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Empathy and Community in the Age of Refugees: Petzold's Radical Translation of Seghers' Transit

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Received: 13 September 2020; Accepted: 10 November 2020; Published: 19 November 2020



Abstract: Petzold's film constitutes a radical translation of Seghers' novel by transforming her tale of political refugees in Vichy France into an existential allegory depicting the fluidity of identities and relationships in a globalized world. The transitory existence of Petzold's war refugee serves as an extreme example of the instability of modern life, which allows spectators to identify and empathize with migrants' unpredictable journeys. Moreover, the director conveys the universality of his protagonist's story by portraying him as an Everyman bereft of distinctive personality traits, by intermingling the past (Seghers' plot) with the present (contemporary settings), and by situating his experiences in non-descript, liminal "non-places." Both thematically and aesthetically, narrative is portrayed as establishing a community in an unstable contemporary world. Like the anti-hero of many modern *Bildungsromane*, Petzold's protagonist fails to develop a stable identity and enduring friendships that anchor him in a community, but he creates his own family of listeners through his storytelling. In a similar vein, the film's voice-over/narrator that bridges the fictional world with that of the audience underscores the film's (and the novel's) central theme: in a world of rapid change and mobility, the individual who may not be able to establish a stable identity or relationships, can create, as a narrator, a community of empathic listeners.

Keywords: transit; migrants; empathy; liminal spaces; *Bildungsroman*; modernity

Every interpretation is based on displacement, since the interpreter redirects the original object by inserting it into a new frame of reference.

(Andrew 1984, p. 154)

1. Introduction

In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said observed: "our age—with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration" (Said 181). World wars, conflicts in Southeast Asia, civil wars in Bosnia and Africa, and recent hostilities in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have forced millions of refugees into exile. Our age is distinguished by migrations, diasporas, dislocation, and displacement (Urry 2007, p. 35). Ira Jaffe (2018, p. 136) claims "... the world now faces possibly the greatest human migration crisis since the end of World War II, with as many as sixty million people displaced worldwide." In Syria alone, civil war has left at least twelve million people homeless.¹ Numerous reports predict the accelerated uprooting of large populations because of more frequent and intense droughts, flooding, storms, and excessive heat that will result from climate change.

Petzold's film depicts the ultimate loneliness and isolation of refugees frozen in transit and captures the essence of Seghers' realistic story, the existential search for love and identity in an unpredictable,

¹ Cited in (Jaffe 2018, p. 136) from a Washington Post article by Burns and Jeffrey (2015).

hostile world. The novel portrays her experiences while fleeing the German army in Vichy France and while trapped in Marseille until she and her family could obtain travel documents. Born Netty Reiling in Mainz in 1900 into a Jewish family, Anna Seghers (her pen name) married Laszlo Radvanzi, a well-known Hungarian Communist, in 1925. She joined the Communist party in 1928 and was arrested by the Gestapo in 1932 for a novel she wrote that warned of the dangers of Nazism. Her books were banned and burned in Germany. In 1934, she immigrated via Zurich to Paris. While in Paris, she wrote her most famous work *The Seventh Cross* that portrays the escape of seven prisoners from a concentration camp. After the Germans invaded northern France in 1940, she fled to Marseille and then to Mexico with her children and husband, who had been released from a camp. In 1947, she moved to the Soviet sector of Berlin (later, East Berlin) where she died in 1983. A stalwart socialist, Seghers was honored in the German Democratic Republic, but also criticized for not speaking out against the repression and excesses of its Communist regime. Her defenders point out that she joined the Communist party when it was viewed as a bulwark against fascism, a crucial detail that illuminates her novel's conclusion.

Regarded as the “godfather” of the contemporary Berlin School of filmmaking, Petzold is the most well-known and commercially successful director of this group. As initially defined by film critics, the Berlin School referred mainly to Thomas Arslan, Christian Petzold, and Angela Schanelec, three graduates of the Deutsche Film-und-Fernsehakademie (the German Film and Television Academy) in Berlin, who began their careers in the 1990s. It now includes a second generation of independent filmmakers. Although the directors themselves do not always identify with this term and there is no group manifesto, there are similarities in their style, which has been described as “minimalist” with reticent, apathetic characters and long takes. Many regard it as a “cinema of drift and alienation” (Lim 2013, p. 90), an apt film style to portray the life of refugees.

Both Seghers' novel and Petzold's film consist of a similar basic plot: In a pizzeria in Marseille, an initially nameless narrator recounts to an anonymous listener the protagonist's brief stay in Paris (after escaping a concentration camp and French Prisoner of War camp), his evasion of German soldiers and French police during his trek from Paris to Marseille, and his attempts to obtain documents to leave France. (The narrator/protagonist in the novel calls himself Seidler, whereas the voice-over narrator in the film is another character, a bartender, who retells the protagonist's story.) While in Paris, he meets his friend Paul Strobel, who asks him to deliver two letters to a fellow writer Weidel. When he arrives at Weidel's apartment, he discovers that the writer has committed suicide² and takes his possessions, including an unfinished manuscript and Mexican transit visas for Weidel and his wife Marie. From the letters, he learns that Marie abandoned her husband, but now wishes to reunite with him as Weidel has a visa that will enable her to leave Europe.³ When he attempts to return Weidel's transit visas at the Mexican consulate in Marseille, he is mistaken for the writer and takes advantage of the confusion by claiming Weidel as his pen name.⁴ Eventually he meets Marie, whom he doesn't immediately inform of her husband's death, and falls in love with her. Marie's futile search for a phantom husband, who, she believes, is residing in Marseille, constitutes a central metaphor in both the novel and film. Although his affection for Marie appears reciprocated, their friendship appears tenuous, at best. The disillusioned protagonist gradually realizes that she doesn't love him and is using him, as she had hoped to exploit Weidel, to help her obtain the required travel papers. He

² Dubrowski (2013, p. 143) believes that Seghers was commemorating the suicide of the writer Ernst Weiss, who lived close to her Paris hotel. The hotel manager informed her of his death. The death of Seghers' compatriot, the Jewish intellectual Walter Benjamin, who also spent time in Marseilles to obtain travel documents, may also have inspired this part of her novel. As the film critic Manohla Dargis (2019) notes, “Benjamin haunts Petzold's movie, including in a shot of a sign for Rue des Pyrenees. Benjamin ended up fleeing across the Pyrenees Mountains and killed himself in Spain.”

³ The motive for Weidel's death of despair is more explicit in the novel than the film. His suicide apparently results from this abandonment and the German occupation of Paris.

⁴ In an inverse mirroring of her protagonist's situation, Seghers was able to escape Gestapo agents, who were looking for her in Paris under her writer's pseudonym, and successfully fled Europe by using her husband's last name. See (Romero 1993, p. 26).

decides not to leave with her and gives his documents to her new companion, a doctor. This repetitive pattern of love, abandonment, and unsuccessful reconciliation in Marie's interactions with Weidel and the protagonist depict relationships as transactional: these men are interchangeable for her. Thus, a stable identity does not seem possible in a world in which human bonds are merely functional, rather than personal, intimate, and unique. Moreover, a Kafkaesque bureaucracy at the consulates with their petty, fickle tyrants and sudden chance encounters that can either create or destroy a life underscores the unpredictability of their lives.

After Marie's departure, the stories in the novel and film diverge significantly. This divergence reflects the artists' different historical and social frames of reference and intentions for their works. In both narratives, the *Montreal*, the ship transporting Marie and the doctor to Martinique, sinks; however, the destinies of Seidler and Georg, his counterpart in the film, contrast starkly and underscore the distinct intentions of the novelist and director. If Seghers' plot is anchored in Nazi-occupied France, then Petzold employs her plot to portray the current plight of refugees that serves as an existential parable of contemporary life. On the one hand, Seidler's success in finding a family, work, and a community in the Communist resistance movement embodies not only the typical trajectory of a protagonist in the classical *Bildungsroman*, but also Seghers' utopian vision of a future, just world free of fascism. On the other hand, Petzold portrays Georg in a final freeze-frame without a home or community. Yet, Georg establishes at least one friendship by recounting his life story to a local bartender, the source of the film's voice-over, who retells it to customers and viewers. Thus, although Georg, like the anti-hero of many modernist and contemporary works, has failed to integrate into a community, he has created a community of listeners within the diegetic space (the bartender's café) and nondiegetic space of the audience.

Petzold's cinematic version of Seghers' novel is closer to a translation, as defined by Linda Costanzo Cahir (2008, p. 198), than an adaptation: "To adapt, is to move *that same entity* (her emphasis) into a new environment. . . . To translate, in contrast 'to adapt,' is to move a text from one language to another. . . . Through the process of translation a fully new text—a *materially different entity* (her emphasis) is made, one that simultaneously has a strong relationship with its original source, yet it is fully independent from it." Cahir (2008, p. 199) notes that "[e]very act of translation is simultaneously an act of interpretation" in which translators decide what is most crucial, what is of secondary importance, and so on. Thus, film translations "are predicated on a hierarchy of purpose" (200). Borrowing from familiar categorizations of translations (line-by-line, paraphrasing, and imitation), Cahir classifies three distinct types of film translations from literature: (1) literal translation, which reproduces the plot and its details as closely as possible to the original; (2) traditional translation that maintains the overall traits of the book (plot, settings, stylistic conventions), but modifies details; (3) radical translation, "which reshapes the book in extreme and revolutionary ways, both as a means of interpreting the literature and of making the film a more fully independent work" (Cahir 2008, p. 200).

I will argue that Petzold's film constitutes a radical translation of Seghers' story by transforming her tale of political refugees in Vichy France to an existential allegory depicting the instability of identities and relationships in a globalized world. Although the film loosely adheres to the novel's overall plot, the distinct conclusions of the two works emphasize the artists' contrasting world views: Seidler establishes himself in a community, whereas Georg finds himself in limbo in a present-day Marseille café without family or friends. If Seghers' utopian ending reveals her idealistic belief in a future world of equality and peace, then Georg's isolation underscores the rootlessness of refugees that brings into stark relief the transitoriness and volatility of contemporary life.

Instead of meticulous fidelity to Seghers' plot, I contend that Petzold's translation captures the spirit, the thematic and aesthetic intentions of the original text. One major *leitmotif* in the novel is the indifference and callousness towards others' suffering that is also embodied, at least initially, in Seghers' protagonist/narrator Seidler. Eventually, Seidler matures and develops empathy for others by recognizing their common humanity and shared suffering. A second *leitmotif* in the novel is that storytelling can bridge the isolation among individuals and create understanding of others. Seghers'

references to myths, legends, and fairytales that depict existential journeys underscore the universality of Seidler's story. This theme is reflected in the nature of her narrator who engages readers' by appearing to directly address them with his conversational style.

In a similar vein, Petzold conveys the universality of Georg's story by portraying him as an Everyman with whom spectators can identify, by intermingling the past (Vichy France) with the present (contemporary Marseille), and by situating his experiences in non-descript, liminal "non-places." The disembodied voice-over, who addresses an anonymous fictional listener, serves the same role as Seghers' narrator, by addressing spectators. This bridging of Georg's fictional world with that of the audience underscores the film's (and novel's) central theme: in a world of transitory relationships, rapid change, and mobility, the individual whose life is in perpetual flux cannot establish a stable identity, but, as a narrator, can create a community of empathic listeners.

In particular, Petzold transforms Seghers' protagonist into a universal figure who is searching for a home and, thus, underscores the existential aspects that are latent in her narrative. The novel portrays the maturation of a youthful narrator, Seidler, who, like the hero of a classical *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel, must overcome obstacles in his search for a home and purpose in life. In contrast, Petzold, who had contemporary refugees in mind while filming *Transit*, portrays Georg as a cipher. Unlike a protagonist in a realist novel such as Seidler with his distinct personality, Georg, has few distinguishing personality traits. Moreover, Seidler's first-person narration reveals his feelings and reactions to events, and, thus, his development, whereas the voice-over offers an inaccurate account of events that is often contradicted by images and presents an unreliable account of Georg's life. Georg, like a Kafka character, constitutes a blank slate and viewers are (mostly) left to make their own assumptions about his inner life.

A second technique that Petzold employs to create a universal allegory of a common human fate constitutes the intermingling of the past, the Nazi invasion of France (Seghers' plot), and the present with contemporary settings in Marseille. As he reveals, "I don't really like the idea of shooting period pictures, because it's somehow as if you had absolute control of time and space, and that makes things seem as if they're out of a museum" (Romney 2019, p. 4). By situating past events in present-day locales with a figure who embodies the transient state of refugees, the director invents a modern parable of contemporary life. The dislocation of the economic migrant or political refugee serves as the most extreme example of the instability of a world of rapid change and mobility.

A third aspect of the film that emphasizes the existential over the individual in Georg's journey is Petzold's use of non-descript, transitional spaces. Petzold's protagonists, as Marco Abel (2008) observes, are usually in transit, inhabiting "in-between spaces—real and dreamlike—indeed ghostlike spaces . . ." In an interview with Abel (2008), Petzold reveals his interest in transitional spaces that modern capitalism has created and believes that most great narratives, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, are travel narratives whose goal is finding one's home. However, the director's protagonists, "are poorly prepared for modern life" and cannot find community: "It is these people who are pushed out of societies or are put in motion, but they don't even know where to go, where all of this is supposed to lead. They consequently end up in transitional spaces, transit zones where nothingness looms on one side and the impossibility of returning to what existed in the past on the other. These are the spaces that interest me" (Abel 2008). Petzold names these transit zones "no-places," "mobile immobilities," that are ubiquitous in contemporary life: "This unmoving movement, this immobile mobility, I think is something, a place, an uncanny place, that has emerged as a fundamental condition of life in the present: a new form of loneliness of the traveler" (Abel 2008).

Moreover, *Transit* transcends the historical and geographical parameters of the fictional worlds depicted in Petzold's other films. For instance, *Barbara* (2012), *Phoenix* (2014), and *Yella* (2007), which are anchored in particular eras and geographical spaces, all depict female protagonists who are in search of a new identity while in transit from a radically different previous life to a new one. Barbara, a doctor in East Germany, seeks to find a new life with her West German lover by planning an escape to the West. In *Phoenix*, a disfigured concentration camp survivor with a reconstructed face attempts

to reestablish her relationship with a husband after the war. Yella, an ambitious woman who seeks a career in the Federal Republic of Germany after reunification, leaves her East German husband and desires a new life and success in her fantasy of the capitalist West. In contrast, Georg, the protagonist in *Transit*, embodies not only the rootless life of refugees, but also the instability intrinsic to contemporary existence. As Ira Jaffe (2018, p. 137) states: “homelessness for Petzold and his colleagues does not only or necessarily mean lack or loss of a physical home. Rather, it may connote psychological disorientation induced by various global economic developments: altered communication technologies and capital flows, increased income inequality, relocations in order to hold jobs or learn new skills, overlong sojourns in transit spaces or non-places.” To sum up, the manipulation of viewers’ perception of time and space in the film creates a sense of a collective, existential destiny.

Finally, both artists underscore the universal aspect of their stories by foregrounding their narrative’s role in transcending time and space by allowing readers and spectators to share the protagonist’s perspective and by blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, which elicits empathy for a common human fate. With his extensive knowledge of German literature, Petzold borrows techniques from German Romanticism such as the use of Romantic irony that acknowledges readers’/viewers’ presence, self-reflexive references to the act of narration itself, and a voice-over/narrator that links the diegetic realm of the film with that of the audience.

2. Transformations: Identity and the Modernist *Bildungsroman*

As Edward Said (2001, p. 184) notes, exile is “fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past.” With the loss of family, home, community and country, refugees have lost the relationships and places that anchor their identity. Said notes their “need to reassemble an identity,” sometimes, through writing. Since the search for a new identity in a rapidly changing world constitutes the central theme of a *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel, this genre serves as an appropriate vehicle to trace the refugee’s quest. In order to survive, Seghers’ protagonist appropriates another’s identity by obtaining a refugee certificate with the name Seidler (2013, *Transit* p. 33). As in a classic *Bildungsroman*, a teleological narrative, in which protagonists mature through love and/or finding a profession, and, consequently, establish a new identity, a social role in a community, Seidler eventually creates a new *persona* for himself both in the personal sphere—he finds a home and work—and a national one—he discovers solidarity with French resistance fighters.

In contrast, Petzold’s protagonist, Georg, like the antihero in a modernist *Bildungsroman*, whose anti-linear trajectory ends with failed attempts to assimilate into a community, finds himself alone and belonging nowhere—a common theme in the cinema of Berlin School filmmakers (Abel 78). In an interview with Jaimey Fisher (2013, loc. 3024), Petzold reveals his own sense of rootlessness, “I guess that I do not have a true home” and notes that where he “grew up was a bit like a trailer park” and that he, like most of his protagonists, had “always lived in transit spaces.”⁵ This lack of a stable home, according to Petzold, contributes to the absence of a solid identity, to the sense that one is “a ghost.” The director elaborates that “the ghost is not only about fear but rather this falling out of time and place, not belonging anymore, that is, to be on the margins, to be unemployed, or even to be an unloved child—such people feel themselves to be ghosts” (Fisher 2013, loc. 3319). He adds, “cinema always tells the stories of people who do not belong anymore but who want to belong once again” (Fisher 2013, loc. 3319).

The in/stability of the fictional world determines whether the protagonist can mature and assimilate into society through enduring relationships. Petzold states: “Love stories can create a home for you, and that’s what *Transit* is about. . . . that struggle by people who are on the edge, people who are about to become ghosts, and who are fighting that. That’s what I call a ghost film. . . . I don’t want to lose my

⁵ Cited in (Jaffe 2018, p. 135). Jaffe cites interviews with Petzold by Fisher (2013).

job. I don't want this woman or man to leave me. I'm fighting for my love. I'm fighting for the money, I'm fighting for my status, my identity. Because if I don't get it, I'm dead or I disintegrate."⁶

Discussing the crucial disparities between the novel's and film's portrayals of the protagonist within the structural and thematic framework of the classical and modernist *Bildungsroman* will clarify the artists' contrasting contexts and intentions. Karl (von) Morgenstern (1770–1852) coined the term *Bildungsroman* at the dawn of the 19th century (Martini 1991, p. 2). The idea of cultivation (*Bildung*), a well-rounded, aesthetic, moral, rational, and scientific education was rooted in Enlightenment thought and embodied the ideal of an ethical, aesthetic, and cosmopolitan humanity of late 18th-century German culture (Martini 1991, p. 8). The hero of a classical *Bildungsroman*, such as the eponymous protagonist of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, matures into an exemplary individual, whose development is formed through mentors, adversaries, and circumstances. He eventually finds a career, a partner, and a home/land. Morgenstern adds that the depiction of the hero's moral and intellectual growth from its inception to its completion can contribute to the cultivation of its readers as well (Martini 1991, p. 18). Fifty years later, Wilhelm Dilthey's discussion of the genre popularized the term and the *Bildungsroman* became a respected genre in German prose and, later, in European literature.

In *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism and the Fiction of Development*, Jed Esty's analysis of the crucial differences between the classical *Bildungsroman* and the modernist one, provides a valuable framework for this inquiry. Esty (2012, p. 39) states that the classic *Bildungsroman* "aligned nationhood and adulthood" and argues that "adulthood and nationhood served as mutually reinforcing versions of stable identity; they were fixed states of being that gave form and meaning to an otherwise chaotic and unending (or unnarratable) set of personal and social transformations." Moreover, "the *Bildungsroman's* biographical form was for generations yoked to a progressive concept of national destiny" (Esty 2012, p. 24). For example, Wilhelm Meister's life is circumscribed "in the frame of the emergent German nation" (Esty 2012, p. 42). Thus, the "closure" of a classical *Bildungsroman* "happens in the form of adulthood and social reconciliation," of "an interlocking alignment of soul and nation" (Esty 2012, p. 50). Seghers presents this intertwining of personal and collective narratives in her novel: the protagonist's maturation includes his gradual awareness of his solidarity with the French resistance and, by extension, the international Communist movement. Esty (2012, p. 6) claims that this genre underwent a dramatic shift when its social context changed: "the developmental logic of the late *Bildungsroman* underwent substantial revision as the relatively stable temporal frames of national destiny gave way to a more conspicuously global, and, therefore, more uncertain frame of reference. He argues that a linear progression towards maturity is more difficult in an age of globalization: "Modernity is a state of permanent transition. Its most trenchant literary incarnation is, then, the story of endless youth" (Esty 2012, p. 202). If the classical *Bildungsroman* offers "a conventionally linear narrative of cultural adjustment, moral uplift, and social mobility" (Esty 2012, p. 213), then the modernist novel foregrounds "anti-linear and non-teleological elements of the genre" (Esty 2012, p. 212). Thus, the modernist *Bildungsroman* consists of stories of "failed maturity" and portrays "a never-ending story of social transformation within the capitalist world-system" (Esty 2012, p. 213).

Seidler's transformation from a rootless refugee without deep connections to others or a purpose in life to one who becomes part of a community reflects the hero's development in a classical *Bildungsroman*. As Fritz Martini (1991, p. 7) points out, the teleological rhetoric of this traditional novel suggests that "events acquire their meaning when they lead to *one* ending." Although the hero embarks on a journey with many unforeseen twists and turns, the world is stable enough for him to eventually put down roots. Seidler's journey reflects the trajectory of the classical *Bildungsroman* hero as he matures from an irresolute wanderer without close ties, strong convictions, or clear goals to a mature individual with

⁶ See the DVD interview in "The Making of Transit."

stable friendships, love, home, and work, and commitment to a cause, the French resistance, when he rediscovers his sense of honor and integrity.

As in a classical *Bildungsroman*, Seidler has mentors who inspire him to live up to his ideals and adversaries who tempt him to abandon them. The writers Paul Strobel and Hermann Achselroth, opportunists who exploit others and desert them, show him how to navigate the bureaucracy of the consulate, but also to regard others merely as a means to an end. When he discovers Paul, whom he hasn't seen since their encounter in Paris, the latter merely looks at him in an "impersonal, detached" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 61) manner and demonstrates no emotion upon hearing that his friend Weidel has died. Seidler states: "You didn't care whether your friend was alive or dead" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 63). Achselroth, the quintessential amoral opportunist, callously forsakes his friends without remorse. When he arrives at "a real crossroads" during the flight from Paris to Marseille, Achselroth abandons his traveling companions without giving notice. Paul recounts how he buys a French military car from its driver and leaves "without even waving good-bye" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 14). This episode foreshadows Seidler's own moral dilemma—to leave France and abandon a boy who loves him, or to stay and risk arrest.

This North African boy and Heinz, a fellow inmate of a French Prisoner of War camp, serve as foils to the narrator's baser instincts and, ultimately, inspire him to act with selflessness and integrity. Seidler serves as a father figure for this child, who is the only one he admits he loves (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 89). He demonstrates his affection for the fatherless boy by playing with him and procuring a doctor when he is sick. Heinz, a Communist, who lost his leg fighting, presumably on the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War, exercises a significant influence on Seidler, who is moved by his integrity and fidelity. He states that Heinz "liked the sort of qualities in people that I lacked, that weren't important to me. Back then, at any rate. I'm referring to unconditional loyalty, which, in those days, I considered senseless and boring, dependability, which seemed to me impossible to maintain, and unswerving faith, which seemed to me as childish and useless as dragging banners across endless battlefields (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 68)." Besides friendship, Heinz offers Seidler a rare gift—a rediscovered identity. While regarding his friend, he states: "I suddenly understood what those clear eyes were looking for and almost instantly found again: it was me, myself and nothing else, and I instantly knew, to my enormous relief, that I was still there, that I had not gotten lost . . . I was here and so was Heinz" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 69). At a crucial turning-point in his life, Seidler ascribes Heinz's strength to his faith in his fellow human beings: ". . . this man lived every moment of his existence, even the darkest, convinced that he was never alone, that wherever he was and no matter for how long, he would always find people who were like him. People who'd be there for him . . ." (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 128). This implicit faith in others inspires Seidler to commit a selfless act to help Heinz leave: he gives him the ticket meant for his romantic rival, the doctor, whom he would have eliminated by sending him abroad. This episode marks a crossroads in his maturation from a mere survivor to an honorable man and prefigures his decision to stay in France with his "family," and to commit to the French resistance. Thus, Seidler, who began his incarceration by slapping a Nazi guard, transforms himself when he rediscovers his ideals of love and honor and reconciles these ideals with action, integration into a community.⁷

In contrast, the instability and chaos of the film's contemporary reality, subvert Georg's attempts to establish stable relationships—and the maturation they can bring. (Berlin Cinema directors typically limit the extent of their characters' development (Kopp 2010, p. 291).⁸ Like a modernist *Bildungsroman's* antihero, Georg's quest is marked by stasis, not progress. Although he loves the boy (called Driss in the film) Georg cannot commit to a new life with him and his mother and does not escape to the mountains with them. Driss leaves without notice and Georg learns of his departure only when

⁷ Lutz Winckler (2014, pp. 155–56) makes a similar observation and also discusses Heinz's influence in the protagonist's self-discovery.

⁸ Cited in (Miller 2012, p. 56).

he discovers new North African occupants in his old apartment. Heinz, who plays a significant role in shaping Seidler's character and decisions in the novel, appears only briefly in the film. Georg accompanies his wounded friend on a train from Paris to Marseille and discovers that he is dead upon their arrival.

The role of the narrator in each work underscores another crucial difference between the novel and the film. Seghers' first-person narrator/protagonist, whose actual name is never revealed, calls himself Seidler and discloses his thoughts, emotions, and, consequently, his developing character, through his reflections on his experiences. In contrast, the film's (initially) anonymous, disembodied, voice-over narrator⁹ offers a sober, second-hand account of Georg's actions and relatively few insights into his thoughts or attitudes towards others. This narrator speculates about Georg's feelings and is, sometimes, inaccurate as his narration often contradicts the action on the screen. Petzold's viewers gain only a few clues regarding Georg's emotions from his behavior that subtly develops from a guarded attitude towards others to an openness and vulnerability that enable him to love. If Seidler establishes a growing intimacy between himself and readers through his revelations, then the voice-over, inspired by Jean-Luc Godard's French New Wave film *Breathless (A bout de Souffle)*,¹⁰ provides, as Petzold states, "a mood and a sense of impermanence."¹¹ The mostly subdued reactions of Franz Rogowski, the actor who plays Georg, conceals more than reveals of his inner life. In short, Petzold creates an Everyman, a refugee who belongs nowhere. This minimalist approach foregrounds the living conditions of those in exile that are inherent in Seghers' work, although subordinate to Seidler's maturation.

Thus, Petzold portrays the interminable flux of refugees' lives, rather than the development of a single character towards a satisfactory resolution. The constantly changing and unpredictable vicissitudes of their lives are triggered by unforeseen chance events such as sudden arrests, accidents, and deaths, and the shifting of national borders (and citizenships) caused by war. In such a *milieu*, a stable home and identity appear unattainable. As Matthew Miller (2012, p. 71) states, "far from offering any affirmation of *Heimat* (home/homeland), they (Petzold's films) circumscribe its elusiveness." Most of Petzold's characters are in transit, whether escaping political persecution or arrest, or out of economic necessity, and even those who inhabit a post-unification Germany cannot find a secure refuge. As Marco Abel [2013] (2015, p. 78) states:

... they (the films) all foreground a problem that defines the condition of life for all his characters: how to imagine and reimagine one's life, and, crucially, fulfill one's desire for belongingness when the conditions of belonging are subject to and subjected by the socioeconomically manufactured need to be in perpetual motion. Petzold cinematically dramatizes this problem in numerous scenes in almost all of his films by featuring characters either driving in their German-engineered cars to and fro through barely defined spaces or restlessly walking without ever arriving ...

The most shocking scene that Petzold inserts into Seghers' plot allows viewers to experience vicariously the sudden, inexplicable, and unpredictable reversals in a refugee's life. A middle-aged Jewish architect, a character in Seghers' novel, whom Georg knows casually from brief encounters in his hotel and the consulate, invites him to a sumptuous, apparently celebratory dinner with champagne in an elegant restaurant. After dinner, they stroll and discuss architecture. Georg offers the woman a cigarette and turns to light himself one. As he looks up, she seems to him (and to us) to have disappeared into thin air. He hears screams and discovers that she has jumped onto the road far below. The abrupt editing creates a lightning-flash interval between the lighting of his cigarette and her disappearance. The sudden, unexpected suicide and its improbably rapid execution trigger a sharp jolt in spectators. There is no obvious indication of the woman's intentions as she appears in good spirits. The transition

⁹ It appears that the voice-over narrator is the pizzeria's bartender.

¹⁰ See the DVD Petzold interview.

¹¹ "The Making of Transit."

from a pleasant walk to a sudden leap to death intensifies the sense of an unstable world full of inexplicable, unforeseen tragedies.

Petzold provides viewers with an apt metaphor: the game of soccer, reminiscent (to this viewer) of Peter Handke's use of the metaphor in his novel, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, for spectators' (not always successful) attempts to discern characters' motives, predict their actions, and anticipate the story's plot. While teaching the North African boy Driss how to outwit him (as goalie) and score a goal, Georg instructs him to position his stable leg so it won't reveal the direction of the kick. This episode mirrors Petzold's own sleight of hand in the suicide scene. The woman's casual allusion to the death of the dogs she was supposed to bring to their owners in America and that represent her means of obtaining a travel visa, explains her suicide, but the celebratory manner in which she spends her last evening blinds us to her desperate plan. Viewers and Georg anticipate a positive conclusion to the evening and fail to perceive and anticipate the fatal turn of events. Consequently, spectators experience the refugee's disorientation in a reality of constantly shifting circumstances in which attempts to establish stable friendships are short-circuited by sudden reversals and abrupt departures.

If Seghers' character finds redemption and assimilation into society, Petzold's refugees are not rescued from their isolation, paralysis, and despair. Although the concept of home is portrayed in both works as an unstable entity and both protagonists struggle against harsh circumstances in their quest to find love and a refuge, the difference in their final destination couldn't be starker. Seidler establishes a new identity with love, family, a home, work, and community, whereas Georg finds himself alone, in the final scene, despite his attempts to form bonds with a child and woman he loves. Esty's analysis of Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), a modernist novel of exile that traces the tragic descent of its young protagonist Anna Morgan, who moves from the Caribbean to England, offers a useful paradigm for Georg's plight. Like Georg, Anna "dwells not in the current of progressive time but in a dark, perpetual present of disorientation and disintegration" (Esty 2012, p. 166) and "narrates exile as an unrepairable existential and political gap" (Esty 2012, pp. 166–67). Like Georg, she can't recognize herself "as an integral subject developing continuously in time" (Esty 2012, p. 168), and her situation, reminiscent of Lukacs's transcendental homelessness, constitutes "a pervasive and chronic dislocation from any space" (Esty 2012, pp. 168–69). The freeze-frame shot of Georg suspended in time and space in the final scene alludes to his existential displacement, his external and internal exile.

3. Liminal Spaces, Non-Places, and Fluid Time

Marc Augé elaborates on travelers'/refugees' loss of identity in terms of liminal spaces and an eternal present in *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (2008) that provides a theoretical foundation for discussing these two aspects of the novel and the film. Petzold read Augé's book, which influenced his film *Yella* (Leweke 2013, p. 34). Augé introduces two ways of life—the sedentary and the transitory—as involving different types of spaces that Hellenists distinguished as the realms of two deities: "Hestia symbolizes the circular hearth placed in the centre of the house, the closed space of the group withdrawn into itself . . . ; while Hermes, god of the threshold and the door, but also of crossroads and town gates, represents movement and relations with others" (Augé [1995] 2008, p. 47). Augé [1995] (2008, p. 37) designates the realm of Hestia, such as a village or a domestic space, as an anthropological place that is rooted in a foundation narrative for a group and provides a stable history and group identity: ". . . it is the spatial arrangements that express the group identity, (its actual origins are often diverse, but the group is established, assembled and united by the identity of the place) . . ." (Augé [1995] 2008, p. 37). It is a "closed and self-sufficient world" (Augé [1995] 2008, p. 38) that provides both a "shared identity" and a social order that bestows a "particular identity" upon individuals (Augé [1995] 2008, p. 42). An anthropological place constitutes a "concrete and symbolic construction of space" as well as "a principle of meaning for the people who live in it . . ." (Augé [1995] 2008, p. 42). Anthropological places have three common traits: they are "places of identity, relations, and history" (Augé [1995] 2008, p. 43) that offer internal, relational, and group stability. The French farm in which Seidler finds work, a community, and an identity, contains these traits and illustrates

Auge [1995] (2008, p. 55) claim that a key feature of French sensibility is that identity is rooted in the soil.

Furthermore, the oven of the pizzeria in Seghers' novel serves as a symbol of hearth, stability, and community where people tell their stories. As her protagonist/narrator Seidler remarks to his anonymous listener, he is searching for such a secure place:

I like watching the open fire, you know, and the way the man hits the dough with his bent wrist. Yes, things like that are the only things in the world I really like. That is to say, I like things that have been and will always be there. You see, there's always been an open fire here, and for centuries they've beaten the dough like that. And if you were to reproach me because I am forever changing and going to different places, then, I'd reply that it's only because I am doing a thorough search for something that is going to last forever.

(Seghers 2013, *Transit* pp. 110–11)

In Petzold's film, the bar in the café/pizzeria with its gold-colored walls serves a similar purpose as Seghers' open fire as a place to tell stories, form friendships, bear witness to others' lives. In the film, the bartender retells Georg's story in the voice-over as listener and witness. The golden colors of Driss's apartment evoke the warmth of a home and an intimate scene (added in the film) between Georg and Driss in which he fixes a radio by soldering a wire with a candle-flame, reveals his paternal feelings for the fatherless boy. A German childhood song about animals returning home that Georg's mother sang to him suddenly is heard on the radio and he sings the song to Driss, which underscores their intimate relationship.

If the anthropological place can be defined "as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 63). These non-places, which are ubiquitous in Petzold's works, are created by three accelerated transformations in contemporary life that Augé refers to as supermodernity: "the acceleration of history" that results from an "overabundance of events" (such as wars and mass migrations, Auge [1995] 2008, p. 23); "a spatial overabundance," an expanded world created by a proliferation of images through new technologies (Auge [1995] 2008, pp. 26–27), and "a spectacular acceleration of means of transport" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 28); and the expanded figure of the ego, the individual who "wants to be a world in himself" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 30). Augé states that "never before have individual histories been so explicitly affected by collective history, but never before, either, have the reference points for collective identification been so unstable. The individual production of meaning is thus more necessary than ever" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 30).

Seghers' and Petzold's portrayals of the non-places of supermodernity include vehicles (cars, trains, buses, ships), transit points (train and subway stations, the port of Marseille), and spaces of transit (hotel rooms and consulate waiting rooms and staircases). In such spaces, the repetitive, prescribed, mass behavior of travelers meld individual identities into a collective group. Auge [1995] (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 83) claims that, "a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer, or driver." These non-places are ones of "solitary individuality" and of the "fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 63). The traveler's space is "the archetype of *non-place*" and consists of "spaces in which neither identity, nor relations nor history really make sense" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 70). In non-places, "solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 70).

Petzold creates this sense of anonymous, urban non-places that are empty of any landmarks, history and meaning, in his depictions of Paris and Marseille. The absence of establishing shots that would indicate a specific locale doesn't allow spectators "the comforts of recognition," but rather appears to depict an imaginary "non-existing space" (Abel [2013] 2015, p. 101). The film consists of scenes of vast, urban spaces, cars on highways, and ships leaving port with anonymous passengers and non-descript, desolate hotel rooms and crowded consulate waiting rooms. In the film, if fire

and warm colors allude to family and home, then bright, cool colors infuse these non-places of transit. The white/blue light of the empty freight train compartment in which Georg and Heinz escape, the beiges and grays of the consulates with compassionless, often petty, bureaucrats, Georg's sparsely furnished, white hotel room, and the dimly lit hotel lobby where the manager exploits Georg's inability to produce identity papers by extorting an "obscene" amount of money from him suggest the sterility, emptiness, even cruelty, of the transactions taking place in these spaces.

Yet, in Petzold's film, the transit space of the hotel room not only portrays Georg's isolation and loneliness, but also offers the possibility of a fresh beginning, the creation of a new identity. As Jaimey Fisher (2018, p. 108) notes, in Petzold's films, "the hotel serves ambiguously, not only as a space of estrangement, of deformed experience and maimed humanity, but also emancipatorily as a place vested and producing personal meaning amidst the ruins of the home." A key scene in the film that marks a crucial turning point in Georg's life occurs in his Marseille hotel room and could either get him imprisoned or lead to a new identity and life. While substituting his own photo into Weidel's passport, the French police, who were tipped off by the greedy manager, stage a raid in the hotel and search his room. Georg has managed to destroy evidence of his forgery attempt and is able to produce Weidel's papers as his own and escape arrest. Georg's and Marie's growing affection and deepening intimacy take place in her hotel room overlooking the port of Marseille. Important turning points in their relationship occur here as well such as the return of Marie's friend, the doctor, from a ship headed west, after he was forced to disembark because French officials appropriated his room. Georg discovers Marie's true identity and she reveals details of her past in her hotel room. Finally, views of departing ships from her hotel window offer hope of a new, free life in the Americas.

The scene of Georg and the architect's after-dinner stroll (and shortly before her suicide) that Petzold added to Seghers' plot offers insights into his use of space. (Although the film's plot is situated in the time of Seghers' novel, Vichy France in 1940, the actual film is shot in contemporary Marseille.) The architect's anachronistic reference to a famous work of Rudy Ricciotti, who was born in 1952 in Algeria, underscores the contrast between merely functional, transitional spaces in which travelers have lost their identity, and historical, anthropological places that are replete with meaning. Ricciotti, who criticized the ahistorical minimalism of contemporary architecture, designed a significant and well-known cultural site in Marseille's port, the Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (known as MuCEM) that is connected to the 12th century Fort Saint-Jean by a suspended walkway, described by Petzold's character. MuCEM is dedicated to the stages of civilizations of the area and contains exhibits on the inhabitants, agriculture, archaeology, art history, and contemporary art of the Mediterranean. The sterile, nondescript, and, initially, unrecognizable vast, empty non-space of their walk contrasts with the subject matter of their conversation, the walkway that links a cultural museum to an historic fort, an anthropological space. While the architect discusses the bridge that links the past (the fort) with the present (a museum with exhibits that link past with present), Georg knows very little of her past nor is he aware of her present frame of mind, her intention to commit suicide. Their relationship, like the generic quality of the restaurant and the sterile space of their walk, lacks any common history or context.¹² Similar to the anonymous travelers or pedestrians of Augé's non-spaces, Georg and the architect share only a common situation, their refugee status and desire to leave. As Augé [1995] (2008, p. 81) notes: "... non-place creates the shared identity of passengers, customers, or Sunday drivers. No doubt the relative anonymity that goes with this temporary identity can even be felt as a liberation."

Goals, not origins, and anonymity, not individuality, define those in transit. As Seidler observes: "Here, in Marseille, everybody asks, 'Where are you going?' They never ask, 'Where are you from?'" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 201). The urgency of the present defines refugees'/travelers' existence:

¹² During their walk, the voice-over refers to the fortress as the site of their walk, but the visual space doesn't indicate the locale of their stroll as a fortress. Only when viewers, along with Georg, look down at the architect's body, can we visually situate the location.

The passenger through non-places retrieves his identity only at Customs, at the tollbooth, at the check-out counter. Meanwhile, he obeys the same code as others, receives the same messages, responds to the same entreaties. The space of non-place creates neither an identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude. There is no room there for history . . . What reigns there is actuality, the urgency of the present moment.

(Auge [1995] 2008, p. 83)

The architect's abrupt disappearance and Georg's discovery of her body on the walkway by the sea below marks a shift of attention for Georg (and viewers) from the present to the past both literary and symbolically. We recognize the site of her suicide as on the edge of the sea and next to what appears to be the wall of a fort and are now able to visually situate the non-place of their stroll. Spectators, along with Georg, get jolted out of the pleasure of the moment into searching for clues in his past encounters with the refugee that would explain her suicide. Her sudden leap "throws" viewers into reevaluating the meaning of previous episodes: her invitation to dinner, her request that they don't speak, her wearing black, the destination of their stroll, and the request for a cigarette. Casual references to her Jewish identity and the death of the dogs that were her ticket to the US, gain significance. Their death would make it difficult, if not impossible, for her to leave Vichy France. With the Nazi army approaching Marseille, she probably feared being arrested. With hindsight, we gain a fleeting insight into her motives and become aware that we share Georg's blindness of others' inner lives.

The film's suicide scene also draws attention to this link between space and time, the intertwining of Augé's anthropological spaces such as the 12th century fort, with a history and communal significance, and the association of his non-places, the nondescript spaces of transit and urban spaces, with an eternal, meaningless present. Auge [1995] (2008, p. 84) describes this "perpetual present" of the traveler's transit spaces as devoid of any history: "Everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news, as if each individual history were drawing its motives, its words and images from the inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present."

Both the novel and the film juxtapose the stasis of refugees' "perpetual present," with its repetitive, circular movements, against the historical that suggests a linear progression. They portray a life in transit as consisting not only of sudden transitions and reversals, but also of stasis, of waiting in cafés and in consulates. In both works the word "transit" refers (in German and English) not only to the transit visa for passage through another country on the way to a destination, but also to a paradoxical state of being in transition, moving from a past life to a future one, but also simultaneously being in a state of paralyzed suspension between past and future, with a sense of impotence, and fear. Pervasive in the modernist *Bildungsroman*, this state of suspension encompasses "the antilinear and nonteleological elements of the genre" (Esty 2012, p. 212) and is evident in both works, but predominant in the film. In the novel, Seidler continually recounts the fortuitous, repetitive, and frequently meaningless encounters that mark Augé's "perpetual present" of those in transit. He admits: "All these casual encounters, these senseless, repeated meetings depressed me with their stubborn unavoidability" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 200). In both works, Marie's futile search through the streets, consulates, and cafés of Marseille for her dead husband, who, she believes, is still alive, serves as an apt metaphor for refugees' quest for love and community. In the film, she repeats this pattern in her search for Georg, who, in turn, searches for her after her departure. As Esty (2012, p. 166) states, rhythmic repetitions produce a circular effect that "cut against the narrative trajectory" and "interrupt and retard the standard process of maturation."

These futile, repetitive, circular movements that do not bring characters any closer to their destinations in both works, particularly in the film, convey a sense of stasis and portray the protagonist as "stuck at a threshold," as in a modernist work (Esty 2012, p. 168). Georg's entrapment in Marseille, with no compelling reasons to leave or to stay, and his futile waiting for the (presumably) dead Marie's return, suggest the existential crisis of characters in *Waiting for Godot* or a Kafka story. Both works

contain a Kafkaesque parable to depict the torment of refugees' infernal waiting.¹³ After being asked by the American consul to share a story, Georg recites one of Weidel's tales that resembles the parable *Before the Law* in Kafka's *The Trial*: "A man died. He was to register in hell. He waited in front of a large door. He waited a day, two. He waited weeks. Months. Then years. Finally a man walked past him. Perhaps you can help me. I'm supposed to register in hell. The other man who looks him up and down says, 'But, sir, this here is hell.'"¹⁴

Caught in the liminal transit space of a café that caters to refugees in Marseille during a transitional time (Vichy France), Georg is paralyzed by his own indecisiveness regarding leaving France through the Pyrenees or finding refuge in the bartender's hiding place. As in a Kafka narrative, the protagonist's state of mind reflects his external situation. Georg's irresoluteness, like that of an anti-hero in a modernist *Bildungsroman*, suggests a failed maturity that is reflected in the non-linear plot and open-ended conclusion, so typical of modernist narratives. Furthermore, Georg's external existence in a doubly liminal space (a café in a port city) reflects an inner paralysis that Petzold cinematically captures in a freeze-frame in the concluding scene.

Petzold underscores this sense of stasis by beginning and ending his film in similar settings. His story begins with Georg in a Parisian café and concludes with him in a Marseille café. Like Anna in Rhys's novel *Voyage in the Dark*, mentioned earlier, Georg cannot achieve social mobility or redemption, because he is not situated in "any discrete, finite, or meaningful order" (Esty 2012, p. 170). Georg and Anna, like the eponymous character in Kafka's short story *The Hunter Gracchus*, an avatar of Ahasverus, a legendary Jewish figure who was cursed to wander the earth, are "trapped in an endless indiscrete flow of unmarked time and unbounded space" (Esty 2012, p. 174). The film's last scene mirrors the first, brings us full circle and suggests Georg's failed quest for a new life. A freeze-frame shot suspends his image in cinematic time and space. Given the film's many self-reflexive references to narrative, it is plausible that this shot serves as a self-referential gesture to filmmaking. Petzold claims that the transitory state depicted in Seghers' *Transit* describes cinema and regards film theaters as a transit rooms in which viewers are simultaneously present and absent: "The cinema tells stories of people in transit, people who have left something, but haven't arrived to another place. All the criminals, who divide their spoils in hotel rooms, all the people, who have lost a love, all the people, who have returned from civil war—they are travelers in transit. In this regard, all of my films are also films about being in transit."¹⁵

Yet, Seghers and Petzold also situate their protagonists in a collective linear hi/story that portrays their lives as part of a universal tale spanning centuries. Seghers' narrator appears aware of himself as a fellow traveler in historical time, through the ancient history of Marseille that enables him to feel connected to previous migrants in this significant port city:

It was the age-old harbor gossip, as ancient as the old port itself and even older. Wonderful, ancient harbor twaddle that's existed as long as there has been a Mediterranean Sea, Phoenician chit-chat, Cretan and Greek gossip, and that of the Romans. . . . 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. . . .

¹³ Olivia Landry offers an insightful discussion of the theme of waiting in Petzold's *Transit*.

¹⁴ Seghers was an avid reader of Kafka's stories, especially while she lived in Berlin in the 1920s. Many have noted stylistic and thematic similarities between her works and Kafka's. One common theme is characters' desperate search for meaning in life. See (Romero 1993, pp. 29–30).

¹⁵ My translation. Cited in German in Landry 2020, p. 101. Petzold's interview with Hannah Pilarczyk. "Was Seghers beschreibt, ist das Kino. Der Kinoraum selbst ist ein Transitraum, in dem wir anwesend und abwesend zugleich sind. Und das Kino erzählt von Menschen im Transit, von Menschen, die etwas verlassen und nicht woanders angekommen sind. All die Kriminellen, die in Hotelzimmern ihre Beute aufteilen, all die Menschen, die eine Liebe verloren haben, all die Menschen, die aus einem Bürgerkrieg zurückkehren—sie sind Transitreisende. So gesehen sind alle meine Filme auch Filme über den Transit."

I felt ancient, thousands of years old. I had experienced all this before. But, I also felt very young, and eager for all that was yet to come; I felt immortal.

(Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 78)¹⁶

In a similar vein, Petzold discusses the continual influence of the past on the present in his film: “I wanted to take the past and transpose it into the present and then look at what would happen. Then thinking about it, I realized it actually stood for something like an infection. We’re looking at something that seems past, but it still has effects today. The present is still infected by the past, and that’s what opens up this transitory space—a space where things are floating” (Romney 2019, p. 4). Georg’s story connects to the past and future in the tales of his *Doppelgänger* Weidel and the film’s narrator. Georg’s storytelling establishes a friendship with the bartender and a connection with viewers, who have witnessed his experiences and share his perspective of events. Storytelling, then, can establish relationships, and, an identity, as it did for Weidel. Thus, Georg’s pursuit of Marie and his storytelling repeats Weidel’s story. Petzold observes this creative potential in Georg’s situation in Marseille: “But he chooses to remain in that transitory space, that limbo, where he decides to wait for Marie. And this limbo can actually be the space where everything unfolds for refugees, and where they also get the opportunity to develop and tell their own story” (Romney 2019, p. 5).

4. Identity, Community and Empathy through Narrative

In their works, Seghers and Petzold self-reflexively foreground the process of narration itself, a common technique in German Romantic and modernist novels. In the novel’s initial scene, an initially nameless narrator addresses an anonymous listener and, by extension, the reader. After referring to the sinking of the ship *Montreal*, the narrator entices the listener to a meal: “Probably you find all of this pretty unimportant? You’re bored?—I am too. May I invite you to join me at my table?” (3). Seghers’ narrator Seidler occasionally addresses his listener as “you,” which jolts readers and invokes a sense of proximity to his world. The film’s voice-over begins in the train with Georg’s reading Weidel’s manuscript (an excerpt from Seghers’ work) in his own language that offers him comfort and a sense of connection with the characters and his lost home/land:

He sensed it was his language, his native tongue. He came across words his poor mother had used to calm him when he’d gotten angry or cruel. In this story, there were a lot of mad folk, really crazy people, all of whom were mixed up in terrible, nebulous stuff. Even those who strove hard not to be. All the people in the story, and one of them resembles him, didn’t annoy him with their complexity, as they would have done in life. He understood their deeds, because he could finally follow them from the very first thought right until their inevitable conclusion. Only because the now-dead writer had described them in that way did they seem less vicious to him.

His mother-tongue (*Muttersprache*) evokes childhood memories in Georg just as the radio song elicits nostalgia for his mother. He identifies with one character and one wonders if the story serves as a *mise-en-abyme*, a microcosm of Georg’s world that is a typical literary device in a German Romantic *Bildungsroman*.¹⁷ He also feels a connection to the dead writer, as a fellow German and traveling companion in transit, who also experiences deep loss. Weidel’s life foreshadows Georg’s as Marie’s (aspiring) lover and as a storyteller himself. Not only does Marie pursue Georg because she mistakes him for her husband, but she seems as ambivalent towards him as towards Weidel. Neither Georg nor

¹⁶ Seghers’ narrator refers to Biblical images, the Tower of Babel (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 35) and Noah’s Ark (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 54), and myths such as of Cyclops (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 25), and the River Styx (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 67) that situate his experiences in a broader context and unite him with previous generations and civilizations.

¹⁷ For example, Wilhelm Meister receives a scroll upon completion of his apprenticeship and sees a picture of a figure that resembles him in the scroll.

the viewers are entirely certain whether she truly loves them or merely uses both because they can provide transit visas. In his guise as Weidel at the American consulate, Georg recites his Doppelgänger's stories as his own. Shortly before the film's conclusion, he passes on the manuscript to a bartender in a café that he frequents, who, we've discovered earlier, is the film's voice-over and who preserves Georg's and Weidel's stories for posterity. Despite his loneliness, Georg connects to others through language. He is intimately linked to the past, to Weidel, through his story, and to the future, through the bartender, who will pass on his tale to customers and viewers. Georg creates a home through reading and telling stories, within the fictional world, through Weidel's manuscript and in his friendship with the bartender, and with spectators. As Said (2001, p. 191) states in "Reflections on Exile," "homes are always provisional" for those in exile and refers to Theodor Adorno's insight that, for the refugee, "the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing."¹⁸

Although the film's final scene suspends Georg without a home or certain future, it provides hope on an aesthetic level both through his fantasy/hope of Marie's return and the survival of his story. In a case of poetic justice, the bartender, the sole acquaintance who offers Georg sanctuary from danger, also "saves" his and Weidel's stories, both as the film's narrator and the guardian of Weidel's manuscript. He also serves as a bridge to the past (the manuscript) and to the future (by retelling Weidel's and Georg's stories) as well as a bridge between the film's fictional world and that of the spectator, through his voice-over. Storytelling offers an aesthetic, if not actual, survival literally and symbolically. Weidel "lives on" not only through Seidler's/Georg's impersonation of him, but also in his writing. While posing as Weidel before an arrogant official who "tasted a bit of power on his tongue" and refuses him a Spanish transit visa because of Weidel's anti-fascist articles, Seghers' protagonist/narrator Seidler notes: "So Weidel isn't just dust, I thought, not just ashes, not just a faint memory of some intricate story that I'd find hard to retell, like the stories I was told at bedtime as a child.... Something is left of him that is alive enough and arouses enough fear for them to close their borders to him The culprits were probably those same articles the American consul showed me on my first visit to his consulate" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* pp. 187–88).

Seidler voices Seghers' own conviction that artistic expression could provide meaning in her life. As Christian Zehl Romero (1993, p. 42) states in her biography of Seghers, the novelist regarded her writing as a source of hope that bestowed upon the individual, transitory existence enduring value. The survival of an individual through art, a fundamental theme in Seghers' works, occurs because the artwork preserves what is essential in the writer (Romero 1993, p. 59). When their stories are passed on through storytellers, they survive in the repetition of their narratives and in listeners' (and spectators') memories. Petzold also emphasizes the importance of storytelling: "They (the characters in *Transit*) long for a story of their own and to discover the fragment of a novel left behind by an author, the fragment of a narrative about flight, love, guilt, loyalty. *Transit* is a story about how these people turn this narrative into their own."¹⁹

In *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Anthony Giddens (1991, p. 54) regards narrative as the predominant means of creating self-identity in modernity: "A person's identity is not to be found in behavior, . . . but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going [his italics]."²⁰ In contradistinction to the self, self-identity, involves reflexivity, which is "something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens 1991, p. 52).²¹ In short, self-identity in modernist works often focuses on narrative expression. Although Georg has not found a "happy ending," he has established an identity as a narrator, and, in this regard, Weidel, whose identity he has taken as a refugee, lover, and storyteller, has served as his mentor. Seidler's and Georg's survival through their stories reflects Seghers' own situation in exile while composing *Transit*. Citing Seghers' son

¹⁸ See Adorno (1978) autobiography, *Minima Moralia: A Damaged Life*.

¹⁹ Quoted from "Historical Silence," Petzold's essay in the DVD brochure.

²⁰ Cited in (Castle 2006), *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, p. 36.

²¹ Cited in (Castle 2006, p. 36). See also (Giddens 1991, pp. 75–80).

Pierre Radvanyi, Lutz Winckler speculates that storytelling had both a healing effect and enabled the writer (like Georg) to endure her trials as a refugee. According to Radvanyi, his mother would recite sections of her manuscript *Transit* to her children during their trip from Marseille to Martinique. By fictionalizing her traumatic experiences, she gained control of her many losses and painful memories (Winckler 2014, pp. 152–53). Thus, for her and other artists in exile, writing her life's story enabled her emotional survival. As Walter Benjamin notes in his essay *The Storyteller*, Seghers takes on the role of "a new Scheherazade."²²

The film's final scene invites viewers to speculate upon Georg's future and, consequently, to co-narrate the rest of his story. Georg and the spectators are left with various possibilities—to accept the bartender's offer of refuge, to escape through the Pyrenees where he might perish, to wait for Marie in Marseille and, possibly, be arrested, or to commit suicide. If one views him as Weidel's alter-ego, one might conclude that his tragic life of unrequited love, abandonment, and suicide foreshadows Georg's demise. Yet, the footsteps of an anonymous female who enters the café and whom Georg stares at from his table, could offer hope. Is it Georg's fantasy of Marie, the actual Marie who has returned, or an acquaintance who might help Georg? By forgoing a reverse shot, Petzold doesn't reveal the intruder's identity. As Olivia Landry (2020, p. 103) observes, "withholding of a reverse shot at critical moments is not uncommon in Petzold's films; it forges a kind of blind spot that does not shut down interpretation and meaning, but rather effectively opens it up." In an interview, Petzold reveals that these deliberate elisions, including the absence of point-of-view shots, imitate gaps that are prominent in modern American short stories, which inspired him, and which, in turn, were inspired by cinema.²³

Spectators' identification with Georg's point of view creates ambiguity regarding the nature of his experiences. In an earlier scene after Marie's departure, Georg and viewers observe the actress who plays Marie leaving the café and it is unclear if Marie has returned or if she is a figment of Georg's imagination. (We later learn that the *Montreal* sank and that Marie probably died.) This ambiguity creates a ghost-like figure, typical in Petzold's films and reminiscent of the revenant played by Kim Novak, in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. (It is widely known that Hitchcock films influenced Petzold's film style and others have noted the similarities between *Vertigo* and an earlier Petzold film *Phoenix*.) As the director observes, "... I feel that the history of film is filled with people on the verge of becoming phantoms" (Leweke 2013, p. 35). He admires films of fantasy "like those of the Weimar Cinema and even recent horror films that play with the blurred boundaries between the (objectively) real and (subjectively) fantasy."²⁴

Thus, the fluid borders between the real and the imaginary create yet another liminal space in Petzold's cinema. Engaging spectators in the film's narrative both visually (Georg's look) and cognitively (the open ending) captivates viewers and entices them to imagine Georg's future. As in a modernist novel, meaning originates in "its narrativity, its being an open-ended process. Meaning is not the result of a fulfilled teleology" (Moretti 1987, p. 7). Thus, "in a modernist world one seeks meaning in the *future* rather than in the past" (Moretti 1987, p. 5).

The fluid boundaries between past and present and between fiction and reality also engage the audience in the creative process. The interweaving of the past (Weidel's retold stories) with the present (Georg's world) mirrors the shifting borders between the fictional world and the contemporary one. Thus, the liminal spaces of transit in both works reflect not only their themes, but also self-reflexively reveal their aesthetic style. Petzold foregrounds this intermingling between past

²² Cited in (Winckler 2014, p. 166) from Benjamin (1977) "Der Erzähler," p. 453.

²³ Petzold states: "I consider American short stories to be the foundation of my work. The things that appear to be missing in a story, the gaps—that's something that American literature learned from cinema, and it's something, that, through my reading, I'm trying to get back into cinema" (Romney 2019, p. 6). With Leweke (2013, p. 39), he discusses the absence of point-of-view shots of a character in another film of his: "For we mustn't show the girl's yearning through pictures. The yearning is in her gaze. That's why we don't see what she's looking at—she sees things that are hers alone. And we show only her gaze. That's what I explained to everybody: we don't have any point-of-view shots."

²⁴ Fisher (2011 p. 457) cites (Fisher 2010) article "German Autoren Dialogue with Hollywood?"

and present with anachronistic references to contemporary events; historical props (an old typewriter, a passport of the Third Reich) and allusions to the Nazis' "cleansings" that contrast with the film's contemporary settings. As mentioned earlier, the scene with the architect discussing Ricciotti's walkway that links the past, the Fort St. Jean, with the present, the MuCEM (Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean) that has exhibits on the past and the present cultures of the area underscores the intermingling of past with present.

The merging of fictional and spectator "realities" is most conspicuous in the train where Georg is reading Weidel's manuscript, an excerpt from Seghers' novel. First, viewers experience this "melding" of the two fictional levels when the voice-over narrates both Weidel's manuscript and Georg's reading his story that contains a character, who resembles him. The knowledge from this reading enables Georg to pose as Weidel at consulates and, with this false identity, to meet Marie and repeat his tragic love story with her. Thus, both narratives—the writer's story and Georg's reenacting Weidel's life as refugee, lover, and writer—begin simultaneously in this scene. Second, the voice-over that intrudes for the first time in this scene melds the fictional world with that of the spectators. Although the narrator is a fictional character, the appearance of the voice-over initially appears nondiegetic, as originating from a source outside the space of the narrative. Only later do viewers identify the narrator as the bartender. A voice-over that creates a sense of immediacy to the unfolding action and intensifies the suspense constitutes a common technique in *film noir* cinema that influenced Petzold's own cinematic style.²⁵

Both Seghers' narrator and Petzold's voice-over produce Romantic irony, the acknowledging of readers'/viewers' presence that was a common narrative technique in Romantic and modernist novels. Seghers' first-person narrator speaking to an unknown listener appears also to be addressing readers. Seidler occasionally addresses his fictional listener as "you," which produces a startling effect: "You know, of course, what occupied France was like in the fall of 1940" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 30). This sudden shift to addressing a "you" and referring to his story as in the past, creates the impression of the tale being told in the present to readers and functions in the same way as Petzold's voice-over that indicates that Georg's refugee life happened in the past.

Petzold's engaging spectators and drawing them into the fictional space by allowing them to share Georg's perspective, by creating a voice-over that initially appears nondiegetic, and by foregrounding the act of narration beg the question of the spectator's role while watching the film. Perhaps Petzold, like Seghers, intended to inspire empathy towards the characters and those they represent? This brings us back to Morgenstern's definition of a *Bildungsroman* that entails readers' edification. If Seghers' work inspires empathy for refugees of the Third Reich, then, Petzold's film inspires compassion for migrants, particularly for contemporary ones.

It is significant that the film's voice-over enters the narrative by reciting a key passage in Seghers' novel on Seidler's (and Georg's) identification and empathy towards Weidel's characters: "All the people in the story, and *one of them resembles him*, didn't annoy him with their complexity, as they would have done in life. *He understood their deeds, because he could finally follow them from the very first thought right until their inevitable conclusion. Only because the now-dead writer had described them in that way did they seem less vicious to him* [my emphasis]." Because the manuscript serves as a *mise-en-abyme*, a microcosm of Georg's story, it may also reflect the purpose of his narrative—that listeners/spectators identify with and feel the empathy towards him and his fellow refugees as he feels towards Weidel's characters.

Seghers believed in the transformative power of art, especially literature, on readers. In an essay, she writes that this transformation (*Umwandlung*) exerts a deep influence over the entire person.²⁶ She trusted that all genuine works of art that expressed the truth engender "a profound

²⁵ Film critics have recognized Petzold as a modern master of suspense and have compared him to Hitchcock. See, for example, Peter Bradshaw (2019) review of *Transit*.

²⁶ Christiane Zehl Romero (1993, p. 93). Cited from: *Essays*, Vol. I (13), p. 170.

transformative impact"²⁷ by making humans "more humane."²⁸ This belief in stories' impact by eliciting empathy towards those who are different from us originated in German Romantic literary theory and the Romantic *Bildungsroman*. As Azade Seyhan (1992, pp. 106–7) observes in *Representation and Its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism*, "The quest for self-knowledge, typical of the *Bildungsroman*, takes the form of encounters with the exotic other . . . The protagonists decode this otherness by learning a new alphabet, a new language, and a new geography. Their education constitutes an initiation in the sacred order of poetry. The initiation takes place in a timeless or unrepresentable time which is possessed in imagination and shared in memory." In a similar manner, in the liminal spaces of novels and films in which time is suspended, readers/viewers become acquainted with alien others in unfamiliar circumstances, whether they are portrayed through language or cinematic images.

Thus, Seghers and Petzold depict narrative as a remedy against indifference towards others. Georg, like Seidler, overcomes his disinterest in others' lives and feels empathy towards strangers while hearing their stories at the Mexican consulate. The voice-over informs us of his initial discomfort in hearing desperate tales of suffering: "He looked at the conductor and all the others who wanted to tell their stories. How they narrowly escaped death. About the children, the men, the women that they had lost on the run. The horrific things they had seen. He couldn't stand to hear it anymore." Later, he has a change of heart and thinks, "This is Marseille. It's a port. And ports are places where stories are told. That's what they're there for. People here have every right to tell stories and to be listened to."

Indifference and empathy (through listening to stories) serve as opposing *leitmotifs* in both works. In Seghers' novel, the indifference of Paul Strobel and Achselroth, who abandon friends, contrasts with the loyalty of Heinz and the boy. One dramatic hotel scene in the film involves a woman being dragged away by the police while indifferent bystanders silently watch: "He [Georg] saw the woman, as if snuffed out. He heard the screams of her husband and children. He saw the others watching like him. Were they without pity [*Mitleid*²⁹]? Relieved that it wasn't them?" Doesn't this passive watching reflect the gaze of inert spectators of on-screen suffering? Brutal callousness distinguishes many figures in Seghers' and Petzold's narratives including the compassionless, calculating hotel clerk, who charges exorbitant prices and informs the police of illegal guests, and heartless bureaucrats in the consulates and travel agencies, who relish their power over a person's life. In Seghers' novel, a travel agent, who is indifferent to refugees begging for a berth on a ship, yawns while a woman sobs that her passage could not be rebooked (Seghers 2013, *Transit* pp. 102–3). In the film, the American consul, who makes Georg painfully aware of his power and is suspicious of his (Weidel's) communist beliefs, appears to deliberately hold Georg (and viewers) in suspense on his decision to give him a transit visa.

On the other hand, both artists depict language, whether through childhood songs or stories, as a bridge of understanding between strangers. Georg's ability to speak French (and play soccer) and Driss's ability to speak German constitute the basis of their friendship. Georg's singing a childhood song in German deepens their friendship and moves the boy's mother as well. Although Georg has lost love either by realizing its value too late (Driss) or discovering that it isn't reciprocated (Marie), he gains a friend (the bartender) through reciting his story and a larger community of future empathic listeners of his narrative.

Weidel himself expresses compassion for others by witnessing their pain in his writing. In the novel (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 119), he has written an article about the Badajoz Massacre in 1936 in which Nationalist Forces shot hundreds, even thousands, of civilian and military supporters of the Second Spanish Republic. His support of Communists in the fight against fascism reflects Seghers' belief that writers in exile were obligated to write about the suffering of fellow citizens and that this

²⁷ (Romero 1993, p. 36). Cited from: Essays, Vol. II (14), p. 150.

²⁸ (Romero 1993, p. 36). Cited from: Essays, Vol. II (14), p. 391.

²⁹ The German word *Mitleid* is more accurately translated as compassion.

endeavor gave life meaning: “What purpose (*Sinn*) does our freedom have, if we, who can speak and write don’t continually name those who are nameless?”³⁰ Witnessing their tragedies in her stories serves as a rebuke of a world in which betrayal and abandonment (*Im-Stich-Lassen*) is common (Romero 1993, p. 80).

Petzold’s *Transit* refers not only to refugees of Vichy France and those of the Algerian War (1954–1962) living in the Maghrebi quarter of Marseille, but also to contemporary migrants to Europe. As Romney (2019, p. 3) states: “Petzold’s quasi-anachronistic approach makes Seghers *Transit* newly resonant for a time when multitudes are desperate not to leave Europe, but to enter it.” The director shifts our attention from past to present by substituting the Badajoz massacre with an anachronistic incident that is based on actual events. The American consul accuses Georg/Weidel of writing an article on the shooting of unionists in Almeria, Spain in a Communist newspaper *The New Frontier*. Moroccans constitute the majority of migrant farm-workers in Almeria, the largest European district for the production of fruits and vegetables. They work in underpaid, temporary jobs, which are dangerous because of the risk of chemical poisoning in greenhouses. This episode refers to the exploitation of economic migrants who suffer from “quasi-slavery practices, back-breaking shifts, meager wages.”³¹ For the last 35 years, mostly North American and European agrochemical corporations have supported the “Almeria miracle” (Caruso 2017, pp. 278–80). These biotech multinational companies influence the production process on a global scale and contribute to the uneven economic development in the world that causes a predictable movement of migrants seeking work (Caruso 2017, p. 279). In many of his films, Petzold criticizes globalization and neoliberal capitalism that, in this context, make it difficult for unions to defend migrant workers’ rights.³² Fisher (2018, p. 275) describes Petzold’s film style that “allows for the viewer’s emotional engagement through characters while also foregrounding socially critical themes, especially the transformational aspects of work and economy.” When asked about the current refugee crisis, Petzold expressed empathy for them:

The [refugee] camp in Calais—“the Jungle”—had just been cleared when we were preparing *Transit*. People told us to go and film it, to get shots of all the African refugees, the boats, the bodies washing up in Lampedusa. But you can’t. You can’t film African refugees. I have no right to do that. I have no idea what it’s like. Instead, we filmed ‘the Maghreb of Marseilles,’ but that’s part of the city, and part of France’s colonial history, it’s there. . . . What I realized during the shoot, when reconstructing the present and the past, is *how easy it was to imagine being a refugee myself. Deep down inside, our identity is that of a refugee* [my emphasis].³³

5. Conclusions

Petzold’s radical translation of Seghers’ novel transforms a refugee story situated in a particular time and place (Vichy France) into an existential allegory of modern life. The director translates her narrative of World War II political refugees into a universal tale of migrants and refugees that, in turn, exemplifies the instability of relationships of a contemporary world in constant flux and engages

³⁰ My translation: “Was hat unsere Freiheit für einen Sinn, wenn wir nicht immer wieder die Namenlosen nennen, wir, die wir reden und schreiben können.” (Romero 1993, p. 66). Cited from: “Deutschland und wir” (“Germany and Us”): Essays Vol. 1 (13) p. 94f.

³¹ Cited in Francesco Saverio Caruso (2017), “Unionism of migrant farm workers: The Sindicato Obreros del Campo (SOC) in Andalusia, Spain.”, p. 281.

³² Well-known xenophobic violence and race riots in which Spaniards torched immigrant homes and shops in El Ejido in February 2000 were not isolated events, but the culmination of a long series of episodes of racial violence against Maghrebi workers. During sit-ins, pickets, and work stoppages, police attacked them. The Spanish union, Sindicato Obreros del Campo (SOC), opened its first branch in Almeria province and demanded the legalization of undocumented workers (Caruso 2017, p. 283). The SOC has relationships with antiracist groups, NGOs, foreign trade unions, and journalists to help their cause and obtained rights for workers for their health, safety, welfare, and dignity (Caruso 2017, p. 286). For articles on Petzold’s critique of neoliberal and global capitalism in his “Ghost Trilogy” films, especially *Yella*, see Jaimey Fisher (2011) and Matthew Miller’s articles and Marco Abel’s and Ira Jaffe’s book chapters.

³³ This quote is from an interview “Ports are Places Where Stories are Told: Christian Petzold on Shooting in Marseilles.” In the DVD brochure.

viewers to identify with the character. First, Petzold modifies Seghers' protagonist/narrator Seidler with his distinctive personality traits and insightful revelations into a universal figure, his enigmatic, cinematic *Doppelgänger* Georg who reveals little of his inner life. Second, situating Seghers' wartime story in non-places—nondescript, contemporary, urban settings—contributes to viewers' impression that his tale transcends a particular time and place. Third, the director's focus on liminal spaces (hotels, a port city, consulates, modes of transportation) underscores this theme of the fluidity of geographical and chronological borders. Finally, both thematically and aesthetically, narrative is depicted as a means of establishing a community in a world of transitory relationships and rapid mobility. In such an unstable world, Petzold's protagonist fails to gain a secure place in a community and, like the anti-hero of a modernist *Bildungsroman*, he can only construct an identity as a narrator, which, in turn, creates a community of empathic listeners. In a similar vein, the film's voice-over, like Seghers' narrator, bridges the fictional realm and that of spectators/readers by directly addressing them and drawing them into the narrative space, and, consequently, closer to the characters. This sense of proximity between readers/viewers and characters creates a sense of intimacy and empathy towards the fictional figures and those they represent.

6. Epilogue

The existential suspense of those in transit serves as a prescient metaphor for today. In an interview on "Sixty Minutes," Indian novelist Arundhati Roy described the suspension of ordinary life during the COVID-19 pandemic with a spatial and temporal metaphor, a liminal, timeless non-place: "Right now, it feels as if we have no present, we have no past and we have no future, and, right now, we are in some sort of transit lounge and there isn't any connection between the past and the future. We should not be thinking of stitching them together without thinking about that rupture." Petzold actually had a plague in mind while filming *Transit*. Romney (2019, p. 4) comments on his use of the term "infection" to describe the Nazi terror and states, "The Marseille of your film recalls the Oran of Camus's *The Plague*." Petzold replies: "You know the Edge Allen Poe story 'The Mask of the Red Death'—I thought of that plague a little bit. . . . I thought, 'What I need is an infection by something like the plague, to shake things up.'"

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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