Transnational Marseille: Film Space and Layers of History in *Transit*

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Abstract

This article takes a spatial approach to the study of transnational cinemas. It argues that through a film's mise en scène, real places speak to spectators. It focuses on the film *Transit* (Christian Petzold, 2018) and frames it within the history of representations of the city of Marseille in the cinema, particularly contemporary cinema. It starts from the historical coincidence of the presence in Marseille of Anna Seghers, the author of the novel on which the film is based (Transit, 1944), and Siegfried Kracauer, the film theorist, both waiting for exit visas to go to America. While Seghers's experiences in the French city became the basis of her novel, Kracauer started writing notes towards a theory of film which would become, years later, his *Theory of Film* (1960), one of the basic works of cinematic realism. Next, the article explores the realist underpinnings of Petzold's films and their pervasive use of location shooting. Through its mise en scène, its ostensible location shooting and its commitment to a particular realist aesthetic that collapses past and present and constantly evokes the city's history, *Transit* opens the door for a panoply of layers from the city's transnational history. Because of its recent history and its long tradition as a city of transit and *métisage*, the transnational is enmeshed with the local in Marseille. As a result, the Mediterranean city becomes in the

film an instance of "actually existing cosmopolitanism" (Robbins, 1998) and "messy cosmopolitanism" (Høy-Petersen Woodward, 2018).

This article seeks to position film space at the centre of discussions of transnational cinema. It argues that through a film's mise en scène, real places speak to spectators, alongside, but not necessarily in tune with, the goals and intentions of the filmmakers and the meanings constructed by the narratives. The article focuses on *Transit* (Christian Petzold, 2018), the second film adaptation of Anna Seghers' novel of the same title (1944) and a film about Marseille, shot on location in the Mediterranean city. Ostensibly, the film is a vaguely dystopian narrative about the consequences in a European city of the ascent of the New Right. However, Marseille tells different and more complex story about itself through the film's mise en scène. This is a story of a transnational city, one with a centuries-old transnational character and with a transnational present. Therefore, it can be said that *Transit* is a transnational film *because* Marseille is a transnational city. This is a consequence of the workings of film space.

The article starts in the year 1940, when Anna Seghers spent a few weeks in Marseille and conceived the novel, a time when another German exile, film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, was also in the city. It then deploys a spatial approach based on the potential of location shooting and its importance in the films of Christian Petzold. The defamiliarization strategy employed by the filmmakers to lift the story out of its historical moorings, in combination with location shooting, opens the door for a panoply of layers of the city's transnational history to insinuate themselves into the film. Some of those layers are explored in this article. A spatial approach to film analysis, which will be described below, turns films like *Transit* into open doors to

explore the specificities of the city *vis-à-vis* transnational cultures. The article argues that, because of its recent history and its long tradition as a city of transit and *métisage,* the transnational is intensely enmeshed with the local in Marseille.

Transit revolves around a group of German exiles escaping from the Nazi horror and waiting in Marseille for their transit visas to travel to America. The film moves the plot to an unspecified time, closer to the present than to 1940, the year in which the action of the novel takes place. In the film, the same characters are still trying to get visas to leave Europe, but it is never explained what they are escaping from. The very visibility of the "real Marseille", at points beyond the requirements of cinematic realism, may trigger fears and anxieties in spectators, well used to media representations of a city in a constant state of emergency, beset by problems of migration, drug traffic, poor housing, social injustice and corruption (see Azcona and Deleyto, 2024, 257-58, 262-63), reinforcing the film's dystopian message about a contemporary society on the brink.

At the same time, the focus on the material city brings to the fore social and cultural nuances and highlights specific strands of urban history, evoking a more complex image of Marseille as a border city with a centuries-old transnational history. This is a city with many social problems, often ideologically exaggerated in the media, but also a vibrant city, a city of transit and of contrasts, of both occasional and permanent transnational encounters and forms of hybridity, of racial and social conflict but also of specific types of border crossings and borderwork, of local alliances and collaborations, of tensions between institutional projects and communal interventions, of discourses of national and racial purity that coexist with cosmopolitan experiences and dynamics. This is the urban environment of what Bruce Robbins describes as "actually existing cosmopolitanism" (1998, 2-3) and Nina Høy-Petersen and Ian

Woodward as a contemporary cosmopolitanism that is "messy, conflicting and often unpredictable". For the latter authors, cosmopolitan practices are constantly shifting vis-à-vis otherness and lead to conflicting attitudes (2018, 655-56). Their insight highlights the contrast between conceptualisations of cosmopolitanism as, on the one hand, an aspiration, an ethical stand or a set of norms of behaviour and, on the other, an everyday reality in contemporary global societies (see Deleyto 2022, 127-28, 138-40, Azcona and Deleyto 2025, 2-5)

Ann Seghers and Siegfried Kracauer

The original story of *Transit* inserts itself within a specific moment of the history of the city: the short period during the Second World War when, as the German army pushed south across France, many central Europeans, mostly Jewish, travelled to Marseille as a port of transit to catch boats that would take them to the American continent, escaping from the Nazis. Famously, the story of *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) is inscribed within this exodus, with the Moroccan city as a port of transit for the US. Marseille never appears in *Casablanca* except on a map tracing the trajectory of exiles in the opening scene, but we know that the transitory residents of Casablanca have all come through the French city. The city as purely a place of transit or as the end point of a truncated onward journey appears in many other films, like *Pépé le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1937) and *Hôtel du Nord* (Marcel Carné, 1938), to mention just two. German Jewish writer Anna Seghers published her novel *Transit* while in exile in Mexico in 1944, first in Spanish, then in English and French and, finally, in 1948, in German. The novel is partly autobiographical: in 1940 she and her children were stranded in Marseille for some weeks before sailing to Mexico, as the Nazis encroached on the city. The novel is based on her experiences during this short but intense period of

waiting. It displays a keen sense of place, with constant references to the area of the city centre where the characters hang out, and an unnamed male protagonist, who, for the most part, feels relatively comfortable in this peculiarly transitory urban environment.

Transit and its characters on the run from the Nazis have become part of Marseille's long transnational history, as have indeed its author and her children, travellers on their way to the new world. The novel, through its realistic aesthetic, also conjures up another Marseillais micro-history: what we might describe as a foundational moment in the history of realistic aesthetics in film studies. Like other German writers and intellectuals such as Heinrich Mann, Hannah Arendt, Lion Feuchtwanger and Walter Benjamin, film critic and theorist Siegfried Kracauer was also in the city with his wife in 1940, waiting for papers to escape extradition by the Vichy government and, in his case, travel to New York. According to Miriam Bratu Hansen, Kracauer started to take notes towards a book on film aesthetics at this time, a time "that we spent in anguish and misery in Marseille," as he wrote later to Theodor Adorno. Walter Benjamin, who was also in Marseille at the time and would soon be found dead in Portbou, across the Spanish border, noted that the frantic scribblings that his friends often saw Kracauer write in cafés while waiting for visas appeared to be part of a ruse of self-preservation. Reading Seghers's novel, we cannot help visualizing Kracauer sitting at a table in one of the cafés near the port, among the throngs waiting desperately for their boats (Hansen, xiv-xv).

Those scribblings would, years later, become his famous *Theory of Film*, published in 1960, in which he described his realist film aesthetics. Hansen explains that the notes from Marseille, gathered into "The Marseille Notebooks", constitute an intermediary stage between his early Weimar writings about the modernist subject and his theory about the affinity between film and material, physical and external reality

(xvi). Considering the painstaking realism of Seghers's novel, it may be more than a coincidence that one of the most important works on cinema realism originated in the particular Marseillais atmosphere of 1940, from which *Transit*, the novel, also came. As Hansen argues, Kracauer is one of the major theorists of the non-narrative aspects of cinema but, more clearly, a critic of the paradigm of classical cinema (xxxii). To quote Hansen in her exegesis of Kracauer, what stands out in *Theory of Film* is "the ability of the particular, the detail, the incident, to take a life of its own, to precipitate processes in the viewer that may not be entirely controlled by the film" (xxxi). *Transit* may also be described as built around a tension between "the incident that takes a life of its own" and the narrative and, therefore, an heir of Kracauer's theories. The almost simultaneous presence of Kracauer and Seghers in Marseille, the real space in which the film's action is set, foregrounds the centrality of realism at the core of the film. It is as if in the film the German thinker emerged from the depths of Seghers' novel to counter the adaptation's primary narrative of near apocalypse with the real city, its details and incidents, and the multiplicity of stories it evokes. The film enlists Marseille for its vision of a world out of joint but, at the same time, in foregrounding the *real* city, it opens the door to the "messy" and "actually existing cosmopolitanism" that has characterized the long transnational history of the Mediterranean city, one that in turn evokes Kracauer's approach to film realism. Petzold's consistent use of realistic strategies, notably location shooting, in his films, reinforces the Kracauerian connection.

From Geoffrey Nowell-Smith to Christian Petzold

An early twenty-first-century proponent of the realist aesthetic of Kracauer, André Bazin, Georg Lukács and others, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, in an article on

location shooting in city films (2001), distinguishes between studio-shot city films, like *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), and mostly location-shot films, like *Rome, Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945). He champions those films that convey a sense of place that is the consequence of "the ontological link between nominal setting and actual location." In these cases, location shooting transforms the film, since locations cannot be guaranteed to enact whatever idea a filmmaker may have (103). He is particularly interested in those films in which the city resists being subordinated to the narrative. In them, against the filmmakers' intentions, "[t]he city becomes a protagonist, but unlike the human characters, it is not a fictional one" (104). In this category of films, he includes Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* (1954) and Michelangelo Antonioni's *La Notte* (1960), with the real cities of Naples and Milan respectively as ultimate protagonists. With several degrees of realism, the tension is ultimately between the filmmakers' desire to harness reality to make it part of their creation *and* to let the real places speak for themselves. Working with real materials and allowing them to retain their original quality however much they are transformed, Nowell-Smith concludes, "is a privilege which filmmakers neglect at their peril" (107).

Nowell-Smith's preference for the power of the real world over the transforming operations of narrative and mise en scène, while rarely an absolute principle, brings to the fore the special position that real places and objects have not only in the meanings of films but also in their very formal scaffolding, in their skin, as it were. Films are not only made up of shots, editing, framing and camera movements, or noughts and ones in the case of digital cinema, but also of bits of reality, snatches of the real world. The real world is both part of the meanings conveyed by the narrative and of cinematic form, where form and content intersect.

Within this realist aesthetic, Nowell-Smith's approach coincides with the advent of the "spatial turn" in film studies, which foregrounds film as a spatial system (Shiel 2001, Duarte 2014), the continuity and inseparability between cinematic and real space (Gaudin 2015), and the power of cinema to record place (Rhodes and Gorfinkel 2011), among other notions. For the purposes of this article, Nowell-Smith's realistic aesthetic offers both a suitable framework for the analysis of *Transit* and a useful entry point into the aesthetic principles and working methods of its director, Christian Petzold. Although the aim of this article is not to provide a study of the German filmmaker's *oeuvre*, his commitment to shooting in real locations, makes it necessary to take a brief look at his films.

Often associated by critics with art cinema and the Berlin School, Petzold's films are recognisable by their minimalist cinematic style, including the actors' performances, and their images of small groups of characters, often triangles, playing out low-key but deep-running moral and metaphysical dramas with a feeling of determinism and inevitable fatality that, in Savina Petkova's words, represent the ethical potential of chance and fate combined (2020). Like those of other Berlin School directors, his films are known for their realism (Böcking, 2022: 50). His stories are largely shot on location, mostly in small or middle-size towns, whose names have twice become the titles of the films (*Wolfsburg*, 2003, *Jerichow*, 2008). Many of these films are set in East Germany, on one occasion in the 1980s, before the country's reunification (*Barbara*, 2012), but mostly in a contemporary reunified Germany, whose citizens are still learning to live with the ghosts of the past and the problems and tensions deriving from the fall of the Berlin Wall. Such is the case of *Yella* (2007), *Jerichow*, *Undine* (2020) and *Afire* (2023). Petzold's characters are the product of this specific historical process. The films are, according to Richard Porton, embodiments of

the pervasive uneasiness of Germans still coming to terms with both their turbulent twentieth-century past and a rootless post-unification present (2019, 17), and, in Clio Nicastro's formulation, attempts to crack the celebratory narrative of German reunification (2022, 111). *Transit* is, after *Phoenix* (2014), Petzold's second attempt to deal, if obliquely, with the country's Nazi past and the first to be set and shot outside Germany.

Location shooting gives Petzold's films a particular look and turns real places into active participants in their moral/historical dramas. Those real places become part of the films' mise en scène and, therefore, of cinematic space. Meaning in Petzold's cinema is largely a matter of geography and social space. The emphasis on space is not novel in studies of the German director (Fisher 2013, 2-3, 78-79, 87; Buhanan 2016, 483; Porton 2019, 17). In the films, side streets in small towns or big cities, country lanes, secondary roads and lonely forests with tree leaves shaking in the wind acquire layers of meaning because of their ontological proximity to the real places.

The locations of Petzold's films, then, are not just the background to their alienated and/or tortured characters but autonomous fragments of the real world from which emerge the human figures and the materials of the social and historical forces that the films are concerned with. The contributions of these real spaces to the films are never clearly delineated, precisely because they remain on the periphery of narrative logic, but it is precisely their slippery relationship with plots and characters that makes them interesting. This brings us back to Nowell-Smith and his valorisation of the unexpected, the unharnessed, those unintended qualities of the real world that may surprise filmmakers and energize their movies. This is the case of *Transit* and the city of Marseille which, in the film, is foregrounded as the site of a rich transnational urban

culture and history of which Anna Seghers and other German exiles in the early 1940s are but one infinitesimal part.

The "real Marseille" and the cinematic city

Marseille grew and thrived as a city of transit, both a port of exit from Europe towards other continents (as in the case of the characters in *Transit*) and a port of entry into Europe. This transnational history starts around the year 600 BC, when a group of Greeks from the city of Phocaea in Asia Minor travelled further west than other Greek sailors had done before and founded the colony of Massalia (both the Greek term Massalia and the phrase "la cité phocéenne" are regularly used nowadays as synonyms of Marseille) and established a trading port between Greece and the westernmost coasts of the Mediterranean. The Phocaeans soon settled down and intermarried with local Gallic women (Abulafia 2014, 165, Tréziny 2018, 34). Since then, people from north and south, east and west, have passed through the city, some staying, others moving on. The most outstanding episode occurred in 1962, at the end of the Algerian war, when hundreds of thousands of *pieds-noirs* – French citizens living in Algeria before the independence, including most Algerian Jews – travelled to and through Marseille in what was called *la grande poussée*, followed, in subsequent years and decades, by Arabs from Algeria and other parts of the Maghreb, and sub-Saharan Africans. As Emile Témime argues, the millions of men and women for whom the city has only been a place of transit have left their visible mark on the surface of the city, in the form of "épaves visibles" or visible debris (1985, 38).

Marseille's continuous history of transnational encounters and journeys has also turned it into part of a network of cosmopolitan Mediterranean cities, like Salonika, Smyrna, Alexandria, Jaffa and Livorno, with much older histories than those of the

countries in which they are now located. Transit and permanence have turned Marseille into a place of *métissage* or *brassage* (Yvan Gastaut, 2003; Attard-Maraninchi et al. 2018, 226), a term that, originally referring to the fermentation of beer, conveys the long-term process of Marseillais mixture and amalgam of populations and races. This long history of deep-rooted hybridity has turned the city into an instance of the contemporary type of cosmopolitanism mentioned above, one that encompasses both hospitality and intolerance. As a businessman wrote in 1725, "even though Marseille is in France, we can also call it little Turkey, little Italy, little Barbary, an abbreviation of all those countries, for better and for worse" (Gastaut 2003, 2). In recent decades, the city has been described and experienced in terms of extremes: from being a place of coexistence and tolerance *par excellence* or the "carrefour du monde" to the racist outbreak of 1973 that turned it into "the capital of racism" (Gastaut 5-6); from the more contemporary racial trouble located in the high-rise HLMs to the slogan "fiers d'être Marseillais", containing a proud celebration of diversity; from interethnic cooperation to widespread and deep-rooted corruption, as forcefully described by Philippe Pujol in *La Fabrique du Monstre* (2016).

The cinema, a child of the twentieth century, has developed its own history of Marseille, one that tends to be aligned along two axes of representation: on the one hand, the often nostalgic celebration of the city and is difference, evoking quaint stories of an imagined mythical *Midi*, with characters speaking in the local accent, embodied in the trilogy of films written by Marcel Pagnol – *Marius* (1931), *Fanny* (1932) and *César* (1936, also directed by Pagnol) –, the later adaptations of his novels such as Claude Berri's *Jean de Florette* (1986) and *Manon des Sources* (1986) and Daniel Auteuil's remake of the (so far) first two films of the trilogy – Marius (2013) and *Fanny* (2013) – and, especially, the films of Robert Guédiguian, to which I return below. On the other

hand, the cinema has returned time and again to the image of the dangerous city beset by gangsterism, corruption, drug traffic, racial conflict and often seemingly uncontrollable urban violence (Ungar 2013, 6). The latter, already present in Maurice Tourneur's *Justin de Marseille* (1935), became , after the tongue-in-cheek beginning of *À bout de souffle* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1959), internationally visible with the French and Hollywood stories of gangsters and drug dealers, including Jean-Pierre Melville's three "Marseille films", *La deuxième souffle* (1966), *L'armée des ombres* (1969) and *Le cercle rouge* (19770), as well as *Borsalino* (Jacques Deray, 1970), *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971) and their sequels. This trend has undergone various mutations in more recent cinema and television, through the stories of poverty and exclusion in the HMLS of Karim Dridi (*Bye-Bye*, 1995, *Khamsa*, 2008, *Le dernier vol*, 2009 and *Chouf*, 2009, among others) and the *policiers* of Cédric Jiménez (*La French*, 2014, and *BAC Nord*, 2020) about the desperate attempts of the legal system and the police to tackle untrammelled violence in the suburbs, among many others. This image of a city on the brink of disaster has often been appropriated by the conservative press and the extreme right to reinforce their anti-migration discourses.

But alongside this representational dichotomy, the dimension of Marseille as a city of transit, transnational encounters and diversity, also has a long film history, starting from the Pagnolesque Marseille of the Marius trilogy, in which the eponymous hero (Pierre Fresnay), looks longingly at the Vieux Port dreaming of sailing to distant lands, which he eventually does for five years, before returning home. Many decades later, Robert Guédiguian, partly a filmmaker in the tradition of Pagnol's cinema, beecame the most prolific chronicler of Marseille in the last twenty-five years or so. The child of parents of Armenian and German origin, his films offer a combination of traditional working-class, left-wing activism and nostalgia for the past. Most of them

are shot on location in and around Marseille, feature a very stable group of actors, including Guédiguian's wife Ariane Ascaride, also of Armenian ancestry, often playing working-class characters. His films, from *Marius et Jeannette* (1997) to *La pie voleuse* (2024), narrate the evolution of the city in the last decades, with the growing impact of globalization on local life and culture, and the greater visibility of diversity and hybridity in the stories, a world dominated by capitalist greed and workers' precarity, but also resilience and cosmopolitan solidarity. Such outsider looks at the city as the little-known *Marseille* (Angela Schanelec, 2004) and the Hollywood mainstream *Stillwater* (Tom McCarthy, 2021), both shot on location, similarly allow the city to take over and unobtrusively but potently showcase its *brassage* and fiercely multicultural realities. Through these and other films, the city displays a remarkable ability to turn itself into cinematic space, partly a consequence of its long, consistent cinematic history. *Transit* inscribes itself within this tradition, bearing in its title the essence of the city, distilled through many centuries of criss-crossing trajectories and indelible debris. Crucially, it also appropriates popular, often ideologically-charged representations of a dystopian *Marseille* for its own discursive remit, but sees this discourse counteracted by the city itself and some of its urban intricacies, that spectators have access to through the mise en scène.

Time and the solid city

Petzold's *Transit* is the second film version of Seghers's novel. The first one was a French-German co-production, with Sebastian Koch, Claudia Messner and Rüdiger Vogler heading a transnational cast, directed by Marseillais René Allio. This is a historical film, set in 1940. Unlike the earlier film, Petzold's version moves the action to an unspecified later time: the characters wear vaguely contemporary or almost

contemporary clothes and stay in flats with vaguely atemporal furniture; the street signs are contemporary and the militarized police wear SWAT gear. Yet, we see no sign of mobile phones or computers, but, rather 1940s-style passports and visas. For Nicholas Jonson, the film refuses to depict history in an "authentic manner" and sets its story in an "alternate-reality Marseille" (51). It depicts history "by not explicitly depicting history" (51). For Cordula Böcking, the film replaces the novel's precise temporality with "a distinctive trans-period approach, setting fascist persecution in the 1940s among the so-called refugee crisis in present-day France" (2022: 52).

In the transition from the Nazi horror in the late 1930s and 1940s to a more abstract and generalized and all-encompassing narrative of transitoriness, of lives in flux, hiding from dark, threatening forces, running from somewhere, heading somewhere else, the film, rather than erase history, highlights parallels between past and present, interpellating 21st-century spectators, particularly sensible to the refugee crisis and the growth of the far right in Europe and elsewhere. Yet, through this blatant narrative strategy, the sense of familiarity in the depiction of the city remains strong. The film's engagement with its urban environment is so evident that even its first part, set in Paris, was also shot in Marseille with very little effort on the part of the filmmakers to hide it. Locations standing for Paris were shot in the same neighbourhoods of the city centre as the rest of the film, including the Bar Tabac La Française, in the Marseillais quartier of Belsunce, where the events of *Opération Vent printanier*, a real-life roundup of Jews in the French capital (Böcking, 52-53) are staged, and Hotel Ryad, in Noailles, where Georg finds Weidel's corpse and manuscript.

From Georg's arrival in Marseille, the visibility of the city is constant: we see him walking by the port, with the ever-present silhouette of Notre Dame de la Garde across the harbour (fig. 1), as the narrator briefly describes the city: "blaue Himmel,

Palmen im Wind, es war kalt, der Mistral" (blue skies, palm trees in the wind, it was cold, the Mistral). He then stops by the Joliette metro station where he sees Marie (Paula Beer) for the first time. The characteristic minimalist performance style familiar from Petzold's other films is apparent at this point and throughout the film, with actors who tend to underplay rather than inspire empathy and characters who are under enormous psychological stress yet appear paradoxically drained of affect. Although this performance style may suggest psychological exhaustion in the face of extreme conditions and, simultaneously, become another modernist strategy of defamiliarization, a further consequence of the low-intensity performances is to draw spectators' attention to the background, to the presence and solidity of the material city behind them. It is as if the characters, incapable of articulating their despair, relied on the city to speak for itself. But, gradually, the city begins to tell a different story.

In the first few minutes, narratively still in Paris but already shot in Marseille, we may recognize the narrow, often hilly streets, the ever-present graffiti on the walls, the Mediterranean light, the steps linking streets and the general appearance of disrepair. If we look attentively, we also make out some shop and café signs: Pharmacie de la Providence, Le Paddock, Retouches Bernex. There is evidence from the beginning of ethnic and racial diversity, anticipating the presence of Melissa (Maryam Zaree) and her son Driss (Lilien Batman), the two central characters of Maghrebi origin that Georg will meet in Marseille.

But, in the story this is still Paris and the atmosphere of imminent danger and paranoia remains central. For the roundup of Jews, the streets are occupied by police with machine guns in contemporary riot uniforms, police car alarms blaring, blue lights flashing, lines of people being searched and soon Georg running away after failing to produce valid papers when he is stopped. As he disappears down a graffiti-laden side

street, an anonymous woman points her finger in his direction to alert the police of the way he has gone, neatly encapsulating contemporary urban tensions and political polarities. These polarities are exacerbated in the first few scenes in order to translate the original story into one with a more generalized tone of pervasive and unspecified menace, one that may appeal more directly to contemporary spectators.

For readers of the novel, the streets of the city centre, the harbour, the Mediterranean light, the image of "la bonne mère", as the Marseillais call the golden statue of Notre Dame de la Garde at the top of the hill, also evoke the time in which Seghers stayed in the city and *Transit* was adumbrated. At the same time, as the characters come and go in a choreography of desultory despair, spectators become familiar with the contemporary city: its bars and restaurants, its streets, the old and new ports and the sea. The ghosts that the characters tirelessly and unsuccessfully chase become not only a metaphor of almost metaphysical threat but, in a different sense, vestiges of the millions of people from all origins that, over the centuries, stopped in Marseille, undecisive whether to stay or go on. In Nowell-Smith's sense, Marseille transforms *Transit*, both through its present realities and its "èpaves visibles", its accumulation of past stories.

Marseille, tourism and the weight of history

The narrative and geographical centre of both novel and film is the Café Mont Ventoux, the establishment where Georg spends much of his time and, in the film, where the narrator works. This café is precisely located by Seghers at the corner of Quai des Belges and La Canebière a few steps from the Vieux Port. What we would see now (and when the film was shot) from the Mont Ventoux is the futuristic "ombrière-miroir", a creation of the Norman Foster studio, inaugurated in 2013 as part of the urban

interventions with the occasion of "Marseille-Provence 2013 capitale européene de la culture." This event reinforced the status of the city as a destination of global tourism. Photos of 1940 confirm the presence of the Restaurant Mont Ventoux on that particular corner, but the establishment is not there any longer. Today, while the building has not changed, the spot is occupied by one of the most popular fast-food restaurants in the world, a glaring contrast with the little joint described in the novel. Petzold could not have used this setting for his film without drastically altering its sense. The film's Mont Ventoux has been moved about one kilometer away, to the location of the real Longchamp Palace restaurant in the nearby quartier of Le Chapitre, on the corner of Rue Bernex and Boulevard Longchamp, near the railway station, Gare Saint-Charles (figs. 2-3-4). Most of the film locations are in this area: quartier Saint Charles, Belsunce, Le Chapitre, le Quai du Port, the Hôtel de Ville area and Le Panier (the historic origin of the city), the Fort Saint Jean, the Mucem, La Joliette and, on the other side of La Canebière, Noailles. What the filmmakers have done is move the locations as little as possible, remaining within the central *arrondissements* of the city and, given the dynamics of tourists' itineraries around urban areas, using those that tourists ignore.

As a consequence, the film's locations remain close to the original ones but tourists are nowhere to be seen, nor do we see recent monuments such as the "ombrière-miroir". We do see, briefly, a cruise leaving the port, just before it goes beyond the frame of the window by which a character is standing. This ship is anachronistically identified as the "Montreal", a name taken from the original story, but, it is not difficult to recognise the boat for what it is, and wonder where all those tourists were while they stayed in the city. Here *Transit* seems to be alerting spectators to its own elisions and prompting us to notice the absences. Although not quite visible, massive international tourism is part of the film's space and of the urban discourses that define the

contemporary city it portrays. We may not see the Vieux Port onscreen or notice the tourist groups alight from the international cruises port, but the adjacent locations that we do see evoke the realities, just beyond the limits of the frame, of this contemporary transformation of tourism under globalization, of which a Mediterranean port like Marseille is a primary example, homogenizing, like the fast-food chain that replaced the novel's Mont Ventoux, what once was heterogeneous and diverse in the name of global business.

At the same time, in Marseille, much of this central area has retained its local/transnational character, the product of a long succession of mobilities and transits. What makes Marseille special today, if not unique, is not the presence of global tourism but its coexistence with a fiercely local culture, one that bears the marks of its transnational past on its surface. Take, for instance le quartier Belsunce. Le Cours Belsunce, its central artery, separates what today is the 1st *arrondissement* from the 2nd. A long, shady promenade, inaugurated in 1687 under the auspices of Louis XIV, it soon became the heart of the city, the link between the old (Le Panier) and new Marseille (La Canebière), a meeting point of merchants, artisans and shop workers with the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, in the words of Michel Méténier and Fernand Revilla, "un lieu de flânerie, d'élégance, de sociabilité demonstrative" (2013:18-19). Today many of the elegant 19th-century buildings remain in place, but the people that walk among them and those who stand behind the counters of its shops and cafés are largely of migrant origin.

Belsunce has its own particular history related to the urban question, successive waves of migration and the HLMs. Michel Samson, in a brief review of a series of books by Emile Temime, the specialist in Marseillais migrations, lists the waves of migrants that settled in this area only in the 20th century: Italians, exiles from the Levant

and Spain, Russians, Greeks, Chaldeans and Armenians, then political or racial exiles from central Europe and, still later, Algerians and other people from the Maghreb. As a consequence of this localized history and of its present realities, the quartier has mixed, assimilated, integrated, rejected, enriched, and exploited millions of people arrived from elsewhere (Samson 1995). The relatively empty spaces of *Transit* reinforce, on the one hand, the post-apocalyptic nature of the narrative. On the other, however, they conjure up its crowded main artery and adjacent streets, a reality that we do see in other films that have used this quartier as location, like *Gloria Mundi* (Guédiguian, 2019) and, more prominently, *The French Connection II* (John Frankenhiemr, 1975). In the latter, a crucial scene starts with a chase down the Cours Belsunce and then turns into the side streets of what the characters call "the Arab Quarter", where the villain's drug factory is located. As Marcelline Block notes, the film shows that in Marseille migrant communities do not only occupy the *banlieu* but also central areas (2013, 56). The Belsunce locations of *Transit*, belong to the same cinematic micro-history and conjure up the social dynamics of the transnational city. Through them and specific mise en scène details, historical and contemporary meanings become part of the film.

With some of the elegant 19th-century buildings at the bottom of La Canebière repurposed by multinational chains and luxury hotels, the narrow streets north of the main artery and on the hill leading towards the railway station retain the flavour of street life characteristic of North Africa. In the meantime, across La Canebière, the lively Marché des Capucins and old shops frequented by a great variety of migrants have been enlisted by the tour operators as part of the packed taste of the Mediterranean city for their clients. Only one block away, the elegant shops and stylish restaurants of the affluent parts of Noailles and the nearby Opéra convey a strikingly different urban dynamic. As in other European cities, quiet streets where people of dramatically

different social and economic strata rub shoulders with each other are only around the corner from the masses gathering around the tourist areas or the local markets. Present and a succession of pasts of the city coexist in a small perimeter, a tiny portion of the expansive metropolis. On the one hand, in *Transit* the mise en scène transforms these real places for narrative purposes. On the other, location shooting allows the material city to transform the film and use it as a medium to address spectators with its own urban issues. Alongside the film's preoccupation with Europe's past and present responsibility in the fate of "the marginalized and displaced in two centuries, and from two continents" (Böcking 2022, 53), the city speaks for itself about concerns that sometimes intersect and sometimes do not, or not obviously, with those of the film. No matter how much effort the filmmakers make to leave the tourists, the fast-food chains and the recent monuments offscreen, they are part of the Marseille we see, even if we do not see them.

Graffiti of Marseille

A particularly striking presence in the first few scenes and throughout the film is the pervasive graffiti, that remains as visible in the mise en scène as in the real Marseille (fig. 5). In recent Marseillais cinema, street art has appeared in various films, including some of Robert Guédiguian's more recent works and *Stillwater*, among others. In *Transit*, it is particularly prominent at the beginning, narratively set in Paris but, as pointed out before, shot in Marseille. This street art is appropriated for the dystopian dimension of the narrative as the profusely decorated or, depending on the perspective, dilapidated walls of the buildings combine with the largely empty streets to produce a first impression of post-apocalyptic desolation. Yet, in Marseille, in Le Panier and parts of Belsunce and Noailles, but also in other areas that we do not see in the film, like

Cours Julien, Cours Lieutaud and Notre Dame du Mont, the cultural meanings of street art are far from apocalyptic (figs 6-7-8).

Rather, the combination of the colourful and/or politically engaged inscriptions with open and busy shops and cafés and the constant flow of people walking past them evoke different dynamics. In recent times, Marseillais graffiti has become both an expression of both grassroots activism against social injustice and a signifier of tourism-targeted institutionalization. Geographers Alexandre Grondea, Florence Pondaven and Manon Boulpicante have studied the development of street art in the city in the last decade or so. According to them, around 2013, while Marseille was the European Capital of Culture, the local authorities started to promote street art interventions in certain areas of the city, aware of the touristic potential of those images and writings, simultaneously subversive and easily "instagrammable" (2023, 4). This institutionalization, carried out in a variety of ways, has triggered both support and opposition from local citizens and small business owners. Street art has become an artistic form to be admired by tourists, particularly those issuing from Mediterranean cruises, while remaining a subversive, "vandal" and illegal activity (5). What is interesting from a transnational perspective is how both ends of the chain of interests represent different, yet deeply related muticultural and multiethnic realities: the international tourist intensely desired by institutionally backed global and local business and the hybrid, vibrant grassroots alliances that resist them.

Le Panier, one of the three areas selected for scrutiny by Gondrea et al., is the oldest part of the city, where the first Phocaeans settled and founded Massalia and remains, therefore, a culturally and symbolically charged site. For a long time, Le Panier was abandoned and segregated against, perceived as violent and difficult to live in. Gradually, improvement in living conditions since the 2000s attracted city projects

related to the tourist industry and the real estate market. This led to gentrification in spite of the persisting socio-economic inequalities (Baby-Collin et Bouillon, 2017). Since then, not only the small art galleries that have sprung up in the area but also graffiti and murals have become a central part of its identity, even though, unlike in the Cours Julien, non-commissioned, political graffiti remains frequent. In 2014, graffiti artists Loïc Seek and "Nhobi" created a big mural fresco in the heart of Le Panier that was subsidized by private entrepreneurs. The initiative was strongly criticized by the local "vandal" community for its commercial and institutional character, and for its betrayal of the art's alternative and counter-cultural essence. Yet, local businesses have generally supported this type of graffiti as opposed to the more spontaneous one that tends to be "dirtier" (21-27). For Gondrea et al., street art in Le Panier illustrates the everyday ambivalence displayed by neighbours, artists, authorities and "users", particularly tourists towards their city. As one citizen summarized it: "Le Panier has become Disneyland, while before nobody came here" (28). Marseillais graffiti encapsulates the complex social and cultural dynamics of 21st-century Marseille, caught between critique and institutionalization, fiercely anti-capitalistic discourses and "touristification", right-wing and left-wing politics, underscoring both its importance as radical and engaged art and as signifier of the capacity of neoliberalism to invade and absorb the social and political margins.

Marseillais street art is a repository of the city's transnational history and realities and, almost literally, of its messy cosmopolitanism and its anarchic diversity. It is this everyday quality that makes Marseille's transnational culture both unobtrusive and pervasive. In Marseille, the specific features of street art – its provisionality, fluidity and excess, its vandalism and aesthetic power – evoke lives in transit, encounters and clashes, resistance and community, confrontations and coalitions. This history of a few

packed and rapidly-evolving decades of fluctuations *vis-à-vis* street art and, beyond, of urban discourses and meanings that go back for centuries is also part of the cinematic city. The tourism evoked by its conspicuous absence in the changed location of Café Mont Ventoux and by the brief sight of a cruise leaving the port, discussed in the previous section, crucially intersects with this history, adding to both the unavoidable presence of a capitalist phenomenon with similar characteristics around the Mediterranean and other parts of Europe, but one which also has its own Marseillais specificities as it coexists with the local and the other dimensions of the transnational city.

In *Transit*, at least two stories of Marseille coexist: on the one hand, the filmmakers' appropriation of the story of exiles from Nazism in Seghers' novel. This story revolves around the rise of the Far Right in Europe, anxieties about political and militaristic repression and the curtailment of individual and collective freedoms. On the other, contemporary transnational Marseille, in its complexities and contradictions, speaks to spectators through the film's space. Christian Petzold's rigorous film style, which crucially incorporates the type of location shooting that Nowell-Smith celebrates, facilitates this conflation of narrative and space and, in the end, brings together transnational culture, contemporary neoliberal practices in the Mediterranean, and deep-seated worries about the decline of democracy, in a unique way. It also embodies the cosmopolitan messiness proposed by Høy-Petersen and Woodward that is at the heart of contemporary transnational culture.

Coda: Back to Kracauer

Two types of ghosts in the film evoke the workings of film space and its proximity to the realities of the city's present and the debris of its multiple pasts. On the one hand, the fictional ghosts, Weidel, the dead man whose identity Georg supplants, Marie in the final minutes of the film and, in a more metaphorical sense, Georg himself. On the other, the real ghosts, Anna Seghers, the author who in 1940 walked the same streets that she minutely describes in her novel and to which the film returns, and also the other German exiles that stayed in Marseille around the same time, Siegfried Kracauer, Paul Benjamin, Heinrich Mann and other central European intellectuals.

Kracauer's ghost is, as we have seen, particularly striking in that his presence grants a seal of approval to the deployment of realistic space in *Transit*. For him, film, like photography, reveals itself "as uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence gravitate towards it" (28). Even those films that do not adhere to a realistic aesthetic and location shooting retain their relation to the material world and, therefore, to real places' geographical, historical and cultural realities. Yet this gravitation is particularly intense in films like *Transit* whose mise en scènes open doors for spectators to access stories that are important segments of the city's history, and as such become part of the films.

The images of real streets and buildings, of the port and the sea, and the permanent presence of the Basilica of Notre Dame de la Garde at the top of the hill (a building with its own long cinematic history) invite spectators to explore the urban and social intricacies at the heart of the city. Belsunce, Le Chapitre, Saint-Charles, Noailles and Le Panier, whose streets are seen repeatedly in the film, may be taken as microcosms of the history and the present cosmopolitan realities of Marseille: of its many waves of migration, of the peoples who passed through and those who, maybe meaning to continue on their journey, decided and were allowed to stay, of the slow

process of *brassage* and the resulting hybrid identities. *Mutatis mutandi*, they also evoke current discourses and realities linking migration and danger, racist flashes and Marseillais solidarity, recent cultural forms like graffiti and their potential institutionalization, and the unstoppable growth of a tourist-based economy that, at the beginning of our century, John Julius Norwich described as "a new and terrible phenomenon: the monster cruise ship" (2006: 860). In the Mediterranean Sea, this phenomenon has become the latest, sad, stage of a long transnational history that goes back to Greek Massalia and beyond (Ruiz-Domènec, 2022, 401-4). *Transit* may well approximate the type of film that Siegfried Kracauer had in mind as he sat at a café terrace scribbling on his notebook in those months of 1940, waiting to move on.

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