

Alternative Inheritances: Re-thinking What Adaptation Might Mean in François Ozon's *Le Temps qui reste* [*Time to Leave*]

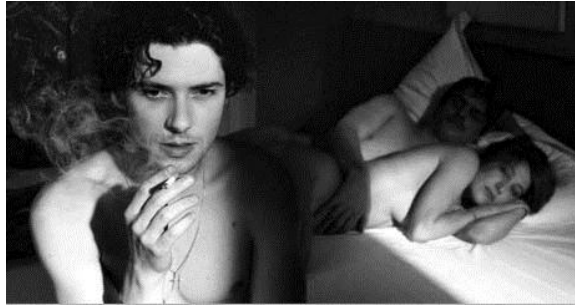
Film adaptation is frequently considered the “most narrow and provincial area” of film theory by its detractors, who characterize it as caught up in old debates about the worth of film against other art forms (Andrew 28). Robert Stam argues that much of the antipathy toward the film adaptation comes from “the myth of facility” and the idea that films are somehow suspiciously easy to watch, leading to a class prejudice, and a division of popularity versus prestige. Critics lambaste filmic “betrayals” of modernist novels, for example, while forgetting the filmic “redemption” of many non-modernist novels. They denounce the Joseph Strick version of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, but forget to laud Hitchcock’s innovative transmutation of du Maurier’s story *The Birds* (4). A familiar series of binary oppositions emerges: literature versus cinema; high art versus mass culture; original versus copy. Recent scholarship by James Naremore, Dudley Andrew, and Robert Stam has moved away from these conceptions, focusing not “on the rather subjective question of the quality of adaptations, rather [on ...] the more interesting issues of 1) the theoretical status of adaptation and 2) the analytical interest of adaptations” (Stam 4). Indeed, rather than seeing adaptations as a simple question of which form is best suited to particular ways of conveying meaning (for example, is the book “better” than the film?), Andrew argues that theories of adaptation are potentially “as far reaching as you like,” referring to the way in which adaptation partakes in a general theory of intertextuality (28). Considerations of categories such as “free adaptations” and “transfigurations” have begun to move away from the fetishizing of original over copy, into a more general examination of the multiple influences exercised over the “new” filmic text (Grant).

In this article, I use this conception of adaptation as interpretation, change, and influence, arguing that such an understanding of the term celebrates the possibilities of difference within textual (re)production. The use of the term reproduction is not an innocent one here, as the terms used to criticize film adaptation tend to be overwhelmingly sexual in nature. The film copy is condemned as guilty of infidelity, betrayal, deformation, violation, bastardization, and vulgarization. Several of these terms conjure up not only aesthetic disgust but also moral and sexual outrage. The notion that a filmic adaptation has to be faithful to a source text resonates with a Victorian prudishness and perhaps fear of miscegenation: adaptation draws attention to its own reproductive act in which this reproduction aims to reduce difference as far as possible, to find the correlative of one medium (literature) in another (film). My interest here is in film that works to introduce difference *as part of* the process of adaptation and that challenges the notion of a “straight” inheritance to avow the queerness both in its antecedent texts and its own body.

François Ozon’s *Le Temps qui reste* [*Time to Leave*] (2005) lends itself to this reading. A moving study of a young man’s last few months alive, it belongs to the more intimate strain in Ozon’s work, and seems a less likely candidate for exploring

adaptation than his more flamboyant *8 femmes* (2002). There are however several reasons to study Ozon's film as a critical reflection upon the process of adaptation. First, it has attracted less critical attention with regard to its interest in hybridity and adaptation than other Ozon films, precisely because this interest is less obviously marked; second, because it borrows widely from other films, notably those of Eric Rohmer, François Truffaut, and Ingmar Bergman; and third, because its style and theme concern itself intimately with the process of change from one art form to another (here, photography and cinema), with citation and representation, and with adaptation in the largest sense of the term, our coming-to-terms with change in our lives. A film such as *Le Temps qui reste* can act as a privileged site for the exploration of the nature of cinema itself precisely through its engagement with adaptation as part of a general process of cultural, personal, and social change.

The film concerns the story of a young fashion photographer, Romain (Melvil Poupaud), who learns that he has only three months to live due to metastasized cancer. He refuses treatment, confiding his plight only in his grandmother (Jeanne Moreau), and continuing to argue with his mother, father, and sister. On the trip to his grandmother's house, he meets a young woman, who asks him if he will agree to father her child as her husband is infertile. After



initially rejecting the suggestion, Romain finally agrees and sleeps with both the woman and her husband. He then wills all his possessions to her unborn child. At the end of the film, he makes his way to a Breton holiday resort. He sits on the beach, looking at the children playing, and is approached by a young boy who throws him his



ball: this young boy is his childhood memory that has come to him in images before, though this is the first time he has interacted with his childhood self. As the sun sets, Romain takes his last breath. The screen fades to black and we hear the sound of waves on the

soundtrack as the credits roll. The film then is intimately concerned with the issues of reproduction and inheritance, both representational (Romain is a photographer) and sexual (Romain's decision to father a child, and to provide for it financially after his death).

This concern with heritage inflects almost all considerations of adaptations. Conventional adaptation generally involves notions of fidelity and a desire to arrest and prevent change. Such a desire for preservation is especially expressed in traditional

“heritage” cinema, seen as one of the main European genres and usually analyzed as one in which issues of literary adaptation are paramount as it is often derived from literary “great works.” (Filmic) adaptation is seen as a result of (literary) inheritance. Yet if we turn to the domains of biology and ecology, we can see how adaptation via inheritance here stresses difference, not conservation, as the key to survival. Following Charles Darwin’s presentation of his controversial theories of evolution in the nineteenth century, the scientific community has been endlessly fascinated with the complex processes of environmental and genetic adaptation, from Darwin’s famous finches on the Galapagos Islands, whose beaks varied according to their feeding habits, to the peppered moth in British industrial cities that developed a melanoma or darker coloring thought to help it blend into the polluted atmosphere.

Adaptation proves in these examples to be a far from neutral, indeed highly active, mode of being, far removed from the unimaginative act of imitation, copying, or repetition that it is sometimes presented as being by film or literature critics obsessed with claims to “originality.” [...] Perhaps it serves us better to think in terms of complex processes of filtration, and in terms of intertextual webs or signifying fields, rather than simplistic one way lines of influence from source to adaptation. (Sanders 24)

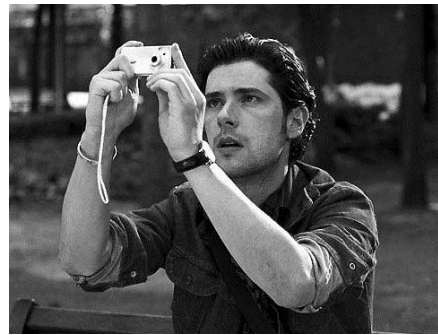
Romain’s relationship to the image is one of the ways in which Ozon’s film foregrounds its processes of adaptation, both in its transferal of one art form (photography) into another (film), and in the multiple references to earlier cinematic works that together form a symphony of intertexts. Romain’s relationship to photography belongs at first to a rather vapid and shallow world, parodied in the fashion shoot sequence we see with bored, spindly models posing on a Parisian rooftop, as François Ozon discusses:

At first his relationship with photography is rather superficial. He works in fashion, and it is simply a work of capturing and representing. But photography acquires a new dimension when he learns of his impending death. All of a sudden, his job makes sense, as if it was premeditated, as if it was fate that guided Romain to choose this job. Like cinephilia, the relationship with photography can be rather morbid. Making images, developing them, keeping them, collecting them, helps to act against time, to contain it.



It is noticeable here that Ozon traces Romain’s use of photography as a *memento mori* to the intimate and the familial—photography as a means of collecting memories rather than creating representational images. This function of photography is highlighted in several ways in the film. When Romain visits his grandmother, they look through family photo albums together. The photographs

fill the screen in close-up, so that the cinematic and photographic image become one. The photographs are of family occasions, notably birthdays and mothers cuddling babies, suggesting that photography plays a key role in the way the family passes on its memories and its history to new generations. These photographs also recall the extra-diegetic world as they feature Jeanne Moreau as she looked during the New Wave period,



referencing her own cinematic history and especially her role in *Jules et Jim* (Truffaut, 1962), where her image was “frozen” at certain moments during the film. The change in status of photography in the film, from trendy capturing of a fleeting fashion moment to an artwork that preserves memory and commemorates the family relationship, is echoed in the change in the way Romain takes his photographs. At the fashion shoots he uses a Nikon and spends time checking light exposures and framing his image. Now, he uses a small digital camera and simply holds it and clicks, barely checking the view through the viewfinder, as he takes pictures of strangers in the park, sunsets, his grandmother, or (secretly) his sister and her children. The act of photographing, of preserving and fixing the moment, rather than the artistic quality of the result, has become more important.

The photograph's relationship to memory is thus made clear and operates upon an entirely realistic level in the film. However, memories are also evoked in the moving image, and here the status of the image itself becomes ambiguous. The first such vision occurs in the bathroom at his parents' house. Having just taken a line of coke, Romain looks into the circular mirror. We cut from an over-shoulder shot to a close-up of Romain's reflection—we are already entering the territory of the virtual image. Then we cut back to a close-up of Romain. On the next cut, the image fades to white, and then an image of a young boy fades in. The adult Romain and the young boy are shot in shot reverse-shot, until his mother interrupts Romain's reverie. Here the image of the boy is contained within the mirror and follows drug use: the suggestion is clear that this may be a hallucination or a fantasy from Romain's mind. The next time we see the young boy, it is when Romain takes a twilight walk through the woods near his grandmother's house, to see the tree house where he and



his sister played as children. On the cut, the lighting changes from the blue of dusk to bright sunlight and we witness a scene between the two children. Here, the entire scene plays before us as any other scene in the film would: the child is no longer contained in a mirror and/or explained by Romain's drug-altered state of consciousness. The child re-occurs in various scenes in the film, but it is not until they are on the beach in Brittany that Romain and the boy interact. The boy is playing with another young child and his ball flies into Romain's hands and he passes it back to him. This image is the most ambiguous, allowing the past to impinge on the present. The moving images have a far more problematic relation to memory than the photograph. While the photograph fixes the past, the moving images interfere with the present. Indeed, the difficulty in identifying the status of these images points to a general truth about that nature of the cinematic image.

The range of these "memory images" calls to mind Gilles Deleuze's crystal image, which "constantly exchanges the two distinct images which constitute it, the actual image of the present that passes and the virtual image of the past which is preserved" (81). Deleuze claims that the crystal image is simultaneously virtual and actual, so that virtuality and actuality become confused. To explicate this notion, he makes reference to the mirror, to its ability to undo the veracity and verisimilitude of the image. The image in the mirror is virtual in relation to the actual person the mirror is capturing, but it is actual in the mirror that now allows the person only a virtual existence as image. The virtual mirror image pushes the actual image out of the frame, but it itself becomes the actual image. Deleuze suggests that the use of an optical device, a mirror, and its circuits of reflections, work to distort the possibilities of constructing meaning in relation to the film text. For Deleuze, the most suggestive of these virtual images is found in the famous hall of mirrors in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1947). Emma Wilson argues that Deleuze's use of specific historical examples raises the question of whether Deleuze's analyses of images, such as the time image, can ever be more than a temporally and historically contingent construct, its meaning dependent on its place in film history and its time in viewing. She suggests that Woody Allen's 1993 *Manhattan Murder Mystery*'s allusion to the mirrors sequence in *The Lady from Shanghai* does not function in the same way as Welles's original but rather works to reveal the over-determination of cinematic images and their paradoxical loss of primary meaning. She suggests that the "crystal image" of cinematic modernism is now being replaced by the "homage image" of post-modernity, in which the unstable relations between the real and the virtual are never resolved. This creates a "cinema of psychosis" in which the spectator never has the satisfaction of complete resolution. This becomes then a cinema of misperception, a cinema in which we are fed "a series of fictions about time, illusion and identity, which remain themselves only ever virtual and ephemeral" (Wilson 24).

So, against Romain's doomed attempts to stave off the inevitability of change and decay through the preservation technique of photography, Ozon's film places its indeterminate mirror and memory images that give the moving image of cinema the possibility to deny a fixity of identity. This ability to overcome the fixity of the still image, and its associations with the family and a determined inheritance, is further complicated in the film by the multiple ways in which these images function as

homage images. Ozon, when asked why Romain sees himself as a child, replies, “people often say that the elderly become children again. Moreover, I thought a lot about *Wild Strawberries*” (Bergman, 1957). Isak Borg in *Wild Strawberries* also interacts with his memories and images of the past. However, while Bergman’s film carefully signals its transitions from present to past through voiceover, lighting, and fades, Ozon’s film gradually loses these devices, so that the final image, where the young boy approaches Romain, is truly indeterminate, impossible to situate as real or imagined, past or present. (In contrast, for example, the final scene of *Wild Strawberries* where an elderly Borg, hand-in-hand with a young Sara, waves to his young parents, is signaled to us as a dream in the preceding voiceover.) As Wilson claims, the time image mutates into a homage image that fosters not an unstable view of the relations between film and reality, but an unstable view of reality itself. The image claims this power here precisely because it is an adaptation of Bergman: it is the reference point that foregrounds the extreme indeterminacy of these new sets of images. Fixity of meaning is denied as the image is opened up to its own virtuality and illusory nature.

As well as his reference to *Wild Strawberries*, Ozon’s film makes use of a series of relationships with Eric Rohmer’s filmmaking through setting and casting, and this allows further foregrounding of the illusory nature of the image. Melvil Poupaud plays Gaspard, the main character, in Rohmer’s *Conte d’été* [*A Summer’s Tale*] (1996), a film that also places him on a Breton beach. Ozon remarks that it was his presence in *Conte d’été* where Rohmer demonstrated he could be filmed “with the same grace and eroticism” as a woman that inspired his casting in *Le Temps qui reste*. In both films, Poupaud’s character ends up alone and isolated, staring out to sea. In *A Summer’s Tale* this is because of his indecision and inconstancy, leaving him, typically for a Rohmer hero, in much the same position at the end as at the start of the film; here it is symbolic of his gradual departure from life into death. Broadly, however, both films subscribe to a cyclical approach. Rohmer is cyclical in his charting of the seasons, and Ozon in his charting of the final months of a life, which are underscored by images of decay as an inevitable part of life, such as the roses given to Romain by his grandmother that wither over the course of the film, or the dead rabbit his childhood self encounters. In their interest in cycles, these films assert changes in form as inevitable. The change associated with the adaptation is thus seen as natural and inevitable. The cinema is a form that borrows and exchanges actors, settings, narratives, and ideas. Rather than attempting to fix meaning, Ozon’s film moves toward the indeterminacy of ever-achieving fixed meaning and absolute closure.

This is most powerfully illustrated by a reading of Ozon’s final scene. Here the casting of Romain’s mother is key. She is played by Marie Rivière, who often works with Rohmer. She is a mother in *Conte d’automne* [*An Autumn Tale*] (1998), providing a subtle filial link to Poupaud through their work in the Four Seasons series. It is however her role as Delphine in *Le Rayon vert* [*The Green Ray*] (Rohmer, 1986) that is important here. At the end of the film, Delphine witnesses the eponymous green ray, a climatic phenomenon where the very last ray of the setting sun appears to be green. This green ray is said to provide illumination and understanding of one’s life. As she witnesses the green ray, Delphine triumphantly exclaims “oui” and cries with happiness. A whole series of ironies and ambiguities operates here. The green ray may

offer illumination, but it is only momentary. Furthermore, the green ray itself is an optical illusion. The green ray underscores both our desire to believe everything we see, and the foolishness of doing so. It inscribes the cinematic image as inherently untrustworthy, a flickering illusion rather than a fixed recording. We do not finish the film with point-of-view shots between Delphine and her new partner, but with the camera at an



oblique angle to the couple looking, and the reverse shot of the green ray. It is the green ray, not Delphine's gaze, which renders the possibility of the young man being an object of desire. The objective shots of the green ray function here as if they were Delphine's gaze. The images we are presented of the sea could thus either be from Delphine's subjective viewpoint, or an objective recording of the scene taken alongside the young proto-couple. Within the logic of the film, the shot stands as all these things at once: objective and subjective; fact and projection; Rohmer's, Delphine's, and the viewer's. "The challenge of *The Green Ray's* final sequence is that the protagonists' meeting contains a paradox: ambiguity, the method of dislocation and rupture, here becomes fixed, the guiding principle of the film's closure" (Tortajada 208). Rohmer's film finishes with ambiguity as its key motif, a motif that allows differences to stand together rather than be resolved.

It is the ambiguity as the principle of closure in Rohmer's sunset that is adapted by the final moments of *Le Temps qui reste*. Here the camera records the sun setting and Romain's prostrate form in the front of the frame falls into darkness. The moment of Romain's death would seem to be the moment of absolute closure and fixity. But if we read Romain's sunset alongside his mother's sunset from *The Green Ray*, we can see how the film resists absolute fixity, pointing to the uncertainty of what we see. This is not a film that seeks to evade the bodily reality of mortality, brought home to us through Romain's fading form, shaved head, and vomiting, and it eschews sentimentality. (Indeed, Poupard prepared rigorously for the role, losing over ten kilos by living on a diet of protein sachets and cucumbers that caused a change in his own physical appearance and attracted popular press interest at the time of the film's release in France, such as an in-depth interview concerning his preparation in *Première* magazine.) However, the beach setting, with its resonance from Rohmer and also Ozon's own films *Sous le sable* [*Under the Sand*] (2001) and *5x2* (2004), asserts a liminality that allows for things to co-exist. The memory and nostalgia of the setting, represented by the young boy playing, and the sound of the waves for the final credits, work to suggest continuity and openness rather than finality and closure.

Continuity also occurs through Romain's decision to father a child. This parenting decision is placed into a context, however, which works to question and problematize traditional family structures as Romain has sexual intercourse with both the mother and the father of the child. The slow, close panning shot over the three naked chests of the participants works to unite them cinematically and images a differing form of sex that combines queerness with reproduction, rather than seeing them as opposed.



We can further see this as a re-appropriation of *Jules et Jim*, a film that the presence of Jeanne Moreau (especially through photographs of her younger self) irresistibly recalls. *Jules et Jim*, traditionally read as a drama of adultery, in fact asserts a relationship of equal intensity among all three of its protagonists. “When Catherine [Moreau] kills both herself and Jim, Jules is less

devastated than he might have been since their death helpfully resolves the ambivalence of his feelings by means of a symbolic fusion” (Forbes 118). A further transposition of *Jules et Jim* occurs in the casting of the German actor Christian Sengewald to play Sasha, Romain’s lover. Just as Jules and Jim formed a couple where one was tall, dark, and French, and the other smaller, blond, and Germanic, so too do Romain and Sasha. Here, though, the desire that could only be expressed in *Jules et Jim* through the conduit of Catherine is clearly articulated. Rather than the denial of homoerotic desire that is acted out by Jules and Jim, who repress their desire for each other into love for Catherine, sexual desire here becomes far more free-floating and ambiguous. Crucially homosexual and heterosexual desire is given equal purchase in the creation of a family.

Inheritance then is shown as something that is born of sexual and artistic desire. Equally, the beach setting acts as a further metaphor for the liminality—the both/and—implied by the term adaptation. This is because adaptation calls for texts to be read alongside each other, one illuminating and opening up the other (rather as the green ray itself acts as moment of illumination). The pleasurable aspect of recognizing familial relationships between texts, the practice of reading “alongside,” of comparison and contrast, of identifying intertexts and analogues, opens up inheritance not as something fixed, conservative, or straight, but as queer, open-ended, on-going, different. Romain’s journey of adaptation to his fate is one where he learns to embrace multiple interactions and a matrix of possibilities: one in which the finality of death is read alongside the ever-changing interactions of both artistic and sexual practice.

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