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BOOK REVIEW: The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School, by Marco Abel; Christian Petzold, by Jaimey Fisher

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Book Review

Abel, Marco. *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School*. Rochester: Camden House, 2013. 348 pages. Cloth, \$90.00.

Fisher, Jaimey. *Christian Petzold*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013. 208 pages. Paper, \$22.00.

“What is the Berlin School?” is the central question for Marco Abel’s most recent book, the first to address the recent trend in German cinema in its entirety. The term “Berliner Schule” was originally coined by critics to describe a group of young filmmakers who all studied at the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin, and has since grown to encompass a larger spectrum of directors whose styles reflect those of the original Berlin School members. Although all the films of the Berlin School are set in Germany and deal with contemporary issues in Germany, the films on the whole have not enjoyed commercial success on the national or international level. Nevertheless, the “Berliner Schule” remains a useful term for talking about the work of these filmmakers, which has only recently begun to receive academic attention, most of it coming from outside Germany. Abel’s book, *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School*, and Jaimey Fisher’s, *Christian Petzold*, being the first ones of their kind, are both major contributions to this area. Both authors delve into the films of the Berlin School and examine what these films have in common and what distinguishes them from ‘mainstream’ national German cinema. Through their respective examinations, what emerges is not the importance of production or reception, but a focus on the symbolic idea of Germany and the conception of the Berlin School as a possible “counter-cinema.”

While a few filmic techniques can be said to be common across the Berlin School (e.g., long takes, non-traditional camera angles and editing, minimal use of non-diegetic sound), the styles of the individual filmmakers show a significant amount of variation, which makes it impossible to characterize the Berlin School on cinematography alone. Abel instead recognizes a general trend in cinematographic style and additionally identifies several common themes. It is this combination of characteristics that Abel uses to define the Berlin School. He closely examines how each filmmaker individually participates in this trend creating what he argues is a “counter-cinema.” These themes include the question of Germany and temporality—specifically, the notion of the “future perfect,” and the concept of “utopia,” or “nowhere,” rooted in the here and now. Abel employs Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of “minor” to explain how the Berlin School films present reality—they do so in a way that neither invites viewers to identify with nor to be alienated from the films, but rather intensifies their experience of reality in order to deepen the presentation of the relevant topic. To do this he dedicates one chapter to each filmmaker, in which he examines his or her films individually, identifying prominent themes, and situating

the films in the larger context of the Berlin School. This approach helps maintain the difference and uniqueness of the various filmmakers while still demonstrating how they could all come to be considered part of the same classification.

The book's structure adopts the conventional division of the Berlin School into two waves: the "First Wave" consisting of Thomas Arslan, Christian Petzold, and Angela Schanelec; and the "Second Wave" of Christoph Hochhäusler, Benjamin Heisenberg, Valeska Grisebach, Maren Ade, and Ulrich Köhler. Abel is sensitive to problems that come with labeling this phenomenon and placing these filmmakers under this label, but finds the term useful in drawing attention to these films that are generally otherwise ignored. Still, labeling them as such and placing them in opposition to more popular German cinema requires the trend to be defined. For Abel, the Berlin School is a "counter-cinema" because it does not only fit neatly into previously defined cinematic categories—it is not transnational, *heimat*, progressive, *auteurkino*, or national cinema—but tends to break down the established borders of these categories. Furthermore, naming the "Berlin School" participates in the "utopian struggle" of naming Germany (309). Thus, according to Abel, "the Berlin School directors are engaged in forging a genuine *counter-cinema*—a 'minor' cinema that in working on its present explicitly refuses its terms in the (utopian) hope [...] for another time-to-come" (310).

Whereas Abel's book provides a comprehensive, thorough treatment of the Berlin School, Jaimey Fisher's *Christian Petzold* does the same for the filmmaker after which this book is named. Christian Petzold, part of the "First Wave" and graduate of the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin, is perhaps the most commercially successful filmmaker of the Berlin School. Fisher characterizes Petzold's work on the whole by distinguishing his overarching themes (most notably economics, ghosts, transition, and transit spaces) and his greater tendency toward genre than any other filmmaker considered part of the Berlin School. This becomes Fisher's central argument while he conducts a close reading of each of Petzold's films in chronological order, giving particular attention to the most popular ones. While Abel argues that the Berlin School is imagining a Germany in the future perfect tense—a sort of nostalgia for what will have been, but is not yet—Fisher argues that Petzold is performing a sort of Benjaminian archaeology in which pieces of the nation's past shed light on its present situation. For Fisher, this archaeological stance toward history lends Petzold's films a spectral quality, which is articulated in the title of the introduction to the book, "A Ghostly Archeology: The Art-House Genre Cinema of Christian Petzold." The ghostly remains or remnants of the past, which are a consistent theme in Petzold's films, act as reminders that things could have been different.

In his own section on Petzold, "Christian Petzold: *Heimat*-Building as Utopia," Abel focuses on how Petzold's films deal with the concept of *Heimat* by rendering an image of life in contemporary Germany. According to Abel, the creation of this image is political not for its message, but its aesthetics. Petzold's films are then different case studies of different types of *Heimat*-building, each of which engages with a different political issue relevant to Germany. Abel plays with the word "utopia," traces its etymology to arrive at the literal meaning of "no-where," and flips it around to argue that Petzold's films depict the "nowhere" of Germany: while *Heimat*-building may be a utopic endeavor, what actually exists is the reality of this "nowhere." In contrast to Abel, Fisher does not focus on *Heimat* as a theme of Petzold's films per se, but rather emphasizes their use of transit spaces to depict a certain sense of homelessness. In both Abel and Fisher's analyses there is a lack of an

established Heimat in Petzold's films, and this omission acts as an indicator of the transitional phases that Petzold's characters are undergoing themselves. Through navigating these transitional spaces and phases, Petzold's films are simultaneously navigating contemporary German political issues and establishing a picture of contemporary Germany.

Both books appearing in the same year build off each other to support their own arguments. Although they approach the Berlin School from different angles, Abel and Fisher both identify an engagement with the "hypothetical" in these films. This reoccurring motif is not simply a means of playing with the possibilities of events—how they have been, could be, or will have been different—but more specifically a longing or desire for a reality that does not exist at the present moment. If one is to follow this argument, then this is perhaps what sets the Berlin School of films apart from the more mainstream trends of contemporary German cinema. To take four of the most well-known mainstream German films as examples (*Goodbye Lenin!* (2003), *Der Untergang* (2004), *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006), and *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* (2008)), Abel and Fisher might argue that mainstream German cinema tends to deal not with hypothetical contemporary situations but with concrete historical themes. The Berlin School's films, on the other hand, are all set in contemporary Germany and deal with contemporary issues, though from their unique hypothetical stance toward the present. The one exception to this is Petzold's *Barbara* (2012), which is set in former East Germany. However, the film remains consistent with the pattern by dealing with issues relevant to a post-reunification German audience.

Looking at the Berlin School films as a product of a reunified Germany and in relation to other Post-Wende works—in literature, for example—may provide some insight into the cultural context from which these films are coming. While Abel and Fisher tend to focus on how these films differ from mainstream German national *cinema*, the themes and style of the Berlin School films do not differ as drastically from Post-Wende *literature*. Like the Berlin School, much of Post-Wende literature tackles a similar subject matter, uses unconventional writing or narrative forms, and has been described by some scholars as a new trend in realism. Furthermore, like the Berlin School, Turkish-German cinema also has little in common with mainstream German cinema, and it also deals with contemporary issues in German society, though in a different way. By contrast, the filmmakers of the Berlin School on the whole do not belong to any marginalized group and they tend to depict the middle class. Therefore, when borrowing Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "minor" to create the concept of "counter-cinema," care needs to be taken to account for the different political valences of these terms when applied to various groups of writers or filmmakers, as well as the differences between the mediums of film and literature.

Abel and Fisher both present unquestionably favorable reviews of the Berlin school, a view that not all critics, especially not those within Germany, share. While both analyses are well thought out and carefully supported, the plurality that exists among the Berlin School films makes them especially difficult to categorize on the basis of only a few common themes and cinematographic styles. Abel and Fisher are both sensitive to this difficulty and, given the variety that exists across Berlin School films and their tendency to thwart the audience's expectations, Abel and Fisher emphasize the fact that the Berlin School films do not lend themselves easily to any single interpretation. Both Abel and Fisher demonstrate that it is possible to approach the films of the Berlin School, especially those of Christian Petzold, from different points of view—Abel from an imagined point in the future and Fisher from the present as it is shaped by the past. Both books offer their respective interpretations

with some obvious overlap, and are ultimately well thought out and carefully supported. They both contribute to the fields of German studies and film studies, especially concerning “realism” in contemporary German culture. As Abel mentions, the Berlin School has received a significant amount of its attention from outside Germany—and these books are no exception to this phenomenon. If we accept Abel’s argument that the Berlin School films deal with the question of what Germany is, then the next logical question to ask would be why these films have been taken up by an international scholarly audience, a question that still remains unanswered.

—Cara Tovey (University of California, Berkeley)