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Negotiating Borders in Anna Seghers’ and Christian Petzold’s Transit

Cordula Böcking

This article focuses on the negotiation of borders in Anna Seghers’ novel Transit (1944) and Christian Petzold’s film of the same name (2018). Seghers’ Exilroman, set in the 1940s, describes the torment of a nameless refugee from Germany waiting to escape Marseille, one of the last open ports in a Europe ravaged by National Socialism. Seventy years later, Petzold’s film delves into the history of displacement and nationalism in Europe by setting the fascist persecution in the 1940s amongst the refugee “crisis” in the present day. Drawing on a trans-period approach which is already present in Seghers’ book, the Berlin School director presents expulsion and migration as timeless phenomena, grounding his film in the historical movement of populations across borders. Both authors construe the crossing of borders as a loss of identity and alienation, but offer different solutions, if any, to what they perceive as an existential as well as a political predicament. After providing some background to each work and author, I will analyse Petzold’s diachronic adaptation of Seghers’ novel before demonstrating that he deploys an understanding of migration inherent in the earlier text. Considering both authors’ representation of displacement as the loss, not only of the home, but also of the self, I will then examine how their coping strategies involve creating and sharing narratives, yet diverge in fundamental ways: Seghers’ self-reliance and international solidarity is juxtaposed with Petzold’s submitting to the absurdity of the transit space. Finally, I will argue that the state of crisis experienced by Seghers’ and Petzold’s protagonists is tied to the enforcement of borders both within and around Europe, making this an enduring humanitarian as well as artistic issue which needs to be addressed in order to protect the rich yet contested multicultural community which has historically shaped, and continues to shape, this continent.
Background and context: Anna Seghers’ 1944 novel and Christian Petzold’s 2018 film

Set in France after the German invasion of 1940, Seghers’ novel is the story of an unnamed narrator who has successively escaped a German and a French camp, and has resorted to living with false papers. He is asked to deliver important letters to a Paris-based exiled writer by the name of Weidel. Weidel, it turns out, has taken his own life, leaving behind a beautiful ex-wife, a visa for Mexico and an unfinished manuscript. Having appropriated the documents, the narrator moves on to Marseille, a town full of people like himself, desperate to flee from the Nazis. He decides to assume Weidel’s identity in order to secure his escape route out of Europe. When he comes across the writer’s estranged wife Marie, now with a new man, a doctor, the narrator falls deeply in love with her. Without disclosing her husband’s demise, he tries to arrange matters so that she can leave with him, whilst concealing that he has taken over the other man’s identity and visa. After many trials and tribulations, just as they are about to board a ship together, he realises that Marie will never cease looking for her husband; he decides to stay behind, passing his ticket and transit papers on to the doctor instead. Once Marie and the doctor have departed, however, their ship hits a mine and sinks, drowning all of the passengers.

Seghers, by her own admission, drew heavily on her personal experience of crossing borders. Born Netty Reiling (later Radványi) in 1900, the Jewish communist writer fled Nazi Germany for Paris, then unoccupied France, before embarking on a three-month voyage from Marseille to Mexico via Casablanca, Martinique, the Dominican Republic, New York, and Cuba. She arrived in New York harbour on June 16, 1941, seeking asylum in the United States. As a left-wing intellectual and a Jew she was doubly in danger of being detained, imprisoned, and most likely murdered by the Nazis, yet Seghers and her family, including three young children, never made it off Ellis Island. After the FBI had been alerted anonymously that she and her husband were “camouflaged Communist agents” (Stephan 454), she was forced to continue on to Mexico instead. Seghers started writing Transit in the 1940s in Marseille, and, after working on it aboard various ships, eventually completed the novel during her stay in Mexico City, on a typewriter gifted to her by the painter Diego Rivera:

I have experienced almost everything that happens in it [...] this book originated in Marseille, in the cafés mentioned, probably even, when I had to wait for too long, in the waiting rooms of the consulates, then aboard ships, also interned on islands, on Ellis Island in the USA, the ending in Mexico.

Transit appeared in English and Spanish translations in 1944 before being published in the original German in 1948. Written at a time when the nation state’s status as mediator of cultural and political identity and protector of its citizens’ general well-being had radically collapsed, it depicts the refugee experience as not only a political, but also an existential category. The novel captures the absurd hell of a life governed by inhumane bureaucracy, where individuals suffer the irrevocable loss of home brought on by forced migration and the loss of identity and meaning that comes with it.

Following the appearance of two documentaries (Fluchtweg nach Marseille: Exodus & Resistance, dir. Ingemo Engström and Gerhard Theuring, 1977, and Transit Marseille, 1985, dir. Norbert Beilharz) as well as one fiction film (René Allio, Transit, 1992),
Seghers’ text was adapted by Christian Petzold some 70 years after its first publication. Petzold’s approach to Seghers’ novel, which he states had been his and his co-writer Harun Farocki’s “Lieblingsbuch” (‘favourite book’; Billerbeck 2018) for a long time, comes with an acknowledged autobiographical angle of its own: born in 1960, the director’s personal story is shaped by his parents’ post-WW2 migration in Central Europe, similar to that of Farocki, whose family experienced forced migration from the Sudetenland in the 1940s. For Petzold, “what was before fascism is fundamentally lost Heimat [home]”; the post-WWII homelessness that was brought on by fascism is now largely an intellectual one. He views the refugee experience as running deeper than individual stories, a characteristic of a collective identity that also defines those born after the war: “Really, deep inside, the refugee is our identity”.

One of the most important representatives of the so-called Berlin School of Cinema, Petzold has explained that in making Transit, he was not interested in re-creating a historical situation, turning the world into a studio and thus “museumising” the past (Pilarczyk). Petzold’s approach to representing historical events ties in with the key tenets of the Berlin School, which marked an intervention in the well-established cinemas of affluence and consensus in post-Wende Germany and contributed to a political turn in German cinema around the turn of the century (Abel 259). While the Berlin School broadly understands reality to be “strongly determined by history and human agency” (Rentschler 213), its films “negotiate displaced places and interstices in a historical void” (Rentschler 215). They also “show how what is is a function of what was while also offering presentiments or perhaps a hope of what might be” (Rentschler 216). By opting against shooting Transit as a period piece, as he had done, for example, with his previous film, Phoenix, which dealt with the immediate aftermath of World War II, Petzold manages to raise broader questions about fascism, migration, and culture, and give a voice to marginalised and displaced people in two centuries and from two continents.

Petzold’s “trans-period” approach and its roots in Seghers’ text

In a deliberate move away from re-creating an “authentic” historical setting, Petzold transforms Seghers’ depiction of the “anguish of dislocation” (Porton 17) into an “extraordinary antihistorical experiment” (Lodge). According to the opening credits, his film is conceived as an adaptation “frei nach” (“freely based on”) Anna Seghers. The descriptor (or disclaimer) “frei nach” conveys both Petzold’s commitment to Seghers’ text (“based on”) and the liberty with which he adapts it (“freely”). His distinctive trans-period approach presents the flight from the Nazis in the 1940s simultaneously with the present-day refugee “crisis” in Europe. Letters dated 1940 and an antiquated typewriter sit next to electronic display boards, drinks cans, modern cars and a special police unit in riot gear. Petzold inserts specific references to historical events relating to the National Socialist occupation of Paris which are not contained in Seghers’ text, most importantly the “Vél’ d’Hiv” roundup (Rafle du Vélodrome d’Hiver, the German mass arrest of Jews in Paris assisted by the French police), code-named Opération Vent printanier, “Operation Spring Breeze”, on July 16 and 17, 1942. While these references attach the narrative more firmly to a specific moment in history on the one hand, they work to establish an explicit parallel to contemporary events on the other. By having
characters translate “Operation Spring Breeze” as “Frühjahrsputz”, “spring cleaning”, Petzold’s deployment of the term eerily conjures up contemporary “clearing operations” in relation to migrant camps in Paris and the infamous Calais “jungle”.

The film further establishes a continuum between the plight of refugees in twentieth- and twenty-first century Europe through including specific characters that are relatively minor in Seghers’ novel – specifically a North African migrant, Melissa (Maryam Zaree), and her son, Driss (Lilien Batman) – and altering their story. In Seghers’ book, the narrator befriends a recent arrival in Marseille called Claudine, who hails from Madagascar rather than from North Africa, explaining her situation as follows: “What do you know about a woman who boards a ship with her child in a shawl because there’s no room for her at home? Because they’re hiring all sorts of people for the farms, the factories, for things she doesn’t know anything about”. Thus Seghers juxtaposes the account of forced migration out of Europe for political reasons with an alternative account of migration into Europe that foregrounds economic necessity.

Petzold has frequently pointed out the connection between the political situation in the 2010s in Germany and Europe and the state of affairs in the 1940s. Although the large-scale experience of forced displacement resulted in the creation of Article 16a of the German Basic Law in 1949, granting the right to asylum to anyone persecuted on political grounds, today’s politicians are tragically reneging on this in their treatment of the refugees that have been arriving in Germany since the 1990s (see e.g. Berlinale Interview). The present-day failure to adequately address the refugees’ misery is brought home in the film when Melissa and Driss, now “illegals”, disappear “into the mountains”, never to be heard of again, only to be replaced by a new set of nameless immigrants. In one of the most astounding scenes, the latter’s silent faces greet Georg behind the door to what used to be Melissa and Driss’s apartment, suggesting a never-ending influx of individuals that are treated as entirely replaceable. It is unclear whether economic considerations were at the root of Melissa’s original decision to leave her homeland; the most notable difference between her and Claudine is that Seghers’ character and her son settle in the city for good, as Claudine explains to her German friend: “For you this city is just a place of departure; for me it was a place of arrival. It was my destination, just [like] those other cities over there […] for you”.

While both texts show people simultaneously trying to escape from, and arrive into Europe, in Petzold’s film, neither group succeeds, and freedom of movement is denied to them all, suggesting that, more than 70 years after the publication of the original text, refugees are not in fact able to cross borders with greater ease.

Petzold’s film is a transit of the present into the past and vice versa, extending Seghers’ scenario into the future, i.e. his and his audience’s present. Yet Petzold’s diachronic, trans-period approach notably builds on the timelessness that was already inherent in Seghers’ mythical time structure (cf. Fehervary 2001). The perpetual nature of migration as an integral part of European history is evident, for example, in the narrator’s description of a pizza maker:

She [the pizza maker] was like the women in those old fairy tales who remain forever young. She had always baked her pizza on that ancient little stove on this hill by the sea, in days when other people now forgotten came by here, and she’ll go on baking pizzas for others yet to come.

Described by Helen Fehervary as a “suspen[sion] in time” (165), this passage places the events of the 1940s in the context of a much more expansive framework of migration
reaching back millennia. This timeless framework reveals itself to the narrator every
time he winds up in his regular haunt, a harbour-side café named Mont Ventoux, where
he contemplates “[t]he ancient, yet ever new harbour gossip – Phoenician and Greek,
Cretan and Jewish, Etruscan and Roman” 10. Seghers, to borrow Fehervary’s words,
“contextualises the desperate flight of Europeans driven to the edge of the
Mediterranean in 1940-41 in historic-mythic terms” (165). The horrors of the 1940s are
merely the latest chapter in an unceasing sequence of flight and persecution that dates
back to the beginnings of European civilization and extends into Seghers’ present.

The narrator joins the ranks of people that include
[m]others who had lost their children, children who had lost their mothers. The
remnants of crushed armies, escaped slaves, human hordes who had been chased
from all the countries of the earth, and having at last reached the sea, boarded
ships in order to discover new lands from which they would again be driven; forever
running from one death toward another.11

Through presenting this never-ending cycle of flight, expulsion, and death (“forever
running from one death toward another”), Seghers maps her contemporary scenario
onto the past, suggesting that amongst cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and chronological
diversity, certain universal human experiences remain immutable. By introducing
contemporary twenty-first century migrants into Seghers’ scenario, Petzold effectively
continues the approach established by the earlier author. Both Petzold and Seghers
represent the refugee experience as transcending not only geographical and
geopolitical, but also temporal borders.

Crossing borders as (self-)alienation

The perpetual experience of crossing borders comes with the loss of not only home, but
also substantial parts of one’s life, as Seghers’ narrator realises in a moment of crisis: “I
was overcome by despair, despair and homesickness (Heimweh). I mourned my twenty-
seven wasted years that had vanished in foreign lands”12. The life spent in foreign lands
is regarded as vanished (verschüttet, ‘spilt’ in the original), lost. Elsewhere, the narrator
talks about characters who left behind “their real lives [...] [in] their lost
countries” 13. Being forced out of their home turns individuals into “human hordes” (T 95), divested
of their identity. The forfeiture of one’s legitimate place in the political and public
realm, which sees one stripped of one’s belonging to a protective nation, occurs
alongside the breakdown of the private world. This is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt’s
description of the refugee experience: Arendt, who, not unlike Seghers, left Germany
for Paris and later fled to the US via Portugal in 1941, wrote in We Refugees (1943):
We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation,
which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our
language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the
unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives [...] and our best friends
have been killed [...] and that means the rupture of our private lives (Arendt 264f).

The loss of language, family and friends, and employment, which had previously
expressed, affirmed, and secured identity, is inscribed in the refugee experience per se.
These factors anchor a meaningful existence, not least because they vouch for the fact
that the individual has a history. Their absence, on the other hand, leads to the
invisibility of the refugee: as Petzold’s protagonist comments, “the terrible thing is that
they don’t see you”14. Thus, the refugee is present to others only inasmuch as he or she
is the object of suspicion, as for example when caught on surveillance cameras or being pointed out during a chase.

In a situation where one has been stripped of one’s habitual identity, it may become necessary to assume an identity not one’s own: “The less we are free to decide who we are or to live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, and to play roles. [...] Our identity is changed so frequently that nobody can find out who we actually are” (Arendt 270). Such unknowability describes the essence of the predicament which Seghers’ and Petzold’s protagonist finds himself in as he assumes another man’s (in Seghers’ novel: other men’s) identity in order to get by. His true identity is concealed from the other characters he encounters in Marseille, and this epistemological uncertainty is mirrored for the reader in the fact that we never find out his real name. The autodiegetic narrator is a hybrid ghost whose unreliability stems, moreover, from the ontological insecurity he experiences. Just as the characters passing through the phantom city of Marseille are unable to ground themselves in any “real” space, so the narrator is at times not sure who he is, or whether he inhabits a dream or reality: “It seemed like a dream in which I myself was the dead man”.

Petzold translates this narratological uncertainty into a tension between Spielraum und Erzählraum, performed space and narrated space, created by his choice of narrator: Anna Seghers’ novel of course includes first-person narration, but I chose to write the voice-over from the perspective of a detached man, a bartender telling his [Georg’s] life story. It’s not literature; it’s oral history. For me, this was not a voice-over that substituted words for images. He’s a witness, but a very bad witness because he’s an unreliable narrator (Petzold in Porton 19).

This approach creates another disjunction, in this case between words and images; for example, the bartender describes a kiss between Georg and Marie at the very moment when this is shown not to take place. Thus Petzold’s strategy, too, draws attention to the pervasive existential uncertainty which the refugee inhabits.

Strategies for reconstituting self and home: creating and sharing narratives

So what is to be done when faced with the loss of identity brought about by crossing the borders of homeland and self? In Seghers’ novel, the act of writing and reading emerges as a way of recuperating lost Heimat. Writing constitutes memory, both intra- and extradiegetically. Seghers’ novel, written in German, becomes a means of recovering her country – at least linguistically –, the homeland from which she has been expelled, just as for her narrator, the discovery of Weidel’s manuscript provides access to long-forgotten memories:

And out of sheer boredom I began to read. I read on and on. I was spellbound [...]. I forgot my cafard. I forgot my deadly boredom. [...] And as I read line after line, I also felt that this was my own language, my mother tongue, and it flowed into me like milk into a baby. [...] I felt as if I were alone again with my own family. I came across words my mother had used to soothe me."

Alienated from German after it had become tainted and compromised as the language of the Nazis, Weidel’s words restore it to the narrator as his mother tongue, the language of his mother. Thus language and literature come to function as a means of
continuing to inhabit one’s home (in the sense of a cultural Heimat) even after having been physically expelled from it.  

Deploying literature as a way of connecting with “home” in a cultural and intellectual sense also occurs at an extradiegetic level when Seghers incorporates a fable by fellow Jewish writer Franz Kafka, whose experience of life in the diaspora was vital to his representation of place. Obliquely borrowing the parable “Vor dem Gesetz” (“Before the Law”) from Kafka’s Der Prozess (The Trial; written 1914/15), a man encountered by the narrator tells him “the fairy tale about the man who died”:

He was waiting in Eternity to find out what the Lord had decided to do with him. He waited and waited, for one year, ten years, a hundred years. He begged and pleaded for a decision. Finally he couldn’t bear the waiting any longer. Then they said to him: ’What do you think you’re waiting for? You’ve been in Hell for a long time already’.

By way of explanation, the speaker adds: “That’s what it’s been like for me here, a stupid waiting for nothing. What could be more hellish? [...] I’ve had enough of it. All I want is to go home”. Hell is waiting for nothing while being confined to a transit space, “home”/“heim” its opposite. In Seghers’ book, this tale, summing up the desperate experience of Marseille’s transient population, is imparted by a fellow refugee; in Petzold’s film, it is a story, now entitled “Der Wartende” (“The One Who Is Waiting”), written by Weidel, which Georg recounts as (false) proof of his own writerly activities. Olivia Landry has pointed out that waiting defines the situation also of the new “floating populations” (a term borrowed from Jean-François Bayart) recently created by globalisation and neocolonialism: “These expanding populations comprised of international migrants are forced to flee war, dictatorship, extreme poverty, and famine, and find themselves waiting in camps and detention centres, or even on ships, waiting for answers, waiting for asylum, and waiting for a visa” (Landry 94). Against this background, the deployment of a story centring on the soul-destroying process of interminable waiting is particularly poignant, inspiring empathy intra- as well as extradiegetically.

Petzold’s Georg, like Seghers’ narrator, recognises himself in the manuscript left behind by Weidel, but the film’s focus is on instances of oral rather than written (hi)stories being shared. Storytelling is seen as cultural work, the processing of inherited narratives and perceptions in an attempt to create meaning. Georg initially feels “he didn’t want to hear their [fellow refugees’] stories any more”, but comes to realise that port cities – surely transnational spaces par excellence – are cities “where stories are being told – that’s what they are there for”. People have “every right in the world to tell their stories, and to be listened to”. Marseille as a place of transience where humans remain adrift in anonymity may be viewed through Marc Augé’s concept of the non-place, itself a recurring motif in Petzold’s work (cf. e.g. Biendarra 426). The non-place is produced by supermodernity in a world “where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions” (Augé 78). A space which “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (Augé 77f), it includes the commercial spaces of travel and consumption, such as airports and malls, as well as “extended transit camps where the planet’s refugees are parked” (Augé 34). The non-place is the opposite of the anthropological place, which offers people a space which empowers their identity and where they meet other people and build common references. When the characters share (tell and listen to) one another’s stories, they arguably turn the non-space into a place. Such acts of solidarity...
are crucial to countering the void in this scenario, because having an identity is about having a past as well as a future. Thus, having a story becomes synonymous with having a history—the words are of course the same in German (cf. Petzold, Director’s Notes, “[the characters] want to have a (hi)story [Geschichte]”). In Transit, sharing a story is not only the equivalent of memory production, it also becomes a form of transnational work in a situation where transnational behaviours are limited – forced migration means that resources have been lost, and returning home is not possible. Yet this remedy is not open to everyone, as it requires access to listeners with whom one shares at least a language: Melissa and Driss are excluded from this practice – Melissa doubly so as she is a deaf-mute and as such cannot readily share her story –, as are the group of new arrivals, and the woman in the hotel who, as she is being deported, is denied a voice whilst everyone watches in silent shame.

Resisting placelessness: self-reliance and international solidarity vs. submitting to the absurdity of the transit space

Shared language and stories are attempts at reconstituting a home, at transcending the confines of the current, hostile space in order to emotionally and intellectually restore and access the homeland. In Seghers, the attempt to expand the limits of the material space occupied by the narrator through mental border crossings back to the homeland is complemented by an inverse strategy. That is, the narrator aims to compensate for the loss of country by narrowing his focus on smaller units of belonging in order to construct a replacement for his lost home. Claudine and her son constitute a substitute family for some time, with the table in their apartment conceived as a space of welcome and acceptance: “a table where people have made room for you – it’s things like that which keep you from going under”\textsuperscript{26}. This table, and the people sitting at it, provide the narrator with a temporary sanctuary in his situation of utter transitoriness. Another place that promises stability comes courtesy of Marie, with whom the narrator is deeply in love: “her small face represented the only place on earth where there was still some peace for me”\textsuperscript{27}. Ultimately, however, none of his attempts at inhabiting these microcosms are sufficient to remedy his feeling of homelessness, not least because the narrator only frequents them as a guest: Claudine and her son live with her partner, and Marie, who is searching for her husband, with the doctor.

It is only when he finds himself thrown into complete solitude that the narrator comes to recognise his personal autarky:

For the first time back then, I thought about everything seriously. The past and the future, both equally unknowable, and also this ongoing situation that the consulates call “transitory” [Transit] but that we know in everyday language as “the present”. And the conclusion I came to – it was only a hunch at that point, if a hunch deserves being called a conclusion – was of my own inviolability.\textsuperscript{28}

Written into two of the international “constitutional” documents of the twentieth century, the Covenant of the League of Nations and the United Nations Charter, the concept of “inviolability” (“Unversehrbarkeit”) is typically used in relation to state borders. That it is applied to a person here strongly underlines the extent to which larger protective units, i.e. countries, have broken down. Realising that one is reduced to the boundaries of one's person as the only safe space to inhabit illustrates the
magnitude of the humanitarian disaster experienced by those persecuted at the hands of fascism. At the same time, there is a positive side to this for the narrator, who, through managing to regain his sense of self-sufficiency, has found peace at last.

Having decided to stay behind in Marseille without Marie, a strategy which Kearns terms “resistance to placelessness” (Kearns 38), Seghers’ narrator then goes to work on a nearby farm with French people poised to fight the fascist occupiers. They accept him as one of their own “You belong here with us. What happens to us, will happen to you”), facilitating a shift of allegiance, which means that the (Nazi) Germans won’t recognise him anymore now that the French have become “his people”: “there’s no way the Nazis would ever recognise me as a countryman of theirs. I intend to share the good and the bad with my new friends [in German: my people] here”). He is confident about his ability to grow roots in his newly chosen place: “If you bleed to death on familiar soil, something of you will continue to grow”. This sentiment simultaneously alludes to and undermines the Nazi ideology of Blut und Boden, according to which a racially defined national body (Blut) is aligned with a settlement area (Boden) (cf. also Kearns 39). It is an example of how Seghers reclaims words which had been misappropriated by National Socialist propaganda, just as Weidel’s manuscript had done for the narrator. In a situation where shifting borders make citizenship precarious and destroy its “easy association [with] natality” (Kearns 31), the only criterion for settling somewhere, according to Seghers, is familiarity, so once the narrator has decided that he will stay, his devotion to the soil allows him to bond with it. Following on from the recognition of the individual as a self-sufficient entity, Seghers’ text displays a firm commitment to internationalism, which constitutes an integral part of her socialist beliefs and ties in with the efforts of Comintern (of whose Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller, the German Association of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers, she was a member) to foster the international spread of Communism and fight fascism (cf. Janzen 3). Thus Seghers can be seen to suggest a tentative transnational remedy to the demise of the nation state, the key to which is a bonding not just with the soil, but, on the basis of this, with fellow human beings.

While Seghers posits both self-reliance and international solidarity as an answer to the crisis at hand, Petzold offers no such solutions. Instead, the closing scenes of the film are marked by the protagonist’s paralysis: as Georg faces the choice between an arduous escape route via the Pyrenees (reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s journey) and certain internment at the hands of the Nazis, he simply stays put in his local pizzeria, waiting for Marie to reappear even after having had notice of her likely death, while the occupiers are marching in the streets. According to Petzold, Transit is “a novel of development” about someone who learns to live in the transit space (Director’s Notes). Georg starts out as someone who has neither past nor future, and lives purely in the present. When he does construct an identity for himself, this is based on another person’s identity, in other words, a lie. But within that lie, he finds an identity as someone who desires and sacrifices. Inhabiting another’s narrative initially emerges as a way out of being adrift – Transit is about a character making a found narrative his own, even though it appears to condemn him to a state of permanent waiting. Suspended in time, and space, once again, he is stationary, but not settled, always looking in or looking out, not expecting anything (“I didn’t expect anything anymore”), but still desiring: “Marie might turn up, the way shipwrecked people unexpectedly come ashore following some miraculous rescue”. Taken verbatim from
the narrator’s monologue on the last page of the novel, Petzold has the barkeeper report Georg’s words according to which he has accepted the absurdity of a situation devoid of plausible exit strategies. That he is no longer awaiting (er-warten) anything is crucial, suggesting that he has freed himself from the hellish scenario depicted earlier. In fact, his submitting to the absurdity of his situation, according to Kearns, can be construed as dissent as opposed to resignation (1), since it constitutes a refusal to dignify the oppression he faces as legal or legitimate (3).

Europe as a contested multicultural community

The protagonist’s personal crisis is framed by Seghers’ depiction of a Europe in turmoil that fails to provide a home for its various citizens:

I watched them streaming into Marseille with their tattered banners representing all nations and faiths, the advance guard of refugees. They had fled across all of Europe, but now, confronting the glimpses of blue water sparkling innocently between the houses, they were at their wits’ end.34

This description is marked by an awareness of Marseille’s location bordered by the Mediterranean: “Ships must always have been anchored here, at this very place, because this is where Europe ends and the sea begins.”35 Having reached the edge of Europe, the known world, the characters must throw themselves on the mercy of the sea. Unless steps are taken to allow them to stay, what looms is the following nightmare scenario, as imagined by Marie: “an utterly deserted continent devoid of human beings, the last ship having sailed, leaving her totally alone in a wilderness that would rapidly overgrow everything.”36 This image is a stark reminder that population decline is the flipside of migration, emptiness the antithesis of civilization.37

Petzold’s multilingual film echoes Seghers’ portrayal of Europe as a multi-ethnic and multicultural entity under threat. Yet it also provides a hint of a conception of Europe that is different from the destructive, anti-immigrant and anti-multicultural one propagated by fascism. In a poignant scene minutes before she takes her own life, a fellow refugee, an architect, alerts Georg to a building designed by Algerian-born Franco-Italian architect Rudy Ricciotti: MuCEM, the Museum of the Civilisations of Europe and the Mediterranean. The building, which was completed only in 2013, sits at the entrance to the old harbour and embodies the connection of disparate time periods, with a modern cube linked to a seventeenth-century fort by a foot bridge. The museum houses a permanent collection charting historical and cultural cross-fertilisation in the Mediterranean basin throughout the ages. Its establishment is a testament to the awareness of a post-WWII, pan-European identity with deep historical roots, drawing on age-old influences from both North and South of the Mediterranean, whilst also offering an alternative to the “Fortress Europe” mentality characteristic of present-day approaches to migration. MuCEM is a truly transnational (and trans-period) project, and an emblem of Petzold’s understanding of what Europe could be, but has repeatedly failed to become.38

Christa Wolf famously said of Seghers’ novel that it was among the books in which her life continued to write new chapters (“an denen mein Leben weitherschreibt”) so that she had to pick it up every few years in order to see what had happened with her and with it in the meantime (“dass ich [es] alle paar Jahre zur Hand nehmen muss, um zu sehen, was inzwischen mit mir und mit [ihm] passiert ist”, 258). The text’s elasticity, as
described by Wolf, is precisely what allows it to act as a touchstone for future generations. Like Seghers before him, Petzold negotiates the crossing of geopolitical as well as temporal borders intra- as well as extradiegetically, while also following his protagonists as they traverse the borders of identity. Yielding more than a “purgatorial palimpsest” (Marchini Camia), Petzold’s engagement with Transit “frei nach” Anna Seghers adapts the earlier work in a way that is “radical” in the sense that it remains committed to its roots in two crucial ways: it creates a text for the twenty-first century that speaks both to Europe’s tragically continuing hostility towards refugees, and to the humanity of those who address it through art.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited


NOTES

1. The departure had been delayed because her passport contained the name Netty Radványi, whereas her pen name Anna Seghers was entered in the visa.

2. “Ich habe fast alles, was darin vorkommt, miterlebt. [...] Dieses Buch ist in Marseille entstanden, in den erwähnten Cafés, wahrscheinlich sogar, wenn ich zu lange warten musste, in Wartezimmern auf Konsulaten, dann auf Schiffen, auch interniert auf Inseln,
in Ellis Island in USA, der Schluss in Mexiko” (Seghers, Über Kunstwerk und Wirklichkeit IV, 160; author’s translation).

3. “Was vor dem Faschismus lag, das ist ja im Grunde verlorene Heimat” (Petzold, Director’s Notes; author’s translation).

4. “Eigentlich, ganz tief drinnen, ist der Flüchtling unsere Identität” (Director’s Notes).

5. For an analysis of Transit that engages with Refugee Studies, see Landwehr (2020) and Landry (2020); for a reading that considers Petzold’s European postmigrant aesthetics, see Hosek (2021). See also Böcking (2022) for further elaboration on how Transit contributes to the ongoing discourse on Europe as a contested and imagined community.

6. Landwehr refers to Petzold’s Transit as an example of “radical translation”, a term coined by Linda Constanzo Cahir. As such, Landwehr regards Petzold’s work on Seghers’ text as fundamentally different from an adaptation, which she defines as moving the same entity into a new environment; a translation, by contrast, creates a “materially different entity” entirely independent from the original source (Landwehr 3). I do not agree with this assessment; while Petzold’s work might certainly be considered radical by virtue of its diachronic, trans-temporal approach, I would argue that rather than create a new and distinct entity, it develops out of features already present in Seghers’ text, as the subsequent analysis will show.

7. “Was verstehst du von einer Frau, die, ihr Kind im Tuch, ein Schiff besteigt, weil daheim kein Platz mehr für sie ist? Weil man allerlei Volk anwirbt für eine Farm, für eine Fabrik, für irgendetwas, wovon sie gar nichts begreift, was es ist” (Seghers, Transit [T] 163; translations taken from Margot Bettauer Dembo’s version of Transit).

8. “Für euch ist die Stadt zum Abfahren da, für mich war die Stadt zum Ankommen. Sie war mein Ziel, genau wie für euch die anderen Städte da drüben” (T 163).


10. “uraltes, frisches Hafengeschwätz, phönizisches und griechisches, kretisches und jüdisches, etruskisches und römisches” (T 292, cf. also 95). Waine posits that the ancient gossip (“uraltes Geschwätz”) provides a grand narrative for the displaced narrator, suggesting the importance of oral narrative as a strategy against the experience of displacement (417; more on this below).

11. “Mütter, die ihre Kinder, Kinder, die ihre Mütter verloren hatten. Reste aufgeriebener Armeen, geflohene Sklaven, aus allen Ländern verjagte Menschenhaufen, die schließlich am Meer ankamen, wo sie sich auf die Schiffe warfen, um neue Länder zu entdecken, aus denen sie wieder verjagt wurden; immer alle auf der Flucht vor dem Tod, in den Tod” (T 95, my emphasis).


13. “ihre wirklichen Leben in ihren verlorenen Ländern” (T 120, my emphasis).

14. "Das Furchtbare ist, dass sie dich nicht sehen”.

15. "Mir war es wie ein Traum, ich sei selbst der Tote” (T 116).
16. Janzen, in her study of Seghers’ work, draws attention to the author’s participation in a “leftist history of producing authorship in the service of solidarity” (16), which here can be seen to happen also intradiegetically.


18. Connecting with the mother tongue is important also because it provides vital grounding in the multilingual situation, the “tower of Babel” (“Turm von Babel”; T 45), which the narrator finds himself in in Marseille.

19. "das Märchen von dem toten Mann" (T 223).


22. Literature and personal stories, written and spoken word merge in the instance of a song which is able to transport the protagonist back to his homeland. Seghers’ narrator expresses his longing for “a simple little song that I had last heard in my homeland at a time when none of us yet knew who Hitler was” (“ein kleines einfaches Lied, das ich zum letzten Mal in meiner Heimat gehört hatte, als noch niemand von uns wusste, wer Hitler war”; T 54). Petzold offers the realization of this desire when a song on the newly repaired radio reminds Georg of his mother, who used the very same lullaby to sing him to sleep. The song in question is *Abendlied* by German singer-songwriter Hanns Dieter Hüsch, and dates to 1975. It is an example of how the film’s timelines are scrambled, as the song pre-dates the contemporary 2010s events yet post-dates the 1940s.

23. “er wollte ihre Geschichten nicht mehr hören”.

24. “in denen erzählt wird—dazu sind sie da”.

25. “alles Recht der Welt auf Erzählen, und dass man ihnen zuhört”.

26. “ein Tisch, an dem man für dich auseinanderrückt, das ist es, was einen hält, das ist es, warum man doch nicht zugrunde geht” (T 63).

27. “ihr kleines Gesicht war der einzige Ort auf Erden, wo es für mich noch Frieden gab” (T 164f, my emphasis).


31. “Wenn man auf vertrautem Boden verblutet, wächst etwas dort von einem weiter” (T 299, my emphasis).
32. “ich erwartete nichts mehr”.
33. “Marie konnte ja wieder auftauchen, wie Schiffbrüchige unversehens durch eine wunderbare Rettung an einer Küste erscheinen” (T 300).
34. “Vor meinen Augen strömten sie an, mit ihren zerrissenen Fahnen aller Nationen und Glauben, die Vorhut der Flüchtlinge. Sie hatten ganz Europa durchflüchtet, doch jetzt vor dem schmalen, blauen Wasser, das unschuldig zwischen den Häusern glitzerte, war ihre Weisheit zu Ende” (T 73f).
35. “hier mussten immer Schiffe vor Anker gelegen haben, genau an dieser Stelle, weil hier Europa zu Ende war und das Meer hier einzahnte” (T 95, my emphasis).
36. “ein[r] völlig leere[r], völlig von allen Menschen geräumte[r] Erdteil[r].., das letzte Schiff abgefahren und sie allein zurückgeblieben in der vollkommenen Wildnis, die alles sofort überwuchert hatte” (T 151).
37. The image conjured up here is reminiscent of Giorgio De Chirico’s painting The Enigma of Arrival and the Afternoon (1912), a print of which Petzold put up in his production office in Marseille while shooting Transit. De Chirico’s painting depicts a harbour strikingly empty of people and a ship outside at sea with no one aboard (see LaGambina).
38. If the lyrics in Talking Heads’ Road to Nowhere in the coda of the film are anything to go by, there is not much hope for a better outcome: “Well we know where we’re going, but we don’t know where we’ve been […] We’re on a road to nowhere, come on inside”.

ABSTRACTS

This paper focuses on the negotiation of borders in Anna Seghers’ novel Transit (1944) and Christian Petzold’s film of the same name (2018). Inspired by the German-Jewish communist writer’s own experience of traversing borders, Seghers’ Exilroman describes the torment of a nameless refugee from Germany waiting to escape Marseille, one of the last open frontiers in a Europe ravaged by National Socialism. 70 years later, the Berlin School director’s multilingual film delves into the history of displacement and nationalism in Europe by setting the 1940s fascist persecution amongst the refugee crisis in present-day France. Petzold’s distinctive trans-period approach gives a voice to the marginalized and displaced in two centuries and from two continents, making it impossible to separate ‘old’ from ‘new’ Europe. Presenting expulsion and migration as timeless phenomena, Petzold speaks to the historical fluctuation of borders and movement of populations. Both authors construe the crossing of borders as loss of identity and alienation, but offer different solutions, if any, to what they perceive as an existential as well as political predicament.

décrit le tourment d'un réfugié allemand sans nom attendant de s'échapper du Marseille des années 1940, l'une des dernières frontières ouvertes dans une Europe ravagée par le national-socialisme. 70 ans plus tard, le film multilingue du réalisateur de l'école de Berlin se penche sur l'histoire des déplacements et du nationalisme en Europe en situant la persécution fasciste des années 1940 dans le contexte de la crise des migrants dans la France d'aujourd'hui. L'approche trans-périodique distinctive de Petzold donne la parole aux marginalisés et aux déplacés sur deux siècles et deux continents, rendant impossible de séparer la "vienne" de la "nouvelle" Europe. Présentant l'expulsion et la migration comme des phénomènes intemporels, Petzold parle de la fluctuation historique des frontières et des mouvements de populations. Les deux auteurs interprètent le franchissement des frontières comme une perte d'identité et une aliénation, mais proposent des solutions différentes, si tant est qu'il y en ait, à ce qu'ils perçoivent comme une situation existentielle et politique délicate.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Seghers (Anna), Petzold (Christian), Transit, littérature d'exil, école de Berlin, fascisme, migration forcé, Seconde Guerre mondiale, crise des migrants, transnationalisme, Europe

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