

Flying Solo: Mobility in *Up in the Air*

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This article analyses the film *Up in the Air* (2009) to explore one of the ways in which mobilities are reflected in twenty-first century cinema. The film's main character, played by George Clooney, is presented as a hypermobile traveller who has adopted a rootless, nomadic lifestyle that enables him to move at will. Combining contemporary critical theories on mobility with close textual analysis, this article examines the specific type of mobility embodied by the film's protagonist, based on weightlessness and incessant, frictionless movement, as well as the effects that large-scale mobility has on people's identities and on the ways in which they relate to others. As will be argued, the representation of the protagonist's mobility changes in the course of the film, in ways that call attention to the shortcomings of his highly mobile lifestyle.

Keywords: *Up in the Air*; mobility; mobile elite; mobile intimacy; George Clooney; gender

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Volando solo: La movilidad en *Up in the Air*

Este artículo utiliza la película *Up in the Air* (2009) para explorar una de las maneras en las que el cine contemporáneo refleja el mundo altamente móvil en el que vivimos. El personaje principal, interpretado por George Clooney, se presenta como un viajero hipermóvil que ha adoptado un estilo de vida nómada que le permite moverse a voluntad. Combinando las teorías críticas actuales sobre movilidad con el análisis textual, este artículo examina el tipo de movilidad encarnado por el protagonista de la película, el cual se basa en la ingravidez y el movimiento incesante y sin fricción, así como los efectos que tiene la movilidad a gran escala en la identidad de las personas y en la manera en que estas se relacionan con otras personas. Este artículo explora cómo la representación de

este tipo de movilidad varía en el transcurso de la película, llamando la atención sobre las limitaciones de la vida móvil del personaje.

Palabras clave: *Up in the Air*; movilidad; élite móvil; intimidad móvil; George Clooney; género

I. INTRODUCTION

For some people, air travel is a hassle. Travelling by plane can be rather uncomfortable, expensive and time-consuming. You have to pack light or else spend extra time checking in your luggage, then go through security and spend hours on a stuffy plane. Overcrowded airports, endless queues, flight delays and airplane food are some of the disadvantages of air travel and the reasons why many people find it troublesome. For others, however, none of these things are a big problem. Such is the case of the protagonist of *Up in the Air*, a 2009 film directed by Jason Reitman and written by Reitman and Sheldon Turner. Based on the 2001 novel of the same title by Walter Kirn, *Up in the Air* stars George Clooney as corporate downsizing expert Ryan Bingham. His job keeps him on the road for 322 days a year, flying around the country in order to conduct layoffs in numerous companies—and he loves it. He lives out of a suitcase and enjoys the sense of freedom and weightlessness that he gets from travelling. On one of his trips, he meets Alex (Vera Farmiga), another frequent flyer and a female version of himself. Since neither of them is interested in having a serious relationship, they start a casual affair, meeting in business hotels when their busy travel schedules allow for it. Ryan's mobile lifestyle is threatened by Natalie (Anna Kendrick), Ryan's new colleague, who has designed a system to fire people remotely using video calls. As a consequence, career transition counsellors like Ryan will not have to travel anymore. He will be grounded, and in more ways than one.

The film presents a world in which travelling is not a difficult endeavour but a rather quotidian activity. Like Ryan, many people from all over the world currently live a life on the move. In their book *Mobile Lives*, Anthony Elliott and John Urry claim that “a golden age of mobility” has arrived, since people are now more mobile than ever (2010, ix). People are travelling further, faster and more frequently, and often spending more time “on the road” (Urry 2007, 4). The study of mobilities began in the social sciences in the 1990s and, since then, has brought together studies on migration, borders, transportation, infrastructure, transnationalism, mobile communications, imaginative travel, tourism, globalisation, geography, culture and anthropology. Scholars such as Marc Augé, Manuel Castells and James Clifford are considered to be the precursors of contemporary mobilities research, followed by the works of Peter Adey, Tim Cresswell, Mimi Sheller and Urry, among others. The “new mobilities paradigm” incorporates new ways of theorising mobilities which focus on “embodied and material practices of movement, digital and communicative mobilities, the infrastructures and systems of governance that enable or disable movement, and the representations, ideologies, and meanings attached to both movement and stillness” (Sheller 2014, 789).

Up in the Air received critical acclaim and earned various awards and nominations. Film critics have praised the film's timeliness and its attention to topical issues such as mass unemployment, cultural alienation and technology (Ebert 2009; Puig 2009). The film's portrayal of topics like the economic recession, personal relationships and mobility has also generated considerable interest among scholars, including Pablo

Echart (2014), who explores individualism and success in *Up in the Air* and two other films starring Clooney, Derek Nystrom (2014), who examines the film's depiction of emotional labour in a moment of economic crisis, and Amanda Du Preez (2015), who writes about mobility, places and non-places and home in the movie. This article aims to contribute to the existing literature on the film by combining contemporary critical theories on mobility with close textual analysis in order to explore the film's central themes and the visual and narrative mechanisms used to present them. I will examine the specific type of mobility embodied by the film's protagonist, who has adopted a mobile lifestyle based on relentless travel, weightlessness and frictionless movement, as well as the effects that large-scale mobility has on people's identities and on the ways in which they relate to other people.

2. RYAN, THE GLOBAL SUBJECT

"To know me is to fly with me," says Ryan Bingham in the opening voice-over (06:05). He lives "up in the air," routinely flying around the country visiting other people's offices and firing them. Yet for Ryan, ceaseless travelling is more than a job requirement; it is a lifestyle that he enjoys immensely. He loves the weightless sense of nonresponsibility that comes from living on one's own, the perks he enjoys as a frequent flyer and the feeling of being surrounded by unknown people. He likes this lifestyle so much that he is also a motivational lecturer, teaching people how to cut down on unnecessary bonds, obligations and possessions to be able to adopt it.

Ryan, like thousands of people from all over the world, lives a mobile life. *Up in the Air* portrays a world in which people move incessantly, faster and more frequently than ever before. As has often been argued, large-scale mobilities are not new, what is new is the speed and intensity with which people, objects and information move these days (Urry 2007; Elliott and Urry 2010). Ryan has successfully adapted to this environment of rapid movement, ceaseless flow and dynamism. He firmly believes that "moving is living" and, consequently, rebuffs everything that hinders his capacity to move or slows him down. "The slower we move, the faster we die," he says (46:52). He has turned travelling into a routine that he performs effortlessly. Watching him pack and move around airport check-in desks and security controls is almost like watching a meticulously designed choreography. As these actions are performed, the fast editing mirrors the frenetic pace of life in contemporary times, showing that Ryan is more than able to keep up with it. For him, the key to doing so is to become weightless, to make his life fit in a cabin-size suitcase or, as he would say, in a backpack. In his motivational speeches, he asks his audience to put all the components of their lives—their house, their possessions, their acquaintances—inside an imaginary backpack and feel the unbearable weight of their lives on their shoulders. His lectures about how to unpack one's backpack encompass his philosophy of life, which enables him to lead a life of intense mobility.

Since Ryan is constantly travelling, he spends most of his time in non-places such as planes, airports and business hotels. According to Augé, non-places are not locally specific; on the contrary, they are almost the same regardless of where they are (2006). For Castells, the similar design of these places aims at the unification of the symbolic environment of the elite around the world ([1996] 2011, 447). Non-places are “sites of pure mobility” (Urry 2000, 63), traversed by thousands of people from all over the world every day. However, they are also “in-between zones” since thousands of people pass by but they do not stay (Urry 2000, 63). In contrast to what Augé understands as anthropological places, non-places are not meeting spaces; therefore, in them one remains anonymous and alone (2006, 54). Ryan has become a willing dweller of these spaces and several times during the film, he emphasises that non-places, which he describes as “faumey” (a combination of “faux” and “homey” (12:33)), are in fact his home. As he puts it at the beginning of the film, “all the things that you probably hate about travelling—the recycled air, the artificial lighting, the digital juice dispensers, the cheap sushi—are warm reminders that I’m home” (07:00). The *mise en scène* of his dull, impersonal apartment, with its plain white walls, minimal, functional furniture and no decorative items displayed, reinforces this idea. The remains of an unfinished meal on the kitchen counter lead the spectator to think that he spends so little time there that he does not even get to have a proper meal before hitting the road again. The untidiness of his apartment stands in contrast to his impeccably organised luggage. In sum, his apartment cannot be described as a home. Rather, it is a home base, a comfortable and convenient place in which to recover while waiting for the next flight. In Du Preez’s words, it looks “like a hotel room” that “shows no presence of its owner” (789).

Transitional non-places are for Ryan more important than the cities he visits, which in most cases would be unidentifiable without the intertitles that provide the audience with an establishing aerial shot of the city and its name. The film focuses more on the regularity and dexterity with which he travels than on the actual destination, and Ryan does not seem to care about his specific location either: “same as every place else” is his default answer when he is asked what a specific city is like. Even though the spectator knows that the film is set in the United States, Ryan’s story would still work if it was set in any other developed country in the world or he was travelling globally. Therefore, in spite of the fact that he does not travel outside the US, Ryan can be considered to be a member of the new world elite whom Zygmunt Bauman calls “the globals” (1998, 99), a new social class of “hypermobile travellers” who live in the fast lane and for whom travelling is almost a daily activity (Gössling et al. 2009). According to Bauman’s division of society into tourists and vagabonds, that is, individuals who move at will and those who move because they have no other choice, like migrants or refugees, globals like Ryan are tourists in so far as they travel because they want to and travelling does not pose any problem for them (1998, 93). This new elite puts great emphasis on swiftness, weightlessness, dexterity and flexibility.

Their mobile nature, as well as the mobile nature of their money, enables them to shift between various countries and regions, tax regimes and legal systems, while living affluent, opulent lifestyles well above the standards of locals living in territorially fixed societies (Elliott and Urry 2010, 67).

“Speed of movement,” writes Bauman, “has become today a major, perhaps the paramount factor in social stratification and the hierarchy of domination” (2002, 27). The members of the global mobile elite are more often than not wealthy. However, megawealth is not what makes this new social class stand out from other elites in the history of humankind. While in the past being a member of the elite implied owning vast expanses of land or massive industrial plants, currently money and possessions play second place to friction-less movement, weightlessness and speed. Membership of the elite is now based on being free to move and choose where to be, and having the means to do so effortlessly, comfortably and quickly. Ryan does not own a luxurious house or a high-end car, nor does he want them, but he benefits from various premium services when he travels: he always flies in business class, stays in the best hotels and eats at fancy restaurants. The services themselves are not as important for him as the promptness with which he can get them—priority check-in at airports and hotels is indispensable for him. He does not aspire to be on the Forbes list of the world’s wealthiest people, but he longs to gain executive status with American Airlines. It is the same case for Alex Goran, whom Ryan meets at the Hilton hotel in Dallas. She also lives the mobile life of a global, frequently away on business trips around the US. In an attempt to flirt, they literally lay their (credit and membership) cards on the table as if trying to trump each other. People like Ryan and Alex give great importance to the number of miles they travel per year, since they see it as an indicator of one’s status. In sum, they are, as Alex says, “two people that get turned on by elite status” (13:37).

Globals like Ryan and Alex are fond of the rewards and privileges they enjoy as frequent flyers, which range from priority airport check-in to personalised greetings and elegant first-class lounges. Even though the mobile lifestyle of globals is accessible only to a miniscule elite, it is presented as a normative ideal and a sign of prestige and power in popular culture and the media, and it has become an object of desire for many people. The incessant demands for travel that the globals’ lifestyle entail are not regarded as constraining and time-consuming but rather as opening up endless possibilities and projects (Elliott and Urry 2010, 73, 80-82). In line with this view of mobility, Ryan is introduced not as the “time-poor” businessman but as a privileged traveller, and his mobile lifestyle is presented not as constraining but as highly desirable.

The glamourised representation of Ryan’s mobility at the beginning of the film seems to imply that it adheres to this positive view of mobilities as a source of freedom, power and privilege, and of mobile lives as attractive and fascinating. This initial representation of mobilities is reinforced by the fact that the character embodying this specific type of mobility is played by Hollywood star Clooney. From the moment that Ryan is introduced, Clooney’s star persona adds certain

connotations to the character and influences spectators' expectations. Praised for his looks and elegance, Clooney has often been compared to classic actors like Cary Grant and Gary Cooper (Sterritt 2012, 220). Most of the characters he plays are imbued with his charm and classic charisma, whether he is playing a high-rolling thief in Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's* trilogy (*Ocean's Eleven* (2001), *Ocean's Twelve* (2004), *Ocean's Thirteen* (2007)), a "fixer" for a corporate law firm in *Michael Clayton* (2007), a narcissistic divorce lawyer in *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003) or a downsizer in *Up in the Air*. As critics have noted, some of his characters seem to resemble his off-screen self and Ryan Bingham is no exception. For instance, Andrew Barker remarks that a film like *Up in the Air*, where Clooney plays a "suave, lifelong bachelor who jet-sets across the country lounging in chic hotels," makes viewers "wonder how much he is simply playing himself," since the actor himself exhibited these qualities in real life, at least until he got married in 2014 (2009, n.p.). The films where he apparently plays himself—as well as other media products, such as his international Nespresso commercials—seem to allow the audience a privileged insight into his off-screen, private self. Thus, the opening voiceover in *Up in the Air* could be seen as an invitation to the audience to get to "know him [Clooney, the star]" by "flying with him [his on-screen double, Ryan]" (6:05). The world of designer suits, VIP services and first-class travel in which Ryan lives replicates that of Hollywood stars like Clooney. This contributes to the idealisation of Ryan's lifestyle and, in turn, of the specific type of mobility that he embodies.

Due in part to Clooney's elegance and charm, the film makes the first-class cabins, airports and hotels where Ryan spends most of his time seem attractive and inviting. Similarly, at least at the beginning of the film, the specific type of mobility that Ryan embodies is presented positively and he seems to rejoice in it. Yet, as will be argued below, the character of Ryan is not without contradictions. In his lectures, he promotes detachment and individualism, but when he has the opportunity to become even more detached from people by doing his job from a distance, he stands up against it and defends the importance of face-to-face personal interaction.

3. RYAN, THE INDIVIDUALISTIC DOWNSIZER

The world of *Up in the Air* is a world of office buildings and business travel. The film examines corporate US at one of its most unstable moments, the economic recession. However, it does so from the perspective of Ryan, a member of the professional elite who experiences the financial crisis from the winning side. It does not have negative consequences for him. Quite the opposite, since his job is to conduct layoffs in companies that, due to the poor economy, have to downsize.

After a boom period of frenetic economic activity in the West, an acute crisis of the global financial system took place in 2007-2008, leading to what is known as the Great Recession. The recession is notably present in *Up in the Air*, a film released in 2009

which deals with the activities of CTC, a fictional consultancy firm that conducts mass layoffs. In fact, Reitman has acknowledged that he adapted the original script, based on a novel published before the economic boom collapsed, to the new context of economic instability in which the film was shot and released (Reitman et al. 2009, n.p.). He even decided to use people who had actually lost their jobs at the time of filming for the firing scenes (Du Preez 2015, 787). Hence, the film not only reflects the effects of the recession but also makes some direct references to the then current economic situation. At one point, Ryan's boss mentions they are going through "one of the worst times on record for America" (20:24). As the film progresses, the effects of the Great Recession become increasingly visible in the offices that Ryan and Natalie visit. In Kansas City, they enter an office that has been greatly affected by the crisis: a devastated secretary greets them with a worried look and the camera pans to reveal an almost deserted space where only a few desks and scattered chairs remain (43:20).

Ryan's life revolves mostly around his professional career, since it is his job at CTC that enables him to travel incessantly and lead a mobile lifestyle. He is euphemistically described as a career transition counsellor, but his job is simply to fire people on behalf of their employers, who hire Ryan's company to do the nasty work. However, he is not just any downsizer; he is the best and seems to have all the skills the job requires. He gives the impression of being empathetic and caring, yet he remains indifferent to what the people he fires say to him, which is often rather unpleasant. Whether they lose their temper or tell the most depressing story, he knows how to control the situation, telling them what they want to hear. To acquire such a level of expertise, Ryan has internalised a philosophy of life that enables him to remain detached from the personal stories of the employees he fires and makes him immune to the negative consequences that losing their jobs has on them. This attitude shows him as an individualistic man who not only enjoys isolation but is also exclusively focused on his own personal success. However, the excesses of his individualism have damaging effects on the people he encounters every day in his job (Echart 2014, 120). His world seems to be ruled by the survival of the fittest and adopting a predatory attitude seems to be an effective way to achieve success. "We are not swans. We are sharks," Ryan claims at one point in the film (46:55). And yet, he is not depicted as an entirely heartless, unscrupulous villain. This is, to a great extent, due to the fact that the star persona of Clooney imbues Ryan with his particular charisma and sense of humour. As the director explained, when portraying a character that fires people for a living, "he better be a darn charming actor. And there really isn't anyone better at that than George Clooney" ("*Up in the Air: A Down-to-Earth Take on Modern Life*" 2009, n.p.).

The young CTC employee Natalie Keener, played by Anna Kendrick, is the antithesis of Ryan. She is eager to show that she is a highly qualified and competent professional, but she lacks Ryan's charm and experience. Natalie's attitude towards and experience of mobility also differs significantly from Ryan's. As scholars have pointed out, mobility is a gendered issue and it is experienced and practiced differently by men

and women. Masculinity is usually coded as mobile and femininity as static (Cresswell and Uteng 2008, 2-5). The character of Natalie supports this idea, especially since, in opposition to the hypermobile male protagonist, she is not fully mobile, which makes her unfit for Ryan's world. The squeaky wheels of her suitcase clash with Ryan's smooth movements and choreographed travelling rituals. Moreover, her suitcase is too heavy, overpacked with things that Ryan thinks are unnecessary. She carries too much in her "backpack," both literally and symbolically. While Ryan is ready to leave at any moment, Natalie needs time to say goodbye to her boyfriend. She believes in love, marriage and family, notions which Ryan considers the biggest obstacles to mobility. Among the things that Ryan takes out of her luggage the first time they travel together is a pillow, an object that can be linked to the cosiness and comfort of the home (28:44). As Sheller notes, tropes of home and dwelling are often feminised and, while men are associated with travelling, hitting the road, and escaping from home, women are more often than not described as rooted in place and home (2008, 258). Thus, Natalie's overpacked suitcase suggests that she is too attached to the local, too rooted to keep up with Ryan's mobile lifestyle.

In addition to being unfit for the globals' world of intensive mobility, Natalie is also portrayed as unfit for the downsizing business. Unlike Ryan, she is unable to remain detached from the harsh words of the people she fires and their stories affect her deeply. As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that the emotional strain is taking its toll on her. This is further emphasised by the film's use of framing and *mise en scène*. For instance, after a long session firing people in a company in Des Moines, Natalie is shown sitting alone in a room full of empty desk chairs, which stand for all the employees that have been dismissed (44:55). The high angle used for this shot makes her appear weak and small, overwhelmed by the mass layoffs that she is part of. Yet, like Ryan, she is not without contradictions. It is Natalie, the less mobile individual, who suggests the new firing-at-a-distance approach, even though it is an impersonal technique that seems to clash with her rootedness and, especially, with the way in which she seems to care about the workers' feelings. The hypermobile and extremely detached Ryan, however, strongly objects to Natalie's methods and openly opposes the changes that his boss has agreed to introduce.

The main reason for Ryan's disagreement is obvious: he is afraid of the consequences it will have on his mobile lifestyle. For Natalie, one of the benefits of implementing this system is to free downsizers from the relentless travel that the job currently requires; as she puts it: "no more Christmases spent in Tulsa, no more hours lost to weather delays. You get to come home" (23:01). It is precisely the lack of mobility that Ryan most fears. As a global, Ryan is afraid of immobility, fixity and the local, which he relates to entrapment, enclosure and lack of freedom. As Elliott and Urry point out, "to be immobile in a society of intensively mobile processes is a kind of symbolic death" (2010, 79), which is in line with Ryan's belief that "moving is living" (09:05). Ryan's attitude towards mobility brings to mind the ideas of

nomadic metaphysics, according to which stasis and fixity are dismissed and mobility is considered to provide a sense of independence, freedom and emotional security (Cresswell 2006, 37).

Ryan is also a defender of the importance of face-to-face communication when dealing with such a delicate situation as telling someone that they have lost their job, which is surprising in a character that, as we have seen, tries to avoid interaction with others as much as possible. For Natalie, the firing process is something one can do mechanically—she has designed a script that enables anyone to carry out the task by simply following the steps. She thinks that increasing efficiency and reducing costs are more important than being physically present when the firing takes place. Ryan, who thinks that Natalie does not know anything about the realities of the downsizing industry, defends the position that in-person meetings are necessary to give a message that leaves people devastated. “There is a dignity to the way I do it,” he says (23:39). For him, firing someone is “the most personal situation that [one] is ever going to enter” and, therefore, it cannot be done via a computer screen (25:29). Ryan’s emphasis on the importance of face-to-face interaction seems somewhat contradictory given his detached, impersonal way of relating to people. The fact that he recognises the value of human connection in his work could be seen as simply an excuse to preserve his mobile way of life but, as will be mentioned later on, it could also be indicative of his own desire for companionship, an aspect that he may have long repressed, but that plays a crucial role in the development of the film and especially in its ending.

4. RYAN, THE LONE WOLF

Over the past few decades, there has been a growing interest in the impact that mobilities have on the ways in which people engage in intimate relationships. According to Larissa Hjorth and Sun S. Lim, along with the mobilities turn came an “intimacy turn” (2012, 477). New mobile patterns of relating have emerged to keep up with the increasing mobilisation of the world. Since people are now more mobile, intimacy and sexual relationships have to be negotiated and renegotiated across distance. Elliott and Urry use the term *mobile intimacy* to refer to the phenomenon of being intimate and managing interpersonal relationships “at-a-distance” (2010, 85). Since people are now making more active decisions about their lives, careers, families and relationships, social life becomes notably individuated and more individualised patterns of relating proliferate (2010, 90). As Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim argue, individualisation means the disintegration of previously existing social forms such as the nuclear family (2002, 2). Many scholars have called attention to the transformations that intimacy and family life have undergone since the late twentieth century. The advance of new family models has been considered to pose a threat to traditional family values and to bring about a crisis of the nuclear family and marriage (Elliott and Urry 2010, 89). The significant rise in divorce and separation

rates, one-parent families, nonmarital cohabitation and open marriages in the past few decades underscores the fact that the traditional model of family is no longer the only one possible. In that sense, other scholars suggest that family life is not undergoing a breakdown, but rather a constructive renewal (Elliott and Urry 2010, 89).

Differences of interpretation notwithstanding, there is general agreement among scholars that leading a mobile life has an impact on family life and forces the mobile individual to strike a balance between their mobility and their family obligations. Ryan is a good example of how a mobile lifestyle of relentless travelling comes into conflict with familial relations. He rarely visits his family in Wisconsin and does not feel the need to start one of his own. According to what he says in his talks, family ties and “all the negotiations, arguments, secrets and compromises” that come with them are too heavy to be carried in his backpack, so he prefers to leave them out (46:22). This point is visually emphasised in the film when he receives a cardboard cut-out of his sister and her fiancé for him to take photos of himself at iconic sights during his trips. We see him expertly packing his luggage but struggling to pack the cut-out in his cabin-size suitcase, which suggests that family does not fit into his lifestyle (27:00). A similar shot of the cut-out popping out of the suitcase can be seen later in the film, only this time the cardboard picture is damaged after so much travelling (01:02:42). This shot suggests that, just as Ryan’s hectic lifestyle has had a deleterious effect on the cut-out, so it has also taken a toll on his relationship with his family.

Ryan’s mobile lifestyle affects not only his family relationships but also the way in which he engages in love and sexual relationships with women. In the same way that he does not spend much time in the same place or with the same people, he does not seek to forge strong intimate bonds with anyone, but simply wants brief, casual affairs with women he encounters along the way. When Ryan meets his alter ego Alex (“Just think of me as yourself, only with a vagina” (31:45)), however, they compare diaries to see if they will be in the same town sometime soon, thus initiating a no-strings-attached mobile relationship. This scene, which takes place in a hotel room after their first sexual encounter, shows a symmetrical two-shot of both characters staring at their laptops, implying that they are mirror images of each other (15:42). Yet, when examining the shot in detail, it is easy to notice that the composition is unbalanced, since there are more objects on Alex’s side: a telephone, a water bottle and, in particular, the large paintings that fill up the wall behind her. This contrasts with Ryan’s side, where there is only a lamp. Thus, the symmetrical composition highlights their compatibility while, at the same time, hinting at the possibility that they may not be as similar as they might seem.

The term mobile intimacy, which has emerged as a by-product of hypermobile lifestyles, is, however, considered an oxymoron by some scholars who argue that intimacy cannot be practiced at a distance, since it inherently implies closeness and proximity (Raiti 2007, n.p.). Similarly, Elliott and Urry draw attention to the existence of a contradiction in mobile relationships in the contemporary age (2010, 110). On the

one hand, mobile relationships make perfect sense in a social context in which people are constantly on the move and, consequently, do not spend much time in the same place and with the same people. The individualistic drive that leads people to move in order to pursue their academic and professional careers has created the need for many couples to be geographically separated. On the other hand, Elliott and Urry underscore the weakening effect that living a mobile life might have on the depth and quality of personal relationships (2010, 110). Mobile relationships are more often than not short lived and unstable, as well as notably challenging. Moreover, the quality of the relationship often deteriorates due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and physical intimacy. Even though technologies can aid in simulating intimacy, shared events are still the “bedrock for relationships” (Raiti 2007, n.p.).

It is precisely one of these shared events—Ryan’s sister’s wedding, which he attends—that shatters his hypermobile lifestyle. The montage sequence of the wedding emphasises the importance of family and love relationships. The use of a hand-held camera gives the impression of a domestic video and makes Ryan appear to be, for the first time, part of the family. Similarly, the warm colours used in the sequence, which contrast with the cold, bluish tones of the non-places where Ryan spends most of his time, stress the warmth of home and family. After this event, Ryan goes back to his mobile life, but something has changed. Back at his apartment, the film’s use of framing makes it look bigger and more deserted and draws attention to the empty closet and the one toothbrush by the bathroom sink. When Ryan is about to give his next lecture, we see him staring at his backpack, questioning the detachment around which he has built his life (01:30:20). His sister’s wedding has made him realise that “life is better with company” and “everybody needs a copilot” (01:24:16). In other words, he realises that mobile intimacy fails to meet his emotional needs. He therefore takes a plane and goes to Chicago to ask Alex to be his copilot, only to discover that she is flying a different plane—she is married and has a family of her own. Her mobile lifestyle made it possible for her to lead a double life, her global work life simply being a break from her “normal” life.

After this unexpected turn of events, Ryan is shown in front of the window of a hotel room. As the camera zooms out, Ryan and the hotel room become increasingly smaller while the solid walls of the hotel building progressively take up the frame, creating a sort of geometrical composition made of parallel windows. No one can be seen through the rest of the windows, as if Ryan was the only person in that huge hotel. By the end of the scene, Ryan is just a tiny spot in an immense world, which suggests the overwhelming feelings of loneliness that his mobile lifestyle has brought about. In the fictional world of *Up in the Air*, hypermobility and mobile intimacy end up having devastating consequences, at least for the main character.

Without Alex’s company, Ryan has to go back to his life on the move alone, only now aware that his former individualistic, detached way of living isolates him and does not make him happy anymore (Du Preez 2015, 796). When he finally reaches his

long-awaited ten-million-air-mile mark, he realises that it does not mean anything if he has no one to share the moment with. Although he has not achieved his romantic goal, he has discovered the need to open up to people and fully engage in emotional relationships. Consequently, he gives his ten million miles to his sister Julie and her husband and helps Natalie to get a new job. In this way, the film's ending seems to be critical of the type of mobility and lifestyle that was presented at the beginning as apparently attractive and desirable, as well as of the type of intimacy that results from such hypermobility. By the end of the film, life in the fast lane is portrayed as lonely and empty and the negative consequences of mobile intimacy are emphasised. Ryan is no longer seen as a privileged man, but as a man compelled to keep moving and for whom travelling is no longer a pleasure but a burden. He has become a prisoner of his own mobility. As Du Preez puts it, he “moves from being a tourist (being mobile at will) to being a vagabond (no longer having a say in the matter); from belonging to the privileged homeless ('in place') to being ostracised and homeless ('out of place')” (2015, 796). The film ends with Ryan entering an airport once more and staring at a huge departures and arrivals board, ready to embark on a new journey by himself. He symbolically lets go of the handle of his carry-on, which he previously held on to tightly in the same way as he held on to his weightless lifestyle. He is now aware that while “most people will be welcomed home by jumping dogs and squealing kids” at the end of the day (01:43:26), he will remain a wanderer relegated to looking at the world from above.

5. CONCLUSION

As Roger Ebert put it, *Up in the Air* is “a film for this time” (2009, n.p.). It is an exploration of today's executive culture and deals with issues such as job loss, individualism and alienation, the drawbacks of technology and the loss of human connection. It also reflects the increasing mobility that characterises today's world.

This article has analysed Ryan's attitude towards and experience of mobility, including its impact on his identity and on the ways he relates to other people, in the light of contemporary critical theories of mobility. *Up in the Air* invites the audience to accompany Ryan on a transformative journey that will show him the shortcomings of flying solo and the need to strike a balance between work and family, detachment and commitment, routes and roots, movement and fixity. Along the way, he starts to realise that the membership cards that used to make him happy are only pieces of plastic and that the air miles he avidly collected are worthless when you have nobody to share them with. To complete his transformation, Ryan has to confront his “backpack” and reconsider the effect that keeping it empty is having on his life. Eventually, he seems to realise that life, even if it is an “up in the air” kind of life, is better in company. In the end, as its tag line advances, *Up in the Air* is “the story of a man ready to make a connection.”

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