

Barbara (2012)

“One cannot be happy in this country.”

Major Credits

Director: Christian Petzold

Screenplay: Christian Petzold and Harun Farocki

Cinematography: Hans Fromm

Cast: Nina Hoss (Barbara), Ronald Zehrfeld (André), Rainier Bock (Klaus Schütz), Jasna Frititzi Bauer (Stella), Mark Waschke (Jörg), Susanne Bormann (Steffi)

Production Background

Christian Petzold is generally recognized as the most accomplished German filmmaker of his generation, the so-called Berlin School that emerged with the turn of the new century. The label is not particularly helpful, however, except to describe the place from which Petzold was educated and began his career. His family emigrated from East Germany to (East) Berlin; Petzold was in film school there when the Berlin Wall fell. In general, the Berlin School can be defined by its realistic visual style (long takes, long or medium shots) and rejection of both the historical themes of the 1970s New German Cinema (Herzog, Fassbinder, Schlöndorff, Wenders) or the shift to popular genre movies of the 1990s.

Barbara is Petzold's 11th feature, his first to be set in the past (early 1980s). It is also his fifth collaboration with the great actress Nina Hoss (she has subsequently starred in a sixth, *Phoenix*), who has served him as something of a muse. Two motifs from his earlier work emerge in *Barbara*: characters on the fringes of society anxiously confronting transformational change; the significance of work in shaping people's lives. Petzold has acknowledged that this film was partially made in response to the depiction of the GDR in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (2006). *Barbara* won the top prize, the Silver Bear, at the Berlin Film Festival and was Germany's nominee for an Academy Award.

Cinematic Qualities

Petzold's work is generally anti-auteurist, and *Barbara's* camerawork and editing do not generally draw attention to the director. The moody night scenes and the trio of close-ups that mark the ending are perhaps the most memorable images from a film that engages the audience through its complex narrative.

1. Camera angles: Beginning with the opening high angle shots, Petzold often draws attention to the panopticon gaze of the repressive socialist State, the Stasi. The protagonist's anxiety and paranoia gain credence through these POV shots.
2. Tracking shots: Barbara's preferred mode of transportation, the bicycle, lends itself to some wonderful traveling shots that reveal the (surprising?) beauty of her provincial locale. Note, too, the slow tracking shot up from her hands to reveal that Barbara (Nina Hoss) is playing the piano, a nice touch of cinematic verisimilitude.

Questions for Discussion

1. The protagonist, Barbara, must decide among three competing claims: her *political* commitment, her *emotional* desires, and her attachment to *work*. What is the crucial turning point within the narrative that impels her final decision?
2. Bicycles have proven to be a favorite image for some great filmmakers: de Sica in *Breaking Away*, the Dardenne brothers in *The Kid with the Bike*, not to mention the popular American movie *Breaking Away*, directed by Peter Yates. Consider Petzold's use of the bike. What ideas about Barbara's current life does the image convey?
3. The scene in which André lectures Barbara on Rembrandt's painting, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, is a perfect example of what theorists call an *overdetermined* moment. Petzold pays special attention to displaying the image, the only example of montage in the film. How does this scene, which appears rather early in the narrative, convey many of the narrative's most significant ideas?
4. How is the impression of East Germany (GDR) in *Barbara* different from what you may have expected or seen in other movies like *The Lives of Others*?