

Miroirs No. 3 – Christian Petzold takes a self-explanatory twist on found family

The German director once again calls on his new muse, Paula Beer, in a relatively compact and slow film, imbued in concealed emotions but without surprises.

Christian Petzold has a long history of success: a Silver Bear at the Berlinale for *Barbara* (2012), a loyal audience following his trilogies and cycles (of Ghosts, of Love in troubled times), a reputation as the best representative of the Berlin School along with Angela Schanelec. Throughout his filmography, Petzold is constantly revisiting reality – relationships, places, objects – and bringing out all its strangeness. His characters are amnesiac, lost, always appearing a bit off.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Paula Beer's character, Laura, decides to recover from the car accident that killed her boyfriend in the house of an unknown woman, with whom she exchanged a few eloquent glances on the road before the fateful moment. Her stay, initially planned for just a few hours, turns into several days, even weeks. After all, everything seems perfectly planned for her: an empty room, clothes to fit her, gardening to do. *Miroirs No. 3* plays on the ambiguity between Laura and her savior, Betty (Barbara Auer), a neurasthenic 50-year-old who looks at her as if she were looking at someone else.

The opening, characterized by two meaningful glances between the women, builds the way to a misty film about trauma, grief and reconstruction. For a moment, the strange ease with which Laura becomes involved in Betty's daily life and the silence of the house create a suspended, intriguing atmosphere. Alas, the feature **begins to speak** and the fog slips away.

The feature still spares some surprises, mostly thanks to two other characters related to Betty, but the finesse of relationships simply fades with time. After attempts to lay down several lines of possible interpretations — Betty's family members are criminals, Laura is a ghost; neither is really convincing — Petzold eventually puts an end to subtlety by having a character shout out the very obvious key to this surface-level mystery.

Miroirs No. 3's plot is an empty shell. This might not have been a problem, as the film's charm lay in the silence, the gaze and the unspoken. Something of an uneasy breeze between flower plantations and German plum cake. Unfortunately, Petzold takes his feature into a more conventional, artificial resolution where truths are shouted out and morality retaliates. With an anti-climactic, almost eye-rolling scene, the director strikes twice, robbing us of any room for interpretation and Paula Beer's character of any depth. Was Laura just a silent, oblivious woman?

Presented at the Directors' Fortnight section at Cannes earlier in the year, Petzold's first appearance at the festival, *Miroirs n°3* came as something of a surprise in the selection, generally intended for emerging filmmakers rather than Berlinale laureates. After an intriguing start and a delicate discussion of grief, Christian Petzold unfortunately seems to be missing its point by trying to clarify what was already made clear by the actors' subtle performance. More than any words, any truth revealed, it is the faces that will linger in our minds, between confusion and emptiness, love and insensitivity.