The Absence of Place in a Borderless City: Exploring the Psychic and Transnational Spaces of *En la ciudad sin limites*¹

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*En la ciudad sin limites* The City of No Limits (2002), a Spanish-language film directed by Antonio Hernandez, is a dramatic thriller that explores the boundaries between time and space and fiction and non-fiction within psychic space and the city of Paris, as a modern-day transnational and paranoiac space. In the film, an aging and ailing cancer patient, a Spaniard named Max (played by Fernando Fernán Gómez), develops paranoiac delusions that conflate the events of the fictional mystery novels he reads with real events in the present and his past. His delusions further intensify when he travels to Paris and realizes that the modern-day city no longer conforms to the vision of the city in his memory. Paris is not home for Max and his family members, who split their time in the city between a hotel and the hospital. Because no one can really call Paris their home and like Max, those who once did can no longer identify those markers of home, the film posits an absence of place in the city. In examining both the psychic and transnational spaces of the film, the goal of this essay is to investigate how the fluidity of borders within the film, both psychic and transnational, translates to feelings of paranoia and displacement for its characters and the larger conditions of exile and displacement that result from inhabiting an increasingly transnational world.

Since ‘space’ and ‘place’ are not interchangeable concepts, it is necessary to clarify the distinction between these two terms as they will be used in this essay. There are numerous definitions and theories of ‘space,’ but for the purposes of this essay, ‘space’ will be defined as an ‘abstraction’ that includes, but is not limited to, physical geography, both natural and man-made; the biological and inner psychic workings of the mind, or mental space; and the functions and limits of the social and symbolic in society, or social space.² Psychic space, as it is used in this essay, refers to the inner workings of mental space, more so than to its biological mapping. Thus, in discussing Max’s paranoiac delusions, my goal is to map out what constitutes psychic space, in order to discuss the possible causes and implications of its ultimate fragmentation. The city of Paris, as a transnational and paranoiac space, contributes to and represents this breakdown of psychic space. ‘Space’ in this context is not a self-contained entity, but a product of multiple defined intersections and is thus capable of conversion into ‘place’ as it acquires “definition and meaning.”³ Unlike ‘space’, ‘place’ is subjective in the sense that it is not necessary for its definition and meaning to be universally acknowledged. According to Tuan, in his book, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, ‘place’ is marked by intimate knowledge and experience and thus, a certain idea of permanence. This definition of place lends itself to discussions of the meanings of home, hometown, and the larger nation in that it is conceived as an “imagined community.”⁴ Consequently, the shift from national place to transnational space, as well as the blurring of boundaries between fiction and nonfiction and past time and present space,
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results in constant mutations of the psychic and transnational spaces within the film. These constant mutations, ultimately, contest any notion of place within the film under discussion.

A Brief Synopsis

The film begins when Victor (played by Leonardo Sbaraglia) arrives in Paris from Argentina to visit his ailing father, Max, who has requested to spend his last days in Paris. As a young man, Max lived in Paris and was involved in smuggling Communist propaganda into Spain. Max's family assumes that he wants to return to Paris because that is where he met and married his wife, Marie (played by Geraldine Chaplin). However, since his arrival in the city, he has alienated himself from Marie and his older sons. As his health deteriorates, Max begins to have paranoiac delusions in which his loved ones become conspirators against him and he must escape to warn someone named Rancel before he attempts to leave the city. Although the rest of the family attributes these delusions to his weakening condition, Victor is determined to find out why his father implicates his family in these delusions. Himself, an outsider in the family, Victor is never quite sure if his father is telling the truth. He consequently co-conspires with Max to help him deliver his message and find out who this mysterious Rancel is before it is too late. During this process, Victor realizes that Max's paranoiac delusions are not purely fictional, but, in fact, are a conflation of the fictional mystery novels that he has been reading with a moment that occurred forty years in the past when his friend and lover, Rancel, was betrayed by a young Marie and sent to prison. When Victor eventually locates Rancel, the man refuses to make peace with Max, who he hasn't seen in forty years. Unable to bring Rancel to Max, Victor takes his father to the train station, where Max finally dies waiting to warn his friend.

Unpacking the Psychic Space within the Film

Since the central theme of the film, The City of No Limits, is centered on paranoiac delusions, analyzing the psychic space of the film, in particular, the region belonging to the ego and its role in memory formation becomes the key to unpacking Max's paranoiac delusions. However, the film problematizes the conventional psychoanalytic reading of paranoia. In The Ego and the Id, Freud attributes persecutory paranoia to a denial of an excessively strong homosexual attachment to some particular person in a special way; and as a result this person whom he loved most becomes a persecutor, against whom the patient directs often dangerous aggressiveness.

Using this understanding of paranoia as “a defense against homosexuality,” Joan Copjec elaborates on the development of paranoia within psychic space in “The Anxiety of the Influencing Machine.” In this essay, she explains how there are two contributing factors in the development of paranoia: a detachment by the libido from the external world and its subsequent reattachment to the ego. Paranoia, therefore, becomes visible in the attempt at recovery when the subject tries to “recapture a relation to the external world by building a world up again.” In the process of recovery, the loving relation to the external world is reversed and hostility emerges.

In Max's case, his paranoia stems from the conflation of the past world in his memories with the present world of contemporary Paris and his blending of fictional and non-fictional elements from his life. However -and this is key- the delusions he manifests are not attempts to deny his homosexual desires, but instead are generated by his need to protect his homosexual love. His latent desire is for a reunion with his homosexual lover and thus his delusions re-create that moment in his past when he might have saved Rancel from prison and secured their relationship, which would have ultimately prevented his marriage to Marie. Unlike the Freudian scenario, Max's hostility is directed towards his family who act as a repressive force and not towards Rancel, the source of his homosexual desires. Max's delusions can also be read as latent manifestations of feelings already in existence. In the film, Max spends his last days in a hospital room under treatment for cancer, where he reads mystery novels and avoids any discussion.
of the real consequences of his impending death (primarily which family member will take over his pharmaceutical company). Max’s constant surveillance by his family and the medical staff creates an environment that simulates and perhaps conjures up his past feelings of persecution—his memories of smuggling illicit Communist propaganda between the Spanish exile community in Paris and Madrid, an issue that will be addressed momentarily.

Here, it is important to investigate the role of memory within the psychic spaces of the film. In mapping psychic spaces, Freud examined the ego as the active agent in navigating the present, its ultimate goal, self-preservation. However, in Max’s case, the ego has become disoriented in space and time. Instead of reacting to the environment of the hospital and storing up the present experiences in his memory, Max’s ego conflates the events of the present with those of the past, causing stored memory to literally ‘spill out’ into reality. As a result, memory becomes the key to an examination of how time and space become psychically blurred. For in the film, memory is neither static nor reliable. Instead, it is transparent, appropriative and consequently mutable. Max has problems with his short-term memory. He forgets basic facts like what month it is and the details of his sons’ lives, although his long-term memory is seemingly intact. He remembers specific elements from his past, such as Rancel’s telephone number and other details about his youth in Paris and his illicit Communist activity. Nonetheless, these memories, along with material from the mystery novels he reads, become conflated in his mind so that he no longer differentiates reality from fiction nor present from past.

Max’s delusions have blurred the lines between fiction and reality. The book he reads, itself called *The City of No Limits*, describes a city controlled by an outside group who keeps its inhabitants locked inside the limits of the city. Those who control the city have the ability to manipulate it and few people know how to escape. For Max, Rancel is one of the few who knows how to escape and is in danger of being caught. A work of fiction, the novel’s author is also named Rancel, which allows Max to easily appropriate its themes into his delusions. As a result, Marie confiscates the novel in the attempt to pacify Max’s delusions. Victor, however, finds the novel and begins to read it. Indeed, it is only after reading it that he begins to understand Max’s delusions as a conflation of reality and fiction.

In the following exchange, Victor has finally tracked down the Rancel, from Max’s past, who is, in fact, the mystery novel’s author. Rancel agrees to meet Victor in a café near his father’s abandoned apartment. This exchange brings up the issues of fiction, authorship, and reality. Rancel has just politely refused the invitation to see Max:

**VICTOR:** I told you before that I would never dare judge you. If you think you shouldn’t go. I’ve got no more arguments. This isn’t my story, it’s yours and his. **RANCEL:** It was mine. Not anymore… **VICTOR:** So why have you come? **RANCEL:** If I’m to be honest, for you, not for him. When Alex told me about the button, I got the impression it was worth coming for you. I’m sorry I can’t go with you. You’ll have to invent something.

**VICTOR:** Yes, I’ll have to invent something. And I don’t know what. If I only had the imagination of the character in your novel. If only I knew the ways to get out of the city. And get my father to do what he didn’t do that night. Because, [in] reality, he just wants to warn you.9

In this scene, Victor positions his father’s delusions as a ‘story’ about the past that needs an ending in the present and he attempts to engage Rancel’s participation as a way for both Rancel and Max to have closure. In referring to the story as belonging to Max and Rancel, Victor tries to avoid his own implication in the narrative. Rancel quickly dismisses his own role as an agent in the ‘story’ and advises Victor that he has to ‘invent’ an ending for Max, which makes Victor realize that he is trapped in a situation that parallels the world of the novel. Only, unlike the main character, he cannot escape. Unable to enlist Rancel as an author of his father’s story, Victor must assume the role himself and find a conclusion for Max.
and the film. By referencing the novel, Victor not only affirms the power of fiction within Max's delusions, but within the reality of the film itself.

In addition to blurring the lines between fiction and nonfiction, Max's paranoiac delusions conflate time and space. As the plot of the film unfolds, Max's paranoia worsens when the memories of his past no longer conform to the facts of contemporary reality. The phone number he dials is no longer in existence and the city he once knew is no longer familiar to him. In an early scene, Victor helps his father "escape" from the hospital to search for Rancel, unbeknownst to his mother and older brother, Alberto. Although Max requested to spend his last days in Paris, this is the first time in the film that he has left the confines of the hospital. Not only does the escape scene function as a narrative progression of the gravity of Max's condition, but it also brings up questions of place within a city that is continually modernizing. However, Max's adventure into the city center ultimately proves to be his psychical undoing, since his inability to recognize familiar landmarks confirms his paranoid delusions. After this escapade, Max's mental and physical condition deteriorates quickly, making the need to find Rancel even more urgent for Victor. However, and important to note, the changes that Max encounters within the city are not due to the manipulation of those who "control" the city, but the result of the city's "natural" evolution over the passage of time. This representation of Paris as a city that has evolved with the passage of time, in addition to the fact that the identity of the city is maintained by the prominent use of the French language, rather than its famous landmarks, suggests an absence of place within the city and is also in part due to its portrayal as a transnational and paranoiac space. As a paranoiac space, the city is an overwhelming and foreboding space for both Max and Victor. Because of his declining mental condition, Max is overwhelmed by the city and is unable to find a place within it. His inability to view the city as a place also alludes to his previous relationship with the Spanish exile community, since "paranoia," not only describes a psychic condition, but also a cultural phenomenon, in this case, the condition of exile.

Transnational Spaces and the Absence of Place

In “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said discusses the exile as a “motif of modern culture [where the] modern period itself is spiritually orphaned and alienated, the age of anxiety and estrangement.” Exile, in his definition, is a “condition of terminal loss.” In his discussion, Said describes how the loss of identity that is associated with exile transforms itself into the need to reconstitute an identity within the new space, and is thus linked with nationalism, which longs for the ‘place’ of a nation. As the home of a large Spanish exile community after the Spanish Civil War, Paris was a site of illicit Communist activity, which produced propaganda that could then be smuggled into Madrid through its train system. Max's job within a reputable pharmaceutical company sets him up as a mediator and smuggler between these two cities. While not seemingly in exile himself, his link with the exile community and its political aims brings up questions of exile and nationalism and problematizes the notion of place and home within transnational spaces. Max has the financial ease that allows him, and later his entire family, to travel between Paris and Madrid (and Argentina in Victor's case), yet he is unable to call Paris his home. Additionally, as a paranoiac, Max finds himself in a city, and a nation, in which he is not able to reconstruct his identity or find community. Exile, for Max, is not only a condition of "terminal loss"; it is quite literally a "terminal cancer.

In his essay, “Paranoiac Space,” Victor Burgin discusses paranoia as it pertains to the absence of time within the unconscious and refers to Edward Said's definition of the exile, which "acknowledges that the space of the exile is a psychical space as much as it is physical." Since neither past nor present exist within the psyche, the loss experienced by the exile has continuous repercussions throughout life. However, unlike Burgin, my argument about The City of No Limits suggests that psychic space has the capacity to delineate past and present. Consequently, paranoia is a condition that results from the conflation of time, and not from its absence. For Burgin, the condition of exile justifies feelings of persecution that are characteristic of paranoia, since the
exile’s banishment leaves him or her without a sense of rootedness in the world. In discussing paranoiac space, he links postmodern advances in technology to the ability to intimately experience what was once spatially alien as it occurs. Burgin notes how the prominence of images within postmodern society resembles “the interior space of subjective fantasy turned inside out,” which ultimately causes a break down in subject-object distinctions. Accordingly, these characteristics of postmodernity—fragmentation, decentering and the loss of subject-object distinctions—are also those that characterize paranoia. Postmodernity and the postmodern city, thus, exemplify paranoiac space. Thus, for Spanish exiles in the *The City of No Limits*, Paris symbolizes the rupture from the nation, the absence of place and becomes a paranoiac space. In depicting a Spanish family temporarily residing in Paris, *The City of No Limits* characterizes the city not only as a paranoiac space for Max, Victor, and Rancel, but also as a non-place for other family members. While Max stays in the hospital, the other family members stay in a hotel. Both spaces are forms of temporary housing. Although Max is terminally ill, his room in the hospital is not a “place” in which he can root himself as he is continually moved in and out of it for various medical tests and ultimately has to switch rooms by doctor’s orders. By its very nature, the hotel also does not allow for any rootedness, although Marie fondly recalls meeting and marrying her husband there. These settings, however, indicate that despite the absence of place within the film, there is not an absence of memory, although as Max’s condition worsens, the places in his memory become less reliable. After Max’s collapse, Victor returns to the mysterious building in the city center, only to find an empty apartment. Through gesture and the use of broken French, he asks the building manager about the apartment, but is unable to comprehend the response, until his sister-in-law enters the room and translates for him, informing him that the apartment has been uninhabited for forty years and, although no one lives there, the owner doesn’t want to rent it. While this scene moves the narrative of the film forward by adding to the mystery of Max’s previous life in Paris, it also functions as a visible indication of Victor’s displacement within the city itself.

This absence of place within the film alludes to the transnational and homeless quality of the characters in the film and Spain at large, since the family is often used allegorically for the nation in Spanish cinema and the Spanish nation is largely characterized by major shifts in movement as a result of its empire during the colonial period and the Spanish Civil War in the 20th century. In *The City of No Limits*, the family members stay in a hotel in order to accommodate their travels to and from Paris. For Victor’s brothers, the hotel becomes a temporary residence in between flights to Amsterdam and Madrid and visits to see Max in the hospital. Additionally, as an outsider in his own family and a foreigner in Paris, Victor is continually out of place within the film. Unlike his brothers, he has chosen a profession outside of the family business and resides in Argentina rather than in Madrid. His distance from Europe is evident in his limited knowledge of the French language and his virtual inability to understand it, although his ability to easily move between all three countries is due to his privileged Spanish nationality and class position. Victor’s inability to understand French is further illustrated in the subtitles for the film, which do not translate French into English or Spanish for the audience. This lack of translation forces those spectators unable to understand French to share in Victor’s displacement.

The fluidity of transnational space as depicted in the film’s setting of Paris translates extratextually to the film as a co-production between Spain and Argentina, which suggests the ease with which language and capital flow across national borders and into cosmopolitan cities. However, as this essay demonstrates, the actual border-crossing by the characters in the film is complicated, as much as it is a privileged facet of their Spanish national identity. Co-productions as international collaborations between film industries induce a circular form of migration of manpower, equipment, and funding and as a result, carry with them a sensibility that is no longer solely national, but is increasingly transnational. Ultimately, the trend towards international co-productions is “economically motivated, for they are trying to
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compete with Hollywood's domination of world markets.”19 More specifically, Marsha Kinder's concept of “macroregionalism” as discussed in her book, Blood Cinema, helps contextualize The City of No Limits in its discussion of the transnational relationship between Argentina and Spain and Spain and France, that points to a larger regional, cultural, and linguistic history between these nations. Kinder describes how the terms “micro-” and “macro-regionalism” become a way to understand the regional/national/global interface, and how they “serve as an effective means of both asserting the subversive force of any marginal position and of destabilizing (or at least redefining) the hegemonic power of any center.”20 Spain's role in the macroregions of the European Union and Latin America emphasizes its dual function as both center and mediator between these two seemingly disparate spaces.

Nonetheless, the lack of any critical and/or significant representation of Spain within The City of No Limits suggests the current powerlessness of Spain to function as a centrally unifying center. Since Argentina is also never shown onscreen, it exists as a mythic space outside of the world of the film and, consequently, the European Union. Similarly, as an outsider within his cosmopolitan European family, Victor ultimately chooses to return to Argentina at the end of the film, which marginalizes the Spanish alliance with Latin America within the European context. Ultimately, Kinder notes that:

The macroregionalism in these co-productions tends to destabilize not the economic infrastructure they were designed to challenge, but rather the cultural identity of Spanish and Catalan cinema. Having had little impact abroad, these films seem to have more influence at home, where they help Spaniards and Catalans redefine how they see themselves in relation to the changing world order.21

In this sense, the film demonstrates how a transnational European identity leads to paranoia and a sense of displacement for the Spanish living in France, and posits Latin America as a potential, alternative place. As mentioned previously, this view of Paris (and France) as a site of paranoia and displacement comes up frequently in writings by Spanish exiles, but is particularly relevant in light of the shift to the European Union (EU). As a transnational entity, the EU complicates the existence of the individual nation and national citizenship, in that the nations within the EU share a common form of currency and territorial mobility for its members. Co-productions between these national film industries can be seen as an increasing move to create a pan-European cultural identity.

Unlike filmic co-productions and discourse on the EU that allude to the utopian quality of transnationalism, The City of No Limits portrays the negative impact that results when national ‘place’ shifts to transnational ‘space’, at least in the context of Spain's history of exile and its marginal position within dominant narratives of European modernity. As evidenced by the film, the act of border-crossing that is indicative of transnational space leaves the characters, in particular, Max with a paranoiac sense of displacement that is further propelled by the ever-modernizing city of Paris. In relating the issues of space and place to modern day exile, my hope was to link these conditions to the larger implications of transnationalism as it inaugurates paranoia and displacement within postmodernity and the modern-day cosmopolitan city. While the shift towards the transnational is unavoidable, the psychic longing for place as symbolized by a physical home or homeland or the memory of such remains salient, so much so, that its absence leads to both psychic and cultural trauma.

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Endnotes

1 En la ciudad sin límites (2002). Dir. Antonio Hernández. 118 min. Sogepaq/Twentieth Century Fox, DVD.
2 This definition of space is influenced by Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work, The Production of Space, which describes a conceptual triad for a discussion of the intersecting relations that define space. This triad is comprised of spatial practice, or perceived space as it is lived and used by a society; representations of space, or conceived space as it is imagined in urban planning; and representational space, or space that is “directly lived through its associated images and symbols.” In Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 38-9.
3 ‘Place’ as used in this paper adheres to the definition by Yi-Fu Tuan in his work, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience. Tuan describes ‘place’ as a transformed space that has lost its abstraction and acquired “definition and meaning.” In Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 136.
4 In Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community, and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign," and he examines the nation as a product of comradeship that enables a sense of community, even if its members may never know each other. In Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1991), 6.
5 According to Freud, the psychical apparatus, what is referred to in this essay as psychic space, houses the id, the ego, and the super-ego. The id is the ‘oldest province’ of the psychical apparatus that contains instincts, whereas the super-ego contains the remnants of ‘parental influence’ that are a product of childhood. In contrast, the ego’s task is self-preservation and thus, it reacts to external and internal events. Internally, the ego takes control of instincts, seeks pleasure and avoids unpleasure. Externally, the ego’s task is to “become aware of stimuli, by storing up experiences about them (in the memory), by avoiding excessively strong stimuli (through flight), by dealing with moderate stimuli (through adaptation) and finally learning to bring about expedient changes in the external world to its own advantage (through activity).” Both the id and the super-ego “represent the influences of the past,” while the ego “is principally determined by the individual’s own experience, that is, by accidental and contemporary events.” In Sigmund Freud, An Outline of Psycho-Analysis, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1969), 14-16.
8 Copjec, 52.
9 Author’s personal transcription from the film.
11 Said, 173.
12 In her book, Spanish Culture Behind Barbed Wire, Francie Cate-Arries examines the untold history of the Spanish refugee camps that arose in France after the Spanish Civil War. In Chapter 5, she focuses on the construction of Paris in the imaginary of the exile community in three novels written by Spanish exiles that are set in Paris. According to Cate-Arries, Paris is portrayed “as a spineless world on the brink of collapse, a self-deluded enclave on the verge of falling open to the outside forces of war, betrayed by cowardice and hypocrisy from within.” The novels indicate that “the true squalor of their times resides not in dirty refugee camps of the so-called rojos, but rather in the corrupt ministerial offices, the brutal police jails, and the wealthy salons that line the sparkling streets of prewar Paris.” In Francie Cate-Arries, Spanish Culture Behind Barbed Wire: Memory and Representation of the French Concentration Camps, 1939-1945 (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), 101-2.
13 Many thanks to Vivian Sobchack for pointing this out.
15 Burgin, 23.
16 Burgin, 23.
17 Many scholars have written about the allegorical role of the family as representative of the nation within Spanish cinema. For a good example, see Marsha Kinder. Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain (Los Angeles: UC Press, 1993).
18 Seventy-eight percent of the funding for The City of No Limits is split between Zebra Producciones, S.A. and Iconica, S.A., with the remaining twenty-two percent to the Argentine production company, Patagonik Film Group. The French production company, ACKOA is credited as participating in the production. In Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte & Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisuales (ICAA). “En la ciudad sin límites.” (Anuario del cine español, 2002), http://www.mcu.es/cine/Anuarios/2002/P63401.pdf (accessed April, 22, 2006).
20 Kinder, 389.
21 Kinder, 415.