

PHOENIX – Film at CONCA VERDE on 26.10.15 – Talk by Peter Anderson

Phoenix is a 2014 film directed by [Christian Petzold](#).

The Plot

The film follows Nelly Lenz, a Holocaust survivor and former cabaret singer, who returns to Berlin after undergoing facial reconstruction surgery for damage caused by a bullet wound.

Following the end of World War II and the liberation of the concentration camps, Nelly returns to Germany with her friend Lene. Here, Lene takes Nelly to a reconstructive plastic surgeon. Although Nelly tells the surgeon that she would like to look exactly like she used to, he is unable to fully recreate her old face and Nelly is clearly disappointed with the final result upon catching a glimpse of her reflection.

Lene finds an apartment for herself and Nelly. Since Nelly's family members have all died during the war, Nelly has inherited a considerable amount of money. Lene suggests to Nelly that she collect the money and that the two of them then travel to Palestine, where they will be safer and can use the money to help with the creation of an independent Jewish state.

Although Lene warns Nelly that her husband Johnny may have been the one to betray her to the Nazis, Nelly denies this possibility and leaves the apartment at night to locate him. She finds Johnny working in a nightclub called Phoenix. Johnny fails to recognize her, yet states that she bears an uncanny resemblance to his late wife, Nelly. In order to obtain his wife's inheritance, he asks Nelly to impersonate his wife. Johnny slowly transforms Nelly into an image of her previous self before her arrest. Nelly goes along with Johnny's plan and keeps her true identity concealed, telling Johnny that her name is Esther. Although Lene continues to warn Nelly that Johnny was possibly complicit in her arrest, Nelly maintains a romantic view of the relationship. As Esther, she questions Johnny about his feelings for his wife and his behavior at the time of her arrest. Johnny avoids answering most of Nelly's questions, wishing instead to stay focused on teaching her to better impersonate his wife. Johnny tells Nelly that he plans to stage her "return" from the camps within the week and invites several of the couple's old friends to meet her with him at the train station.

After spending several days with Johnny, Nelly returns to the apartment she shares with Lene. Here, the landlady informs her that Lene has killed herself, leaving behind a note for Nelly. In this note, Lene admits to Nelly that she knows that Johnny divorced Nelly the day before her arrest. She also includes a copy of the divorce decree, which forces Nelly to accept Johnny's betrayal.

Nelly keeps her knowledge of the divorce a secret, meeting Johnny and her friends at the train station as planned. Later, at the home of one of the friends, Nelly invites the group to listen to her sing, accompanied by Johnny on piano. As Nelly sings, Johnny recognizes her voice and sees the number that was tattooed on her arm during her time in the concentration camps. He stops playing the piano, finally recognizing Nelly as she finishes the song a cappella and silently walks away.

Deviations from source novel

The film's screenplay is loosely based on Hubert Monteilhet's 1961 detective novel *Le Retour des Cendres* (French, "The Return from the Ashes"), which set the story in France. The novel was previously adapted into the 1965 J. Lee Thompson film *Return from the Ashes*. Christian Petzold decided to change the setting to Berlin shortly after the German surrender at the end of World War II. The screenplay was co-written by Petzold and the artist Harun Farocki. It was the last screenplay of Farocki's career.

In the process of adapting the novel, the scenarists changed the characters' names and occupations. They eliminated the book's narrative device, in which the survivor's daughter Fabienne discovers the story of her mother's and stepfather/lover's relationship through journal entries written by her mother, who is revealed to have died under suspicious circumstances. They also dropped a secondary plot in which Fabienne has developed a relationship with her stepfather, and thus challenges her mother for his

Reception

Phoenix received immense critical acclaim. Metacritic, which assigns a normalized rating in the 0–100 range based on reviews from top mainstream critics, calculated an average score of 91, based on 25 reviews. The review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes reported a 99% approval rating with an average rating of 8.2/10 based on 76 reviews.

This 5th Film Show is sponsored by Anderson House – the Cambridge Centre for Bergamo, CRTDrills Lingue Bergamo – the language teachers' association, the Ufficio Scolastico of MIUR – the Italian Ministry of Education and AEGEE Bergamo – the Association of Erasmus students.