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## Christian Petzold's melodramas: from unknown woman to reciprocal unknownness in *Phoenix*, *Wolfsburg*, and *Barbara*

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### ABSTRACT

Stanley Cavell's theory of film melodrama is used for Christian Petzold's *Phoenix*, *Wolfsburg*, and *Barbara*. Key for Cavell's understanding of classical Hollywood melodrama is his notion of the 'unknown woman.' Remarkably, Petzold's more contemporary melodramas feature unknown, i.e. unacknowledged, desires not only of female heroines but also of male protagonists. In Petzold's melodramas, male and female unknownness is reciprocated: the men and women are unable to have a romantic relationship based on mutual acknowledgment. Petzold shows how the private lives of his protagonists are constricted by public, social circumstances. These restrictions do not relate to what Cavell calls 'front-page moral dilemmas' but rather to ways in which, as Cavell points out, the everydayness of the protagonists' lives is determined by their lack of being at home. In Petzold's melodramas, the protagonists find themselves in a place-in-between-places, which cannot harbor mutual trust, mutual acknowledgment. Typically, the three films feature the negotiation by the protagonists of the significance of public artifacts for their personal lives. These are key scenes determining the moral relevance of melodramas in the everyday appearance of social confinement away from front-page moral dilemmas.

### KEYWORDS

Melodrama; mutual acknowledgment; everydayness; Stanley Cavell

German film director Christian Petzold (1960) became well known after he won a mainstream German film prize (*Deutscher Filmpreis* 2001: 'Bester Spielfilm') for *Die innere Sicherheit* (2000), a road movie about the family life of left-wing, 'retired' political activists in post-reunification Germany. A graduate of the Berlin film school, Petzold had already made four critically acclaimed films, but in 2000 he 'transcended art-house cinema' (Fisher 2013, 1). After *Die innere Sicherheit*, Petzold has made eight feature films, most recently *Phoenix* (2014). Petzold's films respectfully refer to mainstream genre films and Hollywood classics, in the case of *Phoenix* Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Generically, *Phoenix* may be seen as a melodrama, a silver-screen version of popular nineteenth-century stage plays sometimes derogatorily referred to as 'weepies.' According to Jaimey Fisher, the author of the only English-language monography on Petzold, his other melodramas are *Wolfsburg* (2003) and *Barbara* (2012).

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Petzold's melodramas have not yet been analyzed as 'melodramas of the unknown woman,' Stanley Cavell's phrase describing a crucial characteristic of Hollywood melodramas of the black-and-white era. Cavell has indicated that his theory of melodrama can also be useful for contemporary films, both mainstream and more artistic, but apart from an occasional reference he has not elaborated on contemporary melodramas of the unknown woman.<sup>1</sup> Because of Petzold's references to mainstream genre films, his melodramas may be expected to feature aspects of Cavell's melodramas. In what follows, Cavell's genre theory will help to understand what, from the perspective of unknown women, are key scenes in *Phoenix*, *Wolfsburg*, and *Barbara*. Using *Phoenix* as an entry point into Petzoldian melodrama, what will retrospectively become clear is that Petzold embeds his stories in their surrounding culture not only by referring to old genre films but also by having his protagonists negotiate the significance of canonical, public artifacts for their private lives.

For Cavell's melodramas of unknown women, the public acknowledgment of one lover by the other is crucial. A Cavellian reading of Petzold's melodramas will bring into focus how a woman's desires in Petzold's melodramas remain unacknowledged. These women will experience this lack of acknowledgment as a form of denial; they will suffer from isolation. In this way, the melodramas of the unknown woman, even if they were mainstream artifacts, according to Cavell, addressed pertinent social issues. In these melodramas, we should not expect 'front-page moral dilemmas' like the death penalty or whistleblowing or informing, Cavell has pointed out, but rather social controversy presented as everyday-life struggles for heroines in Hollywood entertainment.<sup>2</sup>

In Hollywood melodramas women depended on public acknowledgment. When these women ended up alone, they were engulfed by the anonymity of unacknowledged love; when they were able to publicly celebrate their love, as in the comedies of the same era, they lived happily ever after. According to Cavell, this meant that their love interest always had a communal dimension. Key for a Cavellian reading of Petzold's melodramas, then, is this public dimension of lacking acknowledgment in romantic relationships, which, in the Petzold films, is consistently mediated by the public significance of particular artifacts, be it a popular song (*Phoenix*), a classic car (*Wolfsburg*), or a renowned painting (*Barbara*). In Petzold's melodramas, canonical artifacts relate private indulgence to public acknowledgment.

### Cavell's melodramas

Although *Phoenix*'s references to *film noir* and to *Vertigo* in particular do not directly indicate the relevance of melodrama for *Phoenix*, the way in which the film's protagonist remains unknown for her love interest does recall what Stanley Cavell in *Contesting Tears* (1996) has described as 'the melodrama of the unknown woman.' Cavell explains how Max Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) provides the name for a range of Hollywood melodramas from the Thirties and Forties featuring women with tragically thwarted ambitions. Ophüls' film tells the story of a young female admirer of a concert pianist. He does not remember the young woman nor their short-lived romance. She remains unknown to him, even if he has fathered a child with her during that romance. In this literal sense of unknownness, the Ophüls film is unlike the other melodramas in Cavell's book, as these other films – *Gaslight* (1944), *Now Voyager* (1942), and *Stella Dallas* (1937) – feature women who are known-but-unacknowledged by their love interest. Crucially, then, in all Cavell's melodramas 'unknown' means 'unacknowledged,' first and foremost by husbands or lovers.

In these melodramas, the heroines will be disappointed because the men do not or cannot acknowledge the ambitions these women have for their relationships. For that is what the tragic heroines share: unacknowledged women cannot fulfill their desires.

Film theorists have written extensively about the social relevance of melodrama,<sup>3</sup> but what is particularly interesting about Cavell's melodramas in relation to Petzold is Cavell's emphasis on these films' generic lack of recognition by the women's love interests. To be sure, Cavell does point out that social circumstances are crucial for the lack of recognition in the experience of these women, but unlike other theorists Cavell first addresses the family resemblances of these films in terms of their relatedness to what, in *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981), he calls 'Comedies of Remarriage.' His book on comedy notably precedes Cavell's book on melodrama. By relating melodramas to comedies, he is able to relate his favorite films directly to the concrete gestures and dialogues by which the protagonists in the comedies do, and the protagonists in the melodramas do not offer each other mutual recognition. For Petzold's melodramas, the Cavellian perspective entails a concentration on the form that this lack of recognition takes, that is, on the filmic concretization of unacknowledged ambitions.

In *Cities of Words* (2005), Cavell has elaborated on what is important about knowledge of other minds in relation to film. In this book he picks up a theme in his early work, skepticism, and explicitly relates it to film. In Cavell's early work, the connection between skepticism and cinema has not always been clear; in fact, this early work does not yet reveal any such connection, although it does engage with what, at the time, was a received practice of contemporaneous American philosophy. To wit, in *Must We Mean What We Say*, and particularly in his chapter on 'Knowing and Acknowledging,' first published 1969, Cavell discusses the difference in ordinary language philosophy between, for example, saying that we *know* that we are late or saying that we *acknowledge* that we are late: 'from my acknowledging that I am late it follows that I know I'm late (...); but from my knowing that I am late, it does not follow that I acknowledge I'm late' (256–257). In other words, here, to acknowledge implies that one knows, but to know does not imply that one acknowledges. Typically, the ordinary language perspective entails an analysis of the implications inherent in the usage of certain words. Here, the implications of acknowledging are consequential for the speaker: he or she appears to accept an obligation to possibly clarify the reasons for, in this case, being late, whereas the implications of knowing do not entail such obligation.<sup>4</sup>

Later, in *The Claim of Reason* (1979), Cavell elaborates on the difference between knowing and acknowledging specifically in relation to other minds. Here, the significance of philosophical skepticism, i.e. the relevance of the question whether or not it matters to lack certainty about the reality around us, is differentiated by Cavell: we may be indifferent when we are confronted with our lack of certainty about the reality of objects around us; however, when other people are involved, we are concerned. That is, we may comfortably ignore skeptical doubt about the material world, but we will be less comfortable about ignoring people. When we ignore the other, we no longer are indifferent. According to Cavell, 'the alternative to my acknowledgment of the other is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him' (*The Claim of Reason* 1979, 389).<sup>5</sup> Ignorance would be the alternative to knowing; avoidance would be implied by my lack of acknowledgment. Crucially, the difference between Cavell's earliest explorations of ordinary language philosophy and *The Claim of Reason* is the explicit introduction of 'the other' in his latter evaluations of a linguistic claim.

Even though *The Claim of Reason* adds the perspective of the other to his analysis, the relation of these philosophical reflections appears to be isolated from his work on film. In *Cities of Words* (2005), however, Cavell connects both strains of his thought. Reminiscent of the development toward the relevance of other minds and their denial of one's existence, he explains in *Cities of Words* about Paula (Ingrid Bergman) that she is the unknown, that is unacknowledged woman in *Gaslight*: 'the bare proof of her existence (...) is motivated not simply by the sense that [her] existence is unproven, but by the sense that it is denied' (112), a sentence reminiscent of the quote in our previous paragraph. The act of violence perpetrated by Paula's husband, when he withholds acknowledgment of her well-worth existence, first described in the opening chapter of *Contesting Tears*, has become a key example in Cavell's work of what it means to particularize skepticism with regard to others.

In a Cavellian 'Comedy of Remarriage,' the crucial difference with a melodrama like *Gaslight* is that a husband will not withhold acknowledgment and instead will reconfirm that the couple's mutual trust can be warranted, at least momentarily. Martin Gustafsson has emphasized that Cavell in *Cities of Words* did not so much suggest that acknowledgment is a continuously prolonged prospect of an aspiring married couple, but rather depends on the actual confirmation in the here-and-now of their continuous collaborative effort.<sup>6</sup> Gustafsson agrees that perfectionism in Cavell can never be settled in the actuality of a happy marriage, but he insists that Cavell's perfectionism implies the concrete actualization of what in the very moment of that actualization will already have been surpassed by new prospects of perfection. 'The point of perfectionism,' Gustafsson insists, 'is not that perfection is not something we do once and for all, but something we must strive to achieve again and again' (2014, 106). In other words, the married couple not only strives for a better future, it also insists that such a future requires the reiterated concretization of the couple's ambitions in the here-and-now. Their marriage needs to be actualized before it can be improved upon, after which yet another actualization of these improvements will be required, if only to be improved upon yet again.

For Cavell, the consummation of marriage surely is the test of its viability, not only in the privacy of a couple's bedroom, but particularly when the lovers' relationship is tested publically, when they continuously reaffirm their relationship as part and parcel of their community. The stakes of this continuous remarriage are high, as the vows need reiteration, not just privately but publically as well. In fact, for Cavell, the public reiteration of vows is the way in which marriages become a key ingredient of public life. His couples are not love-struck teenagers or secretive conspirers; instead, the public realm of marriage, for Cavell, is the public realm of law and democracy. He explains that the pair indulging in secret affairs runs 'the risk of snobbery,' a tendency to regard society with disdain, 'a tendency to distance oneself from the cultural costs of democracy' (*Cities of Words* 2004, 189). Cavell, therefore, is convinced that the relevance of the melodramas of the unknown woman goes beyond film history and extends into the realm of political theory; they build 'Cities of Words.'

### Germany's melodramatic recuperation: *Phoenix*

Significantly, the cover of *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* features a still from *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor 1940), one of Cavell's comedies of remarriage. In most chapters, Cavell combines film analyses with close readings of texts from the canon of political theory and ethics. The close readings typically emphasize 'reiteration' as a crucial aspect of politics. For example, Cavell's understanding of the contemporary

relevance of John Locke (1632–1704) highlights Locke's emphasis on the re-affirmation of consent in the 'Politick Society' as a precursor of periodical elections (*Cities of Words* 2004, 68). Cavell then combines his Locke readings with a chapter on *Adam's Rib*, a 1949 remarriage comedy in which 'being governed by consent' is a crucial aspect of the Hepburn and Tracy characters re-affirming their endangered marriage (75). According to Cavell, in the melodramas of the unknown woman, the heroines also seek public affirmation. But unlike the comedies, beyond the realm of privacy the protagonists of the melodramas are tragically constrained by the public culture to which they belong. Similarly, in *Phoenix*, Petzold has referred to a canonical artifact, Kurt Weill's jazz composition *Speak Low*, famously sung during World War II by Billy Holliday, as if to embed his melodrama in popular culture. The song features prominently in the final scene, the scene of tentative recognition which, after all, does not result in the acknowledgment of Nelly (Nina Hoss<sup>7</sup>); the film ends with Nelly leaving the room, alone.

Petzold's references to Hollywood cinema are well documented, most elaborately by Fisher (2013). Fisher's book predates *Phoenix*, but he surely would have particularized the film's references to Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Earlier, as Fisher does point out, Petzold's *Toter Mann* (2001) has paid homage to *Vertigo*, enough for Fisher to call *Toter Mann* 'a retooled film noir' (61). Likewise, Petzold himself confirms *Phoenix*'s references to *Vertigo* and describes the protagonists' world as belonging to 'the land of shadows (...), the country of the *film noir*' (Young 2015, 38).<sup>8</sup> More generally, while Fisher describes Petzold's work as fitting the tradition of 'social and political critique characteristic of the Berlin School,' he emphasizes how Petzold engages with 'popular genres to achieve their impact' (11).<sup>9</sup> 'More than any other major art-house cinema director,' Fisher continues, 'Petzold describes and credits the influence of often very popular films on his work' (11). According to Fisher, then, Petzold's documented references to genre films distinguish him from other European directors.<sup>10</sup>

When Petzold respectfully refers to *Vertigo* in *Toter Mann*, his references pertain not to *Vertigo*'s female protagonist becoming melodramatically molded into what is expected from her, but rather to Scottie's delusion. Scottie (James Stewart) is led to believe that his meetings with Madeleine/Judy (Kim Novak) were chance encounters whereas, in fact, they were carefully orchestrated. As in *Vertigo*, when the *Toter Mann* protagonists apparently meet by chance, their encounter actually was meticulously planned. And it is Leyla (Nina Hoss) who is in control of these quasi-spontaneous meetings. With manipulative agency, then, *Toter Mann*'s Leyla is not like Madeleine/Judy at all; she is more like *Vertigo*'s Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore) who orchestrated the scheme misleading Scottie in the first place. Hence, Fisher compares Leyla in *Toter Mann* to 'a femme fatale with notably more agency than Hitchcock affords Madeleine/Judy in *Vertigo*' (Fisher, 62). It is not until *Phoenix* that Petzold's references to *Vertigo* are more specifically related to *Vertigo*'s melodramatic features. Indeed, Nina Hoss' character in *Phoenix*, Nelly, appears to be the opposite of a *film noir* femme fatale. *Phoenix*'s Nelly is more like Judy, a woman whose identity is molded into what her love interest wants to make of her. In this sense, Nelly is more like the unacknowledged female characters of Cavell's melodramas.

Compared to his earlier films, in *Phoenix* Petzold goes back in time furthest. He follows Nelly, who is a Jewish concentration-camp survivor, back to Berlin after severe World War II trauma. As Petzold explains, *Phoenix* is about Germany's 'Year Zero' beyond which it had to reinvent itself in order to recuperate from the war: 'The Germans after the war (...), they are the 'phoenix' (...) it's not Nelly: Nelly is no phoenix' (Young 2015, 41). 'Phoenix'

also is the name of the Berlin nightclub featuring American popular music, jazz. After reconstructive plastic surgery and tentative resocialization, Nelly starts her search for her husband Johnny (Ronald Zehrfeld). She finds him, now called Johann, at work, not as the pianist he was before but as a cleaner in the club's kitchen. Johann does not appear to recognize her, but he does see some resemblances, enough for him to instruct Nelly to assume the role of his wife for the purpose of claiming her inheritance. Here, the film takes its more melodramatic *Vertigo* turn: Johann attempts to recreate Nelly in the image of his wife (cf. Young, 38). Johann's interest, though, is merely financial. Nelly, on the other hand, understands that going along with Johann at least lets her be close to him.

When Nelly suggests strategies concerning the explanation of her prolonged absence, Johann points out that postwar Germans will not be interested in her concentration-camp trauma; instead, their picture of the prewar Nelly needs to be reconfirmed (54:06). This lack of interest in Nelly's trauma arguably is why Johann himself does not recognize his own wife: Johnny may himself be traumatized by his war experiences in which the deportation of his Jewish wife saved his own life. Remarkably, Nelly appears to be less interested in the recognition of her concentration-camp history than in the acknowledgment by Johnny of their love. She desires Johnny's personal acknowledgment of the lover she once was. In any case, until the final scene Nelly's experiences remain unknown for him. He is unable to acknowledge the possibility of a history for Nelly herself.

Cavell would say that Nelly is the unknown woman in *Phoenix*. Her attempts to let her lover see who she really wants to be are all denied. As a camp survivor, Nelly has a tattoo on her arm – Nelly's cosmetic surgery was limited to her face, it has not involved her arm. In her postwar life, her Auschwitz tattoo has remained visible. But it is not until the final scene of the film, that her tattoo becomes visible for Johann. The sparse extra-diegetic sound track has repeatedly offered a double bass with a piano, playing the same chords, inviting the completion of the melody, a singer to fill in the words. In the last scene, then, when Johann/Johnny is behind the piano now diegetically playing the prelude to the song, Nelly finally joins in: before five of their prewar friends, Nelly sings *Speak Low* (1:29:25). When Johnny sees the tattoo and hears Nelly's singing voice, he finally recognizes her. His piano accompaniment is silenced; a point-of-view close up of the hem of Nelly's red-dress sleeve now reveals the number on her lower left arm. The film cuts back to Johnny and to the five-friend audience. Johnny has finally recognized Nelly, but the film ends before Johnny can publically acknowledge who Nelly has become.

For Cavell, a discussion of the acknowledgment of the unknown woman in *Phoenix* would concentrate on this final scene, because here Petzold has presented a dynamic relation between private recognition and public acknowledgment, not only via the publicness of Nelly's performance but also by the canonical reference to the Kurt Weill song. It appears to be Petzold's way of negotiating the privacy of romantic love with the (im)possibility of publicly celebrating that love. Retrospectively, *Phoenix* suggests that Petzold's earlier melodramas, starting with *Wolfsburg*, may similarly contain negotiated understandings of canonical artifacts as a way to establish the communal relevance of private emotions.

### Revisiting melodrama: *Wolfsburg*

In Fisher's book about Petzold, the first film that generically qualifies as a melodrama is *Wolfsburg* (2003) – the title refers to the city that harbors the Volkswagen industrial complex.



*Wolfsburg* is the story of the aftermath of a hit-and-run accident caused by Philip (Benno Fürmann). Single mother Laura (again Nina Hoss) mourns the tragic loss of her only son. Philip appears to regret his fleeing the scene of the accident, but he repeatedly fails to actually tell Laura that he was the driver of the hit-and-run car. Yet, Philip and Laura extend their first meeting in the corridors near the hospital bed of Laura's son: they will get romantically involved. Philip's secret concomitantly becomes increasingly difficult to convey. When Laura finally does find out, their romance ends tragically.

Now that a Cavellian analysis of *Phoenix* has helped to understand the crucial relevance of public acknowledgment, we can concentrate on the same in *Wolfsburg*. To be sure, *Wolfsburg's* perpetrator, Philip, for the most part of the film is literally unknown for Laura. And it is her loss as a mother which remains unacknowledged; at first, the unknown woman in *Wolfsburg* is not a lover but a mother. This will change, though. Laura will have a relationship with Philip, without Laura knowing about Philip's hit-and-run. As long as Philip upholds the lie about his involvement in the death of Laura's teenage son, the couple seems to appreciate each other in a relationship of mutual acknowledgment. Still, Philip, making career as a suave car salesman, and Laura, stuck in a low-wage, department-store job, are an unlikely couple.

For Philip, what first appears to be at stake is his relationship with Katja (Antje Westermann), with whom he shares a house. Their house is built like a fortress, with steel bars across the windows keeping out possible intruders. Petzold's *mise en scène* of Philip's house does not let him feel at home. It is where he alienates from his wife. When Philip and Laura meet for the first time, their encounter near a coffee machine in the hospital, then, paradoxically contrasts the intimacy of the encounter with the fortified seclusion of Philip's house. Still, the hospital does signal a lack of privacy, to be overcome elsewhere, albeit not in Philip's fortified house. As Fisher points out, Petzold is interested in what is being negotiated outside the house as a place possibly harboring new private relationships (cf. 70–71).

For example, the porch in front of a house is more interesting than the house itself, Fisher writes, because Petzold wants to explore the *Schwebezustand*, that is, the place-in-between-places in which his characters appear to float (*schweben*) when they are negotiating feeling at home outside the house: 'this image of hesitant balance, on the inside/outside space of the porch, is exactly what Petzold seeks' (19).<sup>11</sup> In *Wolfsburg* it is the *Schwebezustand*-safety of Philip's car in which Barbara and Philip develop their relationship, and eventually feel closest to each other. While on public roads, this car becomes a private space warranting a development toward intimacy in the relationship between Philip and Laura, even if Philip's classic NSU has also been the material cause of Laura's son accident.

Like popular jazz music in *Phoenix*, a well-known artifact is negotiated for its contemporary significance in *Wolfsburg*. Here, it is a car, a red NSU Ro 80 (1967–1977), a vintage car related to *Wolfsburg's* automotive industry – NSU was acquired by Volkswagen in 1969. In *Wolfsburg's* present, say the early 2000s, Philip's car may be more than 30 years old. As Fisher observes, *Wolfsburg* negotiates the space in which its protagonists feel at home: '*Wolfsburg* charts the social substitution of the house for the car as the protagonist's primary private space' (70). As a result, Philip's house is not a home; his car is. Philip feels more at home in his NSU than in the house he shares with Katja. As Fisher continues, the car often replaces the houses in which the protagonists in Petzold's early work do not feel at home (cf. 71). According to Fisher, this is an aspect of the way in which Petzold incorporates German economical identity, past, and future. For *Wolfsburg* this means 'on the one hand, [that]

the ‘traces’ of the Nazis were everywhere,’ (72) particularly because the Nazis established Wolfsburg as the center of Germany’s automobile industry. On the other hand, in reference to Petzold’s own ‘Auto-Analyse,’ Fisher, well before the Volkswagen Diesel scandal, ominously observes that ‘some 50 percent of German industry is related in one way or another to the automobile’ (71).<sup>12</sup>

After Philip and Laura’s encounter near the coffee machine in the hospital’s waiting room (19:19), the second time they meet is related to Philip’s gray Audi station. Still, they do not really share the car’s privacy. Philip brings Laura home: ‘Sie sind ohnmächtig geworden, ich hab Sie nach Hause gefahren’ (51:38). Their next trip in Philip’s car, Laura is reluctant to really share the car’s space. Philip drives her to work, but Laura wants to ride her bike for the last part of the trip. She appears to not want her colleagues to see her in his car – Philip drives his gray Audi station. He complies but asks Laura out for dinner, still addressing her by ‘Sie’ – as in *Barbara*, Petzold consistently uses the formality of ‘Sie’ until the very end of the film. Apparently, then, the gray car in which Philip and Laura appear to be closest to each other still does not allow them the confidence to use their first names in their conversation.

In their most intimate moments in the Audi, when Philip returns Laura home from their dinner, they enjoy each other’s company in silence (1:00:16). It is not until the closing minutes of the film, however, that Philip and Laura will be on a first name basis. Inside the car, now the red NSU which more intimately belongs to Philip’s private sphere, Petzold is equally reluctant to invade the privacy of the couple’s front-seat space. Until the final scene he positions the camera behind the protagonists. Toward the very end of the film, only a few screen minutes after Philip calls Laura by her first name and they kiss for the first time, Laura reads the NSU’s license plate: ‘FO-RD 189.’ Just before he died, Laura’s son said: ‘Rotes Auto, FORD’; now, Laura realizes that he was referring to the license plate, not the brand name. Back in the car, Petzold for the first time positions his camera in the private space of the front seats. It is in the film’s climactic last minutes, from the front seat of Philip’s red NSU, that Laura’s emphatic ‘Du warst es’ finally is recorded (1:22:08).

The tragedy of their relationship is that its premise makes it impossible for Laura to trust Philip. For Laura, their relationship is based on a lie. For Philip, the situation is not much different. His romantic feelings for Laura may be sincere, but he knows that his lie cannot be amended. It appears unthinkable for both that their relationship can continue. It is not clear from the perspective of the close up of the knife in Laura’s hand that Philip can actually see it, but Philip’s reluctant reaction appears to indicate his acceptance of what is about to happen. After Laura’s conclusion that she knows that Philip was responsible for the hit-and-run killing her son, tears well up in her eyes. His silence affirms the inevitable end of their affair. Similarly accepting the inevitability of her actions, Laura appears to understand the risk of stabbing him while he is driving. She accepts the risk that in the subsequent car crash her life is in danger as well. When the red NSU finally does crash, and Laura survives to walk away, their crushed relationship was inevitable. They were never able to reciprocate their love; instead, they were destined to remain unknown for each other, their unknownness inevitably was reciprocal.

### **East-German melodrama in *Barbara***

In 1980, André (Ronald Zehrfeld) is a talented country doctor working in a provincial hospital scrutinized by the GDR secret service, Stasi. Barbara (again Nina Hoss) is a Berlin

doctor demoted to the same hospital in which she knows that all her actions are closely monitored by the same Stasi. Barbara has learned to distrust everyone in authority, including her immediate supervisor, André. Nevertheless, Barbara begins to appreciate André when she learns to trust the story that André was blackmailed into a submissive position obliging him to, indeed, file reports on Barbara. André reassures Barbara that his reports will remain superficial. Barbara, however, does not reciprocate his trust. She does not tell André about her plans to flee to the West. Their budding romance is destined to fail.

Like *Phoenix* and *Wolfsburg*, *Barbara* refers to a canonical artifact to facilitate mutual recognition. In fact, *Barbara* contains three of these references: André tells Barbara about the reproduction of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* push-pinned on his office wall, Barbara reads to their pregnant patient Stella from Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and André summarizes Turgenev's short story 'The District Doctor.' The Twain references are straightforwardly inspirational: Huck Finn's exaltation about the freedom he experienced, 'wir waren noch nie so reich gewesen' (35:44), contrasts with the confinement forced on Stella, but inspires her to confide in Barbara about her desires to have her child in freedom. The Rembrandt and Turgenev references are more complicated and more interesting from a Cavellian perspective, as they pertain to a developing mutual understanding between Barbara and André. André's interpretations of Rembrandt and Turgenev are both negotiated with Barbara, and the implications of these negotiations are relevant for the tentative exploration by André and Barbara of their relationship. Crucially, their collaborative interpretations are not recited interior monologues like Huck Finn's; instead, they are developed in conversation. Moreover, unlike *Phoenix*, conversational acknowledgment is an issue for both protagonists in *Barbara*.

André's analysis of the Rembrandt painting, which was commissioned by Tulp's guild of surgeons, concentrates on the reasons for Rembrandt's non-conventional depiction of the partly dissected lower left arm of the donor, Aris Kindt. André asks Barbara's medical opinion about the arm. Barbara's response is clear: 'Die Hand stimmt nicht. Die ist vertauscht' (26:41). André then suggests that Rembrandt here defied the guild and intentionally portrayed a right arm, not a left one, and that the portrayed company of surgeons never notices the incongruity. Not a single surgeon in this group of eight, André continues, is looking at the patient: they appear more interested in the handbook, the anatomical atlas depicted by Rembrandt in the lower right corner of the painting. André explains that Rembrandt, in this way, questioned the authority of the surgeon: the surgeons did not display a genuine interest in the patient, they were merely interested in textbook references.

As David Johnson points out, the way in which André interprets Rembrandt's painting in his conversation with Barbara is an allusion to W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (*Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt* 1995). André's claim that Rembrandt deliberately depicted Kindt's right arm where his left arm was being dissected, Johnson explains, is based on the social commentary presented by Sebald, who pointed out that the surgeons were 'too focused on their textbook to see the immediate reality' (Johnson 2014, 494). According to Johnson, this anachronistic reference to Sebald, later reconfirmed by Petzold, is meant to inform 'about resisting official stories (...), about sympathizing with those who cannot speak for themselves' (495). Petzold has based the Rembrandt dialog between Barbara and André, presumably, on the Sebald interpretation of the *Anatomy Lesson*. Inspired by Sebald, then, Petzold lets André take sides with the hapless victim on the surgeons' table: André's interest in the Rembrandt painting is about resisting authority.

Remarkably, André-the-Stasi-informer sympathizes with the artist defying the ones having the means to hire him in the first place.

For Barbara, André's invitation to join him in his interpretation of the painting must have been confusing. In his laboratory, André sets up a quasi-Socratic dialog in which Barbara may have felt like a ventriloquist's puppet baffled by circumstances: a Stasi informer has asked her to fill in the scheme of an anti-authoritarian Rembrandt interpretation. Indeed, their dialog makes them complicit in the appreciation of Rembrandt's defiance of authority. But can Barbara trust André? Debbie Pinfold rightly insists on the importance of the subsequent close up of the gaze of one of the surgeons in Rembrandt's picture. This close up of one of the faces in the painting challenges André's emphatic interpretation that the surgeons are all looking at the book in the lower right corner of the painting. At least one of them, the close up reveals, 'is in fact staring directly at the viewers, (...) a clear case of Petzold addressing the audience behind the characters' back' (Pinfold 2014, 292). According to Pinfold, Petzold is questioning the authority of his protagonist, not unlike Barbara who cannot but question André's allegiance as she knows about his Stasi collaboration.

But the film is not just questioning André's allegiances. To be sure, early in the film, Barbara corrects André by pointing out that his patient has a name: 'Stella. Das Mädchen heißt Stella' (12:26). Later, however, she is similarly corrected by André. When Barbara generically asks about a woman's illness, 'Was hat die Frau?' (1:21:57), André correctively responds by using this particular patient's name: 'Friedl hat Krebs und wird sterben' (cf. Pinfold 2014, 285). Despite finding no reference in her corpus of reviews to André correcting Barbara, Pinfold calls attention to this reciprocity. As Pinfold argues, the film offers mutuality to complicate the relationship between Barbara and André. André is not a state ideologue and Barbara is not an angelic counterpart to totalitarianism. In fact, Pinfold continues, Barbara is made to 'appear less a helpless victim and more a woman who can still make personal and professional choices' (287).

Likewise, the surveilling Stasi agent is presented not only as a suppressive bureaucrat but also as a grieving family member – Friedl is his wife (cf. Pinfold, 287). Most importantly though, it is the relationship between André and Barbara for which Petzold avoids a clear-cut distinction between perpetrator and victim. To be sure, when André is introduced, he is presented as a Stasi collaborator. As the film progresses, however, André relinquishes his willingness to report on Barbara. On the other hand, Barbara's ambition to travel westward may itself not be entirely free. Her lover from West Germany actually sketches a future in which Barbara would be confined to housekeeping because, as he gloatingly reports, he would make enough money for both of them. Moreover, Barbara appears to recognize the resemblances between her and an aspiring young defector, her neighbor in an adjacent hotel room, like Barbara waiting for her Western lover. The women enjoy each other's company while their lovers keep them waiting, and together they indulge in the riches of a Western mail-order catalog. André never finds out about Barbara's Western lover, though. In fact, he may actually be more upfront about his troubled allegiances than Barbara.

Barbara and André twice discuss André's reasons for being in a provincial hospital. The *mise en scène* of their encounter paradoxically uses the public space of the hospital as hospitable to their approximation – as in *Wolfsburg*, Petzold appears interested, in the in-betweenness of public and private space. In their first elaborate encounter in his hospital laboratory, André tells Barbara the propaganda story of an idealist doctor convinced about his purpose in life to support the health center of a provincial town. The second time, André

confides in her and tells her that he was held responsible for a mistake made in the hospital lab when he was conducting an incubator experiment. Here, the *mise en scène* contrasts the professional attire of health-care professionals, long white coats in a clinical environment, with the privacy of using the office as a personal space. This important scene is split in two (minute 39 to 42). First, André walks in on Barbara after she has just woken up in her office, still in her undergarments. They exchange glances, not words. André decides to return to the hallway and wait for her to get dressed. When André enters the office again, both are dressed in white coats. The contrast between André's personal story and the professional environment appears to confuse them. After the first time in the privacy of André's car, when Barbara tells André that she knows about his Stasi involvement (5:35), here in the hospital office, now dressed in her professional white coat, she almost formally lets him know again that she is aware of his reports: 'Schreiben Sie das in ihren Bericht?' (40:45).

The scene continues with André confirming the existence of the reports; he apologetically explains his collaboration with the authorities. While Barbara is standing up, in the position of a purveyor attesting to André's reconstruction of the events, André tells his story sitting down behind a desk. He decides to confide in her about the mistake with the incubator that is still obligating him to the Stasi. The price André had to pay, he explains, is that he was to remain silent about the mistake and that he still has to file reports with the Stasi. Questioned by Barbara about the follow-up and about technical incubator details, André senses her suspicion: 'Zu lang, die Geschichte? Zu rund?' (42:39). André's telling of the incubator story, then, briefly attests to a possible actualization of mutual trust. Yet, such trust is undermined by the circumstances of institutionalized misapprehension. Barbara cannot but distrust a Stasi informant who may be the difference between imprisonment, like Stella, and freedom, like her West-German lover.

Later, less than 5 min before the film's ending, in the privacy of André's home when André and Barbara for the first time refrain from the formal 'Sie' in their conversation, André tells about Ivan Turgenev's country doctor. For Cavell, the intimacy of their language would be important; Petzold appears to add a reference to the literary canon as if to counterbalance the informality of the language and the privacy of André's home. The country doctor is one of the short stories in a Turgenev volume picked up by Barbara from André's bookshelves. The doctor possibly overstays his welcome at the bedside of a nineteen year old girl, André recounts. Tragically, the young woman is about to die before she has ever had the opportunity to love; the doctor helps out. 'Er schläft mit ihr?' (1:26:33), Barbara asks. André's answer is clear: no, the doctor supports her by telling stories, stories of passion, the kind of passion she will never experience.

In both the Rembrandt and the Turgenev episode, the dialog between André and Barbara seeks confirmation for André's interpretations. But after the Turgenev story, Barbara is literally closest to André. In the privacy of his home, Barbara kisses André and both confirm their trust. André now appears less a surveilling Stasi informer and more a passionate country doctor himself. Again, he asks for Barbara's recognition of his story, similar to his request for her acknowledgment of his tragic incubator story and of his anti-authoritarian Rembrandt interpretation. Mistrust has guided Barbara; a desire for recognition has guided André. The kiss is their first physical, briefly reciprocated acknowledgment. Nevertheless, she does not confide in him about her plans to escape to Denmark. The kiss ends abruptly: she is unable to trust him, even now. André's personal stories, then, are represented in what appears to be an economy of lacking mutual recognition.

Similar to Cavell's melodramas, the female protagonist, Barbara, is the unknown, unacknowledged woman. Unlike Cavell's melodramas, however, but very much like *Wolfsburg*, Barbara's unknownness is reciprocated; Petzold's *Barbara* also features 'reciprocal unknownness.' Remarkably, Cavell's comedies of remarriage, which are his comedies of mutual acknowledgment, are contrasted more sharply by Petzold's *Wolfsburg* and *Barbara*, than by Cavell's own melodramas of the unknown woman. In Cavell's comedies the protagonists acknowledge each other, in *Wolfsburg* and *Barbara* the melodramatic protagonists lack each other's reconfirmation. In the latter, Barbara lacks acknowledgment of her desire to find her way West; André lacks acknowledgment of his own imprisonment in a blackmailing scheme coordinated by the Stasi. Both remain unknown for each other, that is, in so far as their desires remain unacknowledged. Their unknownness is reciprocal.<sup>13</sup>

### Conclusion: reciprocal unknownness

Cavell's focus on the lack of acknowledgment in melodramas has helped to understand key scenes in *Phoenix*, *Wolfsburg*, and *Barbara*. These scenes contain no 'front-page moral dilemmas' but rather pertain to the moral significance of everyday life. Remarkably, Petzold's most recent film, *Phoenix*, is more traditionally melodramatic; the older films appear to more contemporarily negotiate the characteristics of the melodrama of the unknown woman. Similar to what Cavell has described for his favorite melodramas, *Phoenix*'s Nelly remains unacknowledged throughout the whole film, and Johann is too self-absorbed to acknowledge her desires. Cavell's *Contesting Tears* addresses a similar lack of the male protagonist's interest in his female counter part in the Hollywood melodramas of the Thirties and Forties – it is why Cavell, in the subtitle of his book, has used the phrase 'unknown woman' from the Ophüls film. Petzold's more contemporary melodramas confirm the relevance of Cavell's paradigmatic films, but they also suggest an update of Cavell's genre.

*Wolfsburg* and *Barbara* both differ from Cavell's melodrama of the unknown woman: a romantic engagement is equally impossible for both Laura and Philip in *Wolfsburg*, and Barbara's lack of acknowledgment is mirrored by an equal lack of acknowledgment for André in *Barbara*. Whereas the Hollywood melodramas critically assessed mainstream society, as Cavell pointed out, the cultural dynamic of Petzold's films is different. In spite of Petzold's acknowledged references to Hollywood film, his melodramas are also thoroughly German, if only in their geographically specific subject matter. To conceptualize the difference between Cavell's Hollywood melodramas and Petzold's German melodramas, *Wolfsburg* and *Barbara* are paradigmatic.

In *Wolfsburg* and *Barbara*, Cavell's unknown woman is complemented by an unknown man. Unlike Cavell's melodramas, Petzold's male protagonists are less clearly portrayed as one-dimensional counterparts to a female tragic heroine. In *Gaslight*, for example, the heroine's husband is an obsessed murderer, and in *Letter of an Unknown Woman* her love interest is an ego-centered concert pianist. Contradistinctively, *Wolfsburg*'s Philip is a hit-and-run driver who develops into a remorseful recluse, and *Barbara*'s country doctor is a conscientious Stasi informer.

To be sure, Cavell's understanding of 'unknownness' in terms of lacking acknowledgment still helps to better understand the relationship between both *Wolfsburg*'s and *Barbara*'s protagonists. In other words, Fisher's characterization of *Wolfsburg* and *Barbara* as melodramas is not denied by a Cavellian reading of the films; instead, taking non-acknowledgment to

be crucial for these films helps to actually better understand Philip and André's role, not just Laura and Barbara's. The tragic development of these romantic relationships is experienced by both the male and the female protagonists. Despite their intentions, their love unavoidably lacks reciprocation.

Petzold's *Wolfsburg* and *Barbara*, then, would be best described as melodramas characterized by 'reciprocal unknownness.' 'Reciprocal' could then be understood as a reference to Cavell's comedies of remarriage in which the protagonists reciprocally acknowledge each other. In fact, Cavell has always indicated how the melodrama of the unknown woman as a genre should be thought in reference to the comedies of remarriage. When acknowledgment fails, 'unknownness' is what results: melodrama is inevitable. *Wolfsburg* and *Barbara* are contemporaneous in their reciprocal non-acknowledgment between Laura and Philip, respectively, Barbara and André. The melodramatic failure of their love results in an unknown woman *and* an unknown man. Both films confirm that Cavell was right to look for the moral relevance of melodramas in their examination of the everyday appearance of social confinement away from front-page moral dilemmas. However, what is contemporary about Petzold's melodramas *Wolfsburg* and *Barbara* is that these films' socially devastating lack of acknowledgment unavoidably appears to be reciprocated: regarding present-day lovers, unknownness appears to be inevitable for both.

## Notes

1. Cavell refers to contemporary films, for example, in 'The Good of Film' (2005, 342–343).
2. 'The Good of Film' 334, and *Cities of Words* 11.
3. In his 1972 'Tales of Sound and Fury,' Thomas Elsaesser influentially wrote about melodrama and psychoanalysis in relation to nineteenth-century popular literature. Elsaesser has explained how the 'melo' in melodrama on film refers to music, to melody in the nineteenth-century theaters, and that 'social drama' was meant to attract the female audiences of the time. Queued by Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), Hollywood melodrama was critically assessed by several feminist authors, among them Linda Williams. Williams' (1984) essay on King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937) features prominently in Cavell's *Contesting Tears* chapter on the same film.
4. Early in Cavell's career, philosophy meant analytical philosophy. In his chapter on John Rawls in *Cities of Words*, Cavell points out that Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971) could become a success partly because Rawls' book filled up a void: 'moral philosophy (in the English-speaking tradition) was in the 1960s (...) largely moribund' (166).
5. Benjamin Mangrum (2013) has commented on the same sentence in Cavell's *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*. He relates it explicitly to tragedy: 'tragedy is the outcome of a philosophical problem even as it is the state of humanity's habitual denial of itself, of its situation' (273). According to Mangrum (2013), then, acknowledgment does not refer to knowledge as certainty about the world, but rather to 'the response to 'the other' (simply) as a human being' (280).
6. Gustafsson takes issue with an article by Paul Guyer (2014) in which Guyer, according to Gustafsson, interprets Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism only as a reference to a future in which actual perfection is continuously postponed. Gustafsson emphasizes that, according to Cavell's perfectionism, in an actually good marriage the partners here-and-now also experience 'the burden of keeping their marriage going' (2014, 107).
7. Hoss plays the lead in six of Petzold's feature films. Fisher characterizes Petzold's work with Hoss as 'one of the most striking collaborations between director and actor in German and even European cinema' (64). According to Fisher, what Petzold particularly favors about Hoss' work is 'how her body is able to convey the tension, the balance situation of abeyance [Schwebezustand]' – a carefully planned alternative to 'German acting in the 1950s [which] became unconvincingly dialogue-driven' (65).

8. According to Jonathan Murray (2015), ‘Phoenix’s most telling American cinematic reference point is (...) Delmer Daves’s *Dark Passage*, 1947, in which Humphrey Bogart plays an escapee who undergoes plastic facial surgery to help him prove his innocence. According to Murray, the reference to *Dark Passage* ‘gives Petzold a subtle means through which to reiterate the key tenets of his analysis of German postwar reconstruction’ (40).
9. Christine Gerhardt (2015) writes that ‘the label “Berlin School” was used first by film critic Merten Wortismann’ in 2001. Gerhardt explains that the term was used for ‘filmmakers associated with the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (...) and, in particular, its first generation: the directors Thomas Arslan, Christian Petzold, and Angela Schanelec’ (66). And Olaf Möller (2007) elaborates that, in Berlin, Petzold was ‘taken under the wing of Hartmut Bitomsky and Harun Farocki’ (40; cf. Fisher 9–11).
10. Marco Abel (2013) also calls attention to Petzold’s combination of ‘a strong yearning for genre cinema and a concomitant awareness of this desire’s impossibility (given) the absence of the very industrial structures’ that would sustain the commercial success of German genre filmmaking (607).
11. Fisher translates *Schwebezustand* as *abeyance*.
12. Ilka Brombach (2013) argues that Petzold has refrained from portraying the city of Wolfsburg as mourning a long-lost idyll, but instead has shown the city’s esthetic modernity as a sign of a forward-looking, postwar community: ‘So bezeugen die Hintergründe hier eine Schönheit der Modernität, die die Gebäude herausgeben wenn man sie nicht als Gegensätze zu einem verlorenen Idyll begreift’ (7).
13. *Barbara* differs from other, more popular German films addressing twentieth-century German history like *Good Bye, Lenin* and *The Lives of Others*. Brombach writes that Petzold’s historical details are not fore grounded, unlike the retro-esthetics of films like *Good Bye, Lenin* (2003): ‘Kostüm- und Requisitenfilme à la *Good bye Lenin* (...) [setzen] auf einen gemeinschaftsstiftenden Wiedererkennungseffekt (...) um dann die damaligen Alltagsgegenstände zu einer farbigen Retroästhetik zusammenzufügen’ (4). Because of the impact of Stasi control on both protagonists, resulting in what Cavell would call a lack of mutual acknowledgment, Fisher favorably compares *Barbara* to Oscar-winning *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen* 2006, directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck) set in 1984 GDR: ‘If *The Lives of Others* succeeds primarily as melodrama, with its moral lines between good and bad self-servingly clear and distinct, *Barbara* excavates out of similar historical drama the moment of ambiguous abeyance that is central to Petzold’s cinema in general’ (141).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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