



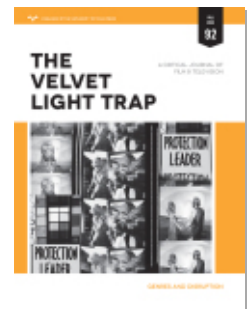
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Hanging On, Drifting Off, Treading Water: Christian
Petzold's *Undine* ; or, Toward an Awkward Romanticism

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The Velvet Light Trap, Number 92, Fall 2023, pp. 52-64 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press



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HANGING ON, DRIFTING OFF, TREADING WATER

Christian Petzold's *Undine*;
or, Toward an Awkward Romanticism

BY LUISE MÖRKE

ABSTRACT

This article positions Christian Petzold's feature *Undine* (2020) in relation to German Romanticism. It considers the film as a turning point in Petzold's oeuvre, offering a way out of alienation: love engenders a comportment that is radically different from the rules of existence dictated by capitalism, the schedules and demands that mold life into a rigid form. The fluidity of water, I argue, is an analogy for a different mode of life—a floating that mirrors his own desired mode of creativity and contemplation, described by him as “a state of hovering” and by others as “abeyance.” But who can float above the neoliberal city, and who must go on kicking to keep from drowning? Through this question, a different kind of romanticism can be glimpsed, one that is less resolved than *Undine* might suggest.

A FAIRY TALE FOR CAPITALISM

At the Spree a stronghold of glass and steel towers, where the historicist facade of Lehrter Bahnhof once impressed Berlin's travelers with its palatial splendor. The architecture of the city's main train station responds to the equally grandiose constructions that make up the government district

on the other side of the river. As a replacement for the Alsenviertel, which was destroyed in World War II, these well-guarded buildings oppose human dimensions with formidable immensity. Between politics and infrastructure, a line of cobblestones interrupts the sleek regularity of the pavement, reminding passersby of the wall that divided the city in two.

In this place, at once historic and anonymous, a key scene in Christian Petzold's film *Undine* (2020) takes place: the camera closely follows the two main characters as they walk in a loving embrace along the riverbank. The appearance of another couple ruptures their world-defying absorption. Despite feigning composure, Undine (Paula Beer) is noticeably unsettled by her recognition of the man as Johannes (Jacob Matschenz), a former boyfriend who left her at the beginning of



FIGURE 1. In passing, the two ex-lovers exchange furtive glances. Still from *Undine* (2020), directed by Christian Petzold.

the film for another woman. In passing, the two ex-lovers exchange furtive glances, then turn around briefly, as if to ensure that what they saw was not a mere trick of the eye. In this moment, suspended between present and past, new relationship and bygone passion, one thinks back to an earlier scene: “If you leave me I will have to kill you,” Undine had announced, countering the casualness of Johannes’s lunchtime breakup with the threatening absoluteness of a prophecy, true to the mythical curse associated with her name.

Petzold’s film, up to this point a lighthearted account of budding romance, consequently takes an uncanny turn that emphasizes the fantastical aspects of the story’s literary precedents. Relationships and temporality move on increasingly shaky ground: Johannes visits Undine at her workplace, the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, imploring her to renew their relationship. She refuses and later calls Christoph (Franz Rogowski), who unexpectedly accuses her of lying, saying he knew that the man they encountered was her ex-lover because he could feel her heart stop beating for a moment. The next day, Undine takes a train to see him and save their relationship but upon arrival is confronted by the fact that he was almost killed in a diving accident. Between the beeps of a pulse monitor at the hospital, Christoph’s colleague Monika (Maryam Zaree) angrily informs Undine that he had already been in a coma for several hours at the time of the alleged phone call. Distraught, Undine leaves on the train, rushing past trailer parks that line the tracks. She gets off near Johannes’s suburban villa and drowns her former lover in his fluorescent pool before walking into a nearby lake herself. The film then cuts to Christoph, who has recovered from the accident and is now on a hopeless quest to find Undine. She has vanished from her apartment and workplace. Undine’s former boss hardly remembers her name and impatiently informs Christoph that it would be impossible to keep up with the whereabouts of freelancers, who come and go in irregular patterns.

Scenes such as these exemplify how Petzold weaves neoliberal capitalism and its hold on relationships into his most recent film, while maintaining a fairy-tale-like atmosphere that pays homage to the mythos on which the story is based. The city he portrays is a conglomerate of transitional spaces and grand, sterile architecture, such as the oversized Kaufland store that is visible from the balcony of Undine’s generically minimalist, Airbnb-style apartment. The love between the two protagonists runs counter to the environ-

ment in which they live, defined by an emotional economy of breakups over coffee and noncommittal affairs, mirroring the structure of freelance employment. Petzold has described his film as a reenchantment of this landscape, a compensation for its mythological lack: “[All] fables and stories and complexities are removed from Berlin by architecture and neoliberal history. And so the habitat of an undine is also destroyed, that was my idea. . . . Films must reenchant the world that is disenchanting by capitalism. How can we extract a song from these things that lie dreaming, on and on?”¹

Undine is the first film of a trilogy in the making, all three parts of which will draw on German Romanticism. Its follow-up, *Roter Himmel* (Red sky), is set to be released in 2023.² Romanticism and fairy tales have been recurring themes in Petzold’s work: *Gespenster* (Ghosts; 2005) is inspired by the Brothers Grimm story “Das Totenhemdchen,” and *Die innere Sicherheit* (The state I am in; 2001) makes frequent reference to Heinrich Heine.³ *Undine*, however, is the first film in which Romanticism becomes central, more than just one of many references. This article examines the reworking of three Romantic motifs in *Undine*: enchantment, animated nature, and utopian love. I consider the explicit turn toward these themes within the context of Petzold’s oeuvre and argue that he attempts to portray a broken or refracted version of Romanticism by seeding doubt about the evidential character of images, as well by toying with a form of the sublime that overwhelms, induced by the confrontation with ideas and references that circulate as discursive currency.

Why does Romanticism resonate today? How are its motifs taken up and made relevant for current issues? These are questions that can also be brought to other recent films, such as Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) and Luca Guadagnino’s *Call Me by Your Name* (2017). Instead of deconstructing love, these films celebrate feeling as a realm of possibility and draw on eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century themes, texts, and motifs.⁴ In the conclusion, I will discuss how Petzold’s Romantic turn relates to his intended critique of neoliberal capitalism and the love and work relationships it engenders.

LITERARY PRECEDENTS

Petzold’s *Undine* adds to an array of works about otherworldly women who emerge from the water to lure land-bound men into a fatal game of attraction.⁵ Following older stories about

such romantic encounters between creatures and humans, the term “undine” first appeared in Paracelsus’s *Ex Libro de Nymphis, Sylvanus, Pygmaeis, Salamandris et Gigantibus, etc* (A book on nymphs, sylphs, pygmies, and salamanders, and on the other spirits; 1566), in which undines are characterized as creatures that can only acquire a soul by marrying a mortal human.⁶ This popular theme eventually found its most well-known expression in Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s novella *Undine* (1811), whose otherworldly subject matter and death-driven romance hit a nerve upon release.⁷ In Fouqué’s version, Undine’s husband falls in love with another woman, which forces the nymph to return to the water and kill her unfaithful lover with a kiss. Jean Giraudoux’s drama *Ondine*, a renewal of this story for the twentieth century, celebrated its premiere in 1939. According to Volker Mertens, the title-giving figure had by then evolved into a symbol of femininity, love, and artistic creation, forces that erupt into the mundane world to unsettle the “small souls” of simple humans.⁸ Like Giraudoux, Ingeborg Bachmann insisted on the story’s universality. In “Undine geht” (Undine goes), published in the prose collection *Das dreißigste Jahr* (The thirtieth year; 1961), the titular heroine is for the first time allowed to take the role of a narrator herself.⁹ She delivers an impassioned farewell speech to the world of men, replete with disappointment and emotional injuries. Bachmann stressed that her “Undine” was not only about gender roles but first and foremost an allegory of the creative capacity itself, stifled by violent language and cruel relations: “Undine is not a woman, not a living being, but, as Büchner would say, ‘art, oh art.’”¹⁰ When asked about his inspiration for the film *Undine*, Petzold has often referred to Bachmann’s version of the story, emphasizing how she is the only one “who has recognized that the curse is not a curse for the men but for the women, because women can only exist through men. Bachmann’s Undine does not want that anymore, and I believe that only [this refusal] can be the subject of a modern film.”¹¹ He locates the difference between his own work and traditional iterations of the myth in the nature of Undine and Christoph’s relationship, which, he says, is not based on a perception of the woman as a muse, damned to passivity and subjected to male desire.

Indebted to Bachmann’s “Undine geht” when it comes to gender relations, the myth’s Romantic legacy suffuses most other aspects of the film. Petzold developed a fascination with the tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann during his youth in North

Rhine–Westphalia. To this day, Petzold perceives encounters with Romanticism to be an inevitable part of life in Germany, where, he recounts, a poem by Joseph von Eichendorff might adorn the ceiling at a massage therapist’s practice.¹² This anecdote, in which an achy director pays a health worker to knead his muscles into a state of bliss, promised in painted verse above him, points to a tension inherent to *Undine*: the values of Romanticism—enchantment, love, oneness with nature—are obstinate desires that enmesh with as well as grate against reality.

PETZOLD’S ROMANTICISM

The difficulty, even impossibility, of defining the term “romanticism” and its employment across genres, nationalities, and times is by now a commonplace.¹³ Instead, the romantic can be thought of as a sensibility,¹⁴ a particular tinge in an artist’s view and experience of the world that may occur at different points in time, often as a critical response to “the challenge of the ever-accelerating modernization of European society.”¹⁵ The film *Undine* responds to this by returning to some of the most frequently cited characteristics of German Romanticism. The film is based on a folktale, a genre that was central to the Romantic project of rehabilitating myths in order to bring about a new dawn, a “Morgenröte,” of the arts.¹⁶ Petzold reiterates this connection between myth and the arts, claiming that “fairy tales can create a new world, where a wish can become reality. I believe that this is also what cinema is about.”¹⁷ Film, in other words, is a medium that can enchant an environment that otherwise lacks mythical appeal. Important to Petzold is the contrast between Undine’s existence as a nymph and the reality in which she moves. In order to thrive she would need landscapes with “fractures, swamps. Areas that make you scared, where people say at night: I don’t want to walk here, there is something.” Berlin, the director contests, is currently being purged of such places. Fissures and idiosyncrasies in the city fabric are eradicated and replaced with “retro-style” houses that smooth the frayed edges of Berlin’s identity by erasing unwelcome aspects of the city’s past.¹⁸ The reconstructed Prussian palace Berliner Schloss, which replaced East Germany’s modernist Palace of the Republic, with the highly questionable intention of “supplying Berlin’s eroded center with a spirit,” is the most prestigious example of this revisionism and a central theme in Petzold’s film.¹⁹

A NYMPH IN THE RESERVOIR

Undine also proposes an understanding of nature as the life world of elemental spirits, which enjoyed great popularity with writers such as Heinrich Heine, who published an essay titled “Elementargeister” (Elemental spirits) in 1837.²⁰ These spirits served as embodiments of nature’s creative energy, an important record of which is Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling’s *Von der Weltseele* (From the world soul; 1789), wherein the author evokes the “world soul” as the unification of spirit and matter and describes the animateness of nature.²¹ The association between *Undine* and the Romantic philosophy of animated nature is most apparent in the film’s final scene, two years after Undine’s disappearance. Enough time has passed for Christoph to recover from the loss and to find new happiness with his colleague Monika, who is expecting their first child. One morning, Christoph is torn from sleep at dawn. He leaves his partner and makes his way to a body of water, perhaps the same reservoir where Undine and he once spent a weekend together. In a state of noctambulation, he walks into the water and dives underneath the surface, while Monika watches from a distance, horrified. In the murky waters of the lake, Undine’s face appears. She hands a miniature diver to Christoph, established as a symbol of their love throughout the film, before he returns to land and comforts a terrified Monika. The point of view then switches: from the water, we now look out at the pair as they walk away together, holding hands. The camera is half submerged, and weak movement ripples the lake’s surface. More and more water fills the screen until Monika and Christoph vanish from sight and the image turns black. This perspective stands out from the rest of the film because it enacts a way of seeing that suggests the nonhuman, since the eyes of a mere mortal would twitch and tear up in this position, making it impossible to discern anything. The audience is thus led to assume that the camera perspective has been altered in order to show the world either from the perspective of Undine, from that of the water, or from the perspective of both, since they have merged into one.

In line with Romantic thought, this final scene can be understood as a reminder that in nature, invisible forces and elemental spirits reign. In contrast to the Romantic idealization of natural landscapes, however, Petzold adjusts the nature-culture relationship for the twenty-first century: while Fouqué separates one from the other—in his novella,



FIGURE 2. From the water, we look out at the couple as they walk away together, holding hands (*Undine*, 2020).

the self-contained darkness of a forest stands in contrast to the lively atmosphere of a town, where banquets and celebrations take place—*Undine* upends this division. The film’s protagonist is an elemental spirit as much as she is a city dweller; places that seem natural are actually shaped by industrialization and infrastructure. A poignant example of this is the Versetalsperre, one of more than seventy dams in North Rhine–Westphalia and the location of several scenes in the film.²² According to Petzold, constructions such as this one flooded “romantic villages. Above it already lies industrialization, the disenchantment of the world. . . . The walls look like ancient Gothic palaces, but were actually built to produce brutal steel.”²³ Petzold’s fascination with dams lies in the destructive force of an industrialization that has spun out of control and acquired an agency of its own, far mightier than those “romantic villages” that were eradicated in the name of progress. The Romantic vision of nature as the site of myth and origins thus bares its cracks. In *Undine*, the grand scale of industrialization creates mythical spaces and an artificial reservoir rather than an untouched lake houses elemental spirits. Romanticism’s infatuation with nature was a product of accelerating environmental destruction at the brink of modernity. Petzold’s fascination with the remnants of Germany’s industrial capitalism develops at a similar moment of transition: as production is increasingly outsourced and replaced by a service economy, its ruins become the sites of legends and folklore.

FLOATING LOVE, STEADY LOVE

A third point that inscribes Petzold’s film into a Romantic lineage is the figuration of love as a utopian state, where a passionate relationship takes on world-altering qualities.

In eloquent fashion, the director uses aquatic metaphors to capture the absorbed, otherworldly twosomeness of Christoph and Undine. According to Petzold, the actors were “floating above Berlin in a water glass of love,” and they “swam together—physically and intellectually” in even the least charming of places: quotes that reveal how he figures love as the transcendence of a disenchanting world.²⁴ Such an understanding of love is essential to Romanticism, exemplified by Friedrich Schlegel’s description of the lovers in *Lucinde* (1799) as being “one for another the universe,” a notion that is intimately connected to art.²⁵ Gerhard Kaiser writes that “just as the lover always circulates in thought around the object of his love, so Romantic literature circulates time and again around the object of its love, art.”²⁶ Both love and art are understood to induce a state of exaltation that approximates something beyond the immediately given, a view shared by the director, who has stressed the capacity of cinema to reenchant landscapes of industrialization, just as Christoph and Undine enchant their surroundings through their emotional states.²⁷

Petzold has explained his fascination with the kind of intense, absolute love that would provoke such statements as “If you leave me I will have to kill you” as a reaction to an emotional economy that has absorbed the neoliberal demand of uncommitted flexibility, forging deflated, “wishy-washy” relationships.²⁸ The permeation of love by capitalism has been a concern of Petzold’s since the early days of his career, most cynically expressed by Laura (Nina Hoss) in *Jerichow* (2009), who tells her lover (Benno Fürmann) that “it’s impossible to love each other if you don’t have any money.” Contrary to this proclamation, *Undine* suggests that romantic rapture is possible despite precarious circumstances. Unabashedly absorbed in their feelings for each other, Undine and Christoph feel at ease in even the most alienating of places. Their relationship circumvents the rules of existence dictated by schedules and demands that mold life into a rigid form. Passionate love, Petzold seems to say, has no truck with such drab rhythms. Its movements are water-like: flowing, floating, ungraspable, dissipating. Waves that give and take—but also open up to perilous depths.²⁹

A more steady kind of love is shown at the end of the film in a “two years after” episode dedicated to the relationship between Monika and Christoph. Despite the narrative’s bias in favor of Undine, Petzold portrays Christoph and Monika as a loving couple. Their relationship seems reassured, steady,

and future oriented—world preserving rather than world altering. Monika’s caring embrace of Christoph after the brief reunion with his former lover, the absence of jealousy or anger, suggests that their relationship is at eye level based on trust and understanding. The final scene shows the two of them walking away hand in hand, metaphorically into a future as a family of three. With *Undine*, Petzold gestures, for the first time in his oeuvre, toward a solution to the futureless conundrums that afflict so many of his previous characters—and that way out is love.

ESSAY FILMS FOR THE OVERWHELMED

A fascination with folktales, enchantment, animated nature, and the utopian potential of love have emerged as cornerstones of Petzold’s engagement with Romanticism. True to his proven strategy of combining sources and putting them in tension with each other, he claims that his reception of Romantic thought and motifs is not entirely straightforward: “If you think about it in more detail, all the shots that we filmed at the lake are actually images that reimagine German Romanticism by taking a detour via French Impressionism. But it isn’t Caspar David Friedrich, these aren’t the German Romantic images—they are already broken, through light, through resolution [*Auflösung*, which can also mean dissolution].”³⁰ More interesting than the equation of his film’s cinematography with Impressionist painting—a claim not necessarily deducible from the images themselves—is the worldview his comparison implies. Later in the same interview, Petzold singles out Édouard Manet as a source of inspiration for the film, a painter heralded for his ability to capture the alienation, flatness, and fleetingness of nascent modernity in a way that thrusts the viewer into a recognition of the indistinction between subject and form.³¹ What Petzold strives to get across with the statement is how his reception of Romanticism operates at a distance from its own point of reference, filtered through the social upheavals wrought by capitalist modernity and a dogmatic form of Enlightenment, deemed by him a “catastrophe.”³² Given this self-interpretation, I will argue that Petzold considers his work to be an attempt at enchantment that must constantly face its own boundaries, set by uninviting architecture and the imposition of the economy on time and relationships.

The assessment of *Undine* as depicting a broken Romanticism must be considered in light of the film itself. There

are two distinct ways in which *Undine* does indeed refract Romanticism—at least the transcendental aspect that Petzold sees in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich.³³ The first lies in the film’s dizzying number of references to other movies, literature, and history in a way that recalls the careful construction of an essay but that, as I will discuss, actually withholds the promise of profundity and intellectual resolve that essayistic constellations entail. Petzold is quick to disclose his direct and indirect citations in interviews, scattering them like a trace of crumbs left for audiences, critics, and researchers to pick up and follow. Points he proposes for further consideration with regard to *Undine* include the following: an old folktale, mediated through the reception of Fouqué, Bachmann, and Peter von Matt; German Romanticism, ruptured by Manet’s vision of modernity; the industrial architecture of North Rhine–Westphalia; and the urban history of Berlin, enigmatically described by Petzold as a “port city without the sea.”³⁴

As with Petzold’s previous films—all marked by the appearance of books, names full of literary weight, and allusions to other films—the narrative flow of *Undine* is thickened with references. One might unkindly deride this as a clever strategy to generate a large body of academic writing on his oeuvre and to supply the cultural elite—to which he, his critics, and many of his characters belong—with something to talk about at dinner parties.³⁵ More generously, one could attend to the dead ends and blockages that Petzold ushers in through the backdoor, via a cluster of citations. In a chapter on “The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime,” Neil Hertz introduces readers to a sense of the sublime that arises “out of sheer cognitive exhaustion, the mind blocked not by the threat of an overwhelming force but by the fear of losing count or of being reduced to nothing but counting—this and this—with no hope of bringing a long series or a vast scattering under some sort of conceptual unity.”³⁶ Hertz’s primary example for such confusion in the face of difficulty is the infinite stack of books one feels one must read before formulating a thought. According to his notion of the sublime, coming to terms with plurality actually generates a “curiously spare tableau: the mind blocked in confrontation with an unsettling and indeterminate play between two elements (here called ‘man thinking’ and ‘man reading’) that themselves resist integration.”³⁷

In an interview with the film scholar Marco Abel, Petzold has described the bafflement he felt when confronted with

a staggeringly extensive watch list in his early days as a filmmaking student. His description of the situation recalls Hertz’s blockage: “We watched a whole bunch of films and ceaselessly discussed them, so much that my head was spinning. It was a permanent state of crisis for me. . . . I was simply incapable of making a film. For more than two years I did not make a film. I merely watched and thought about what I saw.”³⁸ Petzold further recounts producing two essay films during this phase as attempts to follow in the footsteps of his teachers, Hartmut Bitomsky and Harun Farocki, but he says he quickly realized he could not stand the isolation this kind of work led to. Despite his subsequent turn to narrative forms, fueled by a frequently stated “desire for cinema,” essayistic thinking winds through Petzold’s films to this day.³⁹ But whereas in an essay “thought acquires its depth from penetrating deeply into a matter,” Petzold’s films often glide over the surface of the objects they allude to.⁴⁰ Mining for more, one suspects that the pickaxe is actually hitting away at nothing but air.

In *Undine*, the catfish Gunther provides a poignant example of this: given his mythologically charged name, borrowed from the *Nibelungenlied*, and the mysterious circumstances of his sudden underwater appearances, it seems as if this character should indeed be one of those essayistic “elements that crystallize into a configuration,” perhaps an allegory that lends itself to productive exploration.⁴¹ But Gunther is hardly more than a gimmick: Petzold himself has admitted that the catfish first and foremost came into virtual existence because he was excited about the idea of having a large, CGI-animated creature appear in a film by a director of the Berlin School—usually known for understatement rather than costly gestures.⁴²

Similar doubts about substantiality arise when Undine delivers her presentation on the reconstruction of Berlin’s Prussian palace to Christoph. Her speech concludes in a



FIGURE 3. Gunther is hardly more than a gimmick (*Undine*, 2020).

muted voice, whispered into her lover's ear as the two embrace on the balcony, surrounded by night and city lights: "In the center of Berlin now stands a museum in the shape of an eighteenth-century palace, built in the twenty-first century. The deception lies in the assumption that this does not make a difference, which is roughly the same as saying that progress is impossible. That, at least, is a statement, even though we might not like it." At first, these words seem revelatory. The setting of the scene—a view of the city, piano music, the intimacy of the night—suggests that something truly thought provoking must have been said, something that rises up to the intimacy of the shared moment between Undine and Christoph. The actual speech, however, caters to its purpose, a brief overview for tourists, and echoes the countless semi-interesting newspaper articles and panel discussions that the controversial reconstruction of the palace has generated over the last two decades. What Undine says in this scene has become a banality, quick facts and brief summaries of history exchanged for some cultural capital in the market of discourse.

In *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*, Sianne Ngai has laid out "the suspicion of fraudulence" that accompanies the blending of essay and narrative in the novel of ideas.⁴³ Petzold's films adhere to this technique, sometimes citing whole passages from a book such as W. G. Sebald's *Die Ringe des Saturn (The Rings of Saturn)*—itself a novel of ideas that spirals around the dissolution of meaning—or incorporating an academic voice, as in *Undine*. Ngai argues that such idea-driven artworks come under suspicion of being gimmicky, of "working too little . . . or too hard," because they point to the reification of thoughts and discourses that appear as ready-made conversation pieces and thereby encode the "economically ambiguous image of production and circulation" of ideas as artifacts.⁴⁴ Allegory, dialogue, and direct speech are employed in order to get to the heart of an idea, but each technique ends up failing "to achieve the integration for which it was summoned," preventing the artwork from having an absorptive effect on its audience.⁴⁵

Petzold's account of being overwhelmed by the sheer number of films to watch at the German Film and Television Academy Berlin gives reason to believe that what led him to direct idea-driven narrative films was a confrontation with the mundane kind of sublime that is produced, as Neil Hertz helps us understand, by the ever-growing market of globally

circulating ideas. Petzold's response to this predicament entails a turn toward narrative, scavenging "the cemetery of genre cinema, [and making films] from the remainders that are still there for the taking."⁴⁶ Storytelling allows him to touch on many objects of thought without having to achieve the "density of . . . texture" an essay would aspire to, since the narrative arc propels the unfolding of the storyline forward.⁴⁷ By liberally selecting from a pile of references, Petzold inscribes his films into circulating discourses and feeds his work into a market of ideas that is a part, even the motor, of the very system that overwhelmed his younger self. His success is partly due to the intellectual bait he throws out in countless interviews and throughout the films themselves: hungry critics bite, write, and thus inscribe his films into the "head-spinning" economy of ideas. But behind the many possible connections between *Nibelungenlied*, urban renewal, and water metaphors lingers a suspicion that the disparate elements in Petzold's films will, pace Adorno, never actually "crystallize into a configuration." What one might deem a failure of profundity is rooted in the absence of a unity that would connect these nuggets of knowledge to one another. They are fragments that fracture rather than illuminate the whole—first and foremost exchangeable goods and intangible commodities. This is the first way in which Petzold reimagines Romanticism: by rendering how the dream of totality shatters under economic pressure.

EMPTY IMAGES

The second way relates to the nonalignment between what is shown and how it is shown. Petzold's films, I argue, contain an uncertainty or mistrust regarding the capacity of images to accurately represent, to stand their ground as evidence. The credibility of representations is undermined at the very beginning of *Undine*, when Christoph introduces himself by expressing admiration for the presentation he claims he has just listened to. During the speech, however, Christoph was noticeably absent from the group, shown in its entirety from the perspective of Undine entering the room. The small detail of his apparent absence sows a seed of irritation in the viewer, instilling an awareness that what follows might not always align with claims and expectations.

The discrepancy between image and supposed actuality becomes especially apparent in two scenes that contain material from the underwater camera attached to Christoph's

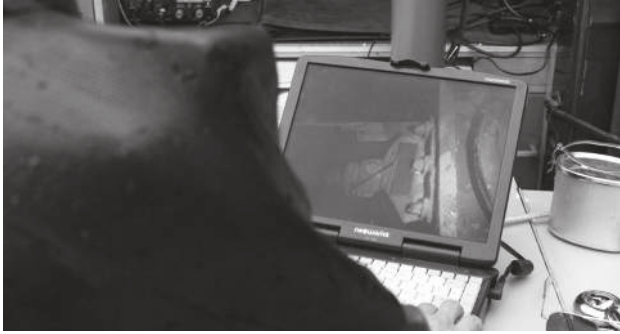


FIGURE 4. An “empty image” stands in for the sight of his lover (*Undine*, 2020).

diving gear. About twenty minutes into the film, he first comes face-to-face with the catfish Gunther, an encounter his two colleagues refuse to believe until he shows them video evidence on the computer. They react with disinterest, their capacity for enthusiasm perhaps subdued by the ubiquity of sensationalist images in the media. At the end of the film, Christoph is again working on the same turbine when the sudden sight of a woman’s hand caressing his own prompts him to look up. The woman is, of course, Undine, looking like a ghostly version of herself. She slowly floats away, then swims out of sight with a few forceful strokes. Back on land, Christoph rushes to the car to review the underwater video footage, only to see . . . nothing. The darkness of the lake fills the screen, and neither hand nor body are visible. An “empty image” stands in for the sight of his lover.⁴⁸

Petzold frequently incorporates noncinematic representations into his films, such as surveillance-camera footage in *Die innere Sicherheit* and *Wolfsburg* (2003), a Rembrandt painting in *Barbara* (2012), and a computer-generated phantom image in *Gespenster*. This self-reflective insertion of images prompts the question of evidence: Is what we see as true as we think it is? In the case of the underwater camera, a cleft opens up between Christoph’s astonishment, as wide-eyed as one can be underneath a diving mask, and actuality. While for him, the catfish’s unforeseen emergence from the dark creates a dreamlike encounter between laboring man and the floating object of regional myth, neither his account nor the footage convey this experience. The camera images verify his claims but fail to capture the invisible significance of this brief moment, like mediocre photographs of an extraordinary vacation. When Undine appears two years after Gunther, a similar situation arises: once again, the camera on Christoph’s gear fails to capture what has happened. This

time, however, both he and the audience are led to doubt the actuality of what he has seen, even though Paula Beer as Undine was, in contrast to the catfish, actually present during filming.

According to David Morgan, “haunting [happens] where enchantment has been banned or suppressed,” and phantoms appear as “nagging forms of memory that refuse to let the past go away.”⁴⁹ While *Undine* does temporarily haunt the lake and her lover’s imagination, this haunting is resolved in the final scene, when she provides artifactual evidence of her existence in the form of a miniature diver that she hands to Christoph. Doubts concerning the actuality of his vision are resolved by this token that can be carried over from water—flowing, unsteady, murky—to more stable ground on land, where hard facts demand visible truths. The final scene thus establishes a certainty that the preceding film worked to dissolve: the credits roll in, accompanied by a sense of certainty that Undine is alive and did in fact appear to Christoph. The reservoir, haunted by a spectral past and the lost future of utopian love, thus turns into an enchanted site of remembrance, and the cinematic image is redeemed as a site of truth: what Christoph and the audience saw underwater is true, and Undine does exist. This is a concession Petzold’s previous films did not make. *Gespenster*, for example, ends when the protagonist throws away a phantom image of herself, dismissing the possibility that she, the lost baby and unburied daughter, could ever rise from the dead and fill the “empty image” with her presence by returning to the mourning parents.

HANGING ON, TREADING WATER

The question that inaugurated Petzold’s career in cinema was, How can we hang on to a dream? The wistful phrase is not just the title of a song that Jeanne (Julia Hummer) plays on the jukebox at a dingy beach bar during the opening scene of *Die innere Sicherheit* but also captures the aporia that torments her parents, left-wing terrorists who have been on the run for fifteen years. The song appears again as the credits roll, right after a terrible car accident has most likely left Jeanne orphaned. There is a numbing melancholy to it now. The dream, it seems, is dead, reduced to a wrecked pile of metal in the ditch. Despite familial ties, the teenage girl does not share her parents’ political radicalism, having been exposed to its fraught edges, impracticability, and internal contradictions.



FIGURE 5. A feeling of vacuity creeps in as Jeanne's gaze goes out into the sunlit field. Still from *Die innere Sicherheit* (2000), directed by Christian Petzold.

When helicopters and black limousines, harbingers of a faceless sovereign, arrive on the scene, they extinguish a dream that was already crushed by the oppression and violence within the private realm of the nuclear family.⁵⁰ A feeling of vacuity creeps in as Jeanne turns her gaze toward the sunlit field. What now? The question hangs in the hazy summer air, applying to Jeanne as much as to the recently reunified nation right at the turn of the millennium.

The chords of “How Can We Hang On to a Dream?” would also make an appropriate companion to the final minutes of *Undine*. Christoph's emergence from the water marks his awakening from a somnambulant state that lured him in the direction of the reservoir and made him return to Undine. The dream that he has trouble letting go of is the love between human and nymph, the floating enchantment that accompanied their movements together and that ended with his lover's sudden disappearance. In sharp contrast to *Die innere Sicherheit*, however, Petzold's latest film proposes a soothing, perhaps sedating, answer to the predicament of agonizing melancholia. The film's final scene reconciles dream and reality: released into the future by Undine, Christoph can walk away into a different kind of happiness, fostered by the nuclear family that he, Monika, and their unborn child will become. Holding on to the miniature diver as a token of his past, the former relationship no longer haunts him as a lost future, but can be commemorated and made peace with as a bygone time of romantic enchantment.

That *Undine* places conciliatory optimism in the family-building future of its human protagonists comes as a surprise, given earlier statements by Petzold on his generation's view of the family unit as “the smallest cell of the state, of fascist structures . . . the biggest piece of shit imaginable,” and

the fact that all of his previous films deal with fractured families and relationships.⁵¹ This shift in attitude goes hand in hand with Petzold's unprecedented emphasis on the floating, enchanted state in which his characters move through the story. Such a “Schwebezustand” was singled out by Jaimey Fisher in his 2013 monograph on Petzold. He translated the term as “abeyance” and connected it to the enduring state of crisis that, according to Fisher, permeates all of Petzold's films.⁵² The difference between Fisher's “abeyance” and the term “floating,” as it is frequently employed with regard to *Undine*, is insightful: while the former implies a hardly bearable impasse, the latter suggests a dreamy weightlessness that places the story in a sphere above the physical world. Love cuts the protagonists loose from gravity, the weight that pulls us to the ground no matter how hard we try to transcend it. Despite Petzold's skepticism toward such a transcendence, *Undine* remains a film that places utopian ambitions in the ephemeral state of floating, a sign that his neo-Romantic turn entails an emphatic belief in the utopia of love that runs the risk of ridding emotions of their material implications.

This tendency marks a countermovement to Lauren Berlant's grappling with neoliberal working conditions (such as those Undine is subjected to as a tour guide) in *Cruel Optimism*. Like Petzold, Berlant is drawn to aquatic metaphors but veers in a different direction than floating. Berlant sees everywhere “a life dedicated to moving toward the good life's normative/utopian zone but actually stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding onto the ledge, treading water.”⁵³

One could judge Petzold's departure from protagonists who are treading water in isolation, as in *Die innere Sicherheit*, for characters who are floating enchantedly above the mundane and the ugly as the director having drifted off into an unworldly slumber for good, perhaps induced by his preferred way of conceptualizing projects “lying down, when half asleep.”⁵⁴ Or one could herald the desired condition as a state of “recessive action, an orientation toward active rest that can be a resource for living on without projecting false futures and pasts into the faux-sovereign world of events,” which is a concept Berlant borrows from Anne-Lise François, a scholar of Romantic literature.⁵⁵ The subversive potential of such recessive action rests on the assumption that the affective atmospheres of a historical situation are shared and that they consequently pave a way beyond “a bourgeois mode of

sensational self-involvement.”⁵⁶ The cleft between these two judgments of floating—as either unworldly slumber or active rest that enables heightened attention and receptiveness to others—mirrors the divisive opinions the inconsequential nature of the Romantic project continues to provoke.⁵⁷ Films that seize upon Romanticism today must show awareness of the tension between enchantment and its impossibility, escapism and recessiveness. *Undine* successfully navigates the pull in both directions, until its redemptive end gives in to the promise of truth, love, and family-building futurity.

What distinguishes the floating state in *Undine* from *Cruel Optimism*'s embrace of recessive action is that Berlant would be skeptical of the possibility of hovering *above* the neoliberal city, which is how Petzold has described the absorptive state of his lovers. Berlant's book is assembled around the awareness that this path is hardly open to all, especially the many who are treading water every day, working odd jobs, trying to assemble a life worth living. If there is a remnant of Romanticism left in and by this assessment of neoliberalism, it is an awkward one: floating sideways rather than in the elevated heights of love and enchantment, walking off into a better future that does not rely on the waning promise of a good life the nuclear family offers. A contemporary form of romanticism would have to take this into account in order to avoid the artful escapism that even *Undine* is not quite free from.

About the Author

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Notes

1. Christian Petzold, "Die entzauberte Welt wieder verzaubern," interview by Jochen Müller, *Blickpunkt Film*, February 21, 2020, <https://beta.blickpunktfilm.de/details/448223>. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

2. See "Christian Petzolds *Roter Himmel* entsteht an MVs Ostseeküste," *MV Filmförderung*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.mv-filmfoerderung.de/allgemein/petzold-roter-himmel/>. By the time this article is published, *Roter Himmel* will have been released.

3. I have written in more detail elsewhere about Petzold's relation to literature: see Luise Mörke, "Hard Cover: Christian Petzold, Reader/Director," *Mubi Notebook*, May 13, 2021, <https://mubi.com/de/notebook/posts/hard-cover-christian-petzold-reader-director>.

4. Sciamma's film is set in the eighteenth century, and the cinematography, especially the scenes on the beach, often resembles Romantic paintings, such as those of Caspar David Friedrich. *Call Me by Your Name*'s recovery of an ancient statue in the lake recalls eighteenth-century odes to Italy as a place that united ancient culture and alluring nature, as in Goethe's *Italienische Reise* (Italian journey; 1816–1817). For a discussion of neo-Romanticism in *Undine*, see Linda Waack, "Neo-Romantik und Richtungsutopie: Aufatmen in Christian Petzolds *Undine*," in *Digital Gender—De:mapping Politics*, ed. Julia Bee, Irina Gradinari, and Katrin Köppert (Leipzig: Spector Books, forthcoming).

5. Filmic iterations of the *Undine* story include *Undine* (Henry Otto, 1916), *Undine 74* (Rolf Thiele, 1974), *Undine* (Eckhart Schmidt, 1991), and *Ondine* (Neil Jordan, 2009). Petzold has watched these films, but they are very far from his own approach to the material.

6. Paracelsus, *Four Treatises*, ed. Henry E. Sigerist (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1941).

7. For a selective overview of stories concerning romances between humans and soulless creatures during this time, see Volker Mertens, "Melusinen, Undinen: Variationen des Mythos vom 8. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert," in *Festschrift Walter Haug und Burghart Wachinger*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2012), 201–31.

8. See Mertens, 228.

9. This is also the case in Seamus Heaney's 1969 poem "Undine." Seamus Heaney, *Door into the Dark: Selected Poems* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1980), 56.

10. Ingeborg Bachmann, *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden: Gespräche und Interviews*, ed. Christine Koschel and Inge von Weidenbaum (Munich: Piper, 1983), 46.

11. Christian Petzold, "Ich mag keine Sex-Szenen," interview by Teresa Vena, *Berliner Filmfestivals*, February 29, 2020, <https://berliner-filmfestivals.de/2020/02/interview-mit-christian-petzold-regisseur-von-undine>.

12. Petzold remarks, "One could enchant them again, these terrible towns, with the help of local libraries and German Romanticism. It became possible to imagine secrets behind the thick walls." Christian Petzold, "Christian Petzold und Knut Elstermann über *Undine*," interview with Knut Elstermann, *Lola Talk: Der Filmpreis Podcast*, April 11, 2020, https://lola-talks.simplecast.com/episodes/s01e06-lola-talk-petzold-E8v_Huht. His self-description as a "Romanticist" as well as the Joseph von Eichendorff anecdote stem

from an interview with *Blickpunkt Film*, cited in the first footnote of this text.

13. See Sandra Kerschbaumer and Stefan Matuschek, "Romantik erkennen—Modelle finden: Zur Einführung," in *Romantik erkennen—Modelle finden*, ed. Kerschbaumer and Matuschek (Paderborn, Germany: Schöningh, 2019), 1–2. Arthur O. Lovejoy's formulation, cited frequently since its publication in 1924, states that "the word 'romantic' has come to mean so many different things that, by itself, it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign." Arthur O. Lovejoy, "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms," in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, 2nd ed., ed. M. H. Abrams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 6.

14. I borrow the term "sensibility" from Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), 1–2.

15. Christoph Bode, "European Romanticisms and the Form(s) of Historicity," in Kerschbaumer and Matuschek, *Romantik erkennen—Modelle finden*, 134.

16. Karl-Philipp Moritz, *Werke II*, ed. H. Günther (Frankfurt: Insel, 1981), 614. For an introduction to German Romanticism's quest for a "New Mythology," see Detlef Kremer and Andreas B. Kilcher, *Romantik* (Stuttgart: Springer, 2015), 108–13. For an overview of the German Romanticists' engagement with folktales, see Kari Lokke, "The Romantic Fairytale," in *A Companion to European Romanticism*, ed. Michael Ferber (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2017), 138–56.

17. Quoted in "Undine Presseheft," *Undine Piffel Medien*, accessed March 6, 2021, http://undine.piffel-medien.de/downloads/artwork-texte/Undine_PH_Dt_DS_4MB.pdf.

18. This, as well as the previous reference to "reenchantment" (*wieder verzaubern*), can be found in Christian Petzold, "Sie haben ihre Figuren getanzt," interview by Bela Akunin, *Kunst + Film*, July 2, 2020, <https://kunstundfilm.de/2020/07/interview-petzold-undine/>.

19. Horst Bredekamp, "Warum der identitäre Wahn unsere größte Bedrohung ist," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 8, 2021, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/postkolonialismus-schaedigt-antikoloniale-vernunft-17232018.html>.

20. See Heinrich Heine, *Elementargeister*, ed. Florian Trabert (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2013).

21. See Kremer and Kilcher, *Romantik*, 61.

22. See Hans-Joachim Neubauer, "Es geht ums Ganze—um die Liebe," *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, February 24, 2020, https://www.saarbruecker-zeitung.de/nachrichten/kultur/undine-von-christian-petzold-bei-der-berlinale_aid-49157935.

23. Christian Petzold, "Undine: Das Interview mit Christian Petzold, Teil 1," interview by Sven Martens, August 28, 2020, *Outnow*, <https://outnow.ch/News/2020/08/28/Undine-Das-Interview-mit-Christian-Petzold-Teil-1#:~:text=Der%20zweite%20Grund%20war%2C%20dass,blauen%20Stahl%2C%BB%2C%20den%20Sensenstahl>.

24. Christian Petzold, "Der Mensch geht ans Wasser," interview by Anke Leweke, *Taz*, June 27, 2020, <https://taz.de/Christian-Petzold-ueber-seinen-Film-Undine/!5692777/>; Petzold, "Sie haben ihre Figuren getanzt." In the latter interview, Petzold states, "Franz and Paula manage to enchant the places in the film once again: A terrible Airbnb apartment suddenly becomes beautiful. The lecture that she gives becomes enchanting and sexy. As if the apartment were set under water like a bucket and the two were swimming in it."

25. Quoted in Kremer and Kilcher, *Romantik*, 131. The authors point out the impossibility of the Romantic ideal of eternal love, calling it an "exclusive model for a Romantic avantgarde and elite. The many requirements of romantic individuality, the psychological refinement of a thoroughly reflected, ironic self-consciousness, is repeated at the level of sociality and on the level of Romantic love" (132). This stipulation seems important if one wants to understand the implications and limitations of Petzold's conceptualization of love.

26. Gerhard Kaiser, *Literarische Romantik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2010), 13.

27. For example, according to Petzold, Michelangelo Antonioni's images of Turin and Milan "manage to reenchant these cities. That is what cinema can do." Petzold, "Sie haben ihre Figuren getanzt."

28. "I wanted to counter wishy-washy love stories à la 'I met someone else and now want to break up,' with something rigorous." Petzold, "Sie haben ihre Figuren getanzt."

29. Water has also been evoked to signify the opposite, the rush and throng of modern life rather than the tranquil floating that Petzold evokes. Marshall Berman notes that "the maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources . . . bearing and driving all these people and institutions along an ever-expanding capitalist world market." Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 16. In *Undine*, the dangerous force of water is contained in the turbine that finally sucks Christoph into its blades and almost kills him. I am not suggesting that this turbine functions as a metaphor for modernity or capitalism, analogous to Berman's maelstrom, but I do believe that it offsets the harmlessness of Petzold's rhetorics about water with a hint toward the element's destructive violence, which is also the flip side of the cursed nymph Undine. One could understand this as the director's way of outlining the limits of his own aquatic utopia that comes to an end in the more landlocked relationship between Monika and Christoph.

30. Christian Petzold, "Feinfühlinger Geschichtenerzähler," interview by Piffel Medien GmbH, *Der Freitag*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.freitag.de/produkt-der-woche/film/undine/feinfuehlinger-geschichtenerzaehler>.

31. For a classic analysis of Manet's modernist project, see T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

32. Talking about his inclusion in *Barbara* (2012) of a lengthy passage by W. G. Sebald on Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, Petzold

has said, “By way of the Rembrandt painting we suggest what a catastrophe the objectification of the Enlightenment is in day-to-day politics.” Christian Petzold, “Eingetrübte Romantik,” interview by Jens Hinrichsen, *Monopol*, March 6, 2012, <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/eingetr%C3%BChte-romantik>.

33. In an interview on *Barbara*, Petzold answers a question concerning his appreciation of Romantic painting as follows: “Caspar David Friedrich, yes, but only in the way in which Gerhard Richter transforms Friedrich. In Romanticism, there still is a god. Richter cites Romanticism, knowing that the sublime does not exist anymore.” Petzold, “Eingetrübte Romantik.” That said, it remains important to point out that Petzold’s idea of Romanticism is surely not as complex as scholarship would have it: one could, for example, infer that his secularized approach brings forth an ironic tendency, which also runs through Romanticism, faced with the impossibility of the striving toward the unification of paradoxes. See Heinz Gockel, “Friedrich Schlegels Theorie des Fragments,” in *Romantik: Ein literaturwissenschaftliches Studienbuch*, ed. Ernst Ribbat (Bodenheim: Athenäum Verlag, 1979), 28.

34. Petzold, “Ich mag keine Sexszenen.”

35. According to Petzold, the protagonist in *Barbara* is a woman “with a socially advantaged background and a clear sense of status.” Christian Petzold, “Zwischen Gestern und Morgen,” interview by Ralf Schenk, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, March 7, 2012, <https://www.fr.de/kultur/tv-kino/zwischen-gestern-morgen-11329540.html>. He has also described the couple in *Gespenster*, who cope with the trauma of losing their child by listening to the music of Bach, as being a part of the “Bildungsbürgertum.” This term translates to “education bourgeoisie” and refers to a class of people who are often employed by the state and hold power through cultural capital rather than by possessing the means of production—professors, teachers, doctors, et cetera. Implicitly, he also includes himself in this class, recounting how he spent a very “formative summer” listening to Bach’s cantatas and “grasping something” in the process. Christian Petzold, “Gespenster irren herum,” interview by Agence France-Presse, *Rheinische Post Online*, September 12, 2005, https://rp-online.de/kultur/film/christian-petzold-gespenster-irren-herum_aid-17041845. As a historian with a doctorate who has no stable employment, Undine represents the decline of this class and its replacement by flexible cultural workers.

36. Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 40.

37. Hertz, 44.

38. Christian Petzold, “The Cinema of Identification Gets on My Nerves,” interview by Marco Abel, *Cineaste* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2008): <https://www.cineaste.com/summer2008/the-cinema-of-identification-gets-on-my-nerves>.

39. See Petzold, “Cinema of Identification.” See also Christian Petzold, “Filme schauen und Fieber messen,” interview by Liane von Billerbeck, *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, September 2, 2020,

https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/christian-petzold-zum-filmfestival-in-venedig-filme-schauen.1008.de.html?dram:article_id=483441.

40. See Theodor W. Adorno, “Essay as Form,” in *New German Critique*, no. 32 (Spring/Summer 1984), 159. In the German original, the phrase emphasizes the importance of depth/profundity for Adorno through repetition: “Der Gedanke hat seine Tiefe danach, wie tief er in die Sache dringt, nicht danach, wie tief er sie auf ein anderes zurückführt.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Der Essay als Form,” in *Deutsche Essays: Prosa aus zwei Jahrhunderten*, vol. 1, ed. Ludwig Rohner (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1972), 70.

41. Adorno, “Essay as Form.”

42. See Christian Petzold, “Über Undine,” interview by Knut Elstermann, *Lola Talk: Der Filmpreis Podcast*, season 1, episode 6, April 11, 2020, https://lola-talks.simplecast.com/episodes/s01e06-lola-talk-petzold-E8v_Huht.

43. Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 109. Ngai’s example for the inclusion of other texts in the novel of ideas is *Doctor Faustus*, into which Thomas Mann “liberally splices” paragraphs from Adorno’s essays on Schoenberg and Beethoven (106). A few pages later, Ngai makes an explicit connection between the novel of ideas and German Romanticism’s investment in fragments, quoting Claire de Obaldia’s book *The Essayistic Spirit* in saying that it arises from a “uniquely self-conscious intellect and an equally self-conscious anti-intellectualism” (110).

44. Ngai, 1, 105.

45. Ngai, 105.

46. Petzold, “Cinema of Identification.”

47. Adorno, “Essay as Form,” 160.

48. Daniel Eschkötter points out that “the empty image and its absolute *hors-champ* as non-place of the (unburied)” has appeared in other Petzold films as well, notably *Gespenster* and *Wolfsburg* (2003). Daniel Eschkötter, “Phantombilder der abstrakten Existenz: Die Szene der Überwachung bei Christian Petzold,” in *Public Enemies: Film zwischen Identitätsbildung und Kontrolle*, ed. Winfried Pauleit (Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2011), 97. But whereas the protagonist in *Gespenster* throws away the computer-generated phantom images of herself and thereby dismisses the possibility that the “unburied daughter” can rise from the dead, *Undine* ends by filling the void of the empty image in the final scene with the miniature diver, which gives material proof of the past.

49. David Morgan, “Enchantment, Disenchantment, Re-Enchantment,” in *Re-enchantment*, ed. James Elkins and David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2009), 5. I am thinking in this context also of Mark Fisher’s interpretation of hauntology, much of which is focused on connecting an eerie feeling of being haunted to the spectral forms of late capitalism. According to Fisher, the twenty-first century is haunted by “the lost futures that the

twentieth century taught us to anticipate” as well as by “forces which act at a distance,” which have causal effects without physically existing. Mark Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?,” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 16.

50. I am referring here to the surveillance that Jeanne’s parents impose upon their daughter in the name of their own security, resorting to physical violence and police-like methods of questioning when she refuses to comply.

51. Petzold, “Cinema of Identification.”

52. Fisher writes, “Petzold’s films constantly negotiate between genre and art-house cinema, between globally circulating images and national particularity, leaving them deliberately suspended in crisis and abeyance.” Jaimey Fisher, *Christian Petzold* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 12.

53. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 169.

54. Christian Petzold, “Zwischen Gestern und Morgen,” interview by unknown interviewer, *Berliner Zeitung*, March 7, 2012,

<https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/regisseur-petzold-im-interview-zwischen-gestern-und-morgen-li.29102>.

55. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 86. See also Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

56. Berlant (paraphrasing Žižek), *Cruel Optimism*, 14.

57. An example of this divisiveness with regard to the political potential of (neo-)Romantic thought is provided by two reviews of Anne-Lise François’s *Open Secrets*, both published in the same journal. While Margaret Cohen heralds the book’s “goal of clearing some space in the mind for readers to enjoy literature’s power to breathe, to be present, to be,” Vivasvan Soni dismisses the book as “an assault on narrative itself and the possibilities for action it implies.” Book review, by Margaret Cohen, *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, no. 55 (August 2009): <https://doi.org/10.7202/039584ar>; book review, by Vivasvan Soni, *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, no. 56 (November 2009): <https://doi.org/10.7202/1001105ar>.