Strangers in a Strange Land: Cinema, Identity and the Modern Nation-State in Roman Polanski's *The Ghost Writer*

ANDRÉS BARTOLOMÉ LEAL
Universidad de Zaragoza
andresbl@unizar.es

Cinema and the modern nation-state, both key offsprings of the late stages of the nineteenth century, have had a somewhat parallel, and arguably problematic, relationship throughout their existence. From being a committed partner in the spreading of the traditions and identities that cemented the formation of modern nation-states, cinema has become one of the most prolific media for the contestation of many of the fixities that sustain them. My aim in this article is, first, to explore the reasons and phenomena behind this change of perspective and, second, to apply this analysis to the specific case of Roman Polanski's film *The Ghost Writer* (2010). For this purpose, I will analyse the film from a transnational perspective at different levels, exploring its portrayal of the decayed condition of the modern nation-state, its depiction of the exiled foreigner as a universal trope for contemporary identities, and its careful use of space and mise-en-scène for the transmission of these meanings.

Keywords: art cinema; identity; mobility; Roman Polanski; space; transnational cinema

. . .

Forasteros en tierra extraña: cine, identidad y el estado-nación moderno en *The Ghost Writer* de Roman Polanski

El cine y el estado-nación modernos, ambos frutos de las últimas etapas del siglo XIX, han mantenido una relación paralela, pero ciertamente problemática, durante su existencia. Otrora un medio comprometido con la diseminación de las tradiciones e identidades que cimentaron la formación del estado moderno, el cine ha pasado a ser uno de los canales más fértiles para la contestación de las certidumbres que los sostenían. Mi objetivo en este artículo es, primero, analizar las razones y fenómenos que han dado lugar a este cambio ideológico y, segundo, aplicarlos al caso específico de la película de Roman Polanski *The Ghost Writer* (2010). Para ello, analizaré la película a diferentes niveles desde un punto de vista

transnacional, explorando su representación de la descomposición del estado-nación moderno, su percepción del exiliado como un tropo universal para las identidades contemporáneas y su meticuloso uso del espacio fílmico para la transmisión de estos significados.

Palabras clave: *art cinema*; identidad; movilidad; Roman Polanski; espacio; cine transnacional

1. INTRODUCTION

Twenty minutes into Roman Polanski's *The Ghost Writer* (2010), an apparently transitional scene that lasts barely a minute depicting a beach walk under a gloomy, cloud laden sky, encapsulates the whole atmosphere and mood of the film and, simultaneously, foreshadows the ideological concerns and emotions that will drive the plot. In this scene, the protagonist, a nameless ghost writer (Ewan McGregor), hired to help finish the memoirs of the former British Prime Minister Adam Lang (Pierce Brosnan), shares a walk along a rough deserted seashore with Lang's wife Ruth (Olivia Williams) under the constant surveillance of one of her bodyguards. The shoreline is located in a fictional incarnation of Martha's Vineyard, an island off the East Coast of the United States which is a residential retreat for the wealthy, where Lang and his entourage are secluded in order to finish the book. Ruth and the ghost writer, having both followed Lang from England to the island, exchange anecdotes about their lives and jobs in an apparently innocuous conversation. However, as if permeated by the gloom of the weather and the bleak lighting of the scene, the dialogue turns to more serious issues such as their latent anxiety about being displaced in a foreign country, Lang's secret love affair with his secretary Amelia (Kim Cattrall) and the mysterious death of the ghost writer's predecessor, McArra. The way in which the walk is shot infuses the scene with an undertone of tension, suspicion, control and entrapment.

Shooting in the wide open and apparently liberating space of the beach, the camera frames the two characters walking together in close-up in two mobile long takes while at the same time using what John Orr calls a "three-shot" (2006, 8), since the omnipresent bodyguard is glimpsed in the background. By means of this triadic framing, the distant figure of this man is used to separate the two characters in the foreground, splitting the image in two. At the same time, the shot of the walk is filmed with a wide-angle 27-mm lens and is composed in depth, showing with precision and clarity the two foreground figures while enhancing the distance between the characters and the horizon in the background. Several meanings arise from the combination of these techniques. Firstly, the decision to shoot the two characters from human height and using a lens similar to the human eye (which is equivalent to a 22-mm lens) serves to immerse the audience in their predicament and depressive mood. The enduring close-up of the characters, which contrasts with the wide open space behind them, serves to transmit the feeling that even in the open they feel trapped. At the same time, the remoteness of the horizon, reinforced through the depth of the shot, renders any possible escape route inaccessible to the characters, while the nervousness of the mobile camera echoes their anxiety. Finally, the image of the bodyguard, constantly within the shot, continuously informs us of the oppressing surveillance, control and even threat of violence to which their lives are subjected.

In this article, I will analyse the various formal and discursive mechanisms used in *The Ghost Writer* to relate the identitarian crisis of its protagonists with the de-stabilizing effects that globalization and its subordinate phenomena are having on contemporary

nations and their citizens. By resorting to theories of transnational cinema, I will argue that the film presents the turn of the millennium as an inherently conflicting historical period, in which individuals continue to be subjected to the geographical and identitarian control of national institutions, while these same governments are constrained by supra-national forces and borderless global capital.

As part of my analysis, I shall, first, refer to the socio-political and cultural changes that have affected our perception of the absoluteness of any spatial referent during modernity, particularly the nation, and how they have affected our existences and identities. Secondly, I shall explore the reasons why cinema as a whole has become such a powerful symbol and channel for many of the changes that define our contemporary times, and, more precisely, how transnational cinema's contestation of national limitations suits the human experience of the last century so well. Finally, I will analyse *The Ghost Writer* as a transnational effort at different levels, focusing on its portrayal of the exiled foreign as a key trope for contemporary identities, and on how the unease arising from this somehow universal displacement and alienation is anchored in, and conveyed through, a careful approach to space and its representation through mise-en-scène.

2. Cinema and the Withering Away of the Nation

It is a recurrent motif in contemporary sociology that the static and homogenous perceptions of history, geography, identity and human relations that have traditionally sustained the idea of the nation are not only fictional cultural constructions but also consciously deceptive ones. The crystallization of what Benedict Anderson famously defined as "imagined communities" was far from a "natural," harmonious process (Anderson 1983), and inevitably comprised the suppression, and repression, of the ambitions of many lesser, heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting groups by the ruling/more powerful group. Different sets of rules and norms were implemented with the creation of modern states, hoping and expecting "to turn contingency into determination, ambivalence into *Eideutigkeit*, randomness into regularity—in short, the primeval forest into a carefully plotted garden, chaos into order" (Bauman 1998, 60-61). The artificial establishment of this identitarian *hortus conclusus* through localizing and conceptual distinctions was predicated on "the indigenous fantasy of a society anchored since time immemorial in the permanence of an intact soil" while its stability was sustained and assured by a subsequent set of narratives of origin (Augé 1995, 44). Thanks to these mythic narratives, states, originally founded on merely political or economic terms, "ideologise[d] themselves into nations" with a full package of geographical, historical and identitarian specificities that could legitimize their power (Hayward 1993, 5). Simultaneously, they concealed the inevitable processes of exclusion, silencing or repression of "difference" necessary for the establishment of the territorial and identitarian limits of every particular group.

However, today, well into the second decade of the twenty-first century, this fantasy seems to be more unsustainable than ever. Defined almost twenty years ago by Zigmunt Bauman as the "Great War of Independence from Space" (1998, 8), the present stage of modernity has brought about the erosion of territorial referents and, in particular, of the major contemporary incarnation of what he calls the "pride of place," the nation (60). The rise of multiple supra-national political categories and actors has forced the national governments to adapt their legislations so as to grant these entities, and their capital, both domestic and global rights (Sassen 1998, xxviii-xxx). The unstoppable internationalization of capital and economics has brought about a subsequent internationalization of labour, resulting in incessant global migrations, both legal and illegal. At the same time, thanks to the increase in speed and the shrinking of space that new technologies and means of transportation have brought about, the localized cultural particularities that were maintained thanks to the physical and temporal constraints of movement in the past are now relativized, contested and reshaped through contact with the other (Bauman 1998, 12). Not even the physical incarnation of the nation, its territory, is regarded any longer as a timeless "original" referent. Instead, contemporary sociology and history reveal that the particular geography of a nation is more often than not a mere contingency, the aftermath of a rupture with a previous territorial boundary and a subsequent migration (Rushdie 2002, 77). A process that is, in fact, usually repeated more than once and that, as Marc Augé points out, "is doomed always to regard the most recent migration as the first foundation" (1995, 47).

Essentialist theories such as that espoused in Martin Heidegger's 1951 essay "Building Dwelling Thinking," in which he described human identity as anchored, rooted, "territorialized and mapped on to a geographic terrain" as Neil Leach put it, are now, at least in theory, regarded as radically categorical and even fascistic (Leach 1998, 33). In contrast, more recent sociology regards identities as "routes," as never-ending processes rather than permanent locations, processes of "becoming as well as being . . . transcending place, time, history and culture" (Hall 1990, 225). As a result of all this, the identity, relations of coexistence and sustained stability that Augé says served to define any "anthropological" place (any nation), are, he feels, being debunked by the fluid and ephemeral spirit of the contemporary experience (1995, 52-54). Concurrently, the functions that the state is expected to perform, its raison d'être, are decreasing alarmingly, and the whole concept of the nation seems to be, as Georg Henrik Von Wright puts it, "withering away" (1997). Now reduced to mere repressive forces and defined by Bauman as "oversized police precincts" nations are far from being self-sufficient or self-sustained entities, and the identitarian fantasy that held them together is now more unstable than ever (1998, 100).

Within this political and ideological reframing, cinema, formerly a promiscuous and committed mediator in the transmission of national myths and identities,[1] has

---

[1] For detailed accounts of the relationship between nation and film, see Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (2000), Andrew Higson (1989) and Stephen Crofts (1993).

grown into the perfect mirror for the "epistemological experience of modernity" and the contestation of fixities that defines it (Charney 1995, 293). Starting with Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), several authors have discussed the reasons why cinema has become such a suitable symbol of, and catalyst for, our contemporary experience. Leo Charney provides a careful recollection of philosophical theories that link the last stages of modernity and their "climate of overstimulation, distraction and sensation . . . of fleeting sensations and ephemeral distractions" with the medium of cinema (1995, 279). According to Charney, for authors such as Walter Pater, Martin Heidegger and Jean Epstein, the onset of modernity not only brought about the culture of the momentary but also the inevitable alienation of the human from that moment. Cinema's representations, these authors argue, came to fulfil this need for sensual stimulation and, as Charney concludes, "play into the evacuation of the presence that characterized the modern" (1995, 292).

From the exile from his/her own identity that the actor undergoes when performing in front of the camera (Benjamin 1935, 9) to an audience's experience when they renounce part of themselves in order to understand and identify with the moving images on the screen (Chow 1998, 170), cinema seems to be a medium created around the instability and alienation of the contemporary subject; revolving around ideas of abandonment, displacement and fragmentation, simultaneously reflecting "the dilemmas and contradictions, nostalgias and hopes, that characterize struggles towards modernity" (Chow 1998, 174). In this sense, as Homi Bhabha argues, "the cinematic visuality of cultural modernity that Benjamin introduces as a 'way of seeing' the strangeness of ourselves, can be pushed in the direction of a revision of what it is that we deem to be familiar, domestic, national, homely" (1999, xi).

3. Approaching Transnational Cinema

With such potential for the contestation of the spatial, temporal and identitarian fixities that sustain the idea of the nation, it is surprising how cinema is still very much regarded in national terms by critics, media and film festivals all over the world. Although the enduring "nationalization" of films is a question worth analysing in itself, the truth is that, at least in industry terms, it is becoming increasingly difficult to label any film as "national." Cinema, affected by the globalized nature of today's society just like any other aspect of human life, has inevitably evaded the confines of national industries, circuits and meanings. The coinage of the term "transnational cinema" reflects precisely on this situation. With its origins in economic and sociopolitical studies (Ezra and Rowden 2005, 1), the term "transnational" has revealed itself as a fruitful tool in very diverse areas of investigation in the face of the contemporary questioning of the idea of "nation" as a defining element of our times. Within the field of film studies in particular, a great array of theories have flourished

which explore the notion of the transnational and its fertility for the analysis of both films and the industry's practices. These works have addressed the effects of the sociological and cultural changes that globalization and its parallel phenomena have had on the film industry and language. However, they have also revealed the problematic of establishing the limits of the term "transnational cinema," basically intended to transcend the constrictions and homogenizing drive that rendered the "national" label sterile. While Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (2005) attempted, with uneven success, to offer an all-encompassing approach to the term, Mette Hjort's (2007) stimulating, but rather arbitrary, typology of different cinematic transnationalisms highlights the openness and diverse nature of the phenomenon.

Nowadays, it is safe to say that the academic world is leaning more towards the latter of these two approaches, choosing to treat each instance of transnational cinema as unique and influenced by the specific background and context surrounding it. Along these lines, Deborah Shaw (2013) has offered a deconstructive analysis of the term, which suggests taking into account one at a time each aspect of cinema production and meaning affected by transnationalism, namely production, distribution, exhibition, themes explored, aesthetics, nationalities of the crew and audience reception. However, probably the most relevant and complete work around these ideas is still that of Hamid Naficy (1999a, 1999b, 2001 and 2003). In three seminal articles and a book, Naficy has defended the constantly evolving and heterogeneous nature of the transnational corpus, and its subsequent "not programmic, already formed style" as one of its key features (2001, 26). According to him, transnational or "accented" films, as he also calls them, have as their only constant characteristic the transmission of certain feelings and atmospheres. Rooted in a certain "structure of feeling" defined by "sadness, loneliness and alienation," these films, he argues, resort to dystopic and claustrophobic representations of exile, displacement and conflicts revolving around the relationship between identities and nations (2001, 22-28). Although Naficy's recurrent, and problematic, use of the "author" and his/her personal biography as the main foundation behind these transnational stories will not be applied in the following analysis, much of his work will be utilized in an attempt to decode the specific meanings that a film like *The Ghost Writer* attempts to transmit.

4. *The Ghost Writer*

It can be said that *The Ghost Writer* is a transnational co-production on almost all levels. The film was funded by companies from the United Kingdom, France and Germany, as well as French and German public capital and Polanski's own production company, R.P. Productions. Although the film primarily takes place in Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, the filming sites were as heterogeneous as its monetary sources. The house was deliberately built from scratch inside Studio Babelsberg in Potsdam, Germany, while the rest of the film was shot at locations in France, the

United States, England and Denmark. Although the main reasons behind the use of these diverse surrogate filming locations relate to the contingencies of contemporary cinema production and Polanski's constant wanderings,[2] it can also be seen as a way of questioning the supposed uniqueness of a geographical space, and therefore, of its impact on the identities of its inhabitants: with the right perspective, it could be argued, any place can stand for any other. As a result of this mobility, the crew was, like the cast, gathered from a multiplicity of countries, including Poland, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States. After the post-production process, in which it went through various laboratories in Germany and France, the film was released at the Berlinale Film Festival of 2010, which Polanski could not attend since he was under house arrest in Switzerland at the time.

A close textual analysis of *The Ghost Writer* reveals that not only its production values were obvious transnational in effort but also, and more importantly, that it is a film "markedly" *about* transnationalism, to use Hjort's terminology (2007, 13-14). Starting with the socio-political background in which the characters' relations are contextualized, the film constantly and conspicuously draws attention to the crisis of the modern nation, becoming a clear example of what is known as "the cinema of globalization" (Shaw 2012, 54). While dealing with the life of a former British Prime Minister, the film also makes constant references to the international relations, changing powers, economic balances and multinational corporations that define contemporary world politics—what Ken Jowitt has referred to as the *New World Disorder* (1992);[3] a state of affairs defined, Bauman argues, by the unpredictability and ex-territoriality of the "self-regulated" transnational forces that are in control and that have taken sovereignty out of the hands of the state (Bauman 1998, 57-58). It is no coincidence, for example, that the lecture to be given by military lobby member and undercover CIA agent Paul Emmett (Tom Wilkinson), Ruth's tutor at Harvard, is entitled "Bipolar Relations in a Multipolar World."

To reflect on this situation, the film focuses on the particular case of Britain and embodies its erosion and malleability in the character of its former Prime Minister Adam Lang, charged during the film with authorizing the torturing of prisoners in a Middle East war. Displaced in the United States from the very beginning, first on his publisher's advice just to finish his memoirs, and later to avoid the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, the character of Lang, "so hated . . . and so loved" as the ghost writer points out, prompts mixed feelings. On the one hand, he is a committed enforcer of fascistic politics of control that rule the lives of many, less

---

[2] Lack of space precludes discussion of the notorious reasons behind those wanderings here, but detailed accounts can be found in biographies by authors like Ewa Mazierska (2007), James Morrison (2007), Elzbieta Ostrowska (2006) and Polanski himself in his autobiography *Roman* (1984).

[3] Almost all the fictional characters, events and locations that are part of the political background of the film can be connected with the actual Gulf Wars, including fictional impersonations of Tony Blair, Condolezza Rice and Robin Cook, as well as references to Iraq and the torturing at Abu Ghraib prison.

privileged individuals. Lang's last conversation with the ghost writer, right before he is shot by a protestor, is very revelatory in this respect:

> Do you know what I'd do if I was in power again? I'd have two queues at airports. One for flights where we'd done no background checks, infringed on no one's civil bloody liberties, used no intelligence gained by torture. And on the other flight, we'd do everything we possibly could to make it perfectly safe. And then we'd see which plane the Rycarts of this world would put their bloody kids on! (Polanski 2010)

On the other hand, and ironically enough, his predicament leads him to experience the consequences of similar politics to those he is defending in this quote, i.e., suffering the distress of being displaced and the alienation of living under constant surveillance. As a matter of fact, Lang's geographical, "external" exile is also connected in the film with what Naficy defines as "internal" exile (2003, 206), that is, a detachment, not only from a certain geographical space but also from public life. The extreme security and omnipresence of bodyguards, who are repeatedly depicted preventing his interaction with any human being not belonging to his inner circle, indicates the fact that Lang, for many years, has also been alienated from real human contact. So much so that he does not drive, does not carry money and does not even know what a pen drive memory is. "How does it feel to be so cut-off?," the ghost writer asks him at one point (Polanski 2010). Not only that: as a retired politician now, when he once was one of the most powerful men in the world, his new status also exiles him from power, a situation that on many occasions he is unable to cope with. All these geographical, physical and metaphorical displacements that echo, as Ruth points out, Napoleon's exile in St. Helena, have an effect on Lang's personality and identity. Film critics Manohla Dargis (2010) and David Denby (2010) have noted the constant, even schizophrenic changes of humour of the ex-Prime Minister. Infused with the "defensive self-righteousness of power" (Denby 2010), a residual element from his time as Prime Minister, his sudden fits of rage or nervous laughter, reflect the unstable, fragmented psyche of a man emotionally adrift, detached, confused and nostalgic for the life he once had. The disorientation he shows every time he gets off a plane, as if not knowing where exactly he has landed, and his recurrent use of a cold "presidential wave" even when greeting his wife, reinforce this perception.

In order to transmit these feelings visually, the film portrays him mostly through the eyes of others, taking, also metaphorically, the control of the narration of his life away from him. He is repeatedly shot within very tight mise-en-scènes, using close-ups, leaving little space between the character and the walls surrounding him and, very commonly, enclosing him by means of different frames-within-the-frame, particularly windows. For instance, during an interview with the ghost writer, in a medium shot, Lang is depicted from behind leaning on the enormous window of his study and looking outside. With his arms wide open over his lowered head, he seems to be holding the

stormy sky on the outside, evoking the image of Atlas bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders and transmitting a sense of defeat, entrapment and nostalgia. As in this case, and rather than being indices of freedom in the film, windows are singularly and deceptively used to entrap, revealing a bleak and menacing outside world, constantly reminding the audience that any hope of escape is a mere fantasy and reinforcing the ultimate inexorability of the character's situation.

One of the main particularities of transnational films is, in fact, that they tend to break traditional open-closed binary approaches to space (usually divided in gender or class terms) in their attempt to reflect the constant negotiations that any kind of boundary necessarily undergoes in contemporary times (Naficy 2003, 211). In these films, distress and oppression are not related exclusively to closed/interior spaces and the claustrophobic feelings that accompany them. Instead, open/outside spaces and agoraphobic tensions very commonly connected to them are shown to be equally distressing, and bring about the same feelings of loneliness and displacement (Naficy 2003, 212; Morrison 2007, 16). In order to transmit the feeling that, for the exiled individual, open spaces are as entrapping and oppressing as closed ones, the film uses various techniques. The photography of the film, dominated by pale, cold colours and with the omnipresence of grey tonalities, has been defined as "bleak" (Paulson 2011), "ashen" (Denby 2010) and "wintry," veering at times "into the near-monochromatic" (Dargis 2010). In extreme long shots, the uniform colouring with which the sea, sky and dry land of the island are treated in *The Ghost Writer* serves to fuse them, creating a homogenous backdrop for the story, an "enveloping field" of sorts (Denby 2010) that is never lifted and which leaves no room for alternatives or exits, while their immenseness and openness function as contrasts with the restrained identities and everyday lives of the protagonists. Simultaneously, the blanched but steady light of the invariably cloudy weather, where the sun never appears, somehow effaces the boundaries between one day and the next, which in fact are only discernible thanks to the night scenes. In this way, by transforming the actions of several days into an almost unitary event, the film manages to transmit the feelings of stagnation and entrapment of the characters, who feel as if their displacement will last forever. The ghost writer in fact makes reference to this when he mentions "I'm aging, this place is Shangri-La in reverse" (Polanski 2010), after only three days on the island. This transformation of the typical image of Martha's Vineyard as an elitist "summer playground" for the rich and famous into an elephants' graveyard becomes equated with Lang's career, now a mere vestigial memory (Paulson 2011, 129).

As the plot unravels, and we discover that Lang had in fact been a political puppet of both Ruth and the United States since his days in college, his whole political identity, if he ever had one, is deflated and, by extension, so is that of the country he represents.[4]

---

[4] The way in which the film finally discloses that it was the US government, through Emmet and Ruth, that had been controlling the British government's decisions all along, could easily be taken as a self-exonerating excuse for the tormented British morale after the calamitous Iraq War.

His entire political life is thus deconstructed little by little and unmasked as pure façade, more the work of an actor (his main interest in college), of a double, than of a politician.[5] The fragmentation and delusion of the supposedly stable, rigid and reliable image and identity of a British Prime Minister is further enhanced by the fact that he deliberately conceals his British accent, a defining element of a person's social standing, origins and personality (Naficy 2001, 23), in favour of a more "Americanized" one when in front of the cameras. He is, in the end, someone who, as he himself explains of his days as a performer, "pretends to be somebody else and [is] applauded for it" (Polanski 2010).

As a consequence, and taking into account that it was Ruth who got him into politics and made all the important decisions for him, Lang's opinions and public identity are reduced to pure literary constructions that reflect the delusive nature of contemporary national and international politics. His conversations with the ghost writer are also very revelatory of the constructedness of his past and identity, not only in that the ghost writer is writing Lang's memoirs as though it was Lang himself writing, certainly a dishonest practice, but also when Lang is accused by the ICC and the ghost writer has to write a statement for the media expressing Lang's opinion:

> LANG. I should sound confident. Not defensive, that'd be fatal. But I shouldn't be cocky. No bitterness, no anger, and don't say I'm pleased at this opportunity to clear my name or any balls like that.
> GHOST WRITER. So, you're not defensive, but you're not cocky. You're not angry, but you're not pleased?
> LANG. That's it.
> GHOST WRITER. Then what exactly *are* you? (Everybody laughs)
> RUTH. Told you he was funny.
>
> (Polanski 2010)

This lack of a real political perspective and stance, of a real identity, is echoed later when the ghost writer starts writing the statement in Lang's name:

> GHOST WRITER. I've always been a strong, no, committed supporter of the work
> of the International Criminal Court… Has he?
> AMANDA. You're the writer.
>
> (Polanski 2010)

Subject to the pressures of international relations, multinational corporations, political correctness, the omnipresence of global media and, finally, exile, Lang's

---

[5] As Ronald Paulson points out, the casting of Pierce Brosnan as Lang fragments even more the character's identity, since it inevitably connects him in the mind of the spectator to the figure of James Bond and the meanings attached to it (2011, 134).

identity has been, since his days in college, displaced and fragmented in the service of the necessities of his position. Just like that of an actor, his identity has been constructed and reworked at every step, not on his terms but on those demanded by the external factors and agents ruling his life, namely Ruth and the United States. Thus, as embodied in the extremely malleable character of Lang, national history and politics that rule and anchor the lives and identities of the masses, reveal themselves as mere literary constructions, "good stories," as Ruth argues, only ruined "by too much research" (Polanski 2010). Even the Twombly paintings hanging inside the house, full of melting images of words, reflect this poststructuralist view of language and history as unstable, mouldable and subject to the contingencies of time.

While Lang's geographical displacement is developed in the film as a metonymy of the unstable and relative nature of national politics and identities, the case of the ghost writer is rather different. An unemployed writer, his experience of mobility is presented more in relation to the work-related migrations that so many people are required to make nowadays in order to earn a living. Like the main protagonist of *Knife in the Water* (Polanski 1962), another story of an outsider coming to disrupt the apparent stability of a couple and their way of life, the ghost writer remains unnamed throughout the whole film. Almost a "blank slate" when he arrives on the island (Dargis 2010), he is only referred to as "man" by Lang or "Brit" because of his acid humour and accent, a "jolly old tone" that will become his only identitarian mark throughout the film (Polanski 2010). He has no family, no apparent origins or past, no political stance (he voted for Lang simply because everybody did) and no identity as a writer since he has only worked as a ghost writer for other people's memoirs. The ghost writer, thanks to his identitarian emptiness, and also to the casting of Ewan McGregor and his middle-class, white, male, "regular type" persona, is meant to represent an ordinary guy on to whom the audience can project themselves and with whom everyone can identify at some level. (Re)incarnating the connotations, seclusion and voyeuristic drive of James Stewart in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), the ghost writer becomes a diegetic extension of the audience. He is almost never out of the frame; he is the reference point for the spectator in the film; it is his perspective of the events that we share and his (limited) level of knowledge that we have access to.

Even if the ghost writer seems to be the main focalizer, the one whose perspective is in control of the narration, the film little by little discloses that he is as observed and controlled as the rest of the characters. For a start, all of his movements are orchestrated by others. His arrival on the island, only a day after accepting the job, is completely on his employers' terms; to get there, he has to take a plane, a light aircraft, a ferry, and at the exact moment he is arriving on the island, he receives a message saying that a taxi is already waiting to take him to the house. Before arriving on the island, the images of water accompanying his trip seem to imply a sense of renewal, of baptism and of change of identity (Mazierska 2007, 84). However, in *The Ghost Writer*, both the

writer's journey and the identity resulting from it will be shown to be always on other people's terms, establishing a clear correlation between agency over movement and identitarian determination.

Once on the island, the ghost writer's movements are equally controlled. After a night at a nearby hotel chosen by his employers, he is moved to the house from which he is forbidden to exit without the company of a bodyguard. With no other personal belongings, his suitcase, repeatedly opened and inspected, becomes a symbol of his detached and nomadic life, but also, as usually happens with films about exile, of his everlasting solitude and deprivation (Naficy 2001, 261). Thus the ghost writer becomes a sort of commodity, displaced at will, only inhabiting transit places, without actually dwelling anywhere. His life seems to take place between spaces such as airports, seaports, parking lots and hotels, the "immense parentheses" in modern life that Augé defined as "non-places" (1995, 77, 111). According to the French author, these places are defined by their lack of identitarian, historical or relational connotations, and are an epitome of a world "surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (1995, 77). Immersed in an environment defined by identity loss, solitude and similitude, the combination of the blank sheet of the ghost writer's identity and the constant surveillance and control over his movements exerted by Lang's entourage serve to restrict his options, conduct his development and rewrite his identity on their terms not his. In this sense, statements like "You're practically one of us now . . . You drafted the statement yesterday. That makes you an accomplice . . . You could be the new Mike McArra" reflect this identitarian manoeuvring and culminate in his overlapping with his predecessor in their tasks, identities and deaths (Polanski 2010).

The fragmentation of the ghost writer's identity does not stop here, as the futility of his task is also reflected in the figure of the Vietnamese houseboy, Duc (Lee Hong Thay). At one point he observes that Duc is trying to gather all the leaves outside the house in a wheelbarrow only to see them immediately scattered again by the wind. As Paulson interprets it, this scene is a "comic juxtaposition," a projection of the alienating, futile and "sisyphean" labour of the ghost writer inside the house trying to put all the pieces of a puzzle together, and an anticipation of the final image of the film, in which the pages of his manuscript are similarly scattered by the wind along a London street (Paulson 2011, 134). The different camera movements also contribute to this equation. The pan shot that connects the image of Duc seen through a chink between the window drapes, with the ghost writer lying in the bed after sleeping with Ruth, becomes a visual metaphor of the entrapment the ghost writer suffers within the walls of the house.

It is precisely in the representation of the closed space of the house, constructed *ex profeso* for the film, that the anxiety, aloofness and alienation of the characters become most salient. Once the taxi that carries the ghost writer crosses the security fence after his passport has been checked, the bleak, austere house appears in the distance as a "giant modernist shoe box" (Denby 2010), surrounded by desert vegetation. Adjacent

to it and anticipating the significance the house is going to have for its inhabitants, the tall iron grilles of the tennis court give the image a prison-like halo. As the car approaches the house, the contour of the building overwhelmingly starts to fill the screen to the point that it seems not to fit in the frame, as if rejecting the idea of a possible alternative or escape. Its façade is plain grey, matching the landscape and photography, with almost no windows. The sense of impassability it transmits is reinforced by the fact that it is wider than it is tall, which confers on the house an air of heaviness and motionlessness. The flat, thick, naked and visually heavy walls of the house become a powerful metonymy for the whole building and the separation deliberately established between its inside and outside, which constantly controls and restricts the movement between the two. Meant to be a safe hideaway, the visual representation of the house turns it into an unwelcoming, imprisoning edifice.

Once inside the house, and after the ghost writer has gone through another security check where his suitcase is opened and inspected once again, its interior is shown to us while Amelia, Lang's secretary, comes down the stairs to receive him. From what we can see in the first interior shot, the cement walls are also unpainted on the inside, the surfaces are flat and sharply angled and the stairs have separate, floating steps with no banister to keep one from falling. Even the railing protecting the first floor from a free fall is made of thin and almost invisible glass panels. After Amelia introduces herself without even asking for his name, the ghost writer is immediately taken to his designated study to begin work on the manuscript, without even being given the chance to acquaint himself with the house. From here on, the house will be presented in a fragmented way, showing the rooms in separate shots, making it difficult to interpret their location and the relation and distance between them. Several other techniques throughout the film help transform the house, a completely uniform and rectangular structure when seen from the outside, into a distorted and disorienting maze. The shots of the characters inside are closer and tighter than when they are outside, using a 35-mm lens and a shallow focus that constantly blur the background. The framings are static and constant visual barriers and frames-within-the-frame are introduced in the mise-en-scène, blocking and fragmenting the view. At the same time, although the doors are always kept half open, it is difficult to tell where they lead; the cold artificial light that illuminates the interiors comes from fluorescent tubes; even views through the scarce though large windows that could evoke a possible escape are constantly impeded by closed curtains or the perpetually obscuring, rainy weather of the outside.

This methodical representation of the distressing space of the "house," which conspicuously breaks its traditional link with the idea of "home," relates the film with the theories on transnationalism and cinema regarding the spatial perception of exilic individuals. According to Naficy's definitions, "*house* is the literal object, the material place in which one lives" while "*home* is anyplace; it is temporary and it is moveable; it can be built, rebuilt and carried in memory and by acts of imagination" (1999b, 5-6, emphasis in the original). For the transnational individual, house and home hardly

ever coincide in time and space. As a result of this separation, a house *per se*, meaning simply the building in which one resides, becomes for the migrant more a signifier of deterritorialization than reterritorialization, of dislocation than of relocation (Naficy 2001, 169). Represented visually almost as a labyrinth, making it difficult to decipher its layout, the house of the film becomes a symbol of the disorientation and entrapment of its displaced inhabitants. As the house is gradually revealed to us, the impersonality that surrounds the building is conveyed through several details. The scarce furniture, the lack of personal belongings decorating the house and the minimum opportunities for personal space and privacy pervades the house with an aura of "temporariness and depersonalization" (Mazierska 2001, 65). The food the ghost writer consumes is reduced to some cold sandwiches and beer, with the exception of the unappetizing soup he eats when he has dinner with Ruth. Even the bath the ghost writer takes in the modern, but surely uncomfortable square bathtub of his room, another metonymy of the whole house as recipient for human life, is interrupted by Ruth's intrusion, apparently careless but quite revelatory of her intentions.

In *The Ghost Writer*, a much more sober film than Polanski's early efforts, there may not be hands coming out of the walls as in *Repulsion* (1965), or twisting elastic stairs as in *The Tenant* (1976), but the feelings behind its images are similar. Imbued with coldness, seclusion, control and danger, the film's representation of the space of the house in Martha's Vineyard (one that extends beyond its walls to encompass the whole island) becomes a projection of the perspective of its inhabitants. Representing the distressing feelings of involuntary displacement, the house is bleak, entrapping and hostile; its walls, the most intimate of borders (Rushdie 2002, 90), being converted into the most oppressing of boundaries.

5. Conclusion

The death of the ghost writer, indexed by the image of flying papers in the almost deserted and silent space of the London street that closes the film, accompanied by no extradiegetic score, with no *melos* to reinforce the *drama*, inevitably transmits a sense of emptiness and triviality. Framed in another extreme long shot and using a wide angle lens and a deep focus, the disintegration of the book that takes place after the ghost writer has been run over off-screen comes to metonimize the displacement, alienation and fragmentation he has suffered throughout the film, as well as the futility of his endeavour and life in general. However, even if he and Lang remain the main exponents of the anxieties that define contemporary times, they are not the only characters suffering the ravages of this era. Ruth, never a proper politician in her own right, controls Lang's decisions behind the scenes, but, in turn, is under the complete control of Emmet and the CIA; McArra, the preceding ghost writer, was also a British government spy inside Lang's entourage; even Amelia, devoted to Lang and responsible for his public image, was also his secret lover while both were married. As Naficy

explains, "[transnational] films embody the constructedness of identity by inscribing characters who are partial, double or split, or who perform identities . . . By engaging in the politics of identity, they cover up or manipulate their essential incompletion, fragmentation and instability" (2001, 272). Recovering the original title of the book—the one by which the film was released on British soil—all the characters are *ghosts* in their own way. They are all displaced from their homes and nations and all experience the same seclusion in the house in Martha's Vineyard. They all have fragmented identities, repeat previous patterns, become doubles, and play roles that are not theirs.

In this sense, *The Ghost Writer*, instead of focusing on the particular effects that contemporary experiences of mobility have for each individual depending on their status within society, chooses to represent a common, all-encompassing "structure of feeling," as Naficy calls it (2001, 26), one defined by displacement, alienation, loneliness and deep identity crisis. This homogenization of the nomadic experience is problematic, as it disregards the differences that factors such as class, race, age or gender make in each particular instance of individual mobility. For anyone looking for an explicit answer on such matters, *The Ghost Writer* is remarkably far from providing it, since it equalizes all subjects in their spatial and identitarian alienation. What the film does do, nonetheless, is illustrate the shared psychological struggles of individuals immersed in a world where the "core of the self . . . [is] fundamentally recast in terms of capacities for movement" (Elliot and Urry 2010, 3); a world, as the film suggests, in which those with no control over their own mobility are ultimately deprived of any real agency, being far too often reduced to a faceless workforce moved and disposed of at will by market necessities.

WORKS CITED

ANDERSON, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

AUGÉ, Marc. 1995. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.

BAUMAN, Zigmunt. 1998. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. New York: Columbia UP.

BENJAMIN, Walter. 1935. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." [Available online].

BHABHA, Homi K. 1999. "Arrivals and Departures." In *Home, Exile, Homeland*, edited by Hamid Naficy, vii-xii. London: Routledge.

CHARNEY, Leo. 1995. "In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity." In *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, edited by Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, 279-94. Los Angeles: U of California P.

CHOW, Rey. 1998. "Film and Cultural Identity." In *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, edited by John Hill and Paula Church Gibson, 169-75. Oxford: Oxford UP.

CROFTS, Stephen. 1993. "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s." *Quarterly Review of Film and Television* 14 (3): 49-67.

DARGIS, Manohla. 2010. "Writer for Hire Is a Wanted Man," *The New York Times*, February 28. [Available online].

DENBY, David. 2010. "Prime Suspect: *The Ghost Writer*," *The New Yorker*, March 8. [Available online].

ELLIOT, Anthony and John Urry. 2010. *Mobile Lives*. New York: Routledge.

EZRA, Elizabeth and Terry Rowden. 2006. "General Introduction: What is Transnational Cinema?" In *Transnational Cinema*, edited by Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, 1-12. New York: Routledge.

HALL, Stuart. 1990. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutheford, 222-37. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

HAYWARD, Susan. 1993. *French National Cinema*. New York: Routledge.

HIGSON, Andrew. 1989. "The Concept of National Cinema." *Screen* 30 (4): 36-47.

HJORT, Mette. 2007. "On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism." In *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, edited by Natasá Durovicova and Kathleen Newman, 12-33. London: Routledge/American Film Reader.

HJORT, Mette and Scott Mckenzie. 2000. *Cinema and Nation*. London: Routledge.

JOWITT, Ken. 1992. *New World Disorder*. Los Angeles: U of California P.

LEACH, Neil. 1998. "The Dark Side of the Domus." *The Journal of Architecture* 3 (1): 31-42.

MAZIERSKA, Ewa. 2007. *Roman Polanski: The Cinema of a Cultural Traveller*. London: I.B. Tauris.

MORRISON, James. 2007. *Roman Polanski*. Chicago: U of Illinois P.

NAFICY, Hamid, ed. 1999a. *Home, Exile, Homeland*. London: Routledge.

—. 1999b. "Framing Exile: From Homeland to Homepage." In *Home, Exile, Homeland*, edited by Hamid Naficy, 1-13. London: Routledge.

—. 2001. *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. New Jersey: Princeton UP.

—. 2003. "Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre." In *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality and Transnational Media*, edited by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, 203-26. New Jersey: Rutgers.

ORR, John 2006. "Polanski: The Art of Perceiving." In *Dark Spaces of the World: The Cinema of Roman Polanski*, edited by John Orr and Elizabeth Ostrowska, 4-21. London: Wallflower.

OSTROWSKA, Elzbieta. 2006. "*Knife in the Water*: Polanski's Nomadic Discourse Begins." In *Dark Spaces of the World: The Cinema of Roman Polanski*, edited by John Orr and Elizabeth Ostrowska, 62-75. London: Wallflower.

PAULSON, Robert. 2011. "Roman Polanski, *The Ghost* (in U.S., *The Ghost Writer*); Robert Harris, *The Ghost*." *The Hopkins Review* 4.1 (Winter 2011): 128-36.

POLANSKI, Roman. 1984. *Roman*. New York: William Morrow and Company.

—. 2010. *The Ghost Writer*. United Kingdom: Optimum Home Entertainment. DVD.

RUSHDIE, Salman. 2002. "Step Across This Line." Lecture delivered at Yale University, 25-26 February. [Available online].

SASSEN, Saskia. 1998. *Globalization and its Discontents*. New York: The New Press.

SHAW, Deborah. 2013. "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Transnational Cinema." In *Contemporary Hispanic Cinema: Interrogating the Transnational in Spanish and Latin American Cinema*, edited by Stephanie Dennison, 47-66. London: Tamesis Books.

VON WRIGHT, Georg Henrik. 1997. "The Crisis of Social Science and the Withering Away of the Nation State." *Associations* 1: 49-52.

Andrés Bartolomé Leal is a PhD student at the Department of English and German Studies at the University of Zaragoza and an Associate Lecturer at the Department of Education of that university. His PhD thesis is focused on the work of film director Roman Polanski, analyzed from a transnational and cosmopolitan perspective. His main interests revolve around issues concerning mobility, identity, transnationalism and the film medium.

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. C/ Pedro Cerbuna, s/n. 50009, Zaragoza, Spain. Tel.: +34 974244103, +34 948337084.