

TRANSIT-MARSEILLE

Transit, written by Anna Seghers in 1944 documents a moment in time when she passed through Marseille during wartime occupied France (WWII) as a refugee fleeing Europe. In order to do so, she had to secure all the appropriate documents needed for her family as they had become ‘undesirable’.¹ The novel concludes once she had safely arrived in Mexico. It produced two filmic adaptations, at two different intervals: a French adaptation by René Allio in 1991, and a German adaptation by Christian Petzold in 2018.² Both films are faithful to her text; the 2018 adaptation eclipses the first one, which by now has been shelved away.³ This essay returns to the displacement narrative at the core of *Transit* (all versions) and interrogates its timeliness today in view of the present situation in Europe and the world, regarding the refugee crisis, the closing of borders and the clear dividing lines created by migrations, and refugees, legal or not and what Homi Bhabha terms “distressed migration” (Bhabha 2019). Although inspired by a novel and its two filmic adaptations, my focus is on people’s displacement during wartime or conflicts, and their tribulations with bureaucratic demands stalling any possible escape and movement. However, the past is no longer just a remote notion; it is embedded in the present. In many ways, the past returns to the present, and is not gone.

Seghers casts a German political male former prisoner, the narrator, who has escaped a French work camp and first takes refuge in Paris. The young man is entrusted with a letter for an older German Jewish writer Georg Weidel whom he never met; however, upon learning that Weidel has just committed suicide in Paris, he seizes the suitcase that contains an unfinished manuscript and flees German-occupied Paris for Marseille situated in the still non-occupied zone, in an attempt to hand it over to Weidel’s widow Marie and to leave the

country. Weidel is not a fictional character; Seghers was inspired by the fate of Austrian writer Ernst Weiss, who committed suicide in Paris as the German troops were entering Paris in 1940 (Bary 9).⁴ It is also reminiscent of writer Joseph Roth's own tragic ending in Paris. The unfinished manuscript opens the door to another world for the narrator. After reading the material, he appropriates the suitcase and manuscript and gradually assumes the writer's identity while drifting through the streets of Marseille seeking the young widow and looking for a safe passage out of the country. Their path will cross many times, as she is waiting for the necessary papers to leave the country and due to that, desperately searches for her husband in various parts of the city as there have been sightings of him. The novel bathes in an uncanny and feverish atmosphere that surrounds the world of clandestine, exiles and refugees during the war, not easy to convey onto the screen.

Anna Seghers, a German Jewish communist, and anti-fascist writer born in 1900, wrote *Transit* soon after leaving Marseille for Mexico, on board of the *Capitaine Paul Lemerle* in 1941.⁵ The memory of the horrific sea passage itself has been recounted in Claude Lévi-Strauss's first chapter of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) based on his personal recollections. The same boat on its first stop to Martinique transported other asylum seekers such as André Breton, and Victor Serge.⁶

Transit is shaped by the ordeal she experienced, as she details the Kafkaesque plight of hundreds of (German) refugees, desperately petitioning for and awaiting for safe permits, 'danger permits' and 'transit visas' to leave France; her Hungarian husband Laszlo Radvanyi, a philosopher and writer, had been interned twice in French internment camps (as Le Vernet, not far from Pamiers in Southern France) controlled by the French Vichy police. Seghers retraces the daily trials that led her, among a multitude of characters, to consulates such as the Mexican consulate, travel agencies, and police headquarters to secure all the vital documents needed to leave the country and in so doing, she records a situation that is largely absent from

screens or fiction especially post-World War II- a situation which personally affected her. At the time, very few boats were leaving Marseille. Historian Annette Wieviorka evokes Seghers's long stay in Marseille, "devoting her days to waiting lines in front of consulates, boat companies, and 'prefecture' offices (Wieviorka 75).⁷

René Allio (born in Marseille in 1924) was initially a painter and theater decorator. He started making films in the early 1960s. He is known for *La Vieille Dame indigne/The Shameless Old Lady* adapted from Bertold Brecht (1965), and *Moi, Pierre Rivière ayant égorgé ma mère, ma soeur/I, Pierre Rivière Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister and My Brother....* (1976) adapted from Michel Foucault's research papers on a 19th century murder case as well as *Les Camisards* (1970).

His project to adapt Seghers' novel *Transit* (1944) is rooted in the early 1970s. He is first and foremost interested in politics, social life and the history of mentalities. He wants to understand the life of German anti-fascist writers during the 1930s and 1940s, and life in France, and Marseille under Pétain at the time of the new order (Allio 1991, 328). Over the years the director justified his interest in various documents, in his notebooks and in long letters to Seghers attempting to convince her to grant him the rights to adapt. He was able to secure the adaptation rights before her death in 1983.

In a letter to Seghers, Allio states that,

Almost all my films returned to social life or to history. To the history of my ideas, but also to the history of mores and mentalities. Most often, my films talk about digression, a passage to the other side of this fragile border that separates in all societies, the forbidden act from the convened act, the instituted ban, order from disorder...

Presque toujours mes films ont renvoyé à la vie sociale ou à l'histoire. A celle de mes idées, mais aussi `celle des mœurs ou des mentalités. Le plus souvent parce qu'ils racontent une transgression, un passage de l'autre côté de cette frontière fragile qui sépare, dans toutes les sociétés, l'acte convenu de l'acte défendu, l'institué de l'interdit, l'ordre du désordre... (Gauthier 27).

Allio takes a stand with *Transit* and presents the film as a transgression. Although the meaning of the actual transgressive act is not explicitly discussed it appears all along in the individual attempt made by the narrator to stand by his ideal – i.e., the transmittal of the document, and escape from occupied France, while helping the writer's widow, yet it runs into a constant deferral. Hence the difficulty to shoot such a narrative, where actions are practically non-existent, and the act of waiting is on the other hand a constant motif. Both films belong to 'slow cinema', in direct opposition to action cinema. The second transgression takes place in the unspoken love he feels for Marie and usurping the dead man's identity. Marie however is viewed as a haunted character, afflicted by some ailment; her constant frantic movements back and forth to the port, through the small streets and back at the café, in search of her husband nowhere to be found are presented as a mental condition. Of course, Marie mistakes the narrator for Weidel, himself slowly usurping his identity. The possible cure can only be found in her departure as evoked by her new partner, a doctor to the narrator:

Une fois en mer, elle guérira. Elle cessera de chercher cet homme, qui apparemment veut qu'on le laisse en paix. Once at sea, she will heal. She will stop looking for this man who apparently wants to be left in peace (my translation).

The young narrator is in turn stricken by her ‘madness’ – seen as contagious here. The same applies to his search for Marie, and for papers/ and visas. He is also ghosting the writer, down to gradually becoming his double.

Allio has implied that filmic heroes in French cinema are usually French and stand on the ‘good’ side of history, whereas oppressors are on the other side (Lindeperg 29). The film is a historical reconstruction meticulously done referring to real events and real historical figures, employing vintage paraphernalia. The plot deeply moved the director for it speaks of a time and place he knew as a teenager and although it was somewhat remote from his own biography, it belongs to the history of intellectual (Jewish for some) anti-fascist immigrants fleeing Germany, and later France, during the 1930s, and early 1940s. He conveyed to Seghers that her book spoke to him about all those he knew, as well as of a ‘terrible’ time he once witnessed (Lindeperg 28). Like a moving painting, Allio explained that “In this film, I want to give the important shade. Dark shadows and breakthroughs in the city where characters spend time” (Peigné-Giuly 36).

Such a topic was uncommon in French fiction films after World War II, except for Louis Malle’s polemical film *Lacombe Lucien* (1974). For obscure reasons that may have to do with legal matters but also politics, Allio’s *Transit* has never been released on DVD to this day in France or elsewhere and this despite a set of two DVDs recently released, one of them dedicated to his Marseille-based stories.⁸ This was his tenth and last feature-length fiction film.⁹

Allio’s family is of Italian origins. He is in fact quite removed from the trials of any political refugee or asylum seeker in World War II, yet he lived through these times and experienced the shortage of food, the police climate, and the impending feeling of a threat. He knew the Binnet family, the kind of people that represent the French Marseillais hospitality in the story and a haven for the narrator, the rare French characters in the story.

Due to the initial spotlight on Weidel, a writer who commits suicide in a Paris hotel, leaving an unfinished manuscript for a novel and two letters, and his double Gerhardt, (the name of the narrator changes according to the different versions from Gerhardt Seidler in Allio's to Georg Petzold, and sometimes unnamed in Seghers'), the ghost of Walter Benjamin haunts the narrative. Benjamin is referenced once in Allio's film in an overheard café conversation among refugees. Allio explains his focus through a Bertold Brecht maxim cited by Walter Benjamin, which he made his : "Do not start from good old things but from bad new ones." ("Ne pas partir des bonnes vieilles choses, mais des mauvaises choses nouvelles », Gauthier 271).

The main character or narrator is another German refugee who escaped a French prison camp located in German occupied France.¹⁰ Originally a mechanic, he picks up Weidel's belongings with the intention to deliver them into safe hands in Marseille. He crosses France and passes the line of demarcation in order to get to Marseille. He proclaims that he is « Neither an intellectual, nor an artist, nor a doctor. »

Seidler is gradually absorbed by the manuscript and the story penned by his compatriot. Weidel's estranged wife Marie, is awaiting her travel papers to leave the country from Marseille with her new companion, a German doctor. She depends on her husband's signature. Little does Seidler know that his task as a messenger sets into motion an entire mechanism in which he takes on Weidel's identity, falls in love with his wife, and secure all the necessary documents for her departure and her new partner's. In a rather Oedipal scenario, Seidler saves the dead man's wife, procures papers out of love for her and sacrifices himself in so doing, opting to stay behind, despite the ominous fate awaiting the Montréal ship, an event that is present in both Seghers 'and Petzold's versions

Many stories crisscross each other; in them, most of the refugees waiting for their transit papers are anonymous. So are the human traffickers. They are secondary characters, in the

larger plot which is about displacement from France's most important port city at a time when Nazis' boots are making their way to Southern France. It is dated : 1941. It takes place between the fall of France (1940), and the spring of 1941. Portraits of these anonymous ones include a female refugee babysitting two large dogs, the music conductor who seeks to go to Caracas, the elderly couple, the doctor, the Marseille hostel keeper who works with the police, and is ready to denounce her lodgers to the police, the foreign legionnaires...At least two main stories stand out : One deals with the underground refugees, at the mercy of legal documents delivered by the appropriate authorities, and one deals with the love between a woman and her estranged husband, although the latter is now lost, or absent from view since he is dead and is substituted by the narrator. For Seghers, the plot was about "two men who are disputing the love of a woman, who loves a third one, already dead."¹¹

Allio excels at filming his hometown, an old city with its maze of uphill streets, facades and linen drying in the *Mistral* (wind), its small cafés housing a crowd of refugees, constantly on the lookout for tips about safe passages and its long lines of people outside grocery stores. The main character is constantly on the move, frantic, and rarely idle, as in a race against time and space.

Director Christian Petzold's recent adaptation of *Transit* departs from the central plot located in 1940, yet relies on it as well, while adding an additional layer: that of a contemporary crisis affecting Europe, with the influx of migrants or asylum seekers located in Marseille or other European port cities; it combines the story of World War II German intellectual and Jewish refugees fleeing fascist forces, the German occupiers but also the French police and the search for legal documents in the labyrinth of bureaucracy for an unclear future. Many of these refugees would end up in French detention camps as recounted by Ruth Schwertfeger. Like Allio, Petzold opted to film on location, in Marseille, away from any studio, and away from his usual filmic landscape, for a more realist feel.

The meaning and location of a 'transit'

Marseille is a place of passage, a border town. It emerges at the end of the European continent, almost an African city. The comparison is established early in Allio and Seghers, especially in the opening description:

At the turn of a path, I saw the sea, all the way down, between the hills. A bit later, I saw the city's reflection on the water. It (*she*) looks as naked and white as an African city. I finally felt calm.

Au tournant d'un chemin, je vis la mer, tout en bas, entre les collines. Un peu plus tard, je vis la ville même se détacher sur l'eau. Elle me parut aussi nue et blanche qu'une ville africaine. Je me sentis enfin calme (Seghers 55).

Seidler travels to Marseille by train and bus and exits the bus before getting to the city in order to avoid arrest. He is able to discover the city from a panoramic viewpoint. However, arriving in the city illegally is a constant problem forcing him to secure safe-conduct papers to officialize his arrival. Much of Marseille's (Massilia) history dates to antiquity, with boats arriving and departing, people leaving and returning. It is the locus of many migration waves into France from Africa, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia. In Petzold's film, the meaning of *Transit* doubly points to the condition of refugees, enforced mobility, and the notion of merchandises in a port city. In other words, the use of *Transit* is evocative of people in flight who are seeking refuge in Europe and are being transported in containers, or skiffs like cattle or merchandise. However, a point raised in Seghers' text, the European location is treacherous since people who are from within Europe are seeking an escape out of it. Allio chronicles all his characters as *transitaires* or transients.

Although both filmic adaptations slightly differ, they deeply rely on the original text giving both films a European texture. Both adaptations were Franco-German co-productions. Both relied on the two languages French and German being spoken. The 2018 adaptation by Petzold, is seeped with in betweenness: (failed) departures, and systems of oppression as seen in his other films such as *Barbara* (2012) or *Yella* (2007). It is the final installment in a trilogy entitled “Love in the times of oppressive systems.” It works well with Seghers’ vision regarding the status of refugees and their endless quests. For Petzold, historical reconstitution is not necessary. Instead the convergence of two historical periods is bold and disturbing, blending the 1940s with an unspecified present – close to the 2015 situation and what is generally known in Europe as the Migratory Crisis which goes beyond any nation state to involve not just France, or Europe but also the planet. The migratory crisis since 2015 marks the most important wave of immigration in Europe since World War II.¹² Despite this anachronism, the combination of two temporal phases is successful although slightly disturbing at first; it eschews any historical reconstruction that would turn into a period film like Allio’s. The *mise-en-scène* seamlessly establishes the city as an unsafe zone, unexplainably engaging with modern-day riot police forces (CRS) in full gear and violent multiple roundups (*raffles*), the constant frantic and circular erring of displaced characters, and the looming presence of ships, boats, vistas of the sea, instilling the possibility of escape but also of clandestine migration. The Binnet family from Marseille, a welcome home to Seidler in Seghers has now been transposed into a broken family of North African descent, a woman, and her young son, to whom Georg (the renamed narrator) reaches out to deliver a message about the German husband, Weidler, now dead. The narrator visits them in the projects several times, and befriends the young boy, only to find out in the last part that they ‘are disappeared’ and replaced by a larger family of refugees occupying their home. In many of these moments, no information is communicated to the spectator who infers the

circumstances in order to draw her own conclusions. Different communities share the same fate, those fleeing war zones, and taking refuge in Europe after crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and those attempting to escape Europe on board of a ship toward the United States or Mexico, back in the 1940s, conflating both past and present predicaments. The film *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) beckons as a counterpoint to the plot. The American film – initially a play - focuses on an American expatriate in Casablanca, Rick Blaine, amidst a crowd of European refugees fleeing Europe, as well as Vichy and German officials. He must choose between the love of a woman or helping her escape Europe with her husband. It was produced by Hollywood. The difference between both plots is that in Allio's story, the secondary characters have become centerstage.

In the more recent *Transit*, two historical periods are interwoven. In both instances, the script implies that no one can safely stay in France; it is just a place of passage, of transit. However, the destinations suggested: Portugal, Mexico, Dakar, the USA, and Martinique acquire a new meaning today especially in the age of new policies regarding 'illegal' migrations and the status of refugees and new laws against hospitality to refugees. Lisbon becomes a mecca for all departures, a haven, the "last open door to freedom"¹³ which kept its port open to Jewish refugees at a time when all Mediterranean port cities had closed theirs.¹⁴ In 1941, to be in Marseille, one had to have a permit, and to leave for another continent, or country; one had to seek transit papers for each country to cross: Spain or Portugal. For those obsessed with the notions of historical verisimilitude and the adherence to reality, the departure on boats or *passages* (in German) is not an outdated concept, confined to the 1940s, especially in view of the current events and the unsafe passages made across the Mediterranean Sea with refugees fleeing conflict zones, or failing economies South, or East. *Transit* addresses the Southern routes. With scarce dialogue, echoes of boat sirens, police cars, armed guards' boots and strident whistles resonate, as well as the distant voices of migrants desirous to leave, speaking

of Mexico and USA, as well as visas, passports, and the screams of bystander denouncing an escapee and the childhood song close to Seidler. The script is in “disconnected or emptied” spaces, which post-war brought cameras to shoot empty spaces, abandoned or demolished cities, and projects. The constant erring and displacement being part of what Gilles Deleuze coined as the “crisis of the image-action” leaving room for purely optical and sound-like situations (Deleuze 169).

In the end, the specters of the people who departed on the *Montreal* (for Petzold) return to haunt the narrator, more disoriented than ever, just as the specter of Walter Benjamin looms over the entire narrative. Hannah Arendt described the complex situation that Benjamin and other refugees encountered in her preface to *Illuminations*.

Thanks to the efforts of the Institute (for Social research) in New York, Benjamin was among the first to receive such a visa (an emergency visa) in Marseille. Also, he quickly obtained a Spanish transit visa to enable him to get to Lisbon and board a ship there. However, he did not have a French exit visa, which at that time was still required and which the French government, eager to please the Gestapo, invariably denied to German refugees (London, 1970, 18).¹⁵

For the reader familiar with French writer Patrick Modiano’s novels, the layering of past and present, along with characters haunted by the past, and the feeling of uncanny, is not so alien. In Modiano, ghosts of the past are very much present. Walking through the city in search of traces of the past becomes common place and necessary for his main character. The feeling that time stands still resurfaces time and time again, as in his novel: *Souvenirs dormants* (2017).

Cinq heures du soir en hiver, quand la nuit tombait et que l'on voyait déjà de la lumière aux fenêtres. J'ai eu la certitude que j'étais revenue dans le passé par un phénomène que l'on pourrait appeler l'éternel retour ou, simplement, que pour moi le temps s'était arrêté à une certaine période de ma vie (Modiano 31).

Five o'clock in the evening in winter, when night was falling and that one could already see lights at the windows. I felt certain that I had returned to the past through a phenomenon that one could call the eternal return, or simply, that for me, time had stopped at a certain time in my life (my translation)

While for Modiano, the city is Paris, oftentimes set during the war and its aftermath, in *Transit* (all versions) Marseille stands out, as a feminine and quasi African port city, at the edge of the European continent, a departure gate. *Transit* is fueled by the same sentiment. In the absence of historical anchors, the recent film (as the novel) is dreamlike and surreal. It is shaped like “a thriller without thrills” (Weiner). Seidler, without anchor is floating and deprived of personal plans, yet upon meeting Marie, he seems to be propelled by her desire to leave. Yet he is accused of not being steadfast in his desire to leave. The doctor (Marie's current partner) blames him for wanting to lead a double life. For Thomas Sotinel (*Le Monde*), Petzold breaks the perspective between Time and Space.¹⁶ As conveyed by Imogen Sara Smith, Petzold relies on the concept of *Geschichtesstille*, history standing still: “historical silence is akin to windlessness or still airthe breeze ceases to propel the sailboat, which is enveloped by the vast nothingness of the sea.”¹⁷ In Modiano as well, time stands still, and echoes of the past are still heard in the present. Petzold's *Transit* recreates the atmosphere of angst, and uncertainty that is timeless. It is detached from the present, and

close to a fantastic time.¹⁸ In fact, the global migratory crisis and the various nationalist movements springing everywhere strangely mirror the 1930s (Bhabha 2019).

Ultimately both directors rework Seghers' prescient tale and interrogate the nightmarish condition of transitory times, and any current discussion of closed borders, passages, undocumented aliens, an eerie reminder of the not-so-distant past. It quasi follows one of Bergson's thesis about time, that the past coexists with the present it has been (Deleuze on Bergson, 1985: 110). The police state is ever present in the city. It gives a pulse of modern-day conditions, pointing to the disorientation of displaced people, their entrapment, as well as the loss of their identity. It is populated by the passing of spectral figures as they return to the shores.

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¹ Anna Seghers. *Transit*. Paris: Autrement, 1995

² René Allio. *Transit*. Script: Allio, Jean Jourdeuil, Anna Seghers. Cinematography Richard Copans. Production : Humbert Balsan. France 3, Action Films, la Sept, 1991. 125 mn.

Christian Petzold. *Transit*. Script : Christian Petzold, Productions : Schramm films. ZDF, Arte, Arte Cinéma. Eurimages. 1h41 mn. 2018.

³ Allio's film has never been released on DVD (or VHS) format; it can be screened at the National French library (Paris BNF) on a streaming platform by appointment. Petzold's film is currently available on the Netflix, Amazon and Hulu platforms.

⁴ Nicole Bary. Foreword to Anna Seghers, *Transit*. Paris: Editions Autrement, 1995. 7-10

⁵ Anna Seghers' novel was first published in translation in English and Spanish in 1944, then in German in 1948, and in its French translation in 1986 by Alinea.

⁶ Victor Serge was a Russian Marxist journalist and writer. André Breton was a poet/writer at the head of the Surrealist movement in France.

⁷ Annette Wieviorka, 75-77.

⁸ Jeanne Biscioni-Baumberger, « René Allio adapte *Transit* au cinéma », *Repères Méditerranéens*. 17 Jan. 1990.

⁹ It took Allio 15 years to finally be able to make the film in 1990. Apparently Allio's film had another made-for television version, twice as long as the released feature length film. The filmmaker died in 1995.

¹⁰ *Transit's* plot starts by Seidler's escape from a camp guarded by French police....(Allio, *Les Chemins*) 30.

¹¹ Extraits des Carnets, (31-1-89), p. 90. René Allio. *Les Carnets I. 1958-1978*. Introduction Arlette Farge. Paris : Lieu Commun, 1991.

¹² «Migrants. La crise européenne expliquée en cartes. » *Le Monde*.

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¹³ Ronald Weber. *The Lisbon Route: Entry and Escape in Nazi Europe*. Government Institute, 2011. ix

¹⁴ For a book on that historical moment in Lisbon, Patrick Straumann's "Lisbonne, ville ouverte". Chandeigne, 2018.

¹⁵ "John Manson, "Anna Seghers (1900-1983) in English",

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¹⁶ Thomas Sotinel. « *Transit*. Réfugiés entre deux mondes, entre deux vies ». *Le Monde*, 25 April 2018.

¹⁷ Imogen Sara Smith, "Neither Here, always leaving or left behind, the refugee protagonists of Christian Petzold's *Transit* circulate on the tides of war and history," *Film Comment*, March-April 2019, 42-46.

¹⁸ For an interesting account of the sea-crossing, Claude Levi-Strauss's first chapter of *Tristes Tropiques*, provides a first-hand account of his departure on board of the Paul Lemerle boat from Marseilles to Fort de France and details the horrible conditions encountered by passengers.

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