



Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory, ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 101–11

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Unintentional Reenactments

Yella by Christian Petzold

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ABSTRACT: What is the relationship between reenactment and repetition compulsion? By shedding light upon the different levels of reenactment at stake in *Yella* by Christian Petzold, I analyse the 'transitional spaces' where the German filmmaker places his wandering characters who have 'slipped out of history'. In *Yella* Petzold mixes up past, present, future, and oneiric re-elaboration to question the memory of the past of GDR, which in his view has never really been constituted as history. The characters that populate this movie move in a setting constructed at the crossroad between a protected environment where the reenacted events are sheltered by the time and the space of the plot and a place weathered by the unpredictable atmospheric agents of the present. How and to which extent can the clash between different temporalities produce a minimal variation?

KEYWORDS: repetition compulsion; minimal variation; German reunification; feminicide; marginal temporality

Unintentional Reenactments

Yella by Christian Petzold

CLIO NICASTRO

And I thought: where did all the girls from the former East Germany go? Which dreams do they have? What kind of fortune hunters are they?

Christian Petzold,
quoted by Jaimey Fisher

Yella (Nina Hoss) is a young woman who grew up in Wittenberg, a town in East Germany. After the fall of the Wall, she lost both her job and her husband Ben (Hinnerk Schönemann), from whom she separated following a crisis in their relationship, perhaps caused, certainly aggravated, by the failure of Ben's business. Yella has now returned to her father's house and, in the first scene, we see her packing her suitcases to move to Hanover, where she seems to have found a job as an accountant. After breakfast with her father, a nasty surprise awaits her in front of the house: her ex-husband insists on giving her a lift to the station, despite her being protected by a restraining order. His insistence is such that she is eventually forced to accept. The conversation is very tense from the start: Ben blames her for not being there for him, for not supporting him at a critical moment, for wanting to start a new life elsewhere without him... The car is approaching a bridge over

the river beyond which the station is located. The dialogue becomes increasingly heated, and Ben deliberately swerves off the road. The car breaks through the guardrail and plunges into the water. A few minutes after the violent impact, the two bodies are miraculously carried face down onto one of the banks, the woman first. Yella opens her eyes. The leaves of a large tree stir over the two motionless bodies. The woman gets up from the ground and, with a dazed look, walks away from her ex-husband's unconscious body towards the station. Her hair and clothes are wet, but not a single scratch is visible.

It was only after reading a review of *Yella* (2007) that Christian Petzold realized that his film was an 'unintentional' remake of one of his favorite movies, *Carnival of Souls* an American low-budget horror film the German filmmaker was obsessed with in the 1980s.¹ *Carnival of Souls*, too, opens with a car crashing into a river, taking with it the protagonist Mary (Candace Hilligoss), an organist who is about to leave her small town and move to Salt Lake City for work — a place that will turn out to be a limbo between the world of the living and the ghosts. In an interview, Petzold pointed out how in that very moment he became aware of the role of the subconscious in filmmaking,² or more precisely, of the difference between 'staged quotations' and those that re-emerge through the unconscious reenactment of the same gestures and circumstances:

[W]hen I wanted to make a quotation, it was a disaster. At the beginning of making *Yella*, I'd seen Hitchcock's *Marnie* again. We ordered very expensive tracks that stretched one hundred meters on a train platform, and Nina Hoss had to stand on this platform like Tippi Hedren. It looked great, but I knew in that moment it was total shit because it had nothing to do with our story—it was just a quotation. It cost 65,000 euro and we threw it out. So I hate quotations. A movie might open a door for you, but to go through that door you don't have to make quotations.³

1 *Carnival of Souls*, dir. by Herk Harvey (Harcourt Production, 1962).

2 Hillary Weston, 'Missed Connections: A Conversation with Christian Petzold', *The Current: An Online Magazine Covering Film Culture Past and Present*, 7 December 2018, hosted by The Criterion Collection <<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6088-missed-connections-a-conversation-with-christian-petzold>> [accessed 20 February 2021].

3 Ibid.

(Expensive) quotations apparently cannot reawaken ghosts, or at least not those wandering creatures that no longer belong anywhere and that populate Petzold's *Ghosts Trilogy* (*Gespenster-Trilogie*). The trilogy is composed of *The State I Am in*, *Ghosts*, and *Yella*.⁴ In the first film, the ghosts are a wanted couple part of the RAF group which is on the run across Europe with their teenage daughter. *Gespenster* follows the wanderings of Nina (Julia Hummer), an orphan girl who lives in a foster home, entrusted to social services, and who spends her daily life on the fringes of Berlin, in those areas that turned into a no man's land after reunification. Petzold's ghosts are not evanescent, frightening creatures, but characters who have lost their place, who are no longer useful, because they have slipped out of history — "They are not needed anymore and fall out of history / the story."⁵ — and are confronted with 'marginal temporalities': that time 'on the run' which is eventually interrupted by the irruption of adolescence in *The State I Am in*, the search for an identity in *Ghosts*, and the temporal loops of the repetition compulsion in *Yella*. These people, who are being pushed out of society and do not know where to go, end up in 'transitional spaces, transit zones where nothingness looms on one side and the impossibility of returning to what existed in the past on the other.'⁶ Together with the other filmmakers belonging to the so-called Berlin School,⁷ namely Thomas Arslan and Angela Schanelec, Petzold has always reflected on the social, economic, and urban transformations that Germany underwent after reunification, which coincides with the period in which he studied at the German Film and Television

4 *The State I Am In* (*Die Innere Sicherheit*), dir. by Christian Petzold (Schramm Film Koerner & Weber, 2000); *Ghosts* (*Gespenster*), dir. by Christian Petzold (Schramm Film Koerner & Weber, 2005); *Yella*, dir. by Christian Petzold (Schramm Film Koerner & Weber, 2007).

5 'Sie werden nicht mehr gebraucht, fallen aus der Geschichte': Christian Petzold, 'Interview: Christian Petzold: "Gespenster irren herum"', *Rheinische Post, RP Online*, 12 September 2005 [my translation, C.N.] <https://rp-online.de/kultur/film/christian-petzold-gespenster-irren-herum_aid-17041845> [accessed 20 February 2021].

6 Marco Abel, 'The Cinema of Identification Gets on My Nerves: An Interview with Christian Petzold', *Cineaste*, 33.3 (Summer 2008) <<https://www.cineaste.com/summer2008/the-cinema-of-identification-gets-on-my-nerves>> [accessed 20 February 2021].

7 See Marco Abel, *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2013) and Jaimey Fisher, *Christian Petzold* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

Academy of Berlin (DFFB) to become a film director. As Benjamin Heisenberg — whom Marco Abel recognizes as a member of the Berlin School's second wave — has pointed out, this generation of filmmakers had to deal with the question of identity (both as an impossibility and as a rejection) and therefore with the need to account for the sudden changes of the country. Beneath the surface of an ostensible stasis, the Berlin School scrutinizes mundane movements and gestures which are not external revelations of a secret essence but rather survival strategies: 'It's not really about how people are hiding something; rather, it concerns how they become economic.'⁸

Among the protagonists of the trilogy, all women, it is Yella who is the 'real' ghost, doubly embodying Petzold's fascination with the ghost as the cinematic figure par excellence, since cinema can restore life to those who have lost a space for action. Yella no longer belongs to the GDR, she has not been given the opportunity to reclaim her history. She has no future unless she undergoes a process of assimilation in which she will learn and repeat the gestures of a 'new' economic system and its strategies. In Petzold's terms, cinema tells the stories of people who no longer belong anywhere, but who claim their right to belong to a history — to interact, to love, to desire; people who want to be there once again, in a space of transition (which, in *Yella*, becomes a metaphor both for German reunification and for the continuous reworking of the unconscious), even when this attempted redemption turns out to be an illusion, the enactment of a repetition compulsion.

Once in Hanover, Yella discovers that the job position was actually a scam and finds herself alone in her hotel room, having only her father's savings to rely on. Sitting on the edge of her bed, worried and looking for a solution, she is assaulted by Ben for the first time (is this a hallucination?). The man will continue to torment and attack her, making more than one attempt on her life. On more than one occasion she will ask for help from Philipp, a manager whom Yella meets in the hotel bar and with whom she will begin to work, learning the techniques and tricks of the negotiations of the marketing world. Although coming from a completely different context, Yella will immediately understand that the power of capitalist structures is based above all on

8 Fisher, *Christian Petzold*, p. 1.

the introjection and reproduction/reenactment of gestures, attitudes, poses, and tricks of the trade. After agreeing on the meaning of certain postures (leaning back in the chair with hands on the nape of the neck, certain words whispered in the ear), Yella and Philipp sit at the table of long negotiations, in front of their clients. Here Petzold — who always developed the scripts for his films together with the German documentary filmmaker Harun Farocki (until Farocki's death in 2014) — accurately reenacts parts of the two-hour negotiation session between the developer and the risk company that Farocki had documented in *Nothing Ventured*.⁹

One night at the hotel where the two continue to stay, after being attacked again by Ben, Yella takes refuge in Philipp's room, with whom she now begins a relationship. The morning after their first night together, Yella finally experiences a moment of domesticity, the only one, as she watches Philipp peel an orange with the same technique and attention as her father, but in fact the comfort of this image immediately becomes, once again, a sign that precedes the return of the repressed. Just as at the beginning of the film the affection with which her father peels the orange at breakfast is the last reassuring familiar gesture before Ben drives the car into the river, the second appearance of the orange, with Philipp's hands carefully removing the peel, anticipates a variation of the motif. Philipp confesses to Yella that he cheated to raise money to start a new business for which he still needs two hundred thousand euros. Determined to not repeat the same 'mistake' she made with Ben, Yella tries to avoid their downfall by blackmailing Dr Gunthen (Burghart Klaußner), seemingly rich (but actually broke) client who is already involved in Philipp's intricate plan. While waiting for the man to hand over the money sitting at the table with other clients, Yella has a strange, vivid vision: the soundscape disappears, the voices of the men sitting opposite her fade away, replaced by a piercing sound. She sees a tree shaken by the wind, a pond, and the image of Dr Gunthen with his hair and clothes soaked in water. She runs to the blackmailed man's house and, together with his wife, finds him face down in the lake in the lush garden. In the meantime, Philipp arrives and accuses Yella

9 *Nothing Ventured (Nicht ohne Risiko)*, dir. by Harun Farocki (Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, 2004).

of having driven the man to suicide with her threats. As she sits alone in the backseat of a cab, weeping silently with her head leaning against the car window, Yella finds herself back in Ben's car, just a moment before Ben deliberately swerves off the road. Just a 'minimal variation' occurs:¹⁰ this time Yella does not react, does not try to steer the wheel in the opposite direction. She stares at the man, the car crashes into the water.

The Wittenberg police pulls Ben's car out of the water and finds the bodies of Yella and Ben inside. They lay them on the riverbank, covering them with a silver cloth. The foliage of a large tree stirs over their bodies.

This story never took place: it reveals itself as a circular dream fallen into the river. Petzold mixes up past, present, future, and their oneiric re-elaboration to question the memory of a past, that of the GDR, vanished and *nachlebend*, which in his view has never really been constituted as history. Yella's story is a series of events we see but which never actually becomes memory, because it is a false future. Who is the subject who dreams it? Understanding the past archaeologically, in particular its moments of transition and transformation, as well as its relationship to the present, means staging its future possibilities, even those that were never actualized, even those that failed. This becomes possible only by conjuring up the minor voices, the ghosts on the margins of history that otherwise would not have had the strength to reappear. Yella is an involuntary dreamer, not free to alter reality through phantasy, but rather forced to confront the past reality inscribed in her unconscious in the constant work of *Durcharbeiten*, in the sense proposed by Sigmund Freud for the first time in 'Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten'.¹¹ Freud, after all, was a constant reference for Petzold both during the development of the screenplay and

10 Here I refer to Harun Farocki's notion of 'minimal variation'. Minimal variation consists in presenting the same fact or the same argumentative process more than once in the same film, every time slightly changed. According to Farocki these different layers together bespeak new problems and critical questions since they gradually undermine the spectator's faith in the previous image. See Harun Farocki: "Minimale Variation" und "semantische Generalisation", *film. Eine deutsche Filmzeitschrift*, 7.8 (August 1969), pp. 10–11.

11 Sigmund Freud, 'Weitere Ratschläge zur Technik der Psychoanalyse: II. Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten', in Freud, *Studienausgabe*, ed. by Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards, James Strachey, and Ilse Gubrich-Simitis, 11 vols

during the filming of *Yella*.¹² In the short 1914 essay, Freud describes the transition from the hypnosis method, which aimed to trigger an abreaction (i.e., an emotional discharge with a cathartic reaction), to free associations to discover what the patient could not remember, thus trying to let resistances emerge. If, under hypnosis, remembering produced a clear distinction between past and present and the patient never confused the previous situation with the present one, the psychoanalytic setting allows to re-enact, to re-actualize patterns and memories through the mechanisms of transference.

[W]e may say that the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action, he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.¹³

The patient does not remember having had a certain behaviour and certain reactions but re-actualizes and re-enacts them in the relationship with the therapist. Freud observes that this repetition, which he defines as repetition compulsion, is the primary way of remembering that the patient develops and maintains during therapy. The greater the resistance, the greater the extent to which remembering is replaced by enacting. The transference process is obviously not linear, but in turn encounters a great deal of resistance: the patient repeats past gestures and behaviours instead of remembering, or rather remembers by translating memory into gesture. So, according to Freud, the question is: what does the patient repeat or re-enact? The therapist must be able to observe symptoms and inhibitions in order to bring to the surface the repressed, which is enacted in the repetition compulsion, whose morbidity, far from ceasing with the beginning of therapy, rather becomes more acute. These symptoms are not to be treated 'as an event of the past, but as a present-day force'.¹⁴ Therefore, the task of the therapist is to carefully lead back into the past in which the patient

(Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1969–75), *Ergänzungsband: Schriften zur Behandlungstechnik* (1975), pp. 205–15.

12 Ficher, *Christian Petzold*, p. 104

13 Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), xii (1958), pp. 145–57, (p. 150).

14 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

experiences these symptoms as something real and present. Freud insists on emphasizing that hypnosis, a laboratory experiment, artificially suspends the struggle between past, present, and future, while the repetition compulsion that occurs in transference exposes the subject to the danger and vertigo of the clash between the different temporal dimensions. Precisely for this reason, as the treatment progresses, new forces can emerge that risk undermining the recovery. In this sense, the doctor's challenge is to keep all the impulses that the patient would like to move into the motor field within the psychic field.

We render the compulsion harmless, and indeed useful, by giving it the right to assert itself in a definite field. We admit it into the transference as a playground in which it is allowed to expand in almost complete freedom and in which it is expected to display to us everything in the way the pathogenic instincts that is hidden in the patient's mind.¹⁵

The transference creates a transitional space between illness and life, in which the repetition compulsion is transformed by the *working through*, which eventually allows the patient to open new unforeseen scenarios. For the analyst this in-between space allows her to partake in the reenactment of the illness, its symptoms, gestures, and language in the peculiar intersubjective context of the psychoanalytic setting. Over time, when the repetition compulsion is successively transformed by the *working through*, the space changes accordingly.

But in which way can the psychoanalytic setting be compared to the space unfolding in *Yella*? Would the analogy lead to the conclusion, that the analyst is the director, feeding the patient/audience with suggestions how to think? Or does it turn the audience into the role of the analyst, dissecting the psychic material of the director? Both ideas are misleading. Both setting and film create an imaginary and intermediary space in which the magmatic material can be looked at without the necessity to react to it as in real life. The director proposes an understanding of a conflict by re-enacting the conflict, shaping and framing it. That is of course different to the technique of free association — the film, on the contrary, presents a highly edited and thought-through result of phantasies related to a specific conflict, not necessarily by

15 Ibid., p. 154.

becoming consciously aware of the content of the conflict. If the film were to resolve the conflict, as it is the aim of psychoanalytic work, the film would collapse into banality. Petzold situates the subjects and objects that populate his stories in a setting constructed at the crossroad between a protected environment where the reenacted events are sheltered by the temporal and spatial coordinates of the plot and a place weathered by the unpredictable atmospheric agents of the present. The wind blowing on the treetops in *Yella*, as well as *Yella*'s hallucinations, become the 'material' trace of the clash between the past and the present — or rather the future that in fact never happened.¹⁶ Both *Barbara* and *Transit* are, in this respect, two emblematic examples of the temporal clash the German director aims to stage.¹⁷ By filming the characters of *Transit* (Franz Rogowski) — a story that takes place during the Nazi occupation of Paris — in the present-day streets of the French capital and in Marseille, Petzold intensifies the disorientation of the protagonist as well as their desperate yet failed attempt to support each other.

Petzold recounts that he once was struck by a sentence of François Truffaut's in which the French director, commenting on *La carrosse d'or*,¹⁸ criticized Jean Renoir for not having shot his historical films in a studio. If, in this film genre, the wind blowing in the images is the real one, the actual one, the scene simply does not work, because the story is substantially altered, interfered with. According to Truffaut, a completely artificial dimension must be created for historical films to be convincing and effective: 'And I believed that for a good while thinking that I could not make a historical drama because I simply cannot bear to be in the studio', Petzold confesses in an interview.¹⁹ At

16 Interestingly, Harun Farocki — in his video installation from 2012, *Parallel* — also shows an image of the wind blowing on a tree to reflect on the different ways in which films, on the one hand, and computer animation, on the other, (re)produce reality: 'animations are currently becoming a general model, surpassing film. In films, there is the wind that blows and the wind that is produced by a wind machine. Computer images do not have two kinds of wind.' <<https://www.harunfarocki.de/installations/2010s/2012/parallel.html>> [accessed 20 February 2021].

17 *Barbara*, dir. by Christian Petzold (Schramm Film Koerner & Weber, 2012); *Transit*, dir. by Christian Petzold (Schramm Film Koerner & Weber, 2018).

18 *La carrosse d'or* (*The Golden Coach*), dir. by Jean Renoir (Panaria Film, 1952).

19 Jaimey Fisher and Robert Fischer, 'The Cinema is a Warehouse of Memory: A Conversation Among Christian Petzold, Robert Fischer, and Jaimey Fisher', *Senses of Cinema*,

a certain point, however, the question arose as to whether Truffaut was wrong: whether the task of directors, of narrators, is not precisely that of reflecting on the past by exposing the characters to the atmospheric agents of the present in such a way as to reenact the past, inverting the relationship between what has been written, said, experienced and its present traces.

The question is not what does [Friedrich] Schiller have to say to us today, but rather what do we mean to Schiller? And I agree with this: the question is not what the GDR [East Germany] in 1980 means to us, but rather what do we, in the future, mean to the people in the GDR in 1980, who were living in a system in utter collapse.²⁰

The temporal circularity of *Yella*, or rather the series of events that will eventually turn out never to have happened — as in Petzold's latest work *Undine* (2020), whose themes are a direct continuation of the 2007 film — becomes an open question about the relationship between natural, mythical, and historical time. Particularly water becomes the *topos* in which hopes for happiness and stability are drowned and that pushes the characters back into the time of a repetition compulsion. Thus, Petzold is not afraid to go beyond the visible connections and rather uses the supernatural to counteract an idea of nature as a return to the origin, to open a critical breach in a reality that is too often content with faithful reproductions.²¹ However, the metaphorical level on which the film operates cannot and must not obscure the event around which the entire story unfolds and on which its circular structure insists: a collapsing economic and political system and a reflection on what it means to put back together the pieces of a country like Germany, avoiding the dynamic of a repetition compulsion on a historical scale. Beneath, within, at the beginning, and again at the end of this macro-analysis that makes use of small 'supernatural' interventions to explore the realm of the possible, of what could have happened, of what should not have happened, the film stages

84 (September 2017) <<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/christian-petzold-a-dossier/christian-petzold/>> [accessed 20 February 2021].

20 Ibid.

21 Clio Nicastro, 'Undine', *Filmidee*, 24 (October 2020) <<https://www.filmidee.it/2020/10/undine/>> [accessed 20 February 2021].

a murder, a femicide. Ben's envy towards his former wife's search for independence, his failing strategy to bind her to himself through coercing love turns into misogynistic rage and hatred. To allow other levels of filmic discourse to attenuate Ben's inability to accept that his ex-wife's life will flourish without him would marginalize what *Yella* puts right before our eyes, at the beginning and at the end of the film, once again. But at the same time, the powerful role of the violent act unfolds precisely in its ambiguous presence and distorted perception. Murder is the center of the film both historically and emotionally, but Petzold would take away the analytic process from the beholder if he were to reveal it. The audience, though, is lured into taking on Ben's deceptive perspective: he does not murder Yella since he kills himself *together* with her, perceiving her as a part of himself. This process of assimilation resonates with Petzold's attempt to crack the celebratory narrative of German reunification. The only character who is able to transform the compulsion to repeat is Yella. Through the *Traumarbeit* in her ghostly dream she is at least able to slightly change the order of events in a minimal variation: but paradoxically what differs in the final scene, when we witness the murder one more time, is the lack of any reaction to Ben's sudden swerve off the road.

Clio Nicastro, 'Unintentional Reenactments: Yella by Christian Petzold', in *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 101–11 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-21_11>

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