similar question marks in me while watching it. We are watching a fairy-tale narrative of mythology in contemporary life and such dilemmas make us ask questions throughout the movie. On the one hand, the vital symbol of water, and on the other hand, death due to infidelity, which is questioning the bond between life and death. The movie has a really strong narrative. The film's perspective on the concept of love is also unusual. For a moment, the film seems disconnected from the real world, but for a moment we see that it takes place in Berlin in the present day. These transitions are really impressive. Did you find it risky in the pre-production process to create such a unique narrative style?

Christian PETZOLD: For me, it was no risk but it is always very hard for me to describe my plans to the people who will give me the money. For example, at *Transit* it was a problem to describe the story from 1941, in contemporary Marseille. They didn't understand it, they thought it was a science-fiction film about people who are from other times, with a machine coming back to Marseille or something like that. I have to be an intellectual to describe it. And in *Undine* it was like this for me, I have read a book, 10 years before I have written down the script. It was a book written by an Austrian female writer, Ingeborg Bahmann and she had taken the myth of Undine in a new narration, in a new story. You know, this myth of Undine is a very old one and it is based on the romantic times of European history. In romantic times, it was a reaction to the industrialization of the world, work in factories, destruction of nature and so on. There is a romantic reaction that they want to find and reenchant the world which is totally destroyed by industrialization. Especially many German myth stories have a reaction and they make the nature seem like paradise, like something where there is truth and so on. Always naked women are at the center of these movements. Undine is one of these naked women. There are always male subjects and they have problems, especially in the myth of Undine, the problem is, there is a man who falls in love with a woman and the woman doesn't love him, so the man is getting depressed and because of being totally depressed, he wants to go into a small lake in the forest to commit and there is Undine in this lake, naked and beautiful. He shouts out her name and she comes out of the water naked and she says to him "I am yours and for all times you can do everything with me, what you want, but if you ever betray me, I will have to kill you and I will go back to the water". This is the myth and it is always like that; This guy is a little bit ugly, not intellectual and now he has a fantastic, beautiful young woman on his side like Undine. When he goes back to his society everybody says "my god, he could be an intellectual and intelligent character. So the original woman he was in love with is interested in him, she wants to sleep with him and wants to marry him.

But, Undine will be betrayed and will have to kill him. In this German myth which is not very intelligent by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, there is a very fantastic poetic sentence. In this night when this guy has a wedding with a woman, she will be surrounded by a bottle of water. Going naked into this room in her wedding night, she takes him into the bubble and he gets drowned there and dies inside this bubble. Then, the bubble bursts, everything is wet on the floor and the death body of the guy and some people, servants come to the room. She cries while saying "my tears killed him". This is a very fantastic sentence. I like this myth because it is complicated. Then, I have read this book by Ingeborg Bahmann with the title "Undine Geh", which means Undine is leaving. This is the first story written from the perspective of Undine, out of the perspective of the male subject. For me, this was interesting because in my whole work, Harun Farocki and I always thought about how to change the perspective a little bit. If we could change the perspective of vertigo by Hitchcock and use this perspective for example, what happens to the story when we change the position of the narrator. And so Ingeborg Bahmann made this and I followed her.

Serdar ÖZTÜRK: Real and fantastic elements can be intertwined in your movies. This is more evident in some of your films, especially *Undine* and *Transit*. But realistic elements are more dominant in some of your films such as *Barbara* and *Jerichow*. On the other hand, we feel that realistic elements are more dominant in terms of places and characters in all of your films. Unreal elements seem to become a part of reality. I think you do this very well with cinematography. I wonder the secret of this success. Petzold seems to be making a special effort to turn fairytales and unreal elements into realistic dimensions. What is your standpoint about reality in the movies?

C.P: You know in 1895 cinema was invented. The same year, psycho-analysis was found by Sigmund Freud. For me, both things had something to do with each other. Yesterday, I had a walk with a friend and we talked about *Pulp Fiction* by Tarantino (1994). There is one sequence when Bruce Willes misses his watch and he has to go back in the apartment to grasp his watch and he knows that it is dangerous, because perhaps, the killers are waiting there for him. And this passage from his move to the apartment is so realistic like New Realism in Italy in the 40s, 50s. It is not beautiful. All the other things in *Pulp Fiction* are very beautiful such as the fantastic Los Angeles light. It is a fantastic place where they can dance. There are fantastic bars. But this sequence is so important because it is so realistic and I love to have the dream pictures and realistic pictures side by side because it is not a contradiction. They have to be in the same room. For example, when you see the New Realistic movies by Roberto Rossellini, you seem strumbly with Ingrid Bergman. For me, strumbly is also like Hollywood. The sand, the poor houses, the atmosphere, because everybody is staring at Ingrid Bergman behind the windows. She is very lonely, she is like a Théodore Géricault painting. So in the New Realistic movies, you have fantasy. They are dreamlike. In these Hollywood dream movies, you have new realistic structures. For me, it is very important to have both in one place, but not separated. I don't see so many Netflix or Amazon Prime productions, because they make a decision to stay realistic or to be in the dreamland. You have to be a Marvel movie or you choose an independent avant garde movie. Both have to be in the same room, I think. From the beginning of cinema, we have workers leaving the factory by Lumiere Brothers as the first movie made. But this scene is not showing the work, it is showing the end of the work. The workers are leaving the factory and cinema starts. You have to have them both, the factory and the cinema in the same picture.

E.A: Concepts such as the past, identity and memory come to the fore in your films. Especially *Phoenix* is a very distinctive film in this sense. However, it is the director's genius in making these concepts more striking through the characters. As far as I can see from outside, you establish a bond, a special connection I guess with the actors. It is reflected in the overall narrative of this movie as your signature. This reflection is also very evident in the acting of

Paula Beer and Franz Rogowski, the lead actors and actresses of *Transit* and *Undine*. How is the relationship between Christian Petzold and his actors/ actresses developing? Because this relationship is an element that affects the entire narrative of the movie?

C.P: I was never an assistant to a director in my whole life. I studied at the German Film Academy in Berlin but I made short films and I was never a rookie or something in a big production, never. I miss this a little bit, I had to invent everything by myself. I don't know how to speak with actors or Director of Photographers. I don't know these, I have to learn it. I must say I have to learn by books, as always in most of my life. When I am writing a script, a project or a treatment, I am surrounded by books, photos, graphic novels, music, other movies. It is not coming out of my head, it is a montage of many things. When I meet the actors for the first time, it is around three months before shooting. I make a seminar for three days in a special room. In this seminar, I am not talking about the project and the characters, I just show them what I have made in the last year. I show them all the graphic novels, I play them music, we watch movies together and I am talking (a little bit too much sometimes). Then, the actors/actresses can leave the seminar after three days, and this is all I can do for them. They can work with this and they can work by themselves. Then, two weeks before shooting, I rent a bus and the actors and I are driving to all the shooting places before all these people, all the stuff destroy the shooting places with their trailers, the busses, the lights etc. For example, when we made *Transit*, actors and I were in Marseille. We were walking through Marseille and we were looking at all the ruins that Germans left there in the time of Nazi occupation. We were thinking about the corruption of the Social Democratic Party of France and what they have done there. We are thinking about the new harbour, old harbour, the story of the refugees and we are in the real city of Marseille. Then, they go back to their home and they have the script. When they are reading the script, they have the impressions of Marseille and the tools I have given them a few months before, so they can work by themselves and I never say to them, "I need more tears" or "Please cry". But everything they create by themselves based on our voyage to the shooting places based on the tools I have given them in our desk during the seminar. This is the work I have done, and so you know I am always shooting with the same actors/actresses, same cast, stuff, DOPs because we are all in this seminar room together, like a small factory. I think Nuri Bilge Ceylan is doing the same. My sound man Andreas Mücke is also the sound man of Nuri Bilge Ceylan and I think it is a little bit like what he is doing but I think I am more democratic. It is my education to be a social democrat, it is deep in my heart.

S.Ö: Your films offer both aesthetic and intellectual pleasure. On the one hand they show the mundane, ordinary life but on the other hand they revolve around deep ethical questions. How can you make the balance between aesthetic pleasure and intellectual pleasure? An ordinary person is able to watch your movies, because the story flows very fluently. On the other hand, intellectual people are able to watch them, because composition of images are highly intellectual. I think your movies can combine different genres. We can not describe them easily as classical movie or modern cinema. What do you think about it?

C.P: When I was 16 I read a book, the interview of François Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock. I was 16 and I was not an intellectual. I was in high school but I wasn't an intellectual, I wanted to be a football player, a pop star or something. And I read this book, for me it was very interesting because I knew all these movies; they were talking about *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *Birds* (Hitchcock, 1963), because I have seen them in television. I remember the name Hitchcock; he was very famous, but it was not a style. From this moment when I read this long interview between Truffaut and Hitchcock, I saw two intellectual people and they were talking about skills about philosophy, to be anxious, to be innocent in the world of power, and to be alone in the world and to be outside of the society. All these things are very very intellectual on the other hand everybody knows this. For me, it was never a contradiction and I am so sad about the separation of cinema, like cinema of students and the cinema of main stream.

I don't like this. When my mother was very young, she went to the cinema three or four times a week. She knows Ingmar Bergman, François Truffaut, Jean Luc Godard but she was a working class woman. It was not a problem for her. She loves Jean Paul Belmondo because of *À bout de Souffle*, 1960, by Jean-Luc Godard it is an avant garde movie. I think separation is destroying culture. For me, it's not that I want to do it, I want to go back to work without separation. When I am thinking about a story, I think all stories are crime stories a little bit. Because you see people who do something which send them outside of the society. That makes them lonely. A man betrays his wife; he has to leave the family and he is alone, so this is a crime of morality. Someone steals money in the factory he works or someone is gay and not part of it. At this moment the story in cinema starts. All stories are about animals, people or women, men and children who are a little bit outcast. And at this moment, everybody on the outside is portraying the inside. They say something about our society. It's political, without saying anything about politics.

E.A: I would like to continue with a general question, because I think this question is one of the most curious aspects of directors whose productions we find valuable and who avoid repetition in their films. Every creative director has different methods and work plans to put his story on the cinematographic plane and reach his audience. What are the stages of the emergence of a Christian Petzold film before undertaking such creative works? How would you describe yourself in this context?

C.P: The most things start with one or two sentences. It is never a novel, sometimes its a kind of short story but sometimes it's just a picture. I remember when I started to write *Wolfsburg* (2003), our daughter was infected and she had to go into the hospital. We had to stay in the hospital three or four days in this period. I had to walk through the hospital, because it was twenty four hours and there was nothing to do but wait with a little bit of fear. There I saw a woman in front of the coffee automat, she put 2 coins into the coffee machine and then the coffee and water came down into the cup. At this moment, she turned to the window and looked outside, and you could see on the window that she was crying, because it was getting wet there. Then she ran away. I know that something bad happened to someone she knew or she was the patient, I don't know. Then, another man came and saw the cup of coffee on the automat and took it, because it was free now and he wanted to drink it by himself. And this woman came back and she cried, "this is my coffee" in a very aggressive way and she forgot her sadness at that moment because she was fighting for her coffee. This was the thing I have seen. Then, I thought about what she had done, what her profession was, what her faith was. I thought about the man too. Then, I wrote down the first treatment of *Wolfsburg*. The second thing I thought was the characters, the protagonists. Harun Faroki and I wrote down some sentences which were very important for us. One is; "you always have to tell two stories". We have in *Wolfsburg* the story of guiltiness and we have another story. The other story was that he was originally from the working class. And now he is a salesman. He was blue color, but now he is white color. He wants to live in a house, he has married a rich woman, he wants to be a part of rich people, but he is from the working class. His identity is not confirmed but he thinks so. At this moment he kills the young boy, he sees the mother. The mother is from the working class It's his class. When he wants to fall in love with her and give her a better life, he always has to fight against his class where he is coming from. It is not only a question of morality, because he has killed the sun and he wants to pay something back for his immortal life. He has also something to do with his fundement of his story, but he is a betrayer of his working class story. It is not a part of the dialogue. It's a part of the atmosphere.

S.Ö: I think we are faced with a kind of generic humanity through your movies. This humanity is universal and crosses the cultural boundries. The composition of images are stripped of their empirical and everyday dimensions. They become abstract, they become no longer a reality of Germany or even of Europe. Characters, relations, problems are universal to a certain level. I

am curious about the views of Christian Petzold on this concept. It seems to me that you are in search of a generic humanity. Is this search related to your life experiences or to your readings? And what kind of path do you follow while transferring this generic humanity to your films?

C.P: You know for me cinema is the best art in the world. I will give you an example, but it is not because we are talking about Germany and Turkey; Nuri Bilge Ceylan's movies are very important for me. There is a scene in his last movie *Ahlat Ağacı* (Ceylan, 2018), the scene of the young writer who had to go back to the town. He walks and he saw a woman on a field working. The woman comes to him and they are under the tree and she wants to have a cigarette. Then, the camera is going up to the tree and you feel they are both in love, but it is not possible for them to be together because he has gone away and she had to marry someone else. But this moment of three minutes, the cigarettes, the looks, the wind and the movement of trees is fantastic. There is a famous, romantic, German poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Hölderlin had written down a poem of the winds of South Germany. For me, it was a little bit like this. In the winds of South, there is the desire of Hölderlin and Germany, desire of love and warm, fantastic colors and another antique protestant life. This wind in this scene, Nuri Bilge Ceylan is also coming to Germany through the cinema at that moment, so everybody understands the scene. Even if this is international, at that moment it's just regional; it takes place in Turkey. It is like a fantastic pop song. This is for me cinema. It's part of Turkey and part of the whole world at the same time. This is how cinema had to be. On the other hand, I also think about Tom Cruise as a doctor in *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999). It's a dream like New York there. I always had the feeling that they made it in a studio in London, but it's Tom Cruise, he is an American. However, the strange feeling is also understandable by everyone in the world. It is also a little bit like the character in *Wolfsburg*, (Christian Petzold, 2003). He is someone of the society of rich people but he is not really a part of it. They don't like him, so this is interesting that we can talk about Stanley Kubrick sometimes that all his characters are parvenues. They don't like him really, they used him, like Tom Cruise. This is interesting but as the answer of your question, I think the scene has to be universal.

S.Ö: We see open-images in your films. Because of open-images we constantly ask questions. These images leave us hesitant during and after the film. The images seem a kind of crystal image. They leave us unable to decide about the reality. We have to use our judgment extensively to fill in the gaps in the movie. At the end of the *Transit*, we can not make a decision about whether the woman is alive or not? In *Undine*, was she a mermaid from the start? Why did Georg return to his family instead of living with the mermaid Maria? By his own will? At Maria's request? I'm curious as to your thoughts on these open images and perhaps crystal-images in your films that leave the audience hesitant. Is it related to it related to your aesthetic and intellectual approach to the art of cinema in general?

C.P: Always when I talk with the DOPs, we always think if this is the picture we want to shoot; if there is a subject inside the picture or if it is a picture only to memorize the scene, like a documentary. Documentaries have to be objective. So is it subjective or objective? I am always a little bit bored about this alternative. At the end, I always have the feeling that things we see in the cinema don't need us any more. They are on their own. For example, when Charlie Chaplin leaves at the last shoot, going down the street with the girl, they don't need us anymore. They are there for themselves. We have to leave now so that they can be independent. This is a fantastic feeling that they don't need us anymore and we are not responsible anymore, but we can think about them. For example, at the end of the *The Searchers* by John Ford (1956) or the end of Antonioni's 1962, the world works for itself and it doesn't need the human beings anymore. I like to have this feeling at the end of the movie. In *Transit*, he turns himself to the door when the doorbell rings, then he sees something, but the counter shot was not there, so it is in his world. At the end, someone opens the door, all look at the door but the counter shot is not there. So it is his world. At the end of my favorite scene in *Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999)

which I like so much. The family of Sopranos are sitting in the dinners. Someone opens the door, all look to the door but counter shot is black. From this moment on, they are living in their world and they are watching something what we can't see anymore. Then, the narration is over. We are then on ourselves like the characters. This is some kind of a moral question, but I think it is a synastic morality what I feel there.

E.A: I want to add something at this point. I found the ending of *Transit* very very impressive. The sound is very surprising at the moment the narration was over. When the film was over with such a look of the character to door we expect to hear a softer music but the director prefers some kind of music unexpected and surprising which may lead to the opposite feeling. This is very impressive I believe and this really supports the idea you just said.

C.P: The producers didn't like this idea. They said that they have written down a score and it is good to have melancholic music. When I was young, I used to go to the church with my parents to protestant churches, which are based on music, especially Johann Sebastian Bach is the most important composer for the churches. I hated to go the churches but there was one moment which I like very much, it was the end of the session. And at the end, there was music and the doors of the churches are opened, so you can go outside to the reality with music. This is a fantastic moment which is very important for the protestant church. I think cinema has some similarities not with religion but you know when the credits are coming, usually movies and credits are together. What happens at the moment when the doors open in the cinema? What kind of music is on, while walking in the corridor on the way back to real life. For me this song is by Talking Heads in *Transit*. It feels like as if David Burns the singer of the group Talking Heads knew something about Marseille in 1994. It is a very sad song (the road to nowhere) but it is like a gospel that has powerful strings. It's a very sad but also dancable song. This is something I like very much. In *Barbara* (Christian Petzold, 2012) also, this song by Chick, was also not found so suitable by the producer. The same year in the USA, they destroyed the records of the band, Chick, because Chick is black, homosexual and their music is not loved by white people. Freedom hurts you and this is what I like very much in this song.

S.Ö: I think the characters in your movies can transform themselves through their experiences. These transformations can provide us a kind of *hope*. Even under the strict and harsh circumstances, there emerges a hope. Therefore I can not see any passive nihilism in your movies. In *Barbara*, there emerges a moment when the Barbara starts to smile. Her face changes. She takes some pleasure from small moments like making meals. For me Barbara's smiling is an exception and hope. This is the seed of the emergent culture. As a person, how can you describe yourself, an optimist, a pessimist? Some directors can also make movies to cope with some of their emotions. For example, as you know Ingmar Bergman made the *Seventh Seal* both to face with and go away from the fear of death.

C.P: I am always interested in people who are living behind walls, who don't want to fall in love because falling in love is something you can lose the control. If you lose the control, they have the experience. If you lose the control, you reach nirvana or you go to jail or something like that. What I like in *Barbara* is that she is living in a country that she wants to leave. She is like a fundamentalist. She said, "this communistic thing is shit, I have to leave here. I am not opening myself, I am behind the wall of my own". The movie is about these walls, there are holds inside the walls. She doesn't want to fall in love, she doesn't want to have empathetic feelings but it starts. This fight is interesting. Cinema is always about producing. Nobody is interested in someone when the movie starts and at the beginning you see two people who are really happy. What people wants to see is the production, not a re-production, they want to see the production of love, production of crime, production of opening yourself. You can't see 100 minutes Barbara fighting against feelings and love because love meant weakness. She thinks that she has to be strong. In her experience love is weakness and you see her fighting.

Seeing the fight is interesting. Seeing the production (not an advertisement), you see happy faces and it is not interesting. They want to sell you something but Barbara doesn't want to sell something. We have to watch her but there is no capitalistic structure between audience and protagonists. They don't want to sell something and we are not consumers. We have to watch, we have to make spirits and we have to see.

S.Ö: In your movies we see some kinds of different perceptions: solid perception and liquid perception. Solid perception is about land movies. But in *Undine* you made a liquid perception, a water movie. And I think in 2023, you will finish your gases perception project, meaning fire movie. These concepts are related to philosophy as well. I wonder the motivation sources of this project?

C.P: To make trilogies is something to do when you are in a city. You see the architecture of some museums. They are fantastic architecture and they are unique. For me, cinema is not this, not to make a museum, to make a street, a quarter or parks. When I think about trilogies, I think many houses with neighbourhoods. I have a better feeling, for me cinema is a city, not a solo place there. I can't stand this. I love architecture; there is a ruined street and they re-create something in that street. I like this architecture more than Dubai, Qatar built houses in the desert. Perhaps, these buildings are impressing but you can't live there. When you see the old cinema in the 40s, 50s, 60s in the USA, France or Turkey, they are in the middle of a city and part of social life. For me, cities are living when there is cinema, theatre, libraries are in the center. When they are not at the center anymore, that means dying. For me, this idea of trilogy is something to be part of a city and cinemas in the city. It is a feeling like this for me.

E.A: Dear Christian Petzold, thank you once again for this precious interview.