

# Exiled From the Absolute: Transnationalism, Displacement and Identitarian Crisis in Roman Polanski's *The Ghost Writer*

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## **Introduction: Exiled from the Absolute.**

The aim of this paper is to analyze Roman Polanski's film *The Ghost Writer* (2010) from a 'transnational' perspective, that is, as a text that, while considering the idea of nation and its borders as paramount elements of our times and identities, focuses on the anxiety and unease that it means for humans to be inevitably subjected to their sovereignty. To do so, I shall, first, introduce the socio-political and cultural changes that have affected our perception of the absoluteness of the frontier, that "elusive line, visible and invisible, physical, metaphorical, amoral and moral" (Rushdie 2002: 78) that limits our existences and identities, and its slippery ontology. Secondly, I shall reflect on the reasons why cinema has as a whole become such a powerful symbol and channel for all the changes that define our post-modern times, and, more precisely, on how transnational cinema's contestation of national limitations suits the human experience of the last century so well. Once the literary and theoretical background have been introduced, I will briefly focus on Polanski's biography and filmography as an example of an author whose work, from industrial and thematic perspectives, evades national restrictions of any kind at the same time as it reflects on them. As a case study of his filmography, I will analyse *The Ghost Writer*, focusing on its portrayal of the foreign exiled being as a key trope for contemporary identities, and how the unease arising from this somehow universal displacement is anchored and conveyed through a careful depiction of space and use of mise-en-scène.

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Humans are and have always been, Salman Rushdie argued in his 2002 lecture and subsequent article ‘Step Across this Line’, “frontier-crossing beings” (76).<sup>1</sup> From the primordial separation between the ocean and solid ground, to the hundreds of thousands of kilometres that separate the Earth and the Moon, a certain force, maybe inscribed in our very own genetic code from the very beginning, Rushdie wonders, has driven humans and all their ancestors to constantly challenge and eventually trespass the limits of their world. Even our birth can be metaphorically described as the crossing of a frontier that somehow mirrors that which brought animals to the surface in the first place, leaving behind a liquid universe, and entering the world of land and air (Rushdie 2002: 75). Frontiers appear to have been there for humans to maintain, contest, defend or transgress since the very inception of our existence, and yet, whether we like it or not, they seem to still maintain their status as essential elements of our identities and existences.

However, the relationship of humans with the idea and the physical entity of the frontier, as well as with all the concepts related to it (nation, home, body, self) has changed drastically in contemporary times. The categorical frame of mind that sustained the essentialist, fixed and unmovable nature of the frontier was debunked from several perspectives during the 20th Century. Although the limitations that borders represent have always been rejected by scientists and artists in their practices and ideals (Rushdie 2002: 91), the development of different theories in physics, such as the relativity theory or the uncertainty principle, as well as the rise of new artistic trends, specifically postmodernism and its several derivatives, has found in the exposure of the instability

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdie uses the term ‘frontier’ to refer indistinctly to both the established limit of a certain entity separating it from the unknown, and, also, to the space or dividing line between two already known items, particularly countries. Although both meanings are equally relevant for this essay, when referring to the second one I will favour the use of the word ‘border’ in order to avoid semantic problems and contradictions. In fact, it could be argued that ‘frontier’ is in essence a much more categorical term and that, to some extent, it has become old fashioned. Since nowadays the unknown is no longer such, ‘border’, which is always a two-sided *shared* experience, seems to be a much more appropriate term for contemporary times.

of borders, real or metaphorical, their *raison d'être*. At the same time, the development of new technologies, from the telephone to the internet, the ascension of mass and global media, the spreading of liberal capitalism all over the world, the international flow of capital, as well many other patterns of globalization, seem to have eroded the significance of the idea of border and the not-so-fixed space/time relationship that used to sustain it.

There remain however, certain realms in which the notion of border has not lost any of its relevance and supremacy over the lives of all individuals, or, at least, over the great majority of them. I am referring primarily here to the “macro level”, as Morley calls it (1999: 155), of nation and national borders.<sup>2</sup> Recent history is full of instances of crises and (violent) conflicts derived from the different perceptions that different people have of what or where a certain border should be, who has control over it or who belongs at which side of it. After all, “it is one of the great characteristics of frontiers to be disputed” (Rushdie 2002: 89). This of course has led to innumerable cases not only of war, but also of expulsion, exclusion, repatriation, exile, nomadism and diaspora, terms now inevitably linked to contemporary times. As Hamid Naficy explains, in spite of all the drastic socio-political, economic, technological and cultural changes occurred during the last century affecting our perception and experience of the border, “national governments everywhere appear to be tightening and guarding their physical borders more vigilantly than ever by enacting and enforcing narrowly defined and sometimes highly intolerant immigration laws and by militarizing their border spaces” (1999: 3). And yet, even with all this ever-increasing control and fear of “spatial penetration”

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<sup>2</sup> Many other types of frontiers at different ‘micro’ levels, from the most concrete to the most metaphorical ones, remain as present as ever in today’s world structure. In their analysis of contemporary geographical, social and cultural situation, different authors have referred, for instance, to language frontiers (Rushdie 2002: 97), home and family frontiers (Morley 1999: 155) or even bodily frontiers (Sobchack 1999: 45), some of which will also have a relevant presence in this paper.

(Morley 1999: 157), somehow, “there has never been a period in which humans have been so jumbled up” (Rushdie 2002: 81).

This almost unsustainable and to a great extent contradictory balance between “boundary maintenance” and “boundary transgression” has become a basic characteristic of our contemporary experience (Morely 1999: 152). Postmodern, postcolonial times and the heterogeneity and ambiguity in thought that they have brought about have meant a serious challenge for the traditional essentialist character of Western countries and the borders that delimited their societies and identities (Peters 1999: 17). Based on “an (idealized) notion of an era when places were (supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities”, as Massey describes it (qtd. in Morley 1999: 156), national borders have become the main site for the struggle and defence of a categorical view of the world, its definite ‘sense of place’ and the essentialist understanding of identity that usually comes with it. The classical notion of human identity as static, *rooted* in tradition, family and nation, has had to be reshaped and adapt to the inevitable effect that every human being’s *routes* in life have in it. Routes have become even more pronounced within the fluid and unanchored spirit of our contemporary existence. As Stuart Hall points out, identity is an open path undergoing constant transformation instead of a permanent and immovable state, a process of “‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’ [...] transcending place, time, history and culture” (1990: 225). The fluctuation from one perception of identity to the other, however, has been more theoretical than practical, and the process, which has still to surpass the towering and fortified walls of traditional mentalities, presents itself as far from unruffled.

As Morley argues, “exclusion and identity construction are dependant processes” (1999: 152), an argument especially true for Eurocentric mentalities, which

have relied far too often on their contrast and exclusion of ‘the other’<sup>3</sup> (that which, as different, does not belong within their patterns and frontiers) for the construction of their supposed uniqueness. Within this frame of mind, “matter out of place” (meaning from garden soil appearing in our living room to immigrants entering a foreign country) is equated with disorder, impurity, contamination and, basically, “dirt”, as anthropologist Mary Douglas notably illustrated the phenomenon (2003: 2).<sup>4</sup> For this kind of mentalities, the contestation of any given border, physical or moral, has historically been linked with “evil” (Rushdie 2002: 102), and any case of miscegenation, turned into an aberration for the defence of a community’s original essence and biocultural identity (Morley 1999: 163-164).<sup>5</sup> These intolerant perspectives “located the members of a society at the centre of the universe, at the spatial periphery of which there is a world of threatening monsters and grotesques” (Morley 1999: 161). In this way, culture and identity, strongly anchored in space, are “territorialized”, and their fixed, traditional, ‘pure’ and supposedly homogenous nuclei, turned into ideals to be protected against spatial contamination. Nevertheless, for theorists like Doreen Massey, there is still the possibility of maintaining a certain stable notion of sense of place, of belonging, that is not necessarily “self-enclosing and defensive” but “outward

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of what ‘the other’ has meant, and still means, for Western civilization in historical and cultural terms, and the creation of its identity, see Stuart Hall “The Spectacle of the Other” (1996). Also, for a complex account of how the same notion of ‘the other’ was constructed from the Western perspective as means of redefining European identity in contrast with the colonies in Asia and Africa, see *Orientalism* (1978) by Edward Said.

<sup>4</sup> As Mary Douglas explains, “dirt” is only named and identified as such when it appears outside its original and essentialist department, e.g. in our bedroom instead of in our garden. This theory has repeatedly been extrapolated to identitarian, cultural, postcolonial theories and basically any study or theoretical framework in whose core laid the idea of frontier, difference and/or the relationship between identity and space.

<sup>5</sup> Populist, racist, anti-immigrant mentalities have often resorted to ethnological and pseudo-scientific theories to justify their arguments. For instance, the inglorious nineteenth century racialist studies by Hunt, Knox and Gobineau established a scale of racial worth, depicting white as superior, and considering that “intermingling races was bad because it diluted the character of the “best” races” (Hand 1995: 149). Another recurrent theory was the “natural territorial imperative” which explains that animals, and by extension humans, “will automatically defend their territory against intruders when these later increase above a certain maximum level” (Morley 1999: 163), which from their point view, legitimized exclusion on the basis that “the relations between different cultures are by nature hostile and mutually destructive” (Stolcke in Morley 1999: 163).

looking” (qtd. in Morley 1999: 156). A sense of place that is not based on the antagonism with its outsides, but one that acknowledges the links between that place and others beyond, one that, instead of being based on *difference*, assumes its *difference*,<sup>6</sup> understanding that the “‘outside[s]’ [...] are part of what constitutes the place” (Massey in Morley 1999: 156-157). As progressive and desirable as these abstract ideas may seem, many forces stand still in the way of their fulfilment, ready to prevent their realization.

In the meantime, the question has become a matter of who moves and who does not, who is still subject to the concept and the control of the border, and who is not, who is taken as ‘dirt’ when trying to cross one and who is received with arms wide open. In his seminal book *Liquid Modernity*, Zigmunt Bauman argued that it is a paramount aspect of todays’ social structures that certain elites in power hold a tight command over the mobility of the rest of the populace. While the general population is denied the possibility of evading its own environment, or the one chosen for them, these elites are able to move freely across borders and exert their dominance invisibly from a borderless and safe distance (Bauman 2000: 8-15). Exempt of the constraints of a “settled form of identity” these elites also take good care that others are “kept in place by forces such as white supremacy, patriarchy and capital” (Peters 1999: 34) while making a profit out of it.

If Bauman throughout his work puts special emphasis on the relevance that the elites’ control over the means of transportation have over the social, identitarian and geographical mobility of the populace, as well as with their understanding of the space/time binomy, other authors have highlighted the impact of technology in that

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<sup>6</sup> The Derridean term of linguistic ‘difference’ refers to the understanding that every word’s meaning is subject to the ‘deferred’ traces of the meanings of all the other words surrounding it, those from which it ‘differs’, as well as to the context in which it is placed, and without which it could not be understood or explained. At the same time, the arbitrary and constantly changing nature of those connections with other words makes meaning an unstable attribute, just like, in this case, national identities.

scheme. As telephones connect us and our homes to elsewhere; as more and more individuals rely on television to “simultaneously staying at home and imaginatively... going places” (Moores in Morley 1999: 159), and as “many homeless physically displaced find in the internet an attractive method of being discursively in place” (Naficy 1999: 4), it becomes clear how electronic technologies have transformed time and space, or at least, overlaid our perceptions of them (Morley 1999: 158).

Digital technology in all its aspects, Ezra and Rowden argue, “has enabled a growing disregard for national boundaries as ideological and aesthetics checkpoints” (2005: 7). However, as other scholars have pointed out, neither have the physical geography and notion of the border ceased to exist or determine our existence (Bhabha 1999: xi; Morley 1999: 159), nor have new technologies, as Bauman also said of modern means of transportation (2000: 15), have become more democratic or egalitarian tools for the physical and identitarian mobility of individuals. In fact, both developments have turned out to become chief instruments of power and domination. This is so, not only because the rich are the only ones able to “express their freedom to overcome space”, thanks to their privileged access to these goods, while “the poor are more likely trapped in space” (Smith in Morley 1999: 160), but also, because the more “the provision of information, education and entertainment passes into regimes determined by cash nexus” (Morley 1999: 161) the more the inequality between the citizens able to pay for their access to them, and those who are not increases.

Apparently, freedom, or what is understood as such in the West, “is to be defended against those too poor to deserve its benefits” (Rushdie 2002: 80). In the world of today, “defined not by its colonial past [...] but by its technological future” (Ezra and Rowden 2005: 5), the unequal organization of the relations of individuals with the changing time-space relationship has become subject to what Massey calls

“power-geometry” (qtd. in Morley 1999: 157). Therefore, access to physical transport or to communication and electronic systems, have turned mobility, that ‘frontier-crossing’ nature of humans Rushdie talked about, into a system still “heavily structured in class, gender, ethnicity and whole range of other social factors” (Morley 1999: 158).

## **Story-Telling and Cinematic Visuality**

Concerns around the relationship of humans with the idea of nation, its borders and the identities developed inside of them, may have experienced a heightened prominence and relevance in contemporary times, but they have been with us forever. We know this because, if it is true that we humans are bound to cross frontiers, it is also true that it is part of us to relate those stories, for we are also, Rushdie argues, “story-telling animals” (2000: 76). Mobility, exile or nomadism might be “among the newest stories in the Western world”, but as Peters argues, they are also “some of the oldest” (1999: 21). A quick glance at the core texts around which Western religions, cultures and nations have historically built their principles and identity, reveal at some point or another a fundamental story regarding the defence of, submission to, or rupture with the boundaries holding them down (Rushdie 2002: 77). Peters in his essay “Exile, Nomadism and Diaspora” offers a brief but interesting account of some foundational myths all over the world built around these topics. Taking special interest in those primordial ones that shaped the Western literary canon, culture and identity, he focuses on the Greek myths and *The Bible*: Odysseus and his perilous return to Ithaca from the war of Troy, a border city strategically placed to control the flow of military and commercial ships between two seas; the story of Oedipus, who brings misery and death to his own city by returning to Thebes, from where he was once exiled; the first book of

the Old Testament, the Genesis, which relates the expulsion from Paradise of Adam and Eve; as well as the second and fourth books, the Exodus and the Book of Numbers, that tell the journey of the Jewish people across the desert from Egypt to Israel, the promised land (1999: 21-31). As Peters argues, all those stories are infused with movement, displacement, change, the confrontation with the new and different, and the effect all these notions have had in the shaping of a whole culture's identity. As he explains, "concepts of mobility lie at the heart of the Western Canon; otherness wanders through its centre" (Peters 1999: 17).

This indissoluble relationship of humans with their surrounding frontiers and what lies outside of them, the tales that related those conflicts, and their "rich metaphoric afterlife" (Peters 1999: 17), have not only legitimized the creation for history of new European lands, but also of new peoples (Rushdie 2002: 88). In this sense, movement and its effect on human identity has become "one of the central resources for social description" (Peters 1999: 18) and "exile", in particular, "*the central story told in European civilization*" (1999: 17, emphasis in the original).

However, it has been a while since all these foundational stories have been sung, told, staged or even written, as they used to be. Arguably, nowadays their representation is mostly visual, and more precisely, filmed. Starting from the theories that Walter Benjamin divulged in his critical essay "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. According to Rey Chow, film's prominence as a medium for cultural expression not only reveals the increasing dependence of cultures on the visual image and the "replacement of human perception by the machine" (1998: 174), key characteristics of postmodern times. Film has also offered artists, due to its very own nature, the

possibility of reproducing the world with an appearance of reality not available before (1998: 169), at the same time that its visual practices expose the mediated, relative and illusory nature of those same realities and identities it represents. In his own words:

The modes of identity construction offered by film were modes of *relativity* and *relations*, rather than essences and fixities. Film techniques such as montage, close-ups, panoramic shots, long shots, jump cuts, slow motion, flashback, and so forth, which result in processes of introduction, projection, or rejection that take place between the images and narratives shown on the screen, on the one hand, and the audiences' sense of self, place, history and pleasure, on the other, confirm the predominance of such modes of relativity and relations. (1998: 170, emphasis in the original)

If cultural identities, as he argues, always find an anchor in media representations, the illusory and dynamic character of cinema has come to embody, from its very form, the accelerated, displaced and exilic existence of our uncertain times, for which it has become such a “strong contender in the controversial negotiations for cultural identity” (1998: 169). Not only that, “film has displaced literature [...] as emblem of cosmopolitan knowledge and identity” (Ezra and Rowden 2005: 3), replacing the solitary and fixed engagement required by the traditional realist novel by the unstable and constantly changing position of the film spectator. At the same time, film, which exemplifies the “technological permeation” of our everyday existence and its subsequent representations (Chow 173), and its quasi-identical reproduction of reality, has contributed to the debunking of the sovereignty of the original, the static and the absolute. The intervention of the camera, and its reshaping of what we perceive (the visible, the real) through its constant movements and

“manoeuvres of light and temporality” (Chow 1998: 170) epitomizes the ‘acceleration’,<sup>7</sup> displacement and defamiliarization individuals experience nowadays as well as a “entirely new structural formations of the subject” (Bhabha 1999: xi).

From the identitarian exile that the actor undergoes when performing in front of the camera (Benjamin 1935: 9), to the one the audiences experience when they renounce part of themselves in order to understand and identify with the moving images of the screen (Chow 1998: 170), cinema seems to be a medium created around the instability of the contemporary subject, revolving around ideas of displacement, abandonment and fragmentation. The spatial organization of spectators and broadcast audiences around the world has also been compared to a disseminated entity, a diaspora of sorts, “sharing a common symbolic orientation without sharing intimate interaction” (Peters 1999: 24). This heterogeneous, dispersed and migratory constitution of film audiences has also served to reveal film as a fertile way of contesting definitive interpretations of reality, of “exploring cultural crisis [and] of exploring culture as a crisis” (Chow 1998: 173). The overall “liveliness of this new illusory world”, as Chow (1998: 169) describes it, conveyed by the iconoclastic filmic techniques and camera movements, has resulted in new modes of showing and perceiving reality and identity, contesting the fixities that used to define them, and reflecting “the dilemmas and contradictions, nostalgias and hopes, that characterizes struggles towards modernity” (Chow 1998: 174). In this sense, as 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 if is that we deem to be familiar, domestic, national, homely” (1999: xi).

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida uses this term, ‘acceleration’, to refer to the change in our experience of the time-space relationship and the succeeding “general dis-location to which our time is destined” (qtd. in Gaston 2006: 107).

## From National to Transnational Cinema

Although the cinema may have served, as these authors illustrate, to contest the fixities and absolutes that defined other times, films, as much as any other media, have had a promiscuous and committed relation with the crystallization of nations and cultures all over the world. Taking as the clearest example that of the United States of America, an astonishing case of precocity in what concerns the formation of a nation's identity, its rise as the world's top power was parallel to the cinema's rapid ascension as the main cultural expression of the last century. It is not surprising that such a markedly U.S. industry as the cinema became the perfect catalyst for the representation, spreading and consolidation of the ideology that the country wanted to embody, from its highly industrialized and technological mode of production, to the histories of freedom and success that it related.<sup>8</sup> However, the U.S. has not been the only country to rely on cinematic depictions for the instauration and/or perpetuation of the values and identity of its nation.<sup>9</sup>

Now conventionally described as “imagined communities”, following Benedict Anderson’s definition, nations all over the world have used cinema to forge a secure and shared identity that could provide integration and meaning for the inhabitants of their “carefully demarcated geopolitical space” (Higson 2005: 16). As Shohat and Stam explain, “contemporary theories see nation as narrated, in the sense that beliefs about the origins and evolution of nations crystallize in the forms of stories” (2003: 9).

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<sup>8</sup> The clearest ambassador, in filmic terms, of the U.S. mentality was, of course, the ‘Western’ genre, built around the idea of the frontier, but mostly, around the desire of breaking with it. Turned thanks to the cinema into a purely U.S. American symbol, nowadays the U.S. frontier hardly evokes the freedom that it used to. As the frontier with the most and more varied filmic representations (Naficy 2001: 239), the ominous U.S.-Mexico border has become a great example of the volatile nature of contemporary notions and ideas, turned nowadays into a symbol of unease, suffering and inequality (Rushdie 2002: 83).

<sup>9</sup> In fact, government supported cinemas have to great extent been a direct reaction to Hollywood’s (U.S.’ national cinema) control of the cinema industry, becoming one of the few ways to counteract their cultural imperialism (Ezra and Rowden 2005: 1; Higson 2005: 21) and to turn cinema into a viable way of promoting local culture and economy (Higson 2005: 20).

‘National’ cinemas, as they are commonly referred to, have performed different functions for the states, becoming ‘national’ in a variety of ways (Higson 2005: 15), but they have been characterized conceptually with a few traits. National cinemas, Higson argued, are “the product of a tension between ‘home’ and ‘away’”, representing the building of the nation’s identity as a balance concerning what is “homely” and how it differs from what lies outside its borders:

On the one hand, a national cinema seems to look inward, reflecting on the nation itself, on its past, present and future, its cultural heritage, its indigenous traditions its sense of common identity and continuity. On the other hand, a national cinema seems to look out across its borders, asserting its difference from other national cinemas, proclaiming its sense of otherness (2005: 18)

However this definition seems to consider nations and their identities as fully formed and immutably fixed in a certain space and time, a perspective that contemporary theories have debunked, as this essay has briefly explained, from several perspectives. Higson himself puts forward the flaws of the theory he has expounded, explaining that borders have always been leaky and that mobility across borders, physical, cultural or of whatever kind, is a central element of our times (2005: 18-19). In consequence, he ends up arguing that the limits of the nation state hardly contain the density of any given identity or culture, and subsequently, of its cinema and film productions, extremely dependant in turn on the “complexities of the international film industry and the *transnational* movements of financial capital, film-makers and films” (2005: 23, my emphasis).

After our first encounter with the key word of this essay, and before getting into details about its application to film studies, it would be appropriate to discuss the implications of the word ‘transnational’ as a critical concept and ‘transnationalism’ as a

theoretical framework. With its origins in economic and sociopolitical studies (Ezra and Rowden 2005: 1), the term has revealed itself as a useful tool within very diverse fields of investigation in face of the contemporary questioning of the idea of ‘nation’ as defining element of our times. According to Ezra and Rowden, “the transnational can be understood as the global forces that link people or institutions across nations”, and it is a direct response to “the decline of national sovereignty as a regulatory force in global coexistence” (2005: 1). As the etymological origins of their prefixes reflect, ‘transnational’ has recently developed somewhat different connotations than the term ‘international’, much more spread and used. While the latter seems to reflect a state or condition ‘among’ nations, which does not contest or problematize the idea of country or its borders, the former conveys an idea of being ‘beyond’ and even ‘away from’ nations, not necessarily negating them, but contesting their unconditional dominion (Vann 2008: 306, 714). From a linguistic perspective, transnational appears to reflect more accurately the dis-placed and constantly changing idea and experience of the contemporary nation, transcending its autonomous cultural particularity, but respecting it as “a powerful symbolic force” (Higson 2005: 2).

As a field of scholarly studies, transnational theories have come to complement and even sometimes substitute for the previous and much more widespread ‘postcolonial’ approaches that, as Naficy points out, have been recently attacked “as being elitist and lacking a commitment to home” (1999: 2). According to Ezra and Rowden, the term ‘transnational’ has also proven to be a much more flexible analytical tool, as it does not rely completely on previous imperial or colonial conflicts in order to develop an analytical perspective (1999: 5). Although Naficy does not share much of the criticism, he recognizes the certain stagnation of the theoretical framework and the

need for new blood, both in terms of scholarly work, and approaches to the contemporary socio-political state of affairs (1999: 3).

Within the field of film studies, “transnational” has become once again quite a problematic term. Although many scholars coincide in characterizing it as a response to the limited scope of ‘national’ approaches to cinema, at a time when such a notion is so unstable (Higson 2005: 15; Ezra and Rowden 2005: 1), it is difficult to find in their analyses a clearcut definition of it, and those who have tried, have faced some difficulties. Ezra and Rowden in their introductory chapter “What is Transnational Cinema?” introduce the term from two perspectives: first, to refer to the globalized nature of Hollywood cinema, whose effortless dissemination all over the world seems not to be subjected to national restrictions and, second, to the “counterhegemonic responses” that other cinemas, mainly from Third World countries and former colonies, have carried out (2005: 1). As fuzzy as this approach appears to be, not much is done in the rest of the chapter to narrow down the meaning of the term. From their perspective, transnational cinema basically refers to films whose “dynamic is generated by a sense of loss”, films that focus on “the image of displaced persons” and “that explore the ways in which physical mobility across national borders necessarily entails significant emotional conflict and psychological adjustment” (2005: 7).

For Deborah Shaw however, to limit the scope of transnational productions to “cinematic depictions of people caught in the cracks of globalization,” in Ezra and Rowden’s terms (2005: 7), means only privileging as transnational a certain kind of cinema with a very specific political approach and ethics, without taking into account the bigger picture of the world’s cinema industry.<sup>10</sup> From this same perspective, other authors have tried to widen the scope of a term that they find basically built around the

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<sup>10</sup> I thank Deborah Shaw for granting me access to her unpublished manuscript “Deconstructing and Reconstructing ‘Transnational Cinema’” and allowing me to use some of her ideas.

idea of an almost complete heterogeneity. While the transnational films that Ezra and Rowden mainly refer to are defined as such in thematic terms, for Higson transnationalism works in films at a more industrial basis, affecting the levels of production, distribution and reception of films. As he argues, films rely now more than ever on nationally heterogeneous personnel and funding, as well as on international distribution and audiences, for the developing and economical viability of a given project, not to mention the impact of the new technologies in the reception of films all over the world (2005: 19). Hamid Naficy, in his extensive work on the issue, labels transnational cinema as a genre that “cuts across previously defined geographic, national cultural cinematic and metacinematic boundaries” (2003: 203). Although he embraces the hybrid nature of transnational co-productions as one of its main features, from a purely representational perspective he defends certain stylistic features as paramount elements for their classification. According to him, transnational or ‘accented’ films, as he also calls them,<sup>11</sup> are usually the product of the filmmaker’s own experience of deterritorialization. Given that one of the key features of transnational cinema is precisely the constantly evolving and heterogeneous nature of its corpus, and the subsequent “not programmatic, already formed style”, the transmission of certain feelings and atmospheres seems to be their only stable characteristic. Rooted in a certain “structure of feeling” defined by “sadness, loneliness and alienation” these films resort to dystopic and claustrophobic representations of exile, displacement and conflicts revolving around the relationship between identities and nations (2001: 22-28).

From these perspectives, it would be complicated to argue if some, if not all, of these features, could not be applied to many previous films not classified under this

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<sup>11</sup> In an essay published in 2003, Naficy identifies and theorizes what he calls the “independent transnational film genre”, which is basically an adaptation of his *Accented cinema* book of 2001, both in terms of authors and traits, but from a specifically generic perspective. In a previous article in the book *Home, Exile, Homeland* from 1999 he referred to it as “postclassical “accented cinema””. In this paper the ideas of all three works are used indistinctly.

label, and especially those dealing with the quite similar tensions around instability and loss that postmodernity as a whole brought about. In fact, it has been argued from several perspectives that the cinema as a whole has been an art permeated with transnationalism from its very inception. Rushdie argues that the “frontierlessness” of art has always been one of its main traits and “heady ideolog[ies]” (2002: 102). Naficy, in turn, points to the fact that, during the twentieth century, transnational authors such as “exiles, émigrés, refugees and expatriates [...] have dominated the pinnacles of modern literatures and cinemas of the West” (2003: 203). Rey Chow argues that cinema has always been a “transcultural phenomenon” in its ability to “create modes of fascination which are readily accessible and which engage audiences in ways independent of their linguistic and cultural specificities” (2005: 174). In this line, several authors have noted that films have been made as international co-productions since at least the 1920s, including the many foreign directors that emigrated to Hollywood in the classical era (Higson 2005: 19); at the same time, considering the collective nature of the enterprise, films have always had an inevitable, and not necessarily premeditated, degree of international personnel, resulting in nationally hybrid works, even when made under the shadow of a big Hollywood studio (Ezra and Rowden, 2005: 2).

Deborah Shaw, in her attempt to offer an all-embracing approach to the transnational in filmic terms, recuperates some of these perspectives and offers a deconstructive analysis of the term, taking into account one by one all the aspects of cinema production and meaning that are affected by the notion. Thus, films and film studies can be permeated with transnationalism from several perspectives, some of them already mentioned, such as production, distribution and exhibition; modes of narration and meanings designed to be accessible to audiences all over the world; films that refer markedly and specifically to topics such as globalization and the idea of nation; films

whose multiple international locations, and the crossing from one to another, become a main subject in the development of their plot and significance; authors that are displaced beings in their real life and reflect their crisis resulting from it in their own work; meanings and readings of films resulting from the cultural exchange brought about by the international distribution of films and critical analyses; audience reception and the impact of their (national) context and viewing practices; and, finally, filmmakers, to which she refers directly as “transnational directors”, which embrace and embody several of the perspectives mentioned above, from the industrial and funding aspects, to the transnational modes of narration and topics. It is in this last category, which in turn comprises all of the previous ones, that I want to place Roman Polanski, looking at his work as an example of the crisis and outcomes of the contemporary relationship of humans with the ideas of border, nation, home and identity.

### **The Transnational Cinema of Roman Polanski**

Since the advent and consolidation of poststructuralism in the second half of the 20th century, it has permeated almost every field of critical and scholarly analysis. Due to its postulates around the relativity of language and its influence on the access to meaning, ideology and subject formation in any given text, nowadays the position of the reader is being highly favoured over that of the author. The most seminal work in this respect was Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author*. In that essay, Barthes postulated the idea that, due to the unlimited interpretations that a text can receive, and the active role that each reader has in his particular understanding of it, “to give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing” (1997: 5). In a time in which the idea of the absolute has been demystified, in

which texts are deliberately dialogical and their meanings continually negotiated in each reading, Barthes famously concluded that “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author” (1997: 6).<sup>12</sup> The truth is that, even if regarded as old-fashioned (especially given the rise of cultural studies), authorial and autobiographical approaches to works of art are still present in today’s critical corpus, and particularly in film studies.<sup>13</sup>

‘Auteur’ theories in films, or ‘auteurism’, developed almost at the same time as poststructuralism by the critics of French cinema magazines (the most famous being *Cahiers du Cinéma*), have changed greatly throughout the last decades. However, they have always maintained a stable core: the focus on the director as main responsible behind the collectivity of film production and the analysis of consistent elements that cohere repeatedly in his films in order to interpret their discourse (Naremore 1999: 22).<sup>14</sup> From this critical approach to films, authors have become a sort of critical concept, different from the actual biological person; no longer an artist, but a “reading strategy” (Grant 2008: 4). Theoretical approaches built around authorship came under attack in the following years, intermittently coming back in different periods,<sup>15</sup> but never without a careful reference to and/or contestation of Barthes’ ideas, something that seems to have turned into a *condition sine qua non* of this kind of studies.

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<sup>12</sup> Barthes in fact, developed in his essay *S/Z* the concepts of “scriptible” and “lisible” (translated to English as “writery” and “readerly”) to refer respectively to texts that explicitly relied on an active approach and production of meaning by the reader, and those more classic and realist ones that locate the reader as a simple receiver of a given message (1974: 4-5).

<sup>13</sup> Ewa Mazierska in order to legitimize the biographical references in her analysis of Polanski’s works, refers to recent studies around the works of Kafka, Proust or Walter Benjamin that have relied in the intermingling of author and work of art for their investigations (2007: 13).

<sup>14</sup> The construction of a certain image of the director out of the material in his films and the bits of his personal life available was named by Grazyna Stachówna “biographical legend” (qtd. in Mazierska 2007: 13) and mirrors to a great extent the widespread notion of ‘star persona’ used when talking about actors or actresses.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed account of the comings and goings of ‘auteur’ theory throughout the years, see the chapter ‘Authorship’ by James Naremore (1999).

Although this thesis will not be particularly concerned with the personal life of Polanski, the transnational theories on which it will be based are keen to use directors, including references to their biographies, as platforms from which to watch and comprehend their filmic texts. As mentioned above, Shaw devotes a category to transnational authors whose personal experiences as exiles, expatriates or nomads have a clear and relevant effect in their work. In this same way, Hamid Naficy in *Accented Cinema*, after evading Barthes' theoretical restrictions, systematically puts the focus on different diasporic, nomadic and exilic filmmakers as examples to develop his theory. In fact, it is one of the key elements of Naficy's theory to analyze transnational cinema, not only as a group of "generic and thematic conventions", but also as the specific cinema developed by authors with a particular location detached from national boundaries and cultural restrictions (2003: 204-205). According to him, taking into account the specific location and circumstances surrounding a particular director or film keep us from dealing with exile or diaspora as standardized experiences, and of transnational cinema as a homogeneous all-encompassing notion (2001: 9).

## **Roman Polanski: An Author on the Move**

Among the relatively reduced scholarly bibliography around Roman Polanski available in English, no author seems to resist the impulse to refer to the extremely notorious and eventful personal life of the director, whose deliberate or forced journeys around the world have taken his life and films from one country to the next.<sup>16</sup> Following the biographical accounts that authors such as Ewa Marzierska (2007), James Morrison

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<sup>16</sup> Polanski's personal life has even been the subject of two documentaries, *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired* (Marina Zenovich, 2008) and *Roman Polanski: A Film Memoir* (Laurent Bouzereau, 2011), as well as of a feature film called *Polanski Unauthorized* (Damian Chapa, 2009). Note the fact that all three of them include his surname as (initial) part of the title.

(2007), Ewelina Ostrowska (2006) and Polanski himself in his autobiography *Roman* (1984) make of his life, here is a brief and personal summary of the events in the director's life that may qualify him as a perfect example of a transnational or 'accented', in Naficy's words, filmmaker.

Roman Polanski (born Rajmund Roman Thierry Polański) came to this world in Paris on 18 August 1933 in the bosom of a Polish Jewish émigré family. After the rise of Nazism and the systematic persecution of Jews that they carried out all over Europe, he and his family returned to their homeland Poland in 1937 thinking it to be the safest place to be. By 1939 however, Krakow, where they were living at the time, was taken by the Germans and the 60,000 Jews living in the city were ghettoized in several neighbourhoods separated from the rest of the city by fortified barricades. The Jewish population of the city, including the Polanski family, would be gradually deported to concentration and forced-labour camps, leaving Roman, who escaped in the last minute, as the only surviving member. Adopted by another family, he would spend his youth watching movies, and once he finished his schooling, he enrolled in Krakow's School of Fine Arts and later in the National Film School at Lodz. There he would make his first short films and *Knife in the Water* (1962), his first feature film. The success of the film at the 1962 Cannes and Venice film festivals, as well as his nomination to the Oscars, would offer him the possibility of participating in *Les plus Belles Escroqueries du Monde* (Claude Chabrol et al., 1964), an international co-operative film where he would share directorial duties with the likes of Claude Chabrol and Jean-Luc Godard. Encouraged by a fellow Polish producer, he would move to London, where his work was increasingly being appreciated and where he would make his following three films *Repulsion* (1965), *Cul-de-Sac* (1966) and *Dance of the Vampires* (1967).

The success and awards brought about by these films, still considered among his best, offered him the possibility of going to Hollywood and make what would become his breakout film, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). The film became controversial, praised by critics and audience, but harshly attacked for its satanic undertone. For his next film, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (Roman Polanski, 1971) he returned to the UK in order to use medieval enclaves for the setting and recuperate the *genius loci* of the play. After the film's poor reception, Polanski took a exilic sabbatical period in Italy, where he would film a minor sex-comedy named *What?* (1972). After a period of inactivity in Rome, he returned to Hollywood to film a quintessentially U.S. American *film noir*, *Chinatown* (1974), a landmark in his career that returned him some of his lost prestige. Given the success of the film, Paramount offered him a project that would later become *The Tenant* (1976), set in Paris and entirely filmed in France. One year after the release of the film, Polanski was notoriously charged with drugging and raping a 13-year old girl. Facing the possibility of a 50-year conviction, Polanski left the U.S. and returned to Paris, but not before pleading guilty of the lesser charge of 'unlawful sexual intercourse'. In 2009 he would be put under house arrest in Switzerland confronting the possibility of an eventual extradition to the U.S. that did not take place. He was released in 2010. Until today, the case remains on hold pending his return under U.S. jurisdiction.

His exile from the U.S. did not keep him from resorting to Hollywood stars and funding. His subsequent films of the late 80's and 90's, even if shot and produced between France and the United Kingdom, all included North American stars and the majority, an amount of Hollywood money. To this period belong films such as *Pirates* (1986), *Frantic* (1988), *Bitter Moon* (1992), *Death and the Maiden* (1994) and *The Ninth Door* (1999), the majority of which are considered far from his best efforts. His

later films, all of them literary adaptations, have put Polanski back on the map of international cinema, especially thanks to the commercial success of *The Pianist* (2002). *Oliver Twist* (2005), *Chacun son Cinéma* (Theo Angelopoulos et al. 2007) (another international collaboration), *The Ghost Writer*, *Carnage* (2011) and a surprising Prada commercial in the form of a short film entitled *A Therapy* (2012) have been his latest productions, pending the release of *D*, planned for 2014.

Polanski's perpetual wanderings between nations as a permanent "fugitive", as he refers to himself, have affected almost all aspects of his filmic production. From an industrial perspective, his production could not be more heterogeneous in terms of production, distribution, location and funding sources. His filmography fluctuates constantly between "elitist and mass cinema [...] low and bid budget productions, America and Europe" (Mazierska 2007: 2). As a result of this, and until the last decade in which he has assembled his own committed team of collaborators, Polanski's filmic production has never relied on a stable crew, including constantly changing cinematographers, scriptwriters and score composers (Mazierska 2007: 1). Being the only stable core behind such a varied filmography and given the international prominence of his figure and private life, the perception of his films as extremely personal and even autobiographical efforts has gradually permeated critical opinion, without him doing anything to avoid it.

Detached from the constraints of any particular national cinema and distribution circuit, the promotion and reception of his films have relied almost completely on international film festivals and audiences. Aware of this, Polanski has reduced the "nationally bound cultural backgrounds" of many of his films, especially noteworthy in his literary adaptations, trying to appeal to as heterogeneous and international an audience as possible (Mazierska 2007: 152). For this same reason, the contestation of

national myths and nationally defined identities is said to be a common trait of his cinema, which he approaches from an almost mocking perspective (Mazierska 2007: 18).

In several interviews, Polanski has referred directly to his deliberate status as a stateless director: “Which world do I belong to? We all know the answer to that: it’s called Earth [...] I don’t know why I should especially associate myself with any particular country just because of where I was born or educated” (2005: 78). When asked about the nationality of his films, his answer goes in the same demythologising direction: “If your story takes places in Poland, it must be Polish. If it takes place in Transylvania, it’s Transylvanian” (2005: 78). However, he proudly defends his European origins and sensibility as well as his belonging to a certain European Cinema culture and background, especially in contrast with the Hollywood filmic tradition, describing himself as a “displaced European” (Polanski 2005: 148-153). The majority of the filmic referents he mentions and with whom he has been compared can also be described as transnational authors, such as Alfred Hitchcock, Fritz Lang and Billy Wilder, whose films, he argues, demonstrate “moments of a genuine ‘cinema of exile’, something I hope my films also have” (2005: 150).<sup>17</sup>

Considered in his beginnings to be a specialized horror/thriller director, his contact with different cinemas and filmic cultures around the world has resulted in an extremely heterogeneous filmography from stylistic and narrative perspectives. In generic terms, his filmography includes comedies such as *Cul-de-Sac*, *Dance of the Vampires* or *What?*, psychological thrillers such as *Knife in the Water*, *Repulsion*, *The*

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<sup>17</sup> Always eager to demonstrate his personal ‘European’ mark in his films, he has consciously and repeatedly resorted to “self-inscription”, as Naficy calls it, that is, appearing in his own films (2001:277). In this same interview he proudly argued that putting a band-aid on Jack Nicholson’s nose was something only a “displaced European” would do (Polanski 2005: 150). It cannot be taken as a coincidence then, that it is the character played by Polanski in the film, which only appears in this scene, precisely the one who cuts Jack Gittes’ (Jack Nicholson) nose in the first place.

*Tenant or Death and the Maiden*, fantasy and horror films such as *Rosemary's Baby* or *The Ninth Gate*, adventure films such as *Pirates*, melodramas like *Oliver Twist*, film noirs such as *Chinatown* and historical (melo)dramas such as *Tess* or *The Pianist*. The stylistic approach to his films has not been more homogeneous than his generic one, as his career and directorial identity have been constantly on the move, absorbing influences from completely disparate cinemas, particularly from European avant-gardes and the New Hollywood of the 1970's (Morrison 2007: 2). In this sense, in certain films or for whole periods, he has shown signs and characteristics of French and Polish experimental and art cinema (Morrison 2007: 35-54; Orr 2006: 5), British post-war cinema (Orr 2006: 5), Hollywood genre and continuity cinema (Mazierska 2007: 4; Orr 2006: 5), movements such as surrealism (Morrison 2007: 4; Mazierska 2007: 4, 57), post-modernism (Mazierska 2007: 5), cubism (Mazierska 2007: 57) the absurd (Coates 2006; Mazierska 2007: 24-49), expressionism (Mazierska 2007: 57) and the grotesque (Ostrowska 2007: 66).

Polanski's films have not only been transnational in their production values and heterogeneous stylistic approaches, they have also been *about* transnationalism, even if the term did not exist when they were made. It is difficult to find one of his films in which the protagonists are not geographically displaced and socially rejected in some way for that same reason. More precisely, it is a typical trope of his films to depict immigrants forced to live in a foreign country, with narratives built precisely around the conflicts arising from that situation. This is a feature already present in his early short films such as *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (1958), in which the two main characters come out of the sea into dry land, and, faced with an extremely hostile environment and society, end up returning to the water for good. As in this short film, characters in Polanski's movies are continuously located "in the very places they should escape

from” (McKibbin 2006: 57). *Repulsion* and *The Tenant* for instance, are films that use oppressing atmospheres and closed interiors, a common trait in Polanski’s filmography, to “explore the nature of the exiled being” (McKibbin 2006: 52). They are films that construct the psychological crises of their protagonists as originating from their condition as immigrants, their “rootlessness” (Lim 2010) and the solitary existence that they are drawn to live by the intolerant locals (Mazierska 2007: 38-41).

This discouraging view of Paris, London and of any big city as xenophobic environments “that detect and punish difference” (Mazierska 2007: 74) would be reproduced years later in films like *Frantic*, in which the U.S. American female protagonist is kidnapped in Paris, *Chinatown* and *The Pianist*, both of which depict cities divided in racial terms (Mazierska 2007: 77-80). The protagonists of *What?*, *Cul-de-Sac* and *Dance of the Vampires*, even if displaced to more rural environments (the Italian countryside, a remote English island and a Transylvanian castle respectively), are also immigrants of sorts trapped in labyrinthine environs, facing assaults from constant sexual harassment and even rape to pure death. It is also common to find in his filmography stories and characters detached from any particular nation, as is the case of *Death and the Maiden*, whose plot is placed in an imaginary country, reflecting the universality of the film’s discourse, and especially of those who take place at sea, such as *Knife in the Water*, *Pirates* and *Bitter Moon*. Polanski’s characters (as well as his filmography) are in constant transit between places, social groups and classes. They are characters that do not seem to fit in pre-existing categories determined by gender, race or nationality, traditional identitarian landmarks, and that end up being rejected and punished by society for that same reason (Mazierska 2007: 142).

It is the arrival of strangers and foreigners in his films, very commonly as third parties in established couples, that actually reveals the falsehood of the apparent

harmony and stability of the relations established in that place (Mazierska 2007: 29). At the same time, they trigger hidden intolerant attitudes towards outsiders and the unwanted disclosure they bring about. Polanski seems to follow Marc Augé's understanding that the figure of the immigrant tends to be rejected by settled people because it "exposes the relative nature of the certainties inscribed in the soil" (qtd. in Morley 1999: 166). For this reason, following the universalizing drive of his filmography, his films persistently debunk the essential differences that supposedly separate disparate cultures and nations, (Mazierska 2007: 32, 187). 'Travel narratives' of sorts, his works appear to be constantly dealing with the crisis of facing new places, new peoples, confronting them, deflating their differences and rendering their similarities.

The majority of his films, Ostrowska argues, reflect a "pervasive preoccupation with specific spaces as a factor influencing people's thinking and behaviour [...] and [how] identity is shaped and developed in that space (2006: 63). In this sense, "Polanski shares a scepticism and a tragic awareness that individual freedom is inexorably limited through social and cultural conventions" (Ostrowska 2006: 66). To represent the constructedness and instability of contemporary identities, Naficy explains, transnational films repeatedly resort to characters who are fragmented or doubled, characters with split personalities, as well as figures such as the *doppelgänger* (2001: 272-273). Polanski recurs to these devices in films such as *Repulsion*, which reflects the constant schizophrenic mood changes of the protagonist; *The Tenant*, in which the main character ends up adopting the personality of the woman who used to live in his apartment; *Chinatown*, in which the outcome of an episode of incest is that the female protagonist is at the same time mother and sister of her daughter, and whose father, is at the same time her grandfather; and *Death and the Maiden*, in which a victim of state

torture becomes a torturer herself as an act of revenge. The same happens with objects, which are attributed different meanings depending on the observer: Coffins used as sleighs in *Mammals* (1961) or beds in *Dance of the Vampires*; the constant and changing meanings of knives in his films; water as liberating and entrapping in *Bitter Moon* or *Knife in the Water*; and houses as prisons. This repeated separation between signifier and immutable signified, goes back to poststructuralist understandings of the formation of meaning as dynamic instead of static process (Mazierska 2007: 54) while also relating to his rejection of the definitive understanding of identities dependant on any essentialist factors such as race, gender, class or nation.

According to Polanski as individual and author, and to his films as autonomous ‘author-less’ entities, nationalities, nationalisms, and any absolutist attitudes, are “deformed outlooks on the human place in the world” (Mazierska 2007: 19), fictional historical constructs that lead to nothing but mere competition within a global cosmopolitan consumer world (Marzieska 2007: 16). In a 1992 interview, in fact, he argued that “in any case, these kinds of subjects never interested me and from the start I worked outside of nationalistic interests” (2005: 148). In this sense, his films radiate a sense of being “foreign” to every place on earth, reflecting “on the multiple identities and shifting forms of contemporary Europe, especially as its ‘imagined communities’ are mediated through film” (Morrison 2007: 3). The heterogeneous and universal(izing) nature of his filmography, that deliberately rejects intolerant nationalist or cultural perspectives as well as essentialist identitarian constraints, except in order to debunk them, detach his films from any particular country or national tradition, inscribing them within the category of the universal or, perhaps, the transnational. As a consequence, Polanski as an author may well be qualified as one of those transnational filmmakers,

part of a wider borderless ‘World cinema’, who deliberately work in the “interstices of social formations and cinematic practices” (Naficy 1999: 10).

### **The Ghost Writer**

#### **Production**

Like many of his earlier films, particularly the most recent ones, *The Ghost Writer* is a literary adaptation, this time of Robert Harris’ 2007 novel *The Ghost*, whose script was co-written by both authors. Probably due to the success of the novel on British soil, the original title of the book was kept for the Irish and British releases. The film was co-produced by companies from the United Kingdom, France and Germany, including French and German governmental funding as well as Polanski’s own production company, R.P. Productions, through which he has been partly financing his films since *Bitter Moon*. Although the film primarily takes place in Martha’s Vineyard, a residential retreat for celebrities and politicians placed in an island of the Massachusetts’ coast, the filming of the different sites was distributed among different European locations. Owing to financial and legal issues (Polanski could not film in the U.S. due to the possibility of being arrested) the locations of the film are as heterogeneous as their monetary sources. German locations were used for the external shots of the house, which was deliberately built from scratch inside Studio Babelsberg in Potsdam, as well as for the publishing house and the airport, supposedly located in London and the Vineyard respectively. The beach scenes were shot in Denmark, while the hotel in which the ghost (Ewan McGregor) resides before moving to the house was in France. Some scenes, however, used the original locations, such as some exterior shots in London, and a few driving scenes in Massachusetts, filmed by a second crew without Polanski or the actors.

Although the main reasons behind the use of these diverse surrogate filming locations in the film respond to the contingencies of contemporary cinema production and to Polanski's legal affairs, it can also be taken as an element that questions the supposed uniqueness of geographical spaces, and therefore, of their impact in the identities of their inhabitants. With the right perspective, it could be argued, any place can stand for any other. As a result of all this, and taking into account the equally despair nationalities of the cast, the crew of the film was composed by Polish, French, British, German and U.S. workers at the same time, while the cast was also from various countries.

After the post-production process, in which the film went through different laboratories between 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. Released in 819 cinemas in 47 different countries in the subsequent weeks, the film made an approximate 60 million box office out of a 45 million budget. Of the total revenue of the film, around 75 percent came from European audiences and those of other continents, and only 25 percent from the U.S.

## **International Relations and National Sovereignties**

Although never directly mentioned by name, there is no doubt that the conflict that serves as backdrop and main inspiration for the story of *The Ghost Writer* is the second Iraq War, begun in 2003 and whose real conclusion is yet to be envisioned. The nationality of the involved parts, the time span to which it refers and the more than obvious similarities between the character of Adam Lang (Pierce Brosnan) and Tony Blair, as well as a short appearance by Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. Secretary of State at



Figure 1. The U.S. seems to be the one doing the talking in this relationship, in front of, and behind the cameras. Ironically, the subheadline reads (in repeated instances): “Foreign purchases of U.S. houses dip”.

that time (fig. 1), all point in that direction.<sup>18</sup> Turned into an international, and transnational, issue due to the foreign intervention in the country, as well as to the extensive coverage offered by the media, the Iraq war is an event to which everyone, at different levels, can more or less relate. This fact not only connects with Polanski’s usual intention to make films with contents accessible to audiences all over the world-- what Deborah Shaw calls “transnational mode of narration” (2012)--, but also to his constant interest and anxiety around political institutions, which he usually addresses with distrust and whose members are usually depicted as selfish, incompetent, corrupt and driven by totalitarian attitudes (Mazierska 2007: 128).

The film, in fact, makes constant references to international relations, the changing power and economic balances between nations occurred in the last decades

<sup>18</sup> The surname Lang is also directly connected to the Iraq wars. Ian Lang, former conservative member of the British Parliament at the time of John Major as Prime Minister of the U.K., was involved in a scandal known as “arms-to-Iraq”, regarding Britain’s sale of military equipment to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War of the 80’s. Ian Lang, as President of the Board of Trade, was quoted repeatedly as the main spokesman of the government and Conservative Party, completely denying the accusations when they came out at the time of the first Gulf War (Strom 1996; Cussick 1997). One of the most notable politicians behind those accusations and against Britain’s involvement in the Iraq War of 2003 was socialist Robin Cook, leader of the House of Commons and Lord President of the council, which also has a fictional impersonation in the film in the form of Richard Rycart (Robert Pugh), the main force responsible for prosecuting the Prime Minister Adam Lang. There was no apparent aftermath for the politicians involved in the “arms-to-Iraq” controversy, but in 1997, and arguably because of this scandal, the conservative party lost the elections against the labour party of Tony Blair.

and their effect on the life of the individuals, becoming a clear example of what is known as “the cinema of globalization” (Shaw 2012). It is no coincidence, for example, that the lecture that Ruth’s (Olivia Williams) tutor at Harvard, military lobby member, and undercover CIA agent Paul Emmett (Tom Wilkinson) has to give is called “Bipolar Relations in a Multipolar World”. The way in which the film finally discloses that it was the U.S. government, through Emmet and Ruth, the one who controlled the British government’s decisions all along, may seem like a self-exonerating excuse for the tormented British morale after the calamitous Iraq War, but it is not far from the typical approach of the U.S. to foreign policies and relations in this ‘polar-changing’ world. Emmet’s main field of studies is, in fact, “the unique importance of the English-speaking peoples in the spread of democracy around the world”. Honduras, Panamá, Cuba, Chile, Afghanistan and obviously Iraq may serve as examples of these democratic quests in the form of repeated intrusions in the politics of South America and Asia during the 20th and 21st centuries, either financing the leaders of their choice or supporting anti-governmental and terrorist organizations, depending on the case.<sup>19</sup> The anti-U.S. animosity that these practices have raised in the rest of the world have resulted in multiple retaliation attacks on U.S. and British soil, resulting in a constant and even paranoid state of fear of the foreign, reflected in a Panopticon-like society in which, as the film very well shows, even publishing houses need metal detectors and reinforced security.

The constant challenge to the national sovereignties of countries all over the world that U.S. foreign policies have brought about is not the only reference to global relations and national identities that the film makes. Once Lang is forced to stay in

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<sup>19</sup> For some reported and recent examples of these policies see, for instance, the articles by Mark Weisbrod’s, co-writer of the transnational documentary *South of the Border* (Oliver Stone, 2009), for *The Guardian* such as “Latin America: how the US has allied with the forces of reaction”, “America’s subversion of Haiti’s democracy continues” or “Why American ‘democracy promotion’ rings hollow in the Middle East”, all of them published in 2012 .

North American soil in order not to be apprehended by the International Criminal Court, the film subtly refers to the impact that international relations and laws have in the delineating of the position and identity of single nations within the contemporary globalized scheme of the 21st century. On the one hand, Britain, by its rejection of political asylum to Lang and unconditional support of the ICC, clearly positions itself as a member of “the community of nations” (Mann 2011: 109), delegating a great deal of their legal sovereignty in international organizations. On the other hand, the U.S., one of the few countries that do not accept the jurisdiction of the ICC, is doing just the opposite in the film, autarkically detaching itself from the rest of the world and reasserting their identity as absolute and independent from external perspectives.<sup>20</sup> As Itamar Mann explains, the acceptance or rejection of international law by a nation is “always framed primarily (and self-consciously) as a political question: who are we?” (2011: 109). It is in fact, Mann argues, the particular relationship that a given country maintains with international organizations, and the balance of power between both, that nowadays delineates national identities.<sup>21</sup> In his own words, “[*The*] *Ghost Writer* suggests that both in America and Europe, attitudes towards criminal law are the stuff for iterations in the first person plural” (110). However, the rejection of the ICC seems

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<sup>20</sup> In line with its mocking approach to the uniqueness of national identities, the film does not miss the opportunity of mentioning some other countries that do not abide by the jurisdiction of the ICC. Those include, according to the film, the U.S.’s unconditional ally Israel, Indonesia, communist China, and, ironically enough, North Korea and Iraq, members of what former U.S. president George W. Bush famously called the “Axis of Evil” in his first State of the Nation speech of 2002. In that speech, he defined those countries as archenemies of the freedom, liberal mentality and national sovereignty of the U.S. and imminent threats to the peace of the world (Bush 2002). As the film satirically points out, the policies and approaches to international relations of those countries, including their effect in their national identities, are not so different from that of the United States. In fact, it would be the U.S. and not any of those countries that would eventually put at risk that supposed world peace by invading Iraq a year later.

<sup>21</sup> It appears, however, that more than a matter of the independent exercise of justice, nowadays national sovereignty and identity are defined in economic terms, as the recent and constant controversies between the European Union and some of its members reflect. As *The Economist* explains: “More than any other great issue the European Community has faced, economic and monetary union raises questions of national sovereignty--real or imagined...[It] calls for a transfer of power to the Community that goes anything beyond what the ECC has known” (qtd. in Goodman 1992: 182).

to work better for the U.S., since not once is a possible prosecution mentioned against their president or collaborators for the torturing and killing of the prisoners.

## **Political Exile, Nostalgia and Entrapment**

Although the film contextualizes the personal conflicts of the characters within global politics and relations, it is the effect these have on the individual's mobility, identity, and psyche that the narrative mostly focuses on. Even if they are subject to different forces, and their circumstances are completely disparate, it should be noted that all the characters that have a minimum relevance in the film are displaced persons at some level or another. From the former British Prime Minister, exiled in a luxurious house at Martha's Vineyard, to the Vietnamese housekeepers working there, no character seems to belong where they are placed. In this sense, the film connects with contemporary theories that mention migration (Rushdie 2002: 81), exile (Naficy 1999: 4), cosmopolitanism (Ezra and Rowden 2006: 11) and nomadism (Peters 1999: 33) as key tropes and archetypical conditions of our age. However, even if all these concepts relate somehow to present beings separated "from the naturalistic and nationalistic *topoi* of nativity" (Bhabha 1999: x, emphasis in the original), not all instances of displacement are the same, not all are experienced in the same terms and, therefore, not all should be addressed in the same way. To assume that everyone experiences the same level and type of displacement, as if it were a generalized homogeneous condition, would not only be naïf, but also "a cruel nonsense" (Morley 1999: 158).

Some authors have tried to delineate the specific implications of all these different kinds of contemporary mobility. A certain line has been drawn, for example, between "those 'who circulate capital' and those 'whom capital circulates'" (Slavoj Zizek qtd. in

Exra and Rowden 2006: 8). In a more complex fashion, a specific division has been drawn between the two main concepts behind contemporary mobility: exile and nomadism. The truth is that these concepts may not only differ and overlap depending on their meaning, but also, that our changing contemporary experience keeps redefining them at every step making it sometimes difficult to discern between the two (Naficy 1999: 10). Peters makes quite an interesting distinction between both using German “archromantic” Novalis’s terminologies; exile for him means “homesickness”, nomadism, by contrast, “being at home everywhere” (1999: 29). In other words, the former implies “enforced displacement” (Bhabha 1999: xii), tied with a desire to return to an original stable place--home?, nation?--, a return that forces alien to the subject keep at bay; the latter, a conscious and personal rupture with the idea of sedentarism and the constraints of any kind of settled identity. While exile seems to be an undesirable status, chosen for the subject by external agents, nomadism is a personal decision that nowadays is only available to those able to afford it and that is extremely dependant on the privileges of “race, gender, class, language, nation” (Peters 1999: 34). Bauman also refers directly to how nomadism is regarded nowadays as the most desirable status for those able economically to experience it in a ‘pleasant’ way. In the past, he argues, “citizenship went hand in hand with settlement, and the absence of 'fixed address' and 'statelessness' meant exclusion from the law-abiding and law-protected community”, and those “who made light of the legislators' territorial concerns and blatantly disregarded their zealous efforts of boundary-drawing were cast among the main villains in the holy war waged in the name of progress and civilization” (2000: 12-13). Today, this derogatory vision of mobile life is only applied to the homeless and “shifty ‘underclass’”, while the elites in power openly embrace it, deliberately detaching themselves from the populace they control. As he explains “we are witnessing the



Figure 2. The anonymous dead body (McArra's) dragged by the tide, suggesting identitarian ambiguity, displacement and loneliness. The following shot reinforces this feeling with an even longer shot of the same scene.

revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement. In the fluid stage of modernity, the settled majority is ruled by the nomadic and exterritorial elite" (2000: 13). The possibility of autonomous movement has become such desirable condition in contemporary times that Peters describes the nomad as "a hero of postmodern thinking" (1999: 33).

It could be well argued that *The Ghost Writer*, instead of focusing on the particular effects that contemporary experiences of mobility have for each individual depending of their status within society, chooses instead to represent a common, all-encompassing "structure of feeling", as Naficy would call it (2001: 26), defined by displacement, alienation, loneliness and deep identitarian crisis (fig. 2). Polanski's tendency to universalize human experiences may be here stepping into quicksand, taking into account that factors such as class, race or gender have extensively been regarded as definitive in what concerns contemporary mobility and its experience. The middle class crisis and neurosis typical of Polanski's filmography, within which he places the plot of *The Ghost Writer*, do not seem to fit the representations of displaced, ethnically marked, low-class immigrants typical of more 'conventional' transnational

cinemas, and could even be regarded as going against them, since they disregard the distance existing between both. In this sense, the film could also be criticized from an ethical perspective for using the apprehension, extradition and death of the alleged terrorists, as well as the death of the son of the protestor, only as backdrops for the familiar and psychological crisis of some first world leader and his entourage, the main agents behind the control of the mobility and lives of so many other less ‘privileged’ individuals.

Taking into account the relevance that the figure of the author and his biography has for transnational film perspectives, it could be argued in Polanski’s defence that focusing on experiences closer to his own and that of his potential audience is still a more honest approach than assuming an external understanding of the feelings and struggles of less fortunate individuals.<sup>22</sup> This diegetical “self-inscription”, as Naficy calls it, by which the filmmaker’s own experiences of exile and displacement permeate the main protagonists, that is so typical of Polanski’s filmography (Mazierska 2007: 8), also reflects the procedures of doubling and duplicity by which transnational directors reflect on their unstable and fragmented identity as well as that of any given exilic individual (Naficy 2001: 272-273). According to Mazierska, more than the specific vicissitudes and sufferings of particular outsiders and disposed characters, Polanski is more interested in the common, shared grounds between their perceptions and experiences (2007: 90). As a matter of fact, it is a specific characteristic of Polanski’s filmography to recognize that, essentialist or not, differences do exist between individuals, but also that, in the end, everyone becomes equated in their suffering, deprivation, misery and death (Mazierska 2007: 191). Although it may be ideologically

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<sup>22</sup> Abused child and pedophile, victim and perpetrator, Polanski himself does not fit the model of that typical suffering artist that the general public feels compassion or pity for (Mazierska 2007: 10). This contradictory, “doppelganger”, nature of his public persona has leaked into his filmography.

questionable, Polanski and his films seem to argue that exile, in its social and psychological effects, also affects the rich.

In other, more convenient circumstances, maybe in a film by another director, Lang, the central character in the film and the one around whose crisis the narrative revolves, would perfectly stand as one of those “absent landlords” that Bauman equated with the nomad, distant, oppressing and unapproachable elites in power (2000: 13). Lang’s last conversation with the ghost, 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!”

Even if during the film Lang is depicted suffering politics of control very similar to the ones he is defending here, the ironic fact that he delivers this final speech from the comfort of his own private jet reveals that there are still huge differences in how different individuals experience their mobility and the constant control to which they are subjected.

Until that moment, mixed feelings are prompted by the predicament and personality of a character as contradictory as Lang, “so hated...and so loved”, as the ghost points out. Before we know that the ICC’s accusations are true, he is presented as a victim of exile, not purely a product of banishment in the traditional view of the term, but more of “a strictly political expulsion” (Naficy 1999: 9). Forced by international laws to remain on foreign soil, and rejected by his own country, 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 from a certain geographical space, but from



Figure 3. Use of frame-within-the-frame: Even when out in the open, the feeling of entrapment, as well as his bodyguards, haunts Lang.

public life. The extreme security and omnipresence of bodyguards (fig. 3), who are repeatedly depicted preventing his interaction with any human being not belonging to Lang's 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 asks him at one point. Not only that: now a retired politician when he once was one of the most powerful men in the world, his new status makes him also exiled from power, a situation that in many occasions he is unable to cope with. At the same time, the entrapment and control that he is forced to suffer inside and outside the house, results in both claustrophobic and agoraphobic emotions, "distressing relations with space" that are very frequently simultaneous and interconnected (Naficy 2003: 212; Morrison 2007: 16). Lang not only suffers anxiety from the seclusion he is forced to undergo in the Vineyard's house and island, but also from the constant rejection that he faces when he goes outside, and that eventually leads to his assassination.

All these geographical, physical and metaphorical displacements that echo, as Ruth points out, Napoleon's exile in St. Helena, do have an effect on Lang's personality and identity. Several critics analyzing the film have noted the constant, even



Figure 4. The weight of the world: a titanic image of power and defeat, entrapment and nostalgia. The old empty helmet/mask stands as a symbol of past glories and of the identitarian void they leave behind.

schizophrenic changes of humour of the ex Prime Minister, who uses his charming and seductive, but also savage and sinister, smile as a presentation letter (Dargis 2010; Denby 2010). Infused with the “defensive self-righteousness of power” (Denby 2010), a residual element from his time as Prime Minister, his sudden fits of rage and nervous laugh reflect the unstable, fragmented psyche of a man emotionally adrift, detached, confused and nostalgic for everything that once was his life (fig. 4). 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 saluting his wife, reinforce that perception. Even his love affair with his secretary Amelia (Kim Cattrall) separates him from his wife Ruth, who, deceptive as she was, offered him the mental stability and constancy needed in a position of such responsibility. However, the co-dependency that they share, hidden behind their constant bitterness, turns out to be quite unbalanced. As the plot unravels, and we discover that Lang had been Ruth’s political puppet since his days in college, his whole political identity, if any, is questioned and, by extension, that of the country he represents. In fact, according to the film, it was not even his political stance and achievements that gained him success in Britain and made him Prime Minister. As the ghost explains, it was just a matter of a “craze”, a media

phenomenon as a result of which many people voted for him. His entire political life is in this way little by little deconstructed and unmasked as a pure façade, the work more of an actor (his main interest in college), of a double, than of a politician.<sup>23</sup> The fragmentation and delusion of the supposedly stable, rigid and reliable image and identity of a British Primer Minister is even more enhanced by the fact that he deliberately conceals his British accent, a definitory 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 Lang explains of his days as a performer, "pretends to be somebody else and [is] applauded for it".

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 are also very revelatory of the constructedness of his past and identity, not only when the ghost starts writing Lang's memoirs in his name, certainly a dishonest practice, but also when Lang is accused by the ICC and the ghost 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:** So, you're not defensive, but you're not cocky. You're not angry, but you're not pleased?

**Lang:** That's it.

**Ghost:** Then what exactly *are* you? (Everybody laughs)

**Ruth:** Told you he was funny.

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

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<sup>23</sup> 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, not only through his interests in girls, but also through his dedication to the British government (2011: 134).

**Ghost:** I've always been a strong, no, committed supporter of the work of the International Criminal Court...Has he?

**Amanda:** You're the writer.

Subject to the pressures of international relations, political correctness, media omnipresence and, finally, exile, Lang's identity has been, since his days in college, displaced and fragmented at 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 in his terms, but in those demanded by the external factors and agents ruling his life, namely Ruth and the U.S. Thus, 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, stories, as Ruth argues, only ruined by too much research. Even Twombly's paintings hanging inside the house, full of melting images of words, reflect this poststructuralist view of language and history as unstable, moldable and subject to the contingencies of time. As the ghost refers, in an almost Borgesian way, to Lang's memoirs, "all the words are there...just in the wrong order."

### **An Outsider's Perspective: Voyeurism and Identitarian Fragmentation**

While Lang's geographical displacement is developed in the film, class controversies aside, as metonymy of the unstable and relative nature of national politics and identities, the case of the ghost is quite different. An unemployed writer, his experience of mobility is presented in the film more in relation to the work-related migrations that so many people have to undergo nowadays to earn a living. Yet again, his perspective, which is the one we share for the whole film, is that of a British middle-

class, educated white man in his 30s that will earn around 250.000 dollars for his displacement. Not particularly a character to feel sorry for, at least at first sight, he is still the main exponent in the film of the entrapment, solitude, alienation and identitarian fragmentation that define the experience of the contemporary displaced individual. In his predicament, uprooted across oceans and nations, and subject to constant surveillance and control, the ghost embodies the disorienting experience of any individual immersed in a different world that he is not able to understand. Divided due to his dissonant “insider-outsider positionality” (Naficy 1001: 275), the ghost comes to reflect the tensions and identitarian ambivalences typical of exilic individuals.

Like the main protagonist in *Knife in the Water*, another story of an outsider coming to disrupt the apparent stability of a couple and their way of life, the ghost remains unnamed throughout the whole film. Almost a “blank slate” when he arrives at the island (Dargis 2010), he is only referred to as “man” by Lang or “Brit” because of his accent and acid humour, a “jolly old tone” that will become his only identitarian mark throughout the film. He has no family,<sup>24</sup> 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 ghost for other people’s memoirs. With no more 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) (fig. 5). A constant in Polanski’s filmography, the small amount of luggage that his characters, “literal and cultural travellers”, carry, becomes a symbol of how much they are separated from their personal past and homeland (Mazierska 2007: 69).

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<sup>24</sup> Contemporary social critics have noted the decreased value of the institution of the family, which has turned into a liability for the detached, mobile experience of postmodernity and an impediment for personal fulfilment (Bauman 2000: 6). The film also subtly makes reference to this situation when Amelia mentions that she does not carry her wedding ring because it always beeps at the security controls of the airports.



Figure 5. Wide angle lens and deep focus depicting the ghost and his suitcase in the “non-place” of the parking lot of a seaport: liminality, displacement and solitude appear to define his identity.

As a matter of fact, it is precisely the ghost's rootlessness and identitarian hollowness that make him fit so perfectly in the job of a ghost writer; someone who will do the job, earn his fees, and disappear again in the anonymous world masses. Thus, he is repeatedly encouraged by his employers to keep not only his assignment but also his identity and presence in the island hidden from the rest of the people. When he is forced to stay at the house with Lang for that purpose, very much à la *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), it is on the basis that “Eventually, they'll discover who you are. And that would be *horrid* for you”. The way in which Amelia delivers those words, with her invariably artificial, cold and empty smile, seems to imply not only a warning to avoid the intolerant attitudes of the locals, but also a threat of what may happen to him if he does not follow his employer's requirements. After all, the same reasons that make him such a suitable ghost writer, namely his detachment from a home, his identitarian uncertainty and lack of stable human relations, typical characteristics of migrant individuals (Rushdie 2000: 82), also turn him into a displaceable, moldable and eventually disposable character.

The ghost, thanks to his identitarian emptiness, and also to the casting of Ewan McGregor, is meant to represent an ordinary guy on to whom the audience can project

themselves and that, at some level or another, everyone can identify with. (Re)incarnating the connotations, seclusion and voyeuristic drive of James Stewart in *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), the ghost becomes a diegetic extension of the audience. He is almost never outside the picture; he is the reference point for the spectator in the film; it is his perspective of the events that we share and his is the (limited) level of knowledge we have access to. In this sense, because of the way in which the film is visually constructed and its plot developed, its structure could be well reduced to a scheme of us observing the observer (Cueto 2010: 27). Thus, the ghost remains for the most part of the film an external witness, a *flâneur* of sorts, wandering inside and around the house trying to gather information in order to gain a personal understanding and decode the situation he has plunged into. This subjectivism that permeates all Polanski's productions and by which the stories are constructed from a single point of view, aims to question the existence of any objective and absolute perception of truth and reality (Mazierska 2007: 57). His seclusion inside the walls of the house, as usually happens in Polanski's films, leads to a slow burning process in which the ghost becomes progressively more inquiring, more paranoid, while his investigations start to demonstrate that things are not what he has been told or what they look like, that truth and reality also have double lives (McKibbin 2006: 56-58).

However, the ghost's look not only follows a subjectivist drive on the part of Polanski; it is also a way for the film to connect the experiences and feelings of observer and observed (fig. 6). For instance, while working on the manuscript, the ghost is equated through his look, doubled, in the figure of the Vietnamese houseboy Duc (Lee Hong Thay) who is trying to gather all the leaves outside the house in a wheel barrow 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



Figure 6. Rear Windows, subjective perspective and identification: all three characters connected in their displacement, entrapment and alienation through the look of the ghost.

“Sisyphean” labour of the ghost inside the house trying to put all the pieces of a puzzle together inside the house, and an anticipation of the final image of the film, in which the pages of manuscript are equally scattered by the wind along a London street (Paulson 2011: 134). In the same way as the ghost’s emotions of entrapment and alienation are repeatedly connected with those of the rest of the inhabitants of the house through his look, the spectators are also introduced as part of that voyeuristic scheme, connected to the ghost in our visual engagement. The film not only seems to argue, as if recuperating Benjamin’s theories, that we are as displaced in our cinematic engagement as the actors and characters inside it, but also that, in our ordinary lives, we are inevitably subject, even “held hostage”, by the others’ look and perceptions (Goscilo 2006: 24). A typical paranoia of modern times, and a repeated concern in Polanski’s films, “it seems as if nobody is immune either from the temptation of snooping or from the danger of being looked at; the world is a gigantic panopticon” (Mazierska 2007: 20).

As part of the constant control he has to undergo to fulfil his task, the ghost is also subject to constant external surveillance throughout the film and, even more conspicuously, his mobility is 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. In fact, following Bauman's perception of the means of transportation as part of the elites' sovereignty over the mobility and identities of the populace, the film demonstrates a quite negative perspective of them, constantly implying control and imminent threat: the first image of the film presents the ferry as a “gaping mouth [...] opening to devour” (Paulson 2012: 129), anticipating that it is there that McArra will disappear; the private jet that Lang uses belongs to Paul Emmet's military company and lobby, main agents behind the Iraq war and the eventual deaths of Lang and both ghost writers; the repetition of on-cue appearances of the threatening black car following the ghost has its climax when it runs over him in the final scene of the movie; even the only time in which he actually drives a car (McArra's), he is guided by the GPS voice, and when he has to embark on the ferry and is asked if he wants a single or return ticket he answers “Return, I hope”, reflecting the little agency he has over his mobility and life in general.<sup>25</sup>

Before arriving on the island, the images of water that accompany his trip, a typical feature in Polanski's filmography, seem to imply a sense of renewal, of baptism and of change of identity (Mazierska 2007: 84). In fact, it is a common trait in films that journeys imply development of the character, maturation and change of personality. However, in *The Ghost Writer*, both the writer's journey and the identity resulting from it will be shown to be in some other people's terms, establishing a clear correlation between agency over movement and identitarian determination. Once on the island, the ghost'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

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<sup>25</sup> The symbolic value conferred to this small dialogue in the film is even more evident if we take into account that ‘single’ and ‘return’ are terms used only in British English.



Figure 7. Identitarian juxtaposition and alienation. The wardrobe, that still holds McArra's clothes, becomes an embodiment of the role that the ghost is expected to fulfil by substituting for his predecessor.

company of a bodyguard. If through his look, the ghost's feelings of entrapment and unease are repeatedly equated with those of the rest of the displaced inhabitants of the house he observes, his ungratifying work on McArra's manuscript will connect him more and more with his predecessor. In fact, once the ghost has been relocated in McArra's old room, the feeling that he is just a replacement with no real identity, a double, the ghost of a ghost, starts to develop. At the same time, slowly but surely, the revenant of his predecessor reappears embodied in different props. His clothes, shoes, notes, documents and even in the voice of the GPS in the car, whose directions and commands he follows, reflect a progression towards almost complete identitarian juxtaposition with McArra. Even the wardrobe, a recurrent trope in Polanski's films as the door to another ontological order (Mazierska 2007: 70), represent that identitarian switch when the ghost takes McArra's clothes out of the wardrobe and puts his own (fig. 7). The absent figure of his predecessor, that nevertheless keeps haunting the ghost, is used in the film as a pattern, "an original" experience of displacement to be reproduced, "an archetype with which to think about exile" (Naficy 2001: 275). Regarded retrospectively, even the fact that the first image we see after that of McArra's

body lying on the beach is that of the ghost eating in a restaurant, seems to anticipate that they will share the same ending and become finally merged in their death.

However, this “vampirization” of the ghost by his predecessor, as Cueto describes it (2010: 27), that echoes the identitarian shifts in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959) and Polanski’s *The Tenant* or *Death and the Maiden*, is especially embodied in the constant presence of the manuscript. Bland, opaque and delusive totemic element (Denby 2010), the manuscript is as secluded, manipulated, displaced and finally discarded as the ghosts themselves. This equation between author and work, between human and object, not only becomes another ‘doubling’ strategy for the film, reflecting the lack of a unique stable identity of the ghost, but, more specifically, Polanski’s concern around the depersonalization, utilitarianism and extreme rationalization of contemporary times. As Morrison explains, Polanski’s films repeatedly present struggles between the subjectivism of the individual and the “objectifying forces of modernity”, which regard individuals only in reference to their social utility (2007: 8-10). The utilitarianism with which his employers regard the ghost is very well exemplified when he is given a surrogate manuscript without warning him to avoid the likely theft of the original one. Used as a “tethered goat”, his employers completely disregard the traumatic experience that he may suffer when assaulted and robbed. Individuals are nowadays objectified, disposable beings, whose experience as humans has a minimized significance, only valuable for what they can produce and whose only goal in life, as Bauman explains, is plain death at the service of power (2000: 13). It is precisely this perspective around human value that leads Lang to permit the torture of the Pakistanis under the premise that it would make plane flights safer, as well as the CIA to orchestrate McArra’s death. Ironically enough, when the ghost starts to understand what is going on and to fear for his life, Rycart naively

comments that “He [Lang] can't drown two ghost writers, for God's sake. You're not kittens”.

Even before becoming just another drowned kitten, the ghost's identitarian journey is repeatedly presented as a pre-established path. As Naficy explains, “accented 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 incompleteness fragmentation and instability” (2001: 272). In this sense, statements like “You're practically one of us now”, “You drafted the statement yesterday. That makes you an accomplice” and “You could be the new Mike McArra” reflect the identitarian manoeuvring of which he is subject, culminating in his overlapping with McArra in their tasks, identities and deaths. The combination of the blank sheet of the ghost's identity and the constant surveillance and control over his movements that Lang's entourage exert over him serves them to restrict his options in life, conduct his development and rewrite his identity on their own terms. Having become the victim of his excessive observation and curiosity, by the time the ghost tries to act and break with his mechanically pre-arranged fate, disclosing the truth behind Lang and Ruth, it is already too late (Cueto 2010: 27). Although after visiting Paul Emmet's house he escapes the ferry anticipating a similar death as that of McArra (fig. 8), his doom, as if following the structure of a Greek tragedy, inevitably catches up with him in the final images of the film.

Through its two main protagonists, the film comments on two of the main concerns of transnational cinema. On the one hand, Lang becomes an embodiment of the malleability and relativity of national identities and sovereignty, now subject to international relations of power and economics. On the other, the ghost embodies the disorientation, alienation and identitarian fragmentation of the exilic individual,



Figure 8. The black figure of the ghost trying to evade the control over his physical and identitarian mobility exerted by external agents.

constantly controlled and displaced at the will of others, and with no real agency or development as individual. However, Lang and the ghost are not the only characters in the film suffering the outcomes that define exilic contemporary times. Ruth, unable to become 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's spy inside Lang's entourage; Amelia, devoted to Lang's assistance and main responsible of his public image, was also his secret lover while both were married. Recuperating the original title of the book, and the one by which the film was released in British soil, all characters are *ghosts* in their own way. All of them are displaced from their homes and nations and all of them experience the same seclusion in the Vineyard house. All of them have fragmented identities, repeat previous patterns, become doubles, and perform identities that are not theirs. At the same time, all of them are subject to higher forms of power, objectified, and turned into marionettes whose actions, mobility and identities are controlled by distant puppet masters.

## **Of Havens and Prisons: Visual Style and Spatial Inscription.**

Although some remarks have already been made regarding the visual techniques and devices with which the film approaches the idea of space in order to reflect on the identitarian crises of the characters, the unique relevance that these have for transnational cinema, Polanski's filmography and *The Ghost Writer* in particular, require more detailed attention.

As mentioned previously, solitude, alienation and disorientation are some of the key emotions of the structure of feeling that govern transnational film's cinematic style. For a film 'genre' so concerned with the effect that geographical mobility and displacement have for the psyche and identity of the individual, the specific visual inscription of its characters in space becomes a paramount factor of their stylistic approach. One of the main particularities of transnational films, in fact, is 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 has to undergo in contemporary times (Naficy 2003: 211). Distress and oppression are no longer terms related exclusively to closed/interior spaces and the claustrophobic feelings that accompany them. Instead, as has already been mentioned, open/outside spaces and agoraphobic tensions are very commonly connected to them, are shown to be equally distressing, and bring about the same feelings of loneliness and displacement.<sup>26</sup> However, transnational films, Naficy argues, still rely mainly on the depiction of enclosing spaces as one of their chief iconographies, one in which the

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<sup>26</sup> By breaking this open/closed, indoor/outdoor division, Naficy argues, transnational films manage to reflect the progressive evolution from the modernist societies of 'discipline' of which Foucault talked, to more contemporary societies of universal 'control'. As he explains, nowadays, domination is not a matter of centralized ideological closed institutions like schools and prisons, but a part of the whole mapping of postmodern late capitalist societies and their "pervasive controlling modulations" (2003: 212). In his own words, society no longer moulds "individuals" but, instead, "its disperse networks of domination [...] serve to modulate "individuals"" (2003: 212).



Figure 9. Curtains block the window and the freedom it evokes. A pan shot connects this oppressive image, and the entrapment it conveys, with the ghost sleeping on the bed.

“(melo)drama of transnational subjectivity” has found its main representation (Naficy 2003: 211). In order to achieve that feeling of entrapment, transnational films usually resort to techniques such as closed shot compositions, tight physical relations of characters and objects within the frame, barriers blocking the shot or lighting patterns that create a mood of constriction (2003: 213) (fig. 9).

The depiction of “phobic spaces”, as Naficy calls them, as tied to the psychic tensions of transnational individuals, is very commonly preceded by, and based on, the filmmakers’ own experience of exile, displacement or incarceration in their homelands or elsewhere (2003: 213). As one of those directors whose life has also been an example of a transnational existence, Polanski also pays great attention to the construction of the *mise-en-scène*, the depiction of space, and the placing of the characters within it. According to Mazierska there are two tendencies in his filmography that explain the importance he gives to the visual inscription and contextualization of characters and objects in his films. First, his drive to approach history and ethnography with the most exhaustive realism, especially in his historical films such as *Tess*, *The Pianist* and *Oliver Twist*, and, second, the importance that psychoanalysis has for his films, turning camera angles, props or setting, and the relation of the characters with them, into more

revealing elements than dialogues or actions (2007: 50-51). As a matter of fact, Orr argues, Polanski's repeated employment of subjective perspectives, using a single character as constant focalizer for his films, points to the inseparability of "the nature of perception" and the "question of emotion". In his own words "emotion colours perception and viceversa [...] how we feel can influence how we see and how we see sometimes defines what we feel" (2006: 12). The "ambiguity of perception" that imbues every Polanski film, not only points to the ultimately illusive nature of the medium of film, "the realm of sight and sound" (Orr 2006: 12). According to Mazierska, it also points to ontological and epistemological factors (2007: 51-52). On the one hand, Polanski's universe and the human world inside of it are multidimensional, full of doublings, reflections and distortions of the original. On the other, the protagonists possess a "double vision", by which they can see what everybody else does, and share, at least temporarily, their perspective, but also have a personal one, which gives them access to perceptions unavailable to other characters. In Polanski's films, Mazierska argues, the nature of people and objects, as well as of truth and reality depend on the observer, his physical and cultural context, his position as outsider or insider within it, and the feelings that arise from that situation (2007: 52-53).

In fact, the recurrent feelings behind the images of his films, much more than his visual techniques, define and give cohesion to Polanski's style, whose influences could not be more heterogeneous. Although Polanski's 'mode of narration' is cemented, more conspicuously in his latest efforts, in Hollywood-esque practices, including relatively high production values, continuity style, generic ingredients and international stars, the feeling of loneliness that imbues his productions separates them from that cinema. As McKibbin claims, Polanski's focus on lonely characters, a rare trait in the typical contemporary North American cinema, a "cinema of social values", connects his films

more with those of European art-house directors such as Robert Bresson and Eric Rohmer (2007: 56-57). Art cinema, not so much defined by a specific style or set of techniques, Morrison explains, is more about the mood, tonality and treatment with which it deals with its main theme, the “life-or-death significance”, that it approaches with a sense of “existential dread [...] gravity [...] low-pitched formality, soberness, and even grimness” (2007: 38-39). In this sense, McKibbin argues that while in Hollywood films isolation is utilised to suggest physical danger and vulnerability, especially in thrillers and horror films, in European cinema the pressure comes from within the characters, in the form of psychological tensions and the expansion of the imaginary in opposition to perceptible reality. Both tendencies converge in Polanski’s filmography. As McKibbin argues, “Polanski wants to work off something that is in-between a European aloneness and an American being alone” (2007: 57). It is precisely the combination of those two feelings, the emotional trauma of the solitary individual and the constant threat of imminent dangers, both of which usually accompany voluntary and involuntary exiles (Peters 1999: 19), that permeates and demarcates the photography and visual style of *The Ghost Writer*.

The first thing to be noticed and that no critic has left uncommented, is the palette of colours that the film utilizes. Dominated by pale, cold colours and with the omnipresence of grey tonalities, the photography has been defined as “bleak” (Paulson 2011), “ashen” (Denby 2010) and “wintry” veering at times “into the near-monochromatic” (Dargis 2010). The colouring, that gives a certain ‘ghostly’ atmosphere to the setting, also denotes and reinforces the emotional coldness that is present all over the film. At the same time, the blanched but steady light of the invariably cloudy weather, in which the sun never appears, the intermittent but violent outburst of downpour, and the constant night scenes, become a visual analogy of the

secrecy and lies that surround the house (Paulson 2011: 129). Following Polanski's wish to represent the double lives and identities of people, objects and places, the film's striking photography also serves to twist the typical image of Martha's Vineyard. Widely regarded as an elitist "summer playground" for the rich and famous (Paulson 2011: 129), a place where they can get away from the masses and media, the cold photography of the film, in line with Lang and his entourage's predicament and perspective, turns it into a bleak and dangerous enclosure that they cannot escape.<sup>27</sup> Completely empty once the summer is gone (the ghost is the only guest in the hotel in which he sleeps), the transformation of the Vineyard into an elephant's graveyard becomes also an equivalent of the ending of Lang's career, now turned into a mere vestigial memory.

This reference to Lang's past is not the only consideration around the passing of time that the film's photography brings about. In fact, the film can be said to have a quite problematic relationship with time. *The Ghost Writer's* carefully consistent lighting, for example, somehow effaces the boundaries between one day and the next, only discernable thanks to the night scenes. Deprived from natural temporal references, mainly the presence of the sun, the fragmented way in which the actions of the characters follow each other, with no reference to past, present or future hours or days, do not help structure the timing of the plot. Only a careful inspection of what takes place onscreen reveals that the main part of the plot, up until Lang's death, occurs within five days, although it gives the impression of taking much longer. According to Naficy, the play with temporal structures is a common technique used by transnational authors to reflect on the value and effect that a certain place has for its characters (2001:

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<sup>27</sup> The doppelganger identity of Martha's Vineyard is present up until the end of the film. When Lang gets out of the plane at the airport for the last time and is shot, a banner hanging from the building where the assassin is hiding reads "Town of Old Haven", which is the fictional, and ironical, name that the place receives in the film.

152). Actually, the blurring of temporal boundaries is often used by transnational authors when trying to represent a utopian vision of their homeland and reproduce the identitarian unity that the place transmits to them (2001: 155). However, in *The Ghost Writer* the effect achieved is quite different. By transforming the actions of five days into an almost unitary affair that, at the same time, seems to last much longer, the film manages to transmit the feelings of stagnation and entrapment of the characters that feel as if their displacement was lasting for ages. The ghost in fact makes reference to this when he mentions, “I’m aging, this place is Shangri-La on reverse”, after only three days on in the island.

As happens with time, Polanski’s particular approach to both open and closed spaces turns him into a law unto himself within transnational cinema. Although open spaces have much less presence and relevance than closed ones in the film, since claustrophobia is the main feeling behind its images, they do help reinforce the feeling of entrapment of the characters by the way Polanski depicts them. According to Naficy, forced exilic authors tend to resort to particular techniques when depicting open spaces to transmit their utopian vision of their distant homeland against the closed spaces used to represent their feelings of displacement and entrapment abroad. In order to do so, they depict wandering diegetic characters in open settings and landscapes using bright natural light, long shots, long takes and mobile framing (2001: 153). Yet again, Polanski’s visual style makes it difficult to place him as an archetype of this trend. As critics have noted, Polanski is not concerned with the return to an original homeland from which one was once rejected. Instead, his films usually conclude “that the condition of exile is irrevocable, the idea of homeland is a sentimental fantasy, that there is no *place* to go back to” (Morrison 2007: 3, emphasis on the original). In this line, his films defend travel as a universal condition, a necessity for survival and



Figure 10. Constant control haunts the ghost. As a result of the character's perspective and feelings of entrapment, the photography of the film turns dry land, sea and sky into a single enclosing wrap.

identitarian self-determination in contemporary times (Mazierska 2007: 190). Therefore, as long as its characters have their mobility controlled, reduced or negated, Polanski's films will treat open spaces as being as entrapping and as oppressive as closed ones.

In order to transmit those feelings, Polanski uses techniques similar to those mentioned by Naficy. Through them, he reinforces the change of perspective around the relationship between homeland and exile. For instance, even when shown in extreme long shots, the uniform colouring with which sea, sky and dry land are treated in *The Ghost Writer* serves to fuse them (fig. 10), creating a homogenous backdrop for the story, an “enveloping field” (Denby 2010) that is never lifted and which leaves no room for alternatives or exists. Fused in an unreachable horizon, the sky and the sea, “two eternities, two types of emptiness”, double and mirror each other, negating the fantasies of freedom that the characters pin on them (Mazierska 2007: 88). At the same time, their immenseness and openness function as contrasts for the restrained identities and everyday lives of the protagonists. Their perennial roughness beckons to the tempest that is about to break and the danger lurking behind the characters. As another primordial element of nature, the forests surrounding the territory are also, through the ghost's perspective, depicted as entrapping places, dangerous labyrinths in which a



Figure 11. Wide angle lens, depth of field and Polanski's famous 'three-shot' suggest detachment, control and entrapment.

wrong turn, as Emmet warns him, can "take you deeper into the woods and you may never be seen again". In the world of double meanings and hidden truths of *The Ghost Writer*, Emmet's apparently innocent joke turns to be a malevolent admonition, inciting the ghost to drop his investigations if he wants to remain alive.

The repeated use of wide angle lenses and depth of field, that allows the filmmakers to show with precision and clarity the objects and figures in the foreground of a shot, while underlining the distance with its background, also serves in the film to address the relevance of context and space for the psyche of the protagonists. This particular visual inscription of the characters in space, placing them in the front while wide open spaces lie in their back, that in *The Ghost Writer* usually serves to reflect the loneliness and insignificance of the displaced individual, is constantly renewed and reworked in the film. The first time the ghost and Ruth go out for a walk by the seashore, constantly followed by a bodyguard, is filmed with a mobile long take and framed with what Orr calls a "three-shot" (2006: 8). Indebted to *Citizen Kane*'s (Orson Welles, 1941) snow sequence, by means of this triadic framing, the distant figure of a character serves to separate the two characters in the foreground, obtaining different effects and meanings (fig. 11). In the case of *The Ghost Writer*, the scene of

the walk, led (also metaphorically) by Ruth's nervous, fast pace and chatter, is shot in the wide open space of the beach. However, the camera frames the two characters in a close shot all through the long take, while the figure of the bodyguard follows them in the background, splitting the image in two. Several effects are achieved by means of this technique; first, it reflects the emotional coldness and separation existing between the characters, who barely look at each other while talking; second, by maintaining the bodyguard constantly within the shot, it keeps reminding us of the constant and distressing control to which the life of the characters is subjected; and third, by contrasting the enduring close-up and the wide open space, the film gets to transmit the feeling that not even in the open can they feel free.

Spaces such as airports, seaports and parking lots, defined as “non-places” by Ezra and Rowden (2005:8), as well as hotels, planes, boats and taxis have a relevant role in the film, reinforcing with their presence the transitional existence of the protagonist. However, if there is a closed space with paramount relevance for the development of the characters and the plot, that is the Vineyard's house, constructed *ex profeso* for the film. Once the taxi that carries the ghost crosses the security fence after the routine checking of his passport, 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 value the house is going to have for its inhabitants, the tall iron grilles of the tennis court grant 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 covers the whole 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 its wider than tall structure, that confers on the house an air of heaviness and motionlessness. The flat, thick, naked and



Figure 12. Fortress or prison? The control of the house is so overwhelming that its façade does not even fit in the frame.

visually potent walls of the house become a powerful metonymy for the whole building and the separation it deliberately establishes between its inside and outside, constantly controlling and restricting movement across them. Meant to be a safe hideaway, the visual representation of the house turns it into an unwelcoming, imprisoning edifice (fig. 12).

This change of perspective around the notion of the house, and the rupture of its traditional link with the idea of home, is a key element of transnational theories and cinema regarding the experience 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" (1999: 5-6, emphasis in the original). Like Naficy, Morse argues that home is not necessarily a real physical place, even if it is chained to an original one, and that, therefore, feeling *at* home is "a personal and cultural link to the imaginary" (1999: 63). 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



Figure 13. Sharp angled surfaces, lack of windows, and no protection against falls. The house is not only unwelcoming and cold, but also dangerous.

signifier of deterritorialization than reterritorialization, of dislocation than of relocation (Naficy 2001: 169).

As archetype of the “bounded realms” Morley talked about, the nature of a given house is defined to a great extent by the type of relation existing between inside and outside and by the level of mobility allowed across the borders delimiting it (1999: 153). Traditionally dependant on a geography of exclusion, and based on a socially produced desire of homogenizing and “purifying” the social space (Bernstein qtd. in Morley 1999: 161), houses may keep people and threats outside its walls, but also inside them. Haven but also prison, Naficy argues, “for the exiles, the house is a site of both deep harmony and hatred” (2001: 169). In fact, authors such as Naficy (2001), Douglas (1991), Morley (1999) and Lipsitz (1999 have found in the contradictory feelings that the notion of home raises the key to understand how it has departed from its physical referent, the house. Nostalgia and resistance, stability and stagnation, protection and entrapment seem to be the binary oppositions behind its nature and our relationship with it.

Once inside the house, and after the ghost has gone through another security check where his suitcase is opened and inspected once again, its interior is shown to us while Amelia comes down the stairs to receive him (fig 13.). From what we can see in

that first interior shot, the cement walls, also in the inside, have no paint on them, the surfaces are flat and sharply angled and the stairs have separated, autonomous steps with no banister to keep you from falling. Even the rails separating the first floor from a free fall are some thin and almost invisible glass sheets. This “punitive luxury”, as Denby describes the house (2010), seems to be, as usually happens in Polanski’s films, more a sign of the social status of its *owners* than a proper domicile meant to respond to the needs of daily living of its *inhabitants* (Mazierska 2001: 68). In fact, it is typical of Polanski’s films to have characters who are “partial homeless”: they may have a roof over their heads, but it is not that of their house and certainly not that of their home (Mazeriska 2001: 64).

After Amelia presents herself without even asking for his name, the ghost is taken right away to his designed study to work on the manuscript, giving him no option to make himself acquainted with the house and its arrangement. From then 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 one another. 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, using a shallower focus that blurs the background, the framings are static and constant visual barriers and frames-within-the-frame are introduced in the mise-en-scene 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 to; the cold artificial light that illuminates the interiors comes from fluorescent tubes; even the scarce but big windows



Figure 14. Polanski's bisecting gaze. Split screen, closed and open spaces, enclosing walls and deceptive windows. Evasion is just a fantasy that reinforces the ultimate inexorability of the situation.

that evoke a possible escape but only to reinforce the inexorability of the situation (fig. 14), have their vision constantly impeded by closed curtains or, in other cases, the perpetually obscuring, rainy weather of the outside.

Represented visually almost as a labyrinth, making it difficult to decipher its layout, the house 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 room for personal space and some privacy pervades the house with an aura of “temporariness and depersonalization” (Mazierska 2001: 65). The food the ghost 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 takes in the modern, but certainly uncomfortable square bathtub of his room (fig 15), is interrupted by Ruth’s intrusion, apparently careless but quite revelatory of her intentions.

As appropriate as this visual approach to the house seems to be, taking into account the plot and implications of the film, this is not the first time Polanski has resorted to this kind of techniques; as a matter of fact, distressing and entrapping houses



Figure 15. A metonymy of the whole house as a recipient for human life, the bathtub is square, stiff and uncomfortable.

have been a key trope all throughout his filmography. Influenced by Vermeer's paintings (Cousins 2006: 2) and, as he has repeatedly mentioned, Laurence Oliver's *Hamlet* (1948) and Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* (1947), Polanski is keen on depicting restricted, even theatrical interiors (2005: 104; 2005: 159). So much so that Cousins has described Polanski's recurrent visual techniques as part of a "fourth wall aesthetic" by which, in his films, the spectator is made to feel as if inside an interior, "feeling virtually the fourth wall behind you" (2005: 2). This drive has of course been connected to his own experiences of imprisonment, claustrophobia and unease, which he has turned into the main themes of his filmography (Cousins 2005: 3). In *The Ghost Writer's* house, a film much more sober than Polanski's early efforts, there may not be hands coming out of the walls as in *Repulsion*, or twisting elastic stairs as in *The Tenant*, but the feelings behind its images are the same. Imbued with coldness, seclusion, control and danger, the film's representation of the Vineyard's house (one that is extended also outside its walls to the whole island) becomes a powerful symbol of the feelings of its inhabitants and, also, those of Polanski himself. Representing the unwelcoming treatment to which displaced individuals are subject in a foreign country and the distressing feelings this situation arouses, the house is bleak, entrapping and

hostile; turning its walls, the most intimate of the borders (Rushdie 2002: 90), into the most oppressing ones.

## Conclusion

Polanski, who is keen to resort to universal cultural archetypes, and particularly, Greek mythology, tropes and literary structures for his films (Mazierska 2007: 187), turns the revelation at the end of *The Ghost Writer* into a destructive one, as in Sophoclean tragedies, instead of into a curative one, as in Freudian psychoanalytical theories (Morrison 2007: 81). The ghost's final death, which echoes that of McArra at the beginning of the film, seems also to recall classical perspectives of human existence as a circular and inescapable cycle (Mazierska 2007: 34). However, nobody laughs or cries in a Polanski film (Morrison 2007: 35),<sup>28</sup> there is no catharsis, there is no real resolution to the conflicts it presents, there is no original harmony being restored. The "incertitude, despair, catatonia or death" with which Polanski tends to end his films (Goscilo 2006: 23), only serves to reflect the vanity and insignificance of individual human endeavours. The image of flying papers in the almost empty and silent London street that closes the *The Ghost Writer*, with no extradiegetic score reinforcing its dramatic significance, with no *melos* to accompany the *drama*, leaves a sense of emptiness, of triviality, of being part of a much wider scheme in which the existence of a single person does not account for much. At the same time, the disintegration of the book and the secret it hid, symbolizes the alienation and fragmentation that the ghost's identity has suffered throughout the film, as well as the futility of his endeavour and life in general (fig. 15).

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<sup>28</sup> Although some of Polanski's latest films such as *Oliver Twist* or *The Pianist*, which are more genre-oriented, turn to traditional Hollywood melodramatic structures, emotions and, also, happy endings.



Figure 15. “Icons of homelessness” (Naficy 2001: 109), the image of flying papers represents the displacement, malleability and fragmentation of the writer’s identity.

While in Greek tragedies a divine relentless fate haunted the characters and made sure they followed their prearranged path to the last consequences, in Polanski’s films, as occurs in *The Ghost Writer*, it is state control, surveillance and repression what conducts and determine the existence of the individual. Replacing the Greek gods, but equally inaccessible and all-powerful, capitalist elites become the distant puppet masters in control of the evolution of the man in the street, subject to their whims and plans. That panopticon-like control is cemented in the establishing and defence of certain borders and the subjection of the individual’s mobility to them, while elites and their capital flow effortlessly across them. A particular and recurrent concern for Polanski, the power of those borders and the effect they have on the body and mind of the liminal individual defines the plots and conflicts of his cinema, turning him into a perfect example of what is known as a ‘transnational’ author. Although, overclassification can be especially dangerous when talking about exilic and diasporic filmmaking, since it goes against its intended heterogeneous, boundary breaking nature (Naficy 2003: 204), several authors have attempted to delimit its characteristics. The majority of those, in fact, can be applied, as this essay has attempted to suggest, to Polanski as an author, to his filmography in general and to *The Ghost Writer* in particular. His personal life is an

example in itself of transnational, forcedly exilic existence, which he openly accepts as a defining part of his identity and he inscribes in his films by projecting his view and experiences on to different characters (sometimes even played by himself); displacement, solitude, disorientation, claustrophobia, alienation and identitarian fragmentation are the main feelings underlying his images; his films deal with international relations and national identities; they are produced with international money sources, cast, crew, locations and depend on global audiences and film festivals to succeed financially; his stylistic approach and influences are extremely heterogeneous, embracing cultural contamination, not to create pastiche or parody, but to reflect affiliation and community (Morrison 2007: 40).

However, Polanski is also a law unto himself, and he has been widely regarded as such. As he did with art cinema and Hollywood mainstream productions, he deliberately plays with the conventions of transnational, exilic, diasporic filmmaking in order to emphasize his own personal view. By inscribing at a fundamental level his station in life and location in culture, Polanski has stamped his films with a particular accent within the already heteroglossic transnational cinema, “one of the dialects of our language of cinema” (Naficy 2001: 26). As a result, for example, his characters belong to white, middle, even high classes, which differ greatly from the underprivileged, marginal ones around which transnational directors usually construct their films. His films mix human experiences that are regarded to be universal nowadays, such as state control and repression, enforced or voluntary displacement, and identitarian crisis, with the subjectivity inherent to every individual’s perception of them. At the same time, instead of approaching exile as “the long dream of home” that Victor Hugo described (qtd. in Peters 1999: 18), by which a distant homeland is kept unapproachable by forces superior to the subject, Polanski thinks of exile as the refusal of the free mobility of

individuals across the globe. As a self-described citizen of the earth (Baecque and Jousse 2005: 78) he understand that place, as well as the identities attached to it, are temporal states (Mazierska 2007: 20). Nomadism, as an almost universal condition nowadays, is only part of the humans' main goal in life: survival (Mazierska 2007: 190).

At a time when, as *The Ghost Writer* depicts, national politics and identities have been eroded due to cultural imperialisms, international justice organizations and economic interests, mobility has turned into a necessity for many individuals. If, as Hall argued, identity is always on the move (1990: 225), then, restricting the mobility of individuals according to national origins and borders entails restricting their identities and possibilities in life, reducing them to mere repetitions of patterns built around an essentialist, nostalgic, exclusive and ultimately fictional sense of national homogeneity and fear of the other.

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