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THE END OF THE FAIRY TALE?: CHRISTIAN PETZOLD'S *BARBARA* AND THE
DIFFICULTIES OF INTERPRETATION

DEBBIE PINFOLD

Traurig bin ich ein bisschen schon, dass das nun als der ultimative Film zu diesem Thema behandelt wird. Als ob es jetzt nichts mehr zu erzählen gäbe über die DDR.

When Nick Hodgkin quotes Wim Wenders' assessment of *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006) at the conclusion of his article 'Screening the Stasi' he notes that only time would tell whether Wenders' pessimism was justified.¹ Hodgkin stresses that politicians and historians had endorsed this film, which 'reinstates the binary approach to East German history – that is of perpetrator / victim, *Mitläufer* / *Anpasser* with which so many eastern Germans have struggled in postunification debates', precisely because it emphasised the GDR's character as a dictatorship and so helped to counter increasing ignorance about the socialist state and a subsequent tendency to trivialise it.² However, the film's massive, especially international, success was problematic for the reasons Hodgkin identifies: the reduction of a complex past to a set of simple binaries; a 'fairy tale of redemption' that was not merely historically unverified, but for some positively offensive; and an almost total lack of ordinary GDR citizens.³

In an interview given in 2013 following the critical success of his 2012 film *Barbara* Christian Petzold claimed: 'Erst seit den letzten zwei drei Jahren kann man so richtig gut Filme über Wendezeit und DDR machen. Der Abstand ist jetzt da.'⁴ Certainly when *Barbara* appeared it was widely hailed as a new kind of film, both in Petzold's own *oeuvre* and about the GDR. While the precise construction and spare dialogue that are characteristic of Petzold's earlier films remain, reviewers were quick to notice a new aspect, summed up by the review in *Der Spiegel*, which not only emphasised the even-handed depiction of the GDR, but referred to the film as 'Psychodrama, Systemkritik, und gleichzeitig so etwas wie

Christian Petzolds erster Liebesfilm – einer, der nicht nur das Unglück sieht und sich immer auch ein Stück Hoffnung wahrt.⁵

The film depicts the initially professional and then increasingly personal relationship between Dr Barbara Wolff, who has been removed from her prestigious post at the Berlin Charité to a hospital in the provinces for disciplinary reasons, and her immediate superior, Dr André Reiser, whom she knows to be reporting on her to the local Stasi officer, Klaus Schütz. The fact that Barbara is under observation is clear from the opening shots of the film, which show her from the perspective of André and Schütz, high above her at the hospital windows when she first reports for duty; moreover, the extremely wary and defensive Barbara is swift to point out to André that she knows he is watching her and that she is on her guard. This hardly sounds like material for a ‘Liebesfilm’, and yet this is the aspect that tended to be foregrounded in reviews, both German and English, with the film critic of *Die Welt* going so far as to refer to ‘eine unendlich berührende und auch fragile Liebesgeschichte *vor der Kulisse* des DDR-Regimes.⁶ This element of emotional warmth clearly not only surprised the reviewers, particularly coming from Petzold, but convinced them as well, despite the fact that a love relationship developing between a Stasi informer and the (knowing) object of his reports might seem at least as unlikely, historically, as Leutnant Wiesner’s Damascene conversion.⁷

This article will provide a close reading of Petzold’s film in the context of the paradigm-setting *Leben der Anderen* and wider debates about representing the GDR. It will argue that Petzold creates a carefully constructed surface narrative that presents a warmer, more complex image of the GDR than we are accustomed to, thus challenging the dominant public discourse of the GDR as merely ‘Stasiland’ and ‘Unrechtsstaat’. It will further suggest that he underpins this already rich surface narrative with a dense matrix of cultural references:

these draw the viewer into the characters' own attempts to interpret their surroundings, and thus foreground the difficulties of interpretation itself in a deeply unsettling manner.

Emotional authenticity in *Barbara*

The commentaries contained in the DVD extras to *Barbara*, like those of *Das Leben der Anderen*, emphasise the creative team's determination to create an 'authentic' image of the GDR, but the result is quite different. This is most obvious in the colour scheme; the directory of photography, Hans Fromm, refers to the need to get away from the 'alten Klischee mausgrauen DDR-Bild', adding that the film's setting in a provincial hospital is conducive to an attempt to create a certain 'Wärme', since hospitals are naturally light and warm toned places.⁸ And while Petzold, like von Donnersmarck, refers to detailed research and a determination to get original GDR objects wherever possible, he is far from the kind of fetishistic attitude von Donnersmarck displays, referring instead to the need to get these things right so that both director and actors can then let go of them: for example, the original 1980 West German *Quelle* catalogue which Barbara and Steffi look through in the Interhotel scene is important not for its physical presence, but for what flicking through it demonstrates about the two women's different attitudes to the West.⁹ Petzold's aim is not primarily to create a 'realistic' looking GDR; his main focus is 'Gesellschaft' and individuals rather than the obvious symbols of the GDR state (MoB1, 20.20-27). His choice of a provincial setting means he can escape such GDR clichés as Berlin 'Plattenbau' and frequent images of Honecker for a more rural setting where one of the few obvious reminders of the GDR state, a sign at the railway station exhorting the population to 'in die Zukunft mit Optimismus schauen', is faded and creates the impression that by 1980 the GDR barely believed in itself (MoB1, 19.33-19.45).

As Petzold discusses his filming techniques it becomes clear that the authenticity for which he strives is less physical / historical than emotional. The fact that his actors were able to visit the setting for the film before rehearsals started in earnest is commented on positively by both Nina Hoss (Barbara) and Ronald Zehrfeld (André), with Hoss remarking that this early familiarisation allowed her to build up a 'körperliches Verhältnis' to the spaces in which her character lives and so to move naturally within them (MoB1, 3.40-4.12). Petzold also emphasises the importance of 'chronologisches Drehen', which, while more time consuming (and expensive) than shooting all the scenes that take place in the same space at the same time before moving to the next location, nevertheless meant that the actors had readier access to the natural sequence of emotions felt by their characters (MoB1, 8.14-9.55). One of the few exceptions to this technique is presented by the scene where Barbara kisses André, a gesture which she, unlike him, knows to be a farewell. This crucial moment was filmed at a relatively early point in the filming process in order to avoid discussing it and its meaning for too long, as Petzold felt this would have reduced Zehrfeld's natural access to André's feeling of bafflement and the spontaneity of the moment (MoB1, 10.50-13.17). This spontaneity was clearly particularly important to Petzold, hence also his technique of allowing the actors to explore and rehearse the scenes that were to be filmed that day for a couple of hours without any of the technical team; this allowed the actors to establish the basic trajectory of the scene before filming, but also left them with the freedom still to improvise and surprise both themselves and their director. (MoB1, 4.52-5.40). The powerful impression of chemistry between the protagonists that this creates is crucial in maintaining the credibility of this relationship for the audience and in undermining what might otherwise be the underlying structural element of the film, the traditional perpetrator / victim binary.

Deconstructing the perpetrator v. victim binary

As Silke Arnold-de Simine and Susannah Radstone point out, ‘Wherever one looks, GDR remembrance culture is framed in terms of neat polar opposites’,¹⁰ of which the most prominent is precisely the perpetrator / victim binary. Nor is this confined to remembrance of the GDR:

the centrality of the Holocaust within memory discourses and memory studies has meant that the dominant modes of memory are, or have been perceived as being, remembering that which has been ‘done to’, and remembering in order to come to terms with that ‘doing’. [...] The fact that German as well as global memory culture is focused on perpetrator-victim narratives means that stories which conform to this narrative pattern are more likely to be heard.¹¹

The fact that this familiar binary finds such ready acceptance with audiences may in part account for the success of *Das Leben der Anderen*; the way the film’s characters divide neatly along victim / perpetrator lines provide the western viewer in particular with the all-too-familiar narrative of a wicked state apparatus and an oppressed population, especially in the form of an artistic elite which, for a western audience, is generally deemed to stand in opposition to the ‘Realpolitik’ of the day. And Berghahn’s ‘fairy tale of redemption’,¹² however ostensibly implausible in this context, nonetheless tallies with one of the most fundamental human (and indeed Marxist) beliefs, which is that human beings can always change for the better. However implausible the plot line may be historically, the film nonetheless speaks to our deepest human beliefs and indeed needs: hence what Owen Evans sees as its paradoxical ability to convince at the artistic level even those historians who derided its claims to historical accuracy.¹³ Evans suggests that while the redemptive plot line may be implausible, the film still has what he calls ‘authenticity of affect, which actually enhances the film’s treatment of injustice and redemption’.¹⁴ According to Evans the ability of *Das Leben der Anderen* to contribute to the cultural memory of the GDR is less a product of its historical accuracy than of its director’s ability to exploit powerful, familiar narratives and generic conventions, particularly of melodrama: at some level, then, the film succeeds because it tells people what they think they already know, or at least want to hear. This opens

up a question central to a full understanding of Petzold's film: namely, if a work is only received as 'authentic' when it conforms to stories that are already familiar to its audience, confirming rather than challenging their preconceived ideas, to what extent can a work of art shift existing cultural paradigms?

If we accept the film critics' judgement that the 'Liebesgeschichte' is the foreground element of *Barbara*, we might suggest that this film too has a highly implausible plot line. The fact that it carries such obvious conviction, both for those critics and, it would appear, for audiences, is largely due to the fact that this film too exploits highly familiar narratives and filmic conventions, notably that mainstay of romantic films and indeed romantic comedies, the story of the initially antagonistic pair who, over a period of enforced working / being together acquire a degree of grudging mutual (professional) respect which gradually turns into love. The pull of this narrative is so strong here, especially when pitted against the much more sporadic presentation of Barbara's relationship with her Western lover, that it works against both the other highly familiar story line of the film (the escape narrative) and indeed the post-socialist audience's usual sympathies: the emotional authenticity with which Petzold invests the Barbara / André relationship is such as to encourage the audience too to invest in it, and wish to see it prolonged.

Barbara and André are also flanked by more obvious victim and perpetrator figures: on the one hand, the girl who escapes twice from the Jugendwerkhof Torgau, Stella, and on the other, the Stasi officer in charge of Barbara's case, Schütz. This careful construction is mirrored in two parallel conversations, both between Barbara and André, which restore to these ostensibly stock figures emotional authenticity and humanity: in the first conversation, just after Stella has been admitted to hospital suffering from meningitis, André's defensive comments about the way 'das Mädchen' has previously feigned sickness in order to get out of work is countered by Barbara's 'Stella. Das Mädchen heißt Stella', endowing the girl with a

personal identity in the face of André's perception of her as a criminal, but also not allowing her to stand as a mere faceless victim.¹⁵ Reviewers have frequently noted this sentence, with Verena Lueken referring to it in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* as 'vielleicht der zentrale Satz, der in diesem Film gesprochen wird' because it goes to the heart of what is wrong with the system and why Barbara can no longer exist in it.¹⁶ However, none of the reviews contained in my corpus noted the second conversation, in which Barbara is dragged off her moral high ground when she asks what is wrong with the female patient at whose home she has just found André:

B: Was hat *die Frau*?

A: *Friedl* hat Krebs und wird sterben. [...]

B: Und der Offizier?

A: Ihr Ehemann. [...]

B: Machen Sie das öfter?

A: Das Sterben erleichtern?

B: Arschlöchern helfen.

A: Wenn sie krank sind, ja. (*B*, 1,21.48-1,22.30, emphases mine)

This conversation continues the humanisation of the Stasi officer which begins as Barbara enters his home in search of André; we initially see him from her perspective as she enters the house, and her double take as she recognises the man slumped at his kitchen table, a pose far removed from his arrogant posture when he invades her own home, causes the audience too momentarily to doubt his identity (*B*, 1,18.14-17). Similarly, the moment when he spontaneously throws himself into the arms of the woman who has been sitting with his wife (also seen from Barbara's point of view) shows a vulnerability that neither Barbara nor the audience would have expected from seeing him in his professional role (*B*, 1,20.02). André does not correct Barbara's assessment of the man as an 'Arschloch', but rather allows for the

possibility that a human being can be both this and in need of professional help and human compassion; the Stasi officer in this film does not have to be ‘redeemed’ in order to be considered a human being. And conversely, Barbara’s sudden apparent loss of the human compassion which otherwise defines her professional identity, while understandable, makes her appear less a helpless victim and more a woman who can still make personal and professional choices, even within a repressive environment.

The scenes at Schütz’s home also contribute in another way to the deconstruction of the victim / perpetrator binary. Twice prior to this scene we have seen Schütz invade Barbara’s home and preside from the comfort of an armchair while she is forced to stand in a corner watching her personal space being ransacked and subsequently subjected to the even more intimate invasion of a cavity search. However, in the scene at Schütz’s home, Barbara herself is the uninvited intruder who sees him in a moment of intense emotional vulnerability; her embarrassment as she sits in the hallway waiting for André to return from tending his patient is palpable, but the camera angles suggest that she nonetheless cannot resist sneaking a look at her adversary now that she, in *her* professional capacity, has the advantage over him. This parallel between perpetrator and victim invites questions about the nature of Schütz’s commitment to the Stasi; as Hodgkin points out, ‘[m]any of those who worked for the Stasi were [...] rather unexceptional figures living ostensibly conventional lives with their families and were probably less committed to their metier than Wiesler’.¹⁷ Barbara’s very passionate commitment to her professional role is evident throughout, particularly in her body language when Stella is first admitted to hospital, where the hitherto tense, taciturn figure displays an animation, confidence and authority which clearly take André and the officers in charge of Stella completely by surprise (*B*, 10.54-46). It is hardly an exaggeration to say that she appears to become her true self precisely in her professional role, and this explains her reaction to what Petzold calls the ‘Todessatz’ of the film, her Western lover telling her she

will not have to work in the West because he earns enough for them both (*B*, 59.10-18).¹⁸ Schütz on the other hand is characterised largely by an immobility and silence which suggests going through (rather minimal) motions, and his reaction to Barbara's arrival at his own home ('Kann ich Ihnen helfen?' *B*, 1,18.20) suggests he barely recognises her either, let alone bears her any personal animosity. He too might be seen as 'doing a job' – fulfilling its demands punctiliously, but with considerably less personal commitment than that demonstrated by his victim.

This undercutting of the usual post-*Wende* demonisation of the Stasi and its methods is seen in a number of other details which create connections between the doctors' work and that of the Stasi. The word 'Akte', normally heavily loaded in this context, appears twice: on the first occasion Barbara's swift initial look at Stella's file reveals that the girl has spent the last six days in a 'Zeckengebiet', hence her immediate diagnosis of meningitis (*B*, 11.45) which causes André to comment in self-reproach: 'Ich lese sie sonst immer' (*B*, 11.46). On the second occasion, André informs Barbara that he knows she is qualified to administer anaesthetic because it 'stand in Ihrer Akte' (*B*, 1,23.45-47), here presumably simply her personnel file. Similarly, the only time the word 'beobachten' is used is when André refers to the need to monitor the attempted suicide Mario's progress (*B*, 1,49.27-36). Finally, there are also visual parallels of this kind: the first time Barbara's flat and person are searched, the cavity search is indicated only by the sight of the Stasi doctor standing outside Barbara's bathroom, pulling on a pair of latex gloves (*B*, 10,26-30) – a chilling moment in itself, but one which becomes more so when we note that it echoes the sight of André doing the same thing earlier before treating the little boy's leg (*B*, 2.34-35). Such parallels strip certain words and objects of their immediate, negative connotations, rendering the word 'Akte' for example simply part of a professional environment in which Barbara, André and Schütz all have their role to play; however, they also highlight the perversion of the ideals of care and

protection that underlay the MfS's role as 'Schild und Schwert der Partei'. As Petzold notes, everything André does for and gives to Barbara has a second meaning, namely: 'dann öffne ich dein Herz und deine Seele und dann werde ich darin lesen, und dann weiss ich über dich Bescheid' (MoB1, 20.33 – 21.00). Unlike films such as Howard Hawks' *To Have and Have Not* (1944) which use either a 'pure' couple or a family that is against the political system 'um es besser kritisieren zu können', *Barbara* features a relationship that is an integral part of that political system, (MoB1, 22.50-24.05), making it impossible to read it in the usual simplistic binary terms.

New ways of experiencing the GDR?

It is clear from this close reading of the plot that this is an unsettling film which adduces familiar narratives and binaries in order comprehensively to undermine them. It relies to a large extent on the audience's emotional investment, especially in the Barbara / André story, and Petzold and his team are adept at drawing viewers into that story, such that they feel almost viscerally involved. In the scene in André's kitchen just prior to the crucial kiss for example, the camera work even positions the audience in the middle of the scene between the characters (MoB2, 10.51-11.30) and the emotional intensity of the audience's experience is also heightened by the number of shots that are obviously from the characters' perspective. But these POV shots too are disturbing. They not only draw us in to the more obviously sympathetic Barbara's perspective; we are also aligned with a gaze on her that appears to be that of a Stasi observer (André? Schütz? Someone else?) forcing us to experience the GDR from the 'perpetrator' perspective. Nor is it only visually that we are sometimes confined to Barbara's point of view: when André tells her the story of how he himself came to end up in the provinces and be working for the Stasi, Barbara's suspicions are obvious when she challenges the detail of his account, but ultimately neither she nor we can know whether he is telling the truth (B, 40.10-43.13). In this instance the audience itself is participating at some

level in this relationship and experiencing for itself the difficulties of trusting one's interlocutor in the GDR.

Petzold's determination to involve and activate his audience is particularly obvious at the end of the film. At one level, Barbara's return to sit opposite André at Mario's bedside suggests the romantic resolution that the foreground love story has conditioned the audience to hope for. The final image is tantalisingly close to that of the nuclear family which was at the heart of the GDR elite's vision for the state; the attempted suicide appears to have come through his operation safely and all will live happily ever after. But we have had a brief and bitter foretaste of this kind of premature happy ending, again for a substitute nuclear family, when Barbara pleaded with André to keep Stella in the hospital rather than sending her back to Torgau and André had asked merely 'Und dann?' (B, 42.26). The final scene takes place in total silence apart from Barbara's exhausted, heavy breathing, and there are only the most minimal of gestures (e.g. the way André's eyes flick to Mario's face and back, as though to point out to Barbara what they have achieved). As Hoss points out, the open ending leaves each individual viewer with the responsibility of interpreting it (MoB1, 24.40-25.18): while some may be tempted to rejoice in the 'happy ending', the timing of that ending is quite unusually artificial, for the silence between these characters can only last so long. The audience knows that Schütz has already visited Barbara's empty flat and is convinced she has escaped never to return; and even her own return will surely not spare her questions and consequences arising from Stella's escape. The *deus ex machina* Mikhail Gorbachev does not make a nicely staged entrance on the front page of a newspaper here as he does in *Das Leben der Anderen*; 1989 is still a long way off if Barbara is to spend the intervening period facing the consequences of helping Stella flee the GDR. Seen in this light the song played over the closing credits, Chic's 'At last, I am free', which appears initially to emphasise the freedom

of Barbara's personal choice to return, is bitterly ironic.¹⁹ Her personal and professional integrity may have been confirmed by the ending of the film – but at what cost?²⁰

Cultural references

This open ending is entirely consistent with a film that poses more questions than it answers. As I have demonstrated, *Barbara* is carefully constructed to undermine certainties and to challenge earlier representations of the GDR to create a more nuanced image. However, the complexities of this surface texture and the demands they make on an active audience are further enhanced by a dense matrix of cultural references, which are used in the first instance by the protagonists to communicate with one another. Those who lived in the GDR became expert, not only in reading the cultural productions of their own artists for potentially subversive messages, but in inserting such messages into and extracting them from their cultural heritage. Barbara and André belong to precisely that cultural elite which was adept at such encoding, and the result is that much is said between them, even when little is articulated. The viewer too is drawn into this coded speech and, in attempting to decode it, experiences directly the frustrations of existing in a society where so much was communicated in roundabout ways. Beyond this however, Petzold also uses the cultural references to speak to the viewer behind the characters' backs: in drawing us into their game he also prompts us to look beyond the messages they intend and so to question the possibility of creating a reliable mono-linear interpretation of the action or the GDR itself.

The most obvious example of the characters communicating via a cultural product is the scene, much commented on by reviewers, where André offers Barbara his interpretation of Rembrandt's picture *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). This painting depicts the dissection of Aris Kindt who has been hanged for theft. At the diegetic level, this scene could be read simply as a case of 'come up and see my Rembrandt'; André's rueful

half-apology at the end of the scene shows he knows he has overplayed his hand in trying to impress Barbara with his laboratory and his erudition (*B*, 27.25-32). However, the scene also clearly has a political element: most obviously, André uses his admiration for the picture to express his own desire to go West in order to see the original, thus allying himself with Barbara and her own failed exit strategy, as she bitterly points out (*B*, 25.04-25.17). Moreover, his interpretation points out an ostensible mistake in Rembrandt's work, which Barbara is quick to see when he prompts her: first that the doctors should have opened the man's stomach first and second that the left hand, which they are supposedly dissecting, is a) much too large and b) in fact, the right hand.²¹ André suggests that in fact this is not a mistake on Rembrandt's part: rather, the artist has painted an image of the hand as it appears in the anatomical atlas that all the doctors in the picture are staring at fixedly:

Rembrandt malt etwas in das Bild hinein, das wir eigentlich nicht sehen können, nur die da, die Abbildung einer Hand. Durch diesen Fehler sehen wir ihn nicht mit durch die Augen der Ärzte, wir sehen ihn, Aris Kindt, das Opfer. Wir sind mit ihm und nicht mit denen da. (*B*, 26.41-27.05)

These comments are apparently intended to reassure Barbara that while the SED state may see her as a criminal, André sees her through the sympathetic eyes of the (art)lover, as a victim of that same state.

However, as with the Rembrandt picture itself, there is more to this than meets the eye. André's interpretation of the image is lifted almost verbatim from W.G. Sebald's *Ringe des Saturn* (1995) and, like Sebald's interpretation, has a mistake of its own which is duly highlighted by Petzold.²² For just as André points out to Barbara how all the doctors are staring at the anatomical atlas ('Alle starren darauf, er, er, alle'), on the word 'alle' the camera zooms in on the one doctor in the background of the picture who is in fact staring directly at the viewers, in the first instance Barbara and André, but also the cinema audience (*B*, 26.31-37). This is a clear case of Petzold addressing the audience behind the characters'

back, since the zoom shot appears to be for us alone; Barbara is still focusing on the detail in the foreground that supports André's interpretation, and indeed, we still have André's interpretation ringing in our ears even as Petzold shows us directly that he is wrong. By focusing on the foreground detail, both Barbara and the viewer run the risk of missing the bigger picture: that even if André is sincere in his coded message that he is firmly on her side, this will be of little help in a context where she is under constant observation from the authorities. The fact that the more reassuring interpretation of the picture is lifted from a post-unification text may also suggest that sympathetic Western interpretations of Eastern dissidents failed to have much effect on the actual treatment of those dissidents in the GDR of the 1980s, and the quite explicit anachronism also suggests that there might have been little sympathy for such victims in the GDR itself. By referencing this picture in this way, Petzold manages to suggest that art can indeed provide an audience with a different perspective from that of established authorities, but also cautions against undue certainty in our own interpretations, lest we miss the significant detail that changes the whole picture.

Petzold's other cultural references, literary and musical, are equally complex in their effects, though they are less obvious and therefore less remarked upon by reviewers. The two literary references, like the Rembrandt, in the first instance serve communication between characters; the brief reference to Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Der Freischütz* (1821) is directed to the audience.

As with the interpretation of the Rembrandt, the second of the literary texts referenced appears to be part of André's attempt to seduce Barbara, but also creates meaning beyond those intended by the character. It is Ivan Turgenev's story 'The District Doctor' (1852), which André describes to and indeed gives to Barbara on the one occasion when she is in his home, just before she is due to escape. He describes it as the story of an 'alten, hässlichen Arzt' (*B*, 1,25.46) who is called to attend a girl of seventeen or eighteen who is dying without

ever having experienced love and who takes the doctor as her lover in order to ensure she does not die without having had this experience. André implicitly positions himself self-deprecatingly as the ‘alten hässlichen Arzt’ and Barbara both as the vulnerable woman who needs to learn to love before it is too late and as his patient.²³

On this occasion the communication is not so direct as in the case of the Rembrandt interpretation, since Barbara herself seems not to know the story; however, she appears initially to understand and indeed appreciate the way André is using it, since his description earns him the first really spontaneous, warm smile she has bestowed on him, as well as an offer of help in the kitchen, all of which culminates in him addressing her as ‘du’ for the first time: ‘ich freue mich so, dass du da bist’ (*B*, 1, 27.33). However, Barbara, perhaps shocked by this rapid development and regretting her momentary openness, perhaps realising the strength of her feelings for the man she is about to leave, responds with what can only be described as a mixed message: a passionate kiss that leaves the bemused André gaping in her wake as she says ‘Ich kann jetzt nicht’ and leaves (*B*, 1, 27.33). The fact that she is shown lingering over the volume’s pages before eventually leaving it on the table in her flat as she sets off with Stella is equally suggestive (*B*, 1, 28.28-50 and 29.23-31), as is the fact that André homes in on the fact that the book is still there when he visits her empty flat (*B*, 1, 33.33). The emotion in his voice as he asks Schütz ‘Habt ihr sie festgenommen?’ (*B*, 1, 33.49) is unmistakable.

For the audience, aware of Barbara’s plans, this literary allusion at André’s home heightens the tension as we wonder whether she will make use of the short time left to her to sleep with him or whether she will even choose to stay with him permanently. However, on further reflection the allusion should also make us question more closely the dynamic underlying this relationship, for Turgenev’s text is not quite as simple as André’s brief summary suggests. In his account it is the sick young woman who takes the initiative in love;

however, in Turgenev's text, which is narrated by a man who has met the doctor some years after these events and relays this story as he has heard it from the doctor, the situation is less clear cut. The doctor's account makes it clear that it was the girl who articulated the proposal that he should be her lover, but well before this his language shows that it was he who was initially attracted to her: his first sight of her, while she is still unconscious, prompts the thought: 'my goodness, never have I seen such a face before... an absolute beauty! I feel so sorry for the girl, it fairly tears me to pieces. Such lovely features, such eyes...'.²⁴ Given critics' focus on the magnetic quality of Hoss's eyes, this might almost be the articulation of André's thoughts as he first watches the (unaware) Barbara from the upper storey of the clinic. One of the film's few unenthusiastic reviews referred to the implausibility of André looking at her with the eyes and the smile of a lover from the moment she appears at the hospital,²⁵ and while Barbara takes the physical initiative in kissing André, it is his 'du' which makes it possible. Even at this climactic moment in the film, knowledge of the Turgenev text, especially the doctor's admission that what the girl felt for him was clearly not love (*DD*, 46) may cause us to question just how reciprocal the relationship between André and Barbara is. Is the kiss a sign of her truly being attracted to him and saying a final, slightly desperate, wordless farewell, or is she merely so overwhelmed by the situation that she will do anything to get out with the fewest words possible? Furthermore, while Barbara herself has prepared the doctor / patient analogy in an earlier scene, when she pre-empted what she assumes will be André's joking comment that she, like Mario, needs an operation because she is unable to show any feelings (*B*, 1,21.15-19), there are more sinister connotations here. The overtones of both care and control in this reference are entirely consistent with what we have seen of their emergent relationship throughout: it is no coincidence that André refers to the need to 'beobachten' Mario, since this appears, both for the doctor and for the Stasi, to be the only viable alternative to opening people's heads in

order to know them and their thoughts completely. It is possible to see here a further literary reference, to Georg Büchner's *Dantons Tod* (1835), where Danton tells his beloved Julie: 'Einander kennen? Wir müßten uns die Schädeldecken aufbrechen und die Gedanken einander aus den Hirnfasern zerren'.²⁶ The twisted analogy between the lover, the doctor, and the Stasi observer is thus complete. Once again, Petzold draws us into the characters' attempts to interpret one another but also forces us to question just how far we can interpret at all.

The other literary reference also serves communication between characters, this time between Barbara and Stella, but also has the potential to resonate much further with the audience: Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). The fact that Barbara lingers so long over this choice in the hospital library should alert us to its significance (*B*, 22.04-11), and the two brief extracts we witness her reading to Stella are evidently just as deliberately chosen by Petzold. The first appears in chapter 7 as the runaway Huck details his elaborate plans to make people think he has been murdered so as to put them off his scent, and it concludes 'Ich kann dann bleiben, wo ich will' (*B*, 22.19-50). The second appears at the beginning of chapter 14 where Huck and Jim are enjoying a brief idyll surrounded by the riches acquired from the wreck and trying to decide what to do next (*B*, 34.34-58). The choice of this text with its focus on various kinds of freedom can be read superficially as Barbara's attempt to hold out a coded – and at this stage illusory – promise of freedom to Stella, and certainly Stella responds to it as such, since it is immediately after the second reading that we witness her asking Barbara whether the older woman can do anything for her and her unborn child, stating explicitly that they have to get away from this 'Scheißland' (*B*, 36.09-51). We may also see a prefiguring of the plot here, with the flimsy looking craft which finally carries Stella off to Denmark echoing Huck's raft. However, the allusion is far richer than this: the theme of freedom in Twain's novel is multi-faceted, encompassing freedom

from both parental abuse and well-meant attempts to ‘civilise’ in the case of the social deviant Huck, and from social injustice in the case of the negro slave Jim. Stella’s situation is parallel to those of both Huck and Jim: as the adolescent seeking escape from what Barbara calls the ‘Vernichtungsanstalt’ Torgau she can be seen as fleeing abuse / social injustice, yet within the parameters of the GDR she is an escaped criminal, seeking freedom from what the state deemed an attempt to bring her in line with its social norms. Barbara, herself a social deviant, nonetheless enjoys a relatively privileged position vis à vis Stella: her dilemma when the girl appears on her doorstep can to some extent be paralleled with that of Huck, who has internalised the values of his state sufficiently to know that in assisting Jim’s flight he is committing a crime, indeed a moral transgression that will send him to hell, yet whose compassion for the man who shows him such devotion and tenderness always triumphs even at moments of severe internal conflict.²⁷ Stella’s moment of compassion for the overtired Barbara, when she sings the older woman a lullaby (*B*, 35.10-47) has something of that care demonstrated by the more obviously vulnerable member of the partnership, while the fact that it is Barbara who is reading, as Huck is described as doing in chapter 14, positions her in the white boy’s role. Similarly, the fact that the main focus of the film is on Barbara’s attempts to escape only for it to be Stella who appears to be en route to freedom at the end makes Barbara’s situation in the final scene comparable with that of Huck: at this point, he is contemplating flight again for fear that Aunt Sally is about to ‘adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before’ (*HF*, 296). Schütz’s comments in the opening scene, when he compares Barbara with a sulky six year old who, by implication, requires supervision and correction, serves to reinforce this parallel (*B*, 1.47-50).

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn was controversial on publication, and remained so until at least a century later when in the 1980s debates raged about whether it was suitable

for study in American public schools owing to its alleged racist content.²⁸ Mark Twain's exasperation with early negative newspaper reviews is reflected in his prefatory notice:

Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. (*HF*, 3)

Certainly the explicit attempt to find a particular 'moral' is likely to result in a very simplistic reading of any text, but this story in particular has been widely understood as either (for present day audiences) inflammatorily racist or a passionate plea for social justice. By referencing a text that shows how apparently decent people could nonetheless believe in values that most western audiences will now find reprehensible, Petzold goes some way to both historicising and normalising the GDR and its values, presenting it firmly as a different time and place which operated according to its own laws. Those readers who know *Huckleberry Finn* well enough to know the prefatory notice may also see in this reference an implicit warning to the contemporary viewer to guard against looking for a particular 'moral' to Petzold's film; the focus is on individuals rather than the state, and those looking for an outright condemnation of the GDR will be as disappointed as those looking for an ostalgie image.

This brings us to the final cultural reference I shall discuss, which is actually the first to appear in the film: a musical reference directed purely at the audience. In the early scene where Barbara is in her bathroom checking her bike tyres for punctures we hear a snippet of radio commentary preceding the opening bars of the overture to Weber's *Der Freischütz*. In a film where the soundtrack is so very sparse and naturalistic (compare for example *Das Leben der Anderen*, where extra-diegetic music frequently shapes our understanding of the plot) such brief moments acquire a heightened significance, and it is particularly notable that the music forms a bridge between this scene where Barbara is alone and that which follows which shows her hurrying to find out what is going on as Stella is admitted to the clinic (*B*,

9.55-10.21). These opening bars are dark and sinister in tone, reflecting the presence of demonic forces in the opera, and this provides a clue as to its purpose here.

Der Freischütz provides a number of striking parallels with the content and structure of *Barbara*, in that the piece of medieval folklore on which it was based relied heavily on a simple binary between innocent country people and the demonic forces which attempt to destroy the protagonists' happiness. The version of the story that inspired Weber, from Apel and Laun's *Gespensterbuch* (1810), is described by Donald G. Henderson as a 'lurid concoction made on the triumph of demonology, ending in sudden horror, death and madness':²⁹ this version ends in complete triumph for the demonic powers. Henderson is at pains to point out that Friedrich Kind's libretto for the *Freischütz*, while drawing on this earlier tale, is by no means a 'mere' adaptation with a tacked on happy ending: the content has been radically revised overall.³⁰ However, this dramatically different ending and the way it was added to a pre-existing story is of particular interest to this discussion.

As with previous cultural references discussed, this one both draws our attention to elements of the plot and characterisation and helps us to challenge and question them. The simple binary of good and evil in *Der Freischütz* apparently prefigures the simple binary of victim v. perpetrator which we have seen so comprehensively undermined earlier in this discussion, with the dark notes overlying Stella's admission to hospital making it clear that she is in the grip (quite literally) of powerful dark forces. And yet at this point the comments of the radio announcer about Furtwängler's interpretation of this overture are still ringing in our ears: 'Mir war es, als hätte ich die Ouvertüre nicht einige Dutzend, sondern zum erstenmal gehört' (B, 10.05-10). This comment, referring to the capacity of artistic interpretations to help us experience both artistic works and indeed daily reality afresh provides the attentive viewer with a hint as to how to read Petzold's film as a whole: with an openness to the new and a reflective, questioning attentiveness. Given what we have already

said about the treatment of the Stasi officer in this film, the fact that Barbara and the audience learn his name – which echoes that of the demonic figure – at precisely the point when Barbara is looking for André and finds him at the officer’s home, seems no coincidence (*B*, 1, 17.45). The wicked perpetrator / innocent victim binary could hardly be more explicitly undermined.

As discussed earlier, *Barbara* has an ending which, like that of *Der Freischütz*, might feel inconsistent with the setting, even if it provides the ‘obvious’ ending to the love story of an initially antagonistic pair. However, Petzold’s reference to *Der Freischütz* reinforces our understanding of the artificial and constructed nature of that ending, for even in Kind’s ‘happy ending’ of *Der Freischütz* not everything is in fact resolved: Max is merely spared banishment and put on probation for a year before it can be decided whether he can marry his beloved Agathe. The reference to *Huckleberry Finn* may hold out some prospect of a happy ending in the West for Stella, for she, like Jim, has been given a chance of freedom, but given the flimsiness of the craft, her drugged state, and the fact that we know nothing about what actually awaits her if she does make it to Denmark, this ending too holds more questions than answers. As for Barbara herself, the prospect of being ‘sivilised’ by the GDR authorities if she is unable to emulate Huck’s intentions to flee again, is grim indeed.

The reference to *Der Freischütz* goes beyond adding depth to characterisation and plot, but also causes us to question the possibilities of art and interpretation themselves. As Henderson argues, *Der Freischütz* has been peculiarly susceptible to adaptation and perversion by the political ideologies of the twentieth century in Germany, having been exploited to serve a racist message under Nazism and then rehabilitated as a means of presenting the perfect community under the cultural policy of the GDR.³¹ Here too there is a warning about how we interpret works of art, but it is significant that it is precisely Furtwängler’s interpretation of the opera that Petzold cites, for it is this conductor’s 1954

production of *Der Freischütz* at the Salzburg International Festival that Henderson describes as an attempt to vindicate the opera after its debasement under Nazism and to restore it to its original spirit.³² Perhaps this reference is intended to suggest Petzold's conviction that he now has sufficient 'Abstand' to make films about the GDR without becoming mired in the ideological trench warfare that so often characterises debates about the 'true' nature of the socialist state in Germany, and that in so doing, he will help his viewers to see / experience it as if 'zum erstenmal'.

To conclude, a careful reading of the structure and texture of *Barbara* already reveals a more nuanced depiction of the GDR than we have seen previously. The ostensible foregrounding of 'eine unendlich berührende und fragile Liebesgeschichte vor der Kulisse des DDR-Regimes'³³ and the director's insistence on emotional authenticity appear to show the GDR in a completely different, some might suggest even ostalgie light, as a land where love was possible, work gave satisfaction, compassion existed, and even the perpetrators had normal family lives which were characterised by the same rich emotional complexity as those of their victims. But even as it tempts us – and later audiences with even less knowledge of the GDR – to read it simply as a story of true love in a difficult climate, the cultural references that Petzold has so carefully embedded in the course of the film raise questions which cannot be explicitly articulated about the characters' true motives, asking the audience to look more closely at the dark forces that penetrated even the most intimate spaces of this society. More than that, it also forces the audience to consider carefully its own interpretative strategies, drawing us into the characters' own intricate coded language and implicitly asking us to participate in the decoding: as demonstrated above, this often leads us on to further questions rather than greater certainty by challenging the familiar narratives to which we are so attached. Through its careful deconstruction of familiar binaries, its use of cultural references, and the strategies which engage the active viewer, the film offers an unusually

complex and empathic representation of what it was to live in the personal and professional compromises of 'real existing socialism', and facilitates genuine audience engagement with what we might describe as the real lives of others.

NOTES

1. Nick Hodgkin, 'Screening the Stasi: The Politics of Representation in Postunification Film' in Nick Hodgkin and Caroline Pearce (eds), *The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German State since 1989*, Rochester NY 2011, pp. 69-91 (p. 87).
2. Hodgkin, 'Screening the Stasi', pp. 84-5.
3. Hodgkin, 'Screening the Stasi', p. 84. See also Daniela Berghahn, 'Remembering the Stasi in a Fairy Tale of Redemption: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen*', *Oxford German Studies* 38 (2009), 321-33 (321).
4. Stefan Schirmer, Martin Machowecz, "'Was es da an Irren gab!'" Interview with Christian Petzold', *Die Zeit*, 31 January 2013, p. 3 at <http://www.zeit.de/2013/06/Christian-Petzold-Filme-DDR-Osten> (accessed 17 July 2013).
5. Daniel Sander, 'DDR-Liebesdrama "Barbara": Zärtlich in der Zone', *Der Spiegel*, 11 February 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de> (accessed 5 November 2012).
6. Ulrike Mau, 'Barbara. Grandioses Drama von Christian Petzold', *Die Welt*, 8 March 2012, available at http://www.welt.de/print/die_welt/hamburg/article13909961/Barbara.html (accessed 24 July 2013). Emphasis mine.
7. See however the autobiographical account by Regina Kaiser and Uwe Karlstedt, *Zwölf heißt: Ich liebe dich: Der Stasi-Offizier und die Dissidentin*, Munich 2004, which was adapted as a TV film directed by Connie Walther and shown on MDR amidst great controversy in 2008.
8. 'The Making of Barbara Teil 2, Hans Fromm, Anette Guther and K.D. Gruber (Kamera, Kostüm, Szenenbild) im Gespräch mit Hans-Christian Boese', 0.15-0.45 and

- 3.15 – 3.40, Christian Petzold, *Barbara* DVD 2013. Further references will be given in the text as MoB2.
9. The Making of Barbara Teil 1', Nina Hoss, Ronald Zehrfeld und Christian Petzold im Gespräch mit Hans-Christian Boese', 13.50-16.05. Future references will appear in the text as MoB1.
 10. Silke Arnold-de Simine and Susannah Radstone, 'The GDR Memory Debate' in Anna Saunders and Debbie Pinfold (eds), *Remembering and Rethinking the GDR: Multiple Perspectives and Plural Authenticities*, Basingstoke 2013, pp. 19-33 (p. 28).
 11. Arnold-de Simine and Radstone, 'The GDR Memory Debate', p. 29.
 12. Berghahn, 'Remembering the Stasi in a Fairy Tale of Redemption', 321.
 13. Owen Evans, 'Redeeming the Demon? The legacy of the Stasi in *Das Leben der Anderen*', *Memory Studies* 3 (2010), 164-77.
 14. Evans, 'Redeeming the Demon?', 164.
 15. Christian Petzold, *Barbara*, DVD 2013, 12.34-12.40. Future references will appear in the text as *B*.
 16. Verena Lueken, 'Freiheit ist mehr als ein Wort: "Barbara"', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Feuilleton*, 6 March 2012, available at <http://www.faz.net/> (accessed 17 July 2013)
 17. Hodgin, 'Screening the Stasi', p. 84.
 18. Schirmer and Machowecz, 'Was es da an Irren gab!', p. 7. Barbara's return to the hospital at the end of the film to some extent positions her as a latter day Rita Seidel, who returns to the GDR in order 'dem Druck des härteren, strengeren Lebens [...] stand[zu]halten'. Christa Wolf, *Der geteilte Himmel* (1963), Munich 1994, p. 216.
 19. Lyrics are available at <http://www.metrolyrics.com/at-last-i-am-free-lyrics-chic.html> (accessed 17 July 2013).

20. Significantly, only those audience members who stay to the end of the credits or know the song already will recognise that the lyrics actually describe the heartache and loneliness of wanting to stay with a lover who is clearly lying to their partner. The freedom described here contains a good portion of uncertainty and emptiness.
21. Given that the man was hanged for theft, this suggests that in fact his dissection is in effect a continuation of his punishment, focusing on the guilty body part first. This might also explain why the right hand is, in fact, the one being dissected.
22. W.G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, Frankfurt 1997, pp. 22-7. I am grateful to members of the 2013 AGS audience in Cardiff for pointing this out.
23. This obviously has positive connotations in the idea of caring for someone, though readers of C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* (1942) may recall that the Junior Devil Wormwood is also charged with monitoring the progress of a 'patient'.
24. Ivan Turgenev, 'The District Doctor' in *A Sportsman's Notebook*, translated from the Russian by Charles and Natasha Hepburn with illustrations by Mary Kessel, London 1959, p. 44. Further references will appear in the text as *DD*.
25. Wenke Husman, 'Liebe in Zeiten des Misstrauens', *Die Zeit*, 13 February 2012, available at <http://www.zeit.de/film/2012-02> (accessed 17 July 2013).
26. Georg Büchner, *Dantons Tod*, Act I, scene 1. Georg Büchner, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Werner R. Lehmann, Darmstadt 1967, I, 9.
27. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Thomas Cooley, New York and London 1999, pp. 221-3. Further references appear in the text as *HF*.
28. See Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, pp. 308-310, and especially Toni Morrison's introduction to the 1996 OUP edition, 'This Amazing, Troubling Book', which is reprinted pp. 385-92

29. Donald G. Henderson, *The Freischütz Phenomenon: Opera as Cultural Mirror*
Bloomington 2011, p. 49.
30. Henderson, *The Freischütz Phenomenon*, p. 48.
31. Henderson, *The Freischütz Phenomenon*, pp. 147-64.
32. Henderson, *The Freischütz Phenomenon*, pp. 186-8.
33. Mau, 'Barbara. Grandioses Drama von Christian Petzold'