

‘Transit’ is an Absorbing Thriller with a Perplexing Conclusion

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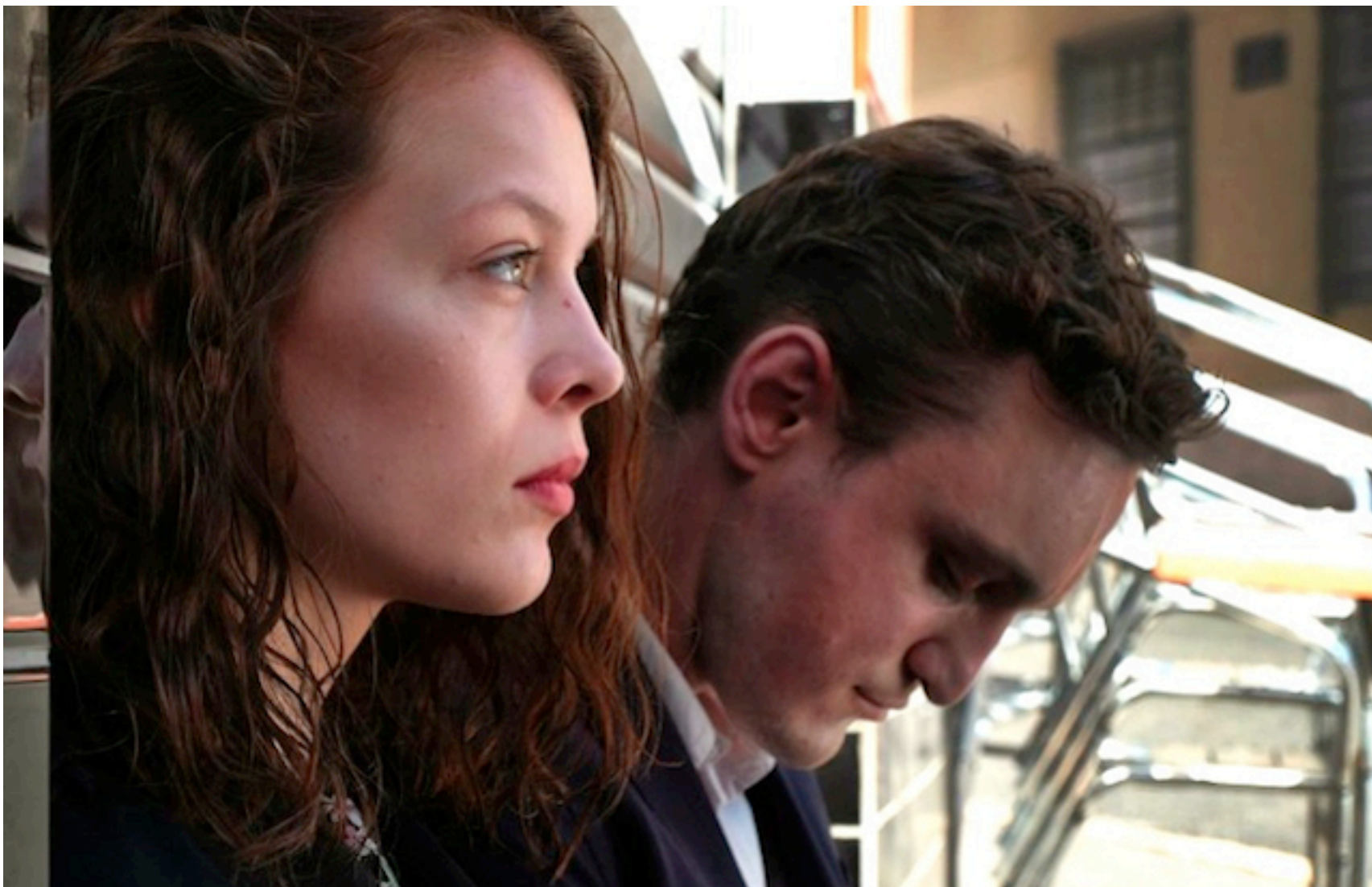


Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – What if a new fascism were to sweep the land, and affects Paris, as it did in World War 2? “Transit” postulates on that very theory and creates a paranoid atmosphere that is stunningly real, but brings that emotion to a conclusion that I believe is redundant, and pretends to be deeper than it is.

The film is based on a 1942 novel by Anna Segher, which was set in World War 2, and is updated to our modern world by writer/director Christian Petzold, which adds a chilling layer to the story. Franz Rogowski, who I would assume is Germany’s Joaquin Phoenix (they look remarkably alike), carries the film on his back like a hired mule, sweating the details of everything that happens. The deception and reality is mixed, and the human chattel is a reminder of a harsher (and more real) version of Casablanca, as the French port town of Marseille becomes where refugees wait, and wait and wait.

Georg (Franz Rogowski) is a cynic waiting for Paris to fall around his ears (a new fascism has risen in Germany, and they are about to be an occupying power). A friend gives him a chance to make transit money by delivering some letters to a radical writer at a hotel. When Georg makes good on the errand, he finds that the writer is dead.



Marie (Paula Beer) and George (Franz Rogowski) in ‘Transit’

Photo credit: Music Box Films

He wants to find a way to Marseille, the port town to freedom, and volunteers to transport another friend while under heavy surveillance. The friend dies in transport, and Georg finds his wife (Maryam Zaree) and son Driss (Lilien Batman) to tell them the news. This begins a connection to them, plus Georg's willingness to take on the identity of the dead writer and to get passage to Mexico. The wrench in the plans is the writer's wife Marie (Paula Beer), who is fervently searching for her husband.

The film has a tense, Hitchcockian tone to it, with some high paranoia. These are interesting human emotions to play off of, and the film has a tone of "people on the edge of a nervous breakdown." Hunger plays a huge part in the desperation, and in the breakdown of institutions that would be a scenario. As mentioned, the Casablanca quality of both the characters – there is a sweaty "conductor" hoping to get to Mexico that is a reminder of Peter Lorre in that classic – and the stakes for "transit visas" is much more present in a modern context. The next time this happens, we will be seriously f**ked.

Franz Rogowski is an amazing presence as Georg. He is tasked with representing the desperate middle class in passage, and plays it as if this is slow suicide (which it is). The most intriguing part of his performance is the question, what does he really want? He hooks into a family, especially the son, but cannot stay with them. He is informed by Marie, the writer's wife, but never seems really connected to her. And he keeps giving up a chance to leave, which allows that Marseille may be a allegorical purgatory (the weigh station between heaven and hell).



Georg and Driss (Lilien Batman) in 'Transit'

Photo credit: Music Box Films

The ending is artsy and open ended, but frustrating at the same time (it may lie inside that purgatory allegory). In the art of cinema, that open ended-ness is often brilliant and thought provoking. In this film, it's somewhat redundant. As human beings in the 21st Century, we continue our search for purpose while on this mortal plane, but at the same time we keep making the same mistakes in accomplishing that purpose, on a macro and micro level. To remind us of that in the film's conclusion is not satisfying in a story sense. We create art because we can't get it right in real life.

Given that information, it's best to come to your own conclusions. "Transit" is definitely a deep and abiding film, and contains scary modern possibilities of fascism invading our days, once again. Those who don't follow history are doomed to repeat it.

"Transit" opened in Chicago on March 15th. See local listings for theaters and show times (locally at Music Box Theatre, 3733 North Southport). Featuring Franz Rogowski, Paula Beer, Godehard Giese, Lilien Batman and Maryam Zaree. Screenplay adapted and directed by Christian Petzold. Rated "R"



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [18]
Editor and Film Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [17]

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