

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF
PENNSYLVANIA
Friday Film Fest Series



Transit

Directed by Christian Petzold

February 21, 2020

● 6:30 PM ●

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of Pennsylvania

611 Spring Garden St.

Philadelphia, PA 19123

Support provided in part by the
Philadelphia Cultural Fund.

The Philadelphia
Cultural Fund

Transit (2018)

Director: Christian Petzold
Novel: Anna Seghers
Screenplay: Christian Petzold, Harun Farocki
Music: Stefan Will
Camera: Hans Fromm
Editing: Bettina Böhler
Length: 101 Minutes
Cast: Frans Rogowski as Georg
Paula Beer as Marie
Godehard Giese as Melissa
Ronald Kukulies as Heinz
Lilien Batman as Driss
Barbara Auer as Architekt
Matthias Brandt as Wirt
Commentary: Karl Moehlmann



Transit

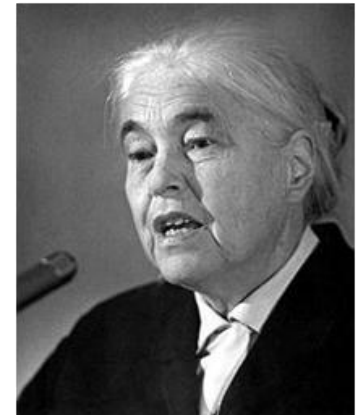
What is a transit paper? *“Ein Transit – das ist die Erlaubnis, ein Land zu durchfahren, wenn es feststeht, dass man nicht bleiben will.”* So if you are in France and you have a visa to Mexico but your ship will stop in the USA then you need a transit visa from the American Consulate because all countries are afraid that you might want to stay instead of passing through. You also need an exit visa from France (*visa de sortie*) and a ticket for the passage on the ship.

The protagonist in this story, named Georg, is a German anti-fascist and political refugee during the Third Reich who had escaped a German concentration camp in 1937 and fled to France. After German troops had invaded France in 1940 he flees from a French internment camp, hiding in Paris. Subsequently he is forced to move on to the city of Marseille in the south of France, which was retained by the Vichy government as unoccupied territory (*zone libre*). In Paris he had accidentally acquired a transcript, two letters and a visa to Mexico, all belonging to the German writer Weidel, who had committed suicide.

Arriving in Marseille he assumes the identity of Weidel when he visits the Mexican embassy and applies for a transit visa in the American Consulate. While waiting for his papers he meets Marie, the wife of the deceased writer. She is desperately looking for her husband. She had left him in Paris and is unaware of what happened to him. When Georg falls in love with her he is faced with an array of difficult questions: is he going to tell her the truth about her husband? Will he be able to convince her to leave with him when she is still committed to her husband? Will he board the ship by himself if she is unwilling to do so after she has been told that her “husband” has been visiting the Mexican and American Consulates and seems to be in town?

Anna Seghers

The film is based on the book of the same title by Anna Seghers (1900–1983). It is set in 1942 in France after the German invasion. It was first published in 1944 in English and Spanish and 1948 in German. Many aspects of the story are autobiographical. Being Jewish and a member of the Communist Party her life was particularly threatened after the Nazis had gained power in 1933. She emigrated to Paris in 1934 and then to Marseille when the German troops invaded France. Seghers left Marseille in March of 1941 on a freight ship and reached Mexico in November 1941, just before the German troops closed in on Marseille and the south of France. Her own experience and those of fellow German philosophers and writers are well referenced in her book.



Anna Seghers

Walter Benjamin, the German philosopher and essayist and also close friend of Seghers, committed suicide on September 25, 1940 at the Spanish border town of Portbou when his transit through Spain to Portugal was rescinded. Seghers refers to Benjamin in her book: *“In einem Hotel in Portbou jenseits der spanischen Grenze hatte sich in der Nacht ein Mann erschossen, weil ihn die Behörde am nächsten Morgen nach Frankreich hatte zurückschaffen wollen. ...Was hatte denn dieser Mann für unermessliche Hoffnungen an*

sein Reiseziel geknüpft, dass ihm die Rückfahrt unerträglich dünkte? Höllisch, unbewohnbar musste ihm das Land erschienen sein, in dem wir alle noch stecken, in das man ihn zwingen wollte zurückzukehren."



Ernst Weiss

The fate of the Austrian author Ernst Weiss (1882-1940), who was also of Jewish descent, may be the source for some aspects of Seghers' plot. Weiss committed suicide in Paris on June 15, 1940 when the Germans invaded the city. (Auf einer Gedenktafel an seinem Wohnort in Berlin steht: "Als Flucht vor den Nationalsozialisten wählte er den Freitod.") The narrator in Seghers' book describes the cause of the suicide of the German author Weidel in Paris as follows: "Ich dachte: Kein Mensch hat seine Geschichten mehr haben wollen, die Frau ist ihm

auch durchgegangen. Er war allein. Die ganze Welt brach zusammen, die Deutschen kamen nach Paris. Das war für den Mann zu viel. Da hat er Schluss gemacht."

Frei nach Anna Seghers

Christian Petzold, the director of the movie, made several changes to the original text by Anna Seghers that significantly altered the narrative perspective and the setting. In the book, Georg, the protagonist, tells his story in the first person, as an *Ich-Erzählung*. He remembers his childhood and songs by his mother. He recounts details of his escape from an internment camp as a political prisoner in Germany, the circumstances of his involvement with the German writer Weidel in Paris and the fear of persecution by the invading and advancing German troops in France.

He poignantly recalls his love for the wife of the deceased German writer and finally his state of mind when applying and waiting for visas and transit papers under the assumed identity of Weidel. A good portion of this *Ich-Erzählung* approach by Petzold's text actually reflects Seghers' own experiences, and does so with great insight and empathy. This approach gives the story a depth and authenticity that captures the interest of the reader from beginning to end.

In the film version of the story, Petzold allows the barkeeper of a café in Marseille to tell the story of Georg. When he inserts himself as narrator early in the movie, we don't know his identity. Only after Georg frequents the café do we find out who he is. "Georg hat keine Freunde, er zieht umher. Es musste jemand sein, dem Georg die Geschichte erzählt hat und der uns jetzt diese Geschichte weitererzählt, während wir diese Geschichte sehen. Deshalb ist es wichtig, dass der Barkeeper, den wir spät als Erzähler identifizieren, am Ende das Manuskript des Schriftstellers überreicht bekommt."

Petzold doesn't believe in *Ich-Erzählungen* in movies because the narrator is not talking to a lone subject reading the story but to a room with an audience. I remain skeptical if this change was necessary because of the different medium. The more objective, outside perspective of the bar keeper cannot possibly substitute the intense subjectivity of the protagonist nor can he be omniscient about Georg's feeling and state of mind while he waits for his transit visa.

A similar objection could be raised about the setting of the movie. Petzold did not film this story in historic sets based on 1942 France during the German occupation but in present day Paris and Marseille. You see and hear French police cars and police men, you see modern cars and buildings and people dressed in today's clothes. "Ich konnte mir vorstellen, dass jemand mit einem Anzug und Seesack am Hafen von Marseille langläuft, sich einmietet in ein Hotel und sagt: "In drei Tagen kommen die Faschisten, ich muss hier raus."

Filming this refugee story in modern day France will surely foreground the plight of the many refugees in Europe and around the world and point to the transitional character of life in general, but whatever you may think about the threat of rightwing extremists in Europe or elsewhere, it certainly will not compare to the terror of the German invasion of France and the persecution of refugees during the Second World War. A situation where you have three more weeks to board a departing ship or your life will be threatened ("Avignon wurde gesäubert. Die Lager wurden gefüllt. Die Deportationen begannen.") cannot adequately be instantiated (for the sake of the story we are being told) in a contemporary urban setting in a Western society.

Kafkaesque

There is also strong evidence that Seghers described the desperate situation of the various "Transitäre" in Marseille by alluding to the parable "Vor dem Gesetz" by Franz Kafka from his novel "Der Prozess". When Georg is asked by the American consul in Marseille what was the last text that he (Weidel) had written, Georg recalls the following passage: *"Ein Mann ist gestorben. Er soll sich in der Hölle melden. Er wartet vor einer großen Tür. Er wartet, einen Tag, zwei. Er wartet Wochen, Monate. Dann Jahre. Irgendwann geht ein Mann vorbei. Der Wartende spricht ihn an. "Vielleicht können Sie mir helfen. Ich soll mich in der Hölle melden." Der andere betrachtet ihn von Kopf bis Fuß. "Aber mein Herr! Das ist die Hölle hier."*

In Kafka's parable a man comes to the law and asks for entrance. The doorkeeper tells him that he cannot grant him entrance now. He gives him a stool and lets him sit next to the door. *"Dort sitzt er Tage und Jahre."* What for Kafka turns out to be a case of lies and deception on a grand scale, is here the horror of the "Transit-Welt, wo die Zeit stillzustehen und nur aus Warten zu bestehen scheint", reflecting the fleeting and transient nature of life itself.

Even at the very end, Georg continues to wait and hope. *"Marie konnte ja wieder auftauchen, wie Schiffbrüchige unversehens durch eine wunderbare Rettung an einer Küste erscheinen, oder wie der Schatten eines Toten mit Opfer und inbrünstigem Gebet der Unterwelt entrissen wird."* And just as he hopes against all odds and against all evidence, he can also imagine that she is still looking for her husband just like on the first day he saw her.

"Sie läuft noch immer die Straßen der Stadt ab, die Plätze und Treppen, Hotels und Cafés und Konsulate auf der Suche nach ihrem Liebsten. Sie sucht rastlos nicht nur in dieser Stadt, sondern in allen Städten Europas, die ich kenne, selbst in den phantastischen Städten fremder Erdteile, die mir unbekannt geblieben sind. Ich werde eher des Wartens müde als sie des Suchens nach dem unauffindbaren Toten." Thus in Petzold's interpretation, Georg's waiting and Marie's searching seem to have become the principle of life itself, even though the reason for the waiting cannot be rationally explained nor the subject of the search be objectively verified.

Upcoming Events

February:

29: 9th Annual Philly Bierfest, 2 PM

March:

3: Harold Glass Lecture - Creating New Drugs and Selling Them: The USA & Germany Compared, 6 PM

8: Wister & More- New World Recorders, 3 PM

11: Konversationsabend: The Bauhaus 100 Years, 6 PM

14: Buchclub- Mario und der Zauberer, 1:30 PM

15: Youth Chamber Music Showcase, 3 PM

20: Friday Film Fest - *Der Vorname*, 6:30 PM

31: German Script Workshop, 10:00 PM

April:

7: Philipp Stelzel - History After Hitler: A Transatlantic Enterprise, 6 PM

8: Konversationsabend: City Planning in the 21st Century, 6 PM

17: Friday Film Fest - *Trautman*, 6:30 PM

19: Wister & More - Duo Parisienne, 3PM

May:

10: Wister & More: The Academy of Vocal Arts, 3PM

13: Konversationsabend - The Healing Power of Music, 6 PM

15: Friday Film Fest - *Steig. Nicht. Aus!*, 6:30 PM