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Merging of Realities: The ‘Non’-America in Roman Polanski’s *The Ghost Writer*.

Most of the plot of the 2010 film The Ghost Writer by Roman Polanski takes place on the island of Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts. However, the film was largely shot on the German islands of Sylt and Usedom, respectively. By comparing the film with the actual locations, this essay aims to show how Polanski constructs a ‘Non’-America that is simply imagined through the addition, rearrangement, or removal of various cultural artifacts.

1. Introduction

The fact that the actual geography of a landscape and the supposed place portrayed in a film sometimes differ is, of course, hardly unusual.¹ The setting of a film is not always the same as the actual shooting location. This is due to a variety of reasons: Sometimes organizational reasons matter (a filming location cannot be used or can only be used inadequately), sometimes financial (the filming is either otherwise too expensive or there is the possibility of funding elsewhere) or even aesthetic reasons. In many cases, real locations are even made into fiction, for example when the desert of Tunisia becomes the planet Tatooine (as in *Star Wars—Episode IV: A New Hope*, USA 1977, George Lucas). An additional layer of abstractness thus conceals the original location.

This paper, which is a supplemental text to my video essay², will explore the question of how Roman Polanski used shooting locations for his film *The Ghost Writer* that deviate considerably from the actual setting. While the plot, with the exception of a few scenes set in the UK, is set on the island of Martha’s Vineyard at the East Coast of the United States of

¹ This essay is dedicated to Franziska Stoppe. The author would like to thank David Letz, Kay Welland, Maik Wengler, and Matthias Wengler for providing the inspiration for this article.

² See Sebastian Stoppe: *Merging of Realities, The ‘Non’-America in Roman Polanski’s The Ghost Writer*. Video Essay. Leipzig 2023, <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19717> (cit. 07.07.2023).

America, Polanski has shot the film in Germany. So how are the United States recreated here and how is this place depicted in the film?

2. The Story of the Ghost

The Ghost Writer is based on the novel *The Ghost* by Robert Harris. In the novel, a ghost writer named Michael McAra, who started to write the autobiography of former British Prime Minister Adam Lang, ends up dead on the beach of Martha's Vineyard. The publisher urgently seeks another writer to complete the autobiography on schedule, and thus, the novel's first-person narrator, whose name is never mentioned in the book (as befits a ghost writer), accepts the offer. He arrives on the island, where Adam Lang is currently staying at the publisher's vacation home, having worked with McAra on his book. At the same time, information becomes public that Lang was involved in events during his tenure that may classify as war crimes and his former foreign minister and current political opponent, Richard Rycart openly accuses him.

While editing the draft by McAra, the 'Ghost'³ notices several inconsistencies in McAra's writing. He subsequently finds some kind of dossier containing several photographs and documents that McAra had apparently assembled. Eventually, he discovers even the private mobile number of Richard Rycart on one file. The Ghost begins to investigate further, driving to the spot on the island where his predecessor was found dead and, after a casual conversation with a local, he concludes that McAra's death may not have been an accident, but a crime. On the day of his death, McAra was travelling by car on the mainland, and the Ghost uses the navigation device to reconstruct his last journey, which leads him to Harvard professor Paul Emmett. Emmett, however, denies being acquainted with Lang, despite the Ghost showing him two photographs of the two men performing together at a university play. Emmett also denies that McAra sought him out on the day of his death. After this visit, the Ghost continues his research and eventually finds evidence that a think tank in which Emmett is heavily involved has ties to a company that manufactures mili-

³ This name derives from the novel itself, where the ghost writer introduces himself at his first meeting with Adam Lang as "I'm your ghost". The same line is also used verbatim in the film. See Robert Harris: *The Ghost*. London 2007, p. 81.

tary technology and is allegedly involved in CIA torture incidents. In addition, Lang is a consultant to this company. McAra allegedly hid hints of these dealings in the book's first manuscript as well, "it was all there in the beginning."⁴ However, a search for it remains fruitless. The Ghost meets Lang at the airport and returns to the island with him. Upon arrival, Lang is fatally wounded by gunfire during an assassination attack. Eventually, the Ghost completes Lang's autobiography and it is only at the event of the book presentation that he is able to decipher the hidden clue left by his predecessor: that it was Lang's widow, who influenced her husband's policymaking for years, steered by the CIA. 'In the beginning,' in fact, meant the first word of each chapter of Lang's book.

Although Harris' novel is a work of fiction, the resemblances of characters with actual people is striking. Harris' novel is a roman à clef. This literary genre features a fictional story told by the author, which, however, also contains—encoded—references to real persons and events. The key between the two layers is the mutual relation between fiction and non-fiction. In *The Ghost*, the characters of Adam Lang and his wife are overt allusions to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Cheryl Blair, while the subplot relating to accused war crimes echoes Blair's conduct in the Iraq War.⁵ The character of Richard Rycart is clearly modelled on former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook.

Harris also remains faithful to reality when it comes to the locations of the novel. Already in the preface, it becomes clear that the author conducted intensive on-site research on Martha's Vineyard.⁶ For instance, Harris describes the Ghost's arrival in Edgartown with accurate detail: "After a while we came to a crossroads and turned into what I guessed must be Edgartown, a settlement of white clapboard houses with white picket fences, small gardens and verandas [...]."⁷ Moreover, referring to landmarks in the town: "At the bottom of the hill, past the Old Whaling Church, a big, misty moon cast a silvery light [...]."⁸ Anyone who has ever

⁴ Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 316. In the book, former Secretary of State Rycart mentions this phrase to the Ghost, whereas in the film adaptation Lang's assistant Amelia Bly refers to it only in the final sequence at the book presentation.

⁵ See Derek Elley: "The Ghost Writer". *Variety* 418.2 (2010), p. 28.

⁶ See Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. III.

⁷ Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 53.

⁸ Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 53.

been to Edgartown will recognize that these descriptions are consistently accurate.⁹ Placing his fictional characters within detailed and real places, Harris achieves a high degree of plausibility in his narrative with these realistic descriptions of the scenery.

On a deeper level, moreover, the final plot twist mirrors the roman à clef, in that a secret message is revealed from the autobiography—a book-within-a-book, so to speak.

3. Adapting the Novel

In the beginning, Roman Polanski was interested in adapting another novel by Robert Harris, *Pompeii*, when *The Ghost* came to his attention. As with numerous others of his projects, Polanski was directly involved in the transformation of the plot of the original novel into a film script and co-wrote the screenplay with Robert Harris. As a result, the film stays remarkably close to the novel and only rearranges a few plot elements (see table 1). “With a few exceptions, and necessary tightening, it’s pretty much all up on the screen—page by page of plot, line by line of dialogue—in one of the most literal adaptations [...] since the Harry Potter series.”¹⁰

Seq. No.	From	To	Duration	Location	Synopsis	Chapter in the novel	Differences in the book
1	00:00:00	00:01:55	00:01:55	Martha’s Vineyard	A car is found abandoned on a ferry; a body washed up on the beach.	Ch. 1, pp. 1-4	The Ghost tells McAra’s death retrospectively.
2	00:01:55	00:02:52	00:00:57	London	The Ghost meets with his agent for lunch; report on the death of Adam Lang’s ghost writer.	Ch. 1, pp. 4-18	The subplot of the Ghost breaking up with his girlfriend is completely omitted from the film.
3	00:02:52	00:10:00	00:07:08	London	Meeting at the publishing house; the Ghost gets the job; raid in London.	Ch. 2, pp. 19-37	
4	00:10:00	00:13:48	00:03:48	London, Martha’s Vineyard	Departure to the United States; news of Lang’s involvement in war crimes; ferry	Ch. 3, pp. 38-59	Landscape and arrival are described in detail, the Ghost first drives to the

⁹ The author of this essay has been to Martha’s Vineyard himself and knows the locale from personal experience.

¹⁰ Elley: “The Ghost Writer” (like note 5), p. 28.

					crossing to Martha's Vineyard; drive to Lang's vacation house.		hotel, not directly to the house.
5	00:13:48	00:19:36	00:05:48	Martha's Vineyard	Meeting with Lang's assistant and his wife Ruth; first review of the manuscript; ride to the airport.	Ch. 4, pp. 60-82	
6	00:19:36	00:21:37	00:02:01	Martha's Vineyard	First meeting with Lang at the airport; ride to the hotel.	Ch. 5, pp. 83-95	
7	00:21:37	00:28:08	00:06:31	Martha's Vineyard	Further meetings with Lang; alarm drill.	Ch. 6, pp. 98-115	
8	00:28:08	00:36:13	00:08:05	Martha's Vineyard	Further meeting with Lang; report on Lang's indictment by Rycart; encounter with hotel guest (the later assassin).	Ch. 7, pp. 116-146; Ch. 5, pp. 95-97	
9	00:36:13	00:45:06	00:08:53	Martha's Vineyard	Arrival of journalists; change of residence from hotel to vacation house; arrival of legal counsels; statement of Lang; Lang departs to Washington.	Ch. 8, pp. 147-172; Ch. 9, pp. 173-177	
10	00:45:06	00:50:15	00:05:09	Martha's Vineyard	The Ghost alone in the house; begins to write; discovers hidden dossier.	Ch. 9, pp. 177-193	
11	00:50:15	00:56:46	00:06:31	Martha's Vineyard	Bicycle trip to the spot where McAra's body washed up; rainstorm; meeting with older local; Ruth finds Ghost, brings him back.	Ch. 10, pp. 194-213	
12	00:56:46	01:06:31	00:09:45	Martha's Vineyard	Hot bath; dinner with Ruth; in bed with Ruth.	Ch. 11, pp. 214-241	
13	01:06:31	01:14:02	00:07:31	Martha's Vineyard/Belmont	The Ghost takes the car and reconstructs Mike's last ride; ferry crossing to the mainland.	Ch. 12, pp. 242-262	
14	01:14:02	01:29:16	00:15:14	Belmont/Ferry Terminal	Meeting with Emmett; the Ghost is pursued; successful escape from the departing ferry.	Ch. 13, pp. 263-278	The Ghost does not return to the ferry and is not followed.
15	01:29:16	01:43:05	00:13:49	Ferry terminal/airport	Recap and web research at a motel at the ferry terminal; meeting Rycart at a diner; Rycart takes the Ghost to the airport.	Ch. 13, pp.278-295; Ch. 14, pp. 296-326; Ch. 15, pp. 327-345	Research at an internet café in Belmont, then flight to New York, meeting with Rycart there.
16	01:43:05	01:51:33	00:08:28	Martha's Vineyard/Boston	Return flight to Martha's Vineyard; confrontation with Lang;	Ch. 15, pp. 345-361	

17	01:51:33	01:58:50	00:07:17	London	attack on Lang; questioning by FBI.	
	01:58:50	02:02:30	00:03:40		Return to Lon- don; book launch event; dénoue- ment	Ch. 16, pp. 362-394; Ch. 17, pp. 395-400
					Credits	

Table 1: sequence log of *The Ghost Writer*

On the one hand, Polanski's adjustments tighten the story to fit the medium of film. For example, he completely omits the subplot with the Ghost's girlfriend, as well as the chapters in which the Ghost travels to New York to meet with Rycart. Nevertheless, this meeting, which is important for the plot, is relocated to another location. On the other hand, Polanski uses scenes from Harris' book to deliberately build suspense and tension in the film. Thus, the opening scene, an apparently abandoned car on a ferry and a washed-up corpse on the beach, does not initially make sense to the viewer. It is only in the following sequence that this event becomes retrospectively explained. Polanski thus cinematically recreates what Harris has the Ghost narrate (also retrospectively) on the first pages of his novel.

Both Polanski and Harris' close adaptation of the novel leads one to expect that they would do the same with regard to the characters and, especially, the settings. After all, Martha's Vineyard in particular is charged with considerable symbolism for the plot: The island is known in the U.S. as a popular retreat and vacation spot for celebrities. Numerous well-known personalities have owned or still own estates or spend their vacations there. At the same time, the island represents remoteness, quiet, and isolation—especially off-season, Martha's Vineyard is essentially home only to the locals. "In summer the population is a hundred thousand, but when the vacationers have closed up their holiday homes and migrated west for the winter, it drops to fifteen [thousand]."¹¹

Martha's Vineyard is also a well-known filming location, especially since Steven Spielberg already shot *Jaws* (USA 1975) here (among other places also in Edgartown). However, shooting in the United States was out of the question for Polanski; since 1977 there has been a U.S. arrest

¹¹ Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 52.

warrant against him, and he has not travelled to the United States since then. Hence, the challenge with this film was to find a suitable location outside the USA that could stand in for Martha's Vineyard. In view of the high amount of on-location work, this was not an easy undertaking, because "transporting an entire American island, including a ferry and a part of the mainland, to Europe was a much more elaborate [matter]."¹²

Polanski thus decided to shoot the film exclusively in Europe, contrary to the actual geographical location of the plot. Berlin and some of its surrounding countryside as well as the Baltic Sea island Usedom and the North Sea island Sylt served as filming locations, while the interior shots were filmed at the Babelsberg film studios near Berlin.¹³

The choice of Sylt and Usedom are obvious in that the geography of both islands have much in common with Martha's Vineyard. This reflects especially in Sylt's dune landscape, which strongly resembles the southern coast of Martha's Vineyard. Secondly, this is the woodland of Usedom; Martha's Vineyard also has these wooded areas.¹⁴ However, a second aspect can be considered here: Sylt in particular, similar to Martha's Vineyard, is a frequented retreat and vacation spot for German celebrities.¹⁵

¹² Paul Werner: *Polanski. Die Biografie*. Munich 2013, p. 285.

¹³ See Ed Meza: "Polanski back to Berlin". *Variety* 415.3 (2009), p. 8. It can be assumed that this decision was probably also influenced by the German film funding system. In this way, the production was able to apply for film funding from three different state institutions (from the German states of Berlin/Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and Schleswig-Holstein). The exterior facade of the house, including artificial dunes (to match the beach location to the Sylt geography), was built at Peenemünde on the island of Usedom, while the plate shots for the outside view through the windows of the vacation home are combinations of shots from Sylt and from France. However, no specific location is mentioned in the film credits, but a separate second unit for France is listed. See James Greenberg: *Roman Polanski. Seine Filme, sein Leben*. Munich 2013, p. 245.

¹⁴ Due to its exposed and little protected location in the North Sea and the prevailing Western winds, there is no significant forestation on Sylt.

¹⁵ See Andreas Jacke: *Roman Polanski – Traumatische Seelenlandschaften*. Gießen 2010, S. 276.

4. The Iconography of *The Ghost Writer*

Both the original and the adaptation show a split in the plot locations. The framing story takes place in London.¹⁶ This is where the Ghost gets the assignment and eventually ends up at the book launch. The second part of the film takes place on Martha's Vineyard. It is here that the Ghost meets Adam Lang, and that he learns of Lang's life and career through the interviews he conducts. In this respect, the locations also reflect the two sides of Lang (and his wife)—on the one hand, the public person and, on the other, the private individual. On a metaphorical level, Polanski uses the island as this very symbol for the hidden secrets surrounding Adam Lang. The island here is indeed a protected place, a retreat that can only be reached with considerable efforts. The island is, by definition, a remote place,¹⁷ which makes it so ambivalent as such a pivotal location for the film. Both the novel's meticulous description of Martha's Vineyard and the film's transformation of the German islands into an American one turn the location into a metaphor that literally overshadows the entire film.

In this way, Polanski transforms Harris' novel into a kind of 'film à clef'. The characters of the novel have been retained and can be easily deciphered by the audience as their real-life counterparts. In the case of the Secretaries of State of the United Kingdom and the United States, even a strong physical resemblance of the actors becomes apparent. The setting of the action becomes multi-layered: here, too, the real place and the superimposed place of Martha's Vineyard can be decoded from the cinematic image.

In the film, both Sylt and Usedom transform into the artificial non-place of Martha's Vineyard: "It is not noticeable that the film, which is set in a Martha's Vineyard that seems to have fallen out of time, was shot on Sylt and Usedom, in Berlin and at Studio Babelsberg, among other places."¹⁸ This representation leads to a merge of realities, but at the same time, it creates a displacement, as Leal rightly points out. In this way, this

¹⁶ All London scenes were actually filmed in Berlin. See Werner: *Polanski* (like note 12), p. 286.

¹⁷ See Hans Richard Brittnacher: "Die Insel: Idylle und Desaster. Ein Vorwort". In: Hans Richard Brittnacher (ed.): *Inseln*. Ed. Hans Richard Brittnacher. Munich 2017, pp. 7-17, herein p. 12.

¹⁸ Margret Köhler: "Der Ghostwriter". *Filmdienst* 63.4 (2010), p. 38.

non-place in Polanski's film world is at the same time a seemingly unreal 'Non'-America. The remote nature of the island, in Lang's case, becomes both a trap and his political exile. The characters on the island become "displaced persons at some level or another"¹⁹.

I would especially like to consider four sequences to explain how the realities of both the shooting location and the location in the narration merge in the film. These sequences all have in common that the protagonist makes journeys: 1. he arrives on the island, 2. he explores it as he makes inquiries, 3. he leaves it again, and 4. he is finally prevented from ferrying again from the mainland.

5. On Location

In the novel, Harris describes the Ghost's journey in detail from his arrival at Boston's Logan Airport and the bus ride to the ferry terminal to the ferry passage.²⁰ Polanski only slightly condenses this voyage in the film by focusing on the ferry (sequence 4). Here he visually recalls the opening scene to emphasize on the Ghost's transition from the outside world (the mainland) to the inside world (the island) (sequence 1). This inner world is literally bleak: the images are pale, grey, and rainy throughout.

Following Polanski's wish to represent the double lives and identities of people, objects and places, the film's striking photography also serves to twist the typical image of Martha's Vineyard. [...] The cold photography of the film, in line with Lang and his entourage's predicament and perspective, turns it into a bleak and dangerous enclosure that they cannot escape.²¹

Starting from this sequence, the storyline remains focused on the island for the next hour of screen time. The Ghost takes a cab from the ferry to

¹⁹ Andrés Bartolomé Leal: *Exiled From the Absolute. Transnationalism, Dis-placement and Identitarian Crisis in Roman Polanski's The Ghost Writer*. Master's thesis. University of Zaragoza 2012, p. 35.

²⁰ See Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 46ff.

²¹ Leal: *Exiled* (like note 19), p. 57.

Adam Lang's house.²² "We drove out of town for about ten minutes, following signs to West Tisbury, into flat, thickly wooded, country [...]."²³ The exterior shot of the house is actually only a backdrop constructed on the beach of Usedom, while the interior shots took place at the Babelsberg studio. "A few moments later I had my first glimpse of the Rhinehart compound [...] it all somehow resembled a holiday home designed by Albert Speer; the Wolf's Lair came to mind."²⁴ In this establishing shot sequence, Polanski indeed skilfully combines both exterior shots of Usedom and Sylt along with a few second unit footage that was actually shot in the United States to create a consistent and authentic impression of Martha's Vineyard.²⁵

He takes a similar approach with the subsequent ride from the house to the hotel. In this case, the exterior shot is of an actual hotel building on Sylt, the Fährhaus ("ferry house") in Munkmarsch, which is relocated to America in the film with only minimal changes.²⁶ In the film, it is named 'Fisherman's Cove Inn' and is located right next to a lighthouse, which, however, does not exist in reality at this location. The original architecture of the ferry house, however, is indeed reminiscent of the 'white clapboard houses' already mentioned. The fact that Polanski adds a lighthouse to the scenery here is in keeping with the realism of the novel, where it says: "not long after that we pulled up outside the Lighthouse View Hotel"²⁷. In fact, there is a lighthouse directly in Edgartown harbour and the aforementioned hotel, which is actually called Harbor View Hotel.

²² There is a ferry connection between Sylt and the Danish island of Rømø (which is located north of Sylt), and it is this ferry that is used here as a filming location. Besides that, however, Sylt is also accessible by train via a railway causeway. This is indeed a significant difference compared to Martha's Vineyard.

²³ Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 60.

²⁴ Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 62f.

²⁵ In the film credits, explicit thanks are given to the police of Wellfleet, Provincetown, and Bourne. These towns are all located on Cape Cod, in the immediate vicinity of Martha's Vineyard. The plate shots essentially feature exterior shots of the driving car and are used to authentically reinforce the local reference.

²⁶ In fact, the hotel building on Sylt was only used as an exterior filming location. The interior shots took place in another hotel near Berlin. See Jacke: *Roman Polanski* (like note 15), p. 284.

²⁷ Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 53.

Nevertheless, for those who are familiar with the island of Sylt, the filming location can still be recognized as the Fährhaus. On the one hand, then, a merging of realities happens here. On the other hand, *if* one recognizes Sylt here, the realities disentangle and become *two* again.

Out of a sudden, the Ghost is confronted with a large entourage of press in the morning. As he looks out the window, he sees many press vehicles, including a broadcast van, in the harbour. Because of the emerging media interest, the Ghost has to move from the hotel to the vacation retreat. Polanski's attention to detail is striking in this very brief scene as it deliberately features American cars to create an authentic impression of Edgartown harbour.²⁸

Now that the Ghost is residing directly in the vacation home, he eventually discovers a hidden dossier of documents from his deceased predecessor. He begins to investigate and, to this end, sets out by bicycle to explore the island and the place where his predecessor was found dead on the beach (sequence 11). Again, this site is a real one on Martha's Vineyard named Lambert Cove. "Just out of West Tisbury I stopped by Scotchman's Lane to check directions. [...] About two miles later the road forked and I parted from the main highway, turning left towards the sea."²⁹ In this sequence, the realities merge once again and at the same time decompose into two distinct layers. This is because here, too, the locations are clearly recognizable to those familiar with Sylt, namely the headland of the island of Ellenbogen in the far north. Nonetheless, Polanski manages to maintain an authentic image of Martha's Vineyard by comparatively little effort, transposing the setting to America through an overhead power line commonly used in the United States, a yellow road marking, and U.S. street signs.³⁰ The geography of Sylt thus blends in seamlessly, transforming the island into Martha's Vineyard. Reinforcing this is a close-up of a street map (also a clear reference to the novel, in which it is explicitly mentioned). The Ghost uses the map to navigate, but for the viewer, the location is once again unmistakably marked as Martha's Vineyard. In this way, Polanski makes it clear once again, that he wants to stay close to the novel

²⁸ Jacke goes on to explain that in order to shoot the scene, "a window was specially erected in a box for the camera on scaffolding at the appropriate height and with a good perspective". In his book, however, he misidentifies the filming location on Sylt. See Jacke: *Roman Polanski* (like note 15), p. 288.

²⁹ Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 198f.

³⁰ See Werner: *Polanski* (like note 12), p. 286.

with his adaptation and that it is not an anonymous island on which the story is set. Finally, the Ghost arrives at the beach: “It was still a shock to clamber up and suddenly be confronted by that vista—that seamless grey hemisphere of scudding clouds and heaving ocean, the waves hurtling in and smashing against the beach in a continuous, furious detonation.”³¹ In view of this description, the appearance of the Sylt beach in the film is actually in no way inferior to that of Martha’s Vineyard.

A similar effect occurs when the Ghost uses the car the following day to take the ferry to the mainland, because he wants to follow up further clues here (sequence 13). The Ghost simply drives the route that his predecessor drove and that is still stored in the car’s navigation device. As with the road map, certain shots explicitly refer to the GPS display on Martha’s Vineyard, or more precisely Edgartown. Footage from inside the car is again combined with plate shots of the car, taken in the area around Martha’s Vineyard.³² However, the ferry crossing that follows here, from the time the vehicle enters the ferry terminal until it leaves the ferry, is again a merge of realities. “I steered down the hill into Vineyard Haven [...]. About a hundred yards away, across the puddled, rain-swept tarmac, a queue of vehicles was driving up the ramp of a ferry.”³³ In the film, the local reference to Sylt (and the ferry’s actual destination, the island of Rømø) is again clearly recognizable to those familiar with the area. Both ferry terminal and ship have again been re-localized to America using typical cultural artifacts: blue mailboxes, a U.S. flag, and English-language lettering.

Accordingly, Polanski remains consistent with his scheme in the final sequence examined (sequence 14). Here, too, yellow lane markings and U.S. traffic signs can be found at the other ferry terminal. The ferry’s interior—on which the Ghost faces a pursuit—is also completely adapted simply by means of English-language lettering. However, Polanski’s insistence on authenticity actually goes so far that even the vehicles on the car deck correspond to U.S. rather than European reality, from license plates to vehicle types.³⁴

³¹ Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 205.

³² The novel remains so precise and authentic in its description of Martha’s Vineyard that it even refers to the only traffic light on the island. See Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 255.

³³ Harris: *The Ghost* (like note 3), p. 255f.

³⁴ Among other things, an US type ambulance is clearly recognizable.

6. Conclusion

In his film adaptation of Harris' novel, Polanski remains close to the novel and uses the island motif to reflect the emotional world of its characters. It turns out that Sylt and Martha's Vineyard are so similar in their geographies that the new local reference can be created quite easily by substituting cultural artifacts such as flags, power lines, traffic signs, or automobiles. Scenery can be used interchangeably as long as there are no iconic buildings or landmarks—it is even possible that the city streetscape of Berlin can stand in for London. At the same time, Sylt and Martha's Vineyard echo each other in a symbolic dimension as a secluded retreat for celebrities detached from the actual world.

Accordingly, the characters are removed from the 'normal world' for the most part of the plot. Due to the investigations against him, Adam Lang is increasingly isolated, while the Ghost tries to literally bring light into the darkness on the island as well as on the mainland (the 'normal world') through his investigations. At the same time, the Ghost itself does not really belong to this estranged world of celebrities, politics, and conspiracies. In this context, the setting, the monochromatic images and, not least, the weather in the movie's plot are symbolic of these discoveries: fraud, agency, and immoral political action.

Almost all individual locations are paradigmatic non-places: the house, the island itself, but also the ferry as a gateway between the worlds. The island is an 'inner place', outside of usual norms and conventions. Polanski's staging carries over the multi-layered nature of Harris' novel into his cinematic language. Martha's Vineyard is the established plot location, while under this layer Sylt remains recognizable as the filming location. Realities thus merge and yet remain decodable, in a manner comparable to a roman à clef. Therefore, the America in the film is also a 'Non'-America. The locale in Polanski's *The Ghost Writer* defines itself out of cultural artifacts alone and remains an otherworldly and imaginary one.