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Barbara 2012

105 mins, Germany

Director: Christian Petzold

Writers: Christian Petzold and
Harun Farocki

Cinematographer: Hans Fromm

Cast: Nina Hoss...Barbara
Ronald Zehrfeld ...André
Rainer Bock...Klaus Schütz



Barbara is a film about the old Germany from one of the best directors working in the new: Christian Petzold. For more than a decade Mr. Petzold has been making his mark on the international cinema scene with smart, tense films that resemble psychological thrillers, but are distinguished by their strange story turns, moral thorns, visual beauty and filmmaking intelligence. *Barbara* begins in 1980 with an East German doctor from Berlin (Nina Hoss) who, after an unspecified offense, has been recently banished to the boonies. There, in between hospital rounds and harassment from the secret police, she waits and she burns.

The cinema of resistance takes different forms. It includes films that advocate revolution, like the 1966 classic *The Battle of Algiers*, and works that, more by virtue of their aesthetic choices, join the opposition. *Barbara* is another type of resistance movie. That's partly because it concerns a dissident who, with modest, obstinate anger, pushes back against totalitarianism, but also because Mr. Petzold refuses movie clichés as strongly as he does political orthodoxy. At once regionally specific and a student of all cinema, he draws on numerous traditions and makes them his own. His early love of Hitchcock, for one, is evident in the prickles of unease that creep into his work, creating a cold climate of paranoia and an oft-justified fear of an imminent threat.

Crucially, almost as soon as Barbara appears she's being watched by another East German. Her watcher is a young doctor, Andre (Ronald Zehrfeld), a friendly looking teddy bear who peers at her from an upper-story window. There's someone else in the room, too: Klaus Schütz (Rainer Bock), a dry, severe, gray man whose officiousness envelops him like a cloud of dust. "Is that her?" Andre asks. The scene seems innocent enough — just two men gossiping about a new colleague — but that's only because it has yet to be revealed that Klaus works for the Stasi, the East German secret police. He confirms her identity and then adds a curious observation: "If she were 6, you'd say she's sulky."

Sulky, petulant, wary — all these initially seem true of Barbara, so much so that you may forget that this unflattering, condescending characterization has been made by a Stasi operative. The implication is that she's like a child and therefore incapable of making her own choices, an idea that helps define the political reality. Ms. Hoss, who has appeared in several of Mr. Petzold's films, is a striking woman with a delicate face dominated by large, wide-set, somewhat baggy eyes. For much of the film she wears her blond hair pulled away from her face, which makes her character appear simultaneously vulnerable and watchful. (There's nowhere to hide, not even under a curtain of hair.) If Barbara is always watching her watchers and looking over her shoulder, she has reason.

Andre gives her cause for concern as does Klaus. The two men may be in league together, putting on a good-spy, bad-spy show. Klaus, who regularly searches her apartment, frightens her. Andre, an intensely warm, sympathetic presence, intrigues her. As she moves between the men — they each pull at her, she pushes right back at them — she is simultaneously swept up in the life of Stella (Jasna Fritzi Bauer), a young runaway from a work camp who lands in the hospital. Barbara also secretly meets with her lover, Jörg (Mark Waschke). After they make love on a forest floor, he leaves her with stockings, West German cigarettes and a promise that adds to the thickening plot.

Working from his own script, Mr. Petzold puts his pieces into play gradually. Early scenes, some nominally observational, others more overtly dramatic, unfold with no obvious narrative connection. In one sequence Barbara receives a stash of money from a stranger; in other scenes she reads “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” aloud to the bedridden Stella. In some of the most visually arresting passages in this quietly beautiful movie, Barbara bikes alone along a country road next to a stand of windblown trees, her only accompaniment the sounds of the howling wind, churning leaves and cawing sea gulls. In time, though, particularly after Jörg discusses an escape plan with Barbara, and after Andre speaks of the individual’s responsibility to the collective, these outwardly disconnected pieces fit together.

Early on there are stretches in the film when it can feel like a study in solitude. Barbara’s aloofness is one reason. The first time she enters the hospital cafeteria she walks past Andre’s table with a perfunctory greeting. “That’s Berlin,” a colleague snipes. Mr. Petzold takes his time revealing what makes Barbara tick, so that the full depth of her character emerges through her dealings with other people, through how she reacts to Klaus’s searches, Andre’s attentions and Stella’s troubles. Each presses on her, insistently. Barbara doesn’t necessarily say much in return, but with her arms folded across her body, she conveys a great deal. At one point, though, those arms drop. And while Barbara may just look like she’s letting down her defences, what you witness is the revelation of a moral imperative that is itself profoundly political.

Manohla Dargis (2012)

Christian Petzold filmography:

2012 *Barbara*

2008 *Jerichow*

2007 *Yella*

2005 *Gespenster*

2003 *Wolfsburg*

2000 *The State I Am In*

Our previous presentation:

Based on the feedback slips returned on the night, you rated *A Simple Life*, screened on 20th February, 4.66 stars out of 5 from 32 responses. Please visit the current season page at <http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk> to read all the feedback comments.

You can still provide feedback on this, or any other film, by visiting the Discussions page (<http://www.chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk/discussion/>).

Our next presentation:

The Patience Stone will be shown on 25th March, starting at 8:00pm.

REMINDER

We are asking members to send film suggestions for next season - please send them to: - enquiries@chelmsford-filmclub.co.uk