

Queer Filiations: Adaptation in the Films of François Ozon.

Abstract: The adaptation of canonical literary texts in cinema is often linked to a genre known as ‘heritage cinema’, a form associated especially with European cinema and used to promote a conservative vision of the nation as a site of heteronormative reproductive futurity. However, recalling Judith Butler’s assertion that all repetition carries within it the possibility of subversion, and, furthermore, that subversion requires repetition, adaptation reappears as a potentially queer textual activity. As Linda Hutcheon argues, adaptation is ‘repetition without replication’. Through a close reading of differing modes and techniques of adaptation in the films of François Ozon, this article will demonstrate that adaptation offers the possibility of imagining new relationalities and affective encounters beyond the heteronormative reproduction of the nation state.

Keywords:

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Introduction

In François Ozon’s 2007 film, *Angel*, we witness a theatrical performance of one of Angel’s best-selling novels, *The Lady of Irania*. This scene does not occur at all in the novel by Elizabeth Taylor on which the film was based, but is inserted into the film in order:

to visually illustrate the essence of her writing. But I tried to temper the ridicule and the clear absence of literary merit with Angel's emotional reaction to her success. I wanted to show the creative force of someone who is capable of inventing an imaginary world, and who takes great pleasure in doing it.¹

In the next scene, Angel is feted as a successful novelist at an after-show party held in her honour. Esme, a penniless artist with whom Angel will later fall in love, tells her he has seen her play, but not read any of her books, and Angel responds, 'well the play is just an adaptation. It hardly does justice to the complexities of the novel'. This sentence works to draw our attention to the vexed status of adaptation, the anxieties it provokes, and also its constant presence within culture, as Ozon's film shows us an imagined adaptation of an imagined novel discussed in a film that he himself has adapted from a novel. This four-level procedure (from actual novel to virtual novel to virtual stage performance to actual film) indicates a deep involvement with the social, cultural and aesthetic meanings of adaptation and its role in mediating narratives to us.

In this article, I argue that Ozon's self-conscious use of adaptation as trope draws attention to the radical queer potential that is at the heart of the adaptation process as it offers the possibility of subversion within repetition. This queer potential is anxiously policed by the media and the State in their desire to promote a 'heritage cinema' that imagines repetition as perfect reproduction and in which adaptation works to help reproduce the nation. Yet if we turn to the work of Judith Butler and her outlining of the queer potential of repetition, we can see how the act of adaptation as a kind of textual repetition contains the possibility of subversion as well as that of

¹ François Ozon, 'Interviews about *Angel*', <http://www.francois-ozon.com/en/interviews-angel> [accessed 7th July 2010]

confirmation of the status quo. Adaptation can be understood as always-already queer in its potentials and effects, as it is repetition with difference, a subversive repetition with the potential to call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself. Before I go on to discuss the queer potential of adaptation and its varying effects in Ozon's work, I will first explain the way in which adaptation is usually understood as a ideologically conservative process and product.

Landscape, family and nation

Adaptation is used by national governments and certain elements of the press in Europe to shore up ideas about the relationship between the family, the cinema, and the national landscape, in both the political and aesthetic senses of the term. Literary adaptation has above all been identified with the heritage film, a form that is imbued with particular ideas of historical and cultural prestige. As Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau argue, such films belong to wider and longer standing traditions of the idea of Europe as old, a place of antiquity and as the font of Western culture, a Eurocentric view of history that the heritage film draws on through adapting canonical literature.² For example, during the 1980s, 'British' cinema's revived fortunes were at least partially attributed to the rise of the 'heritage film', a form that contains 'luxurious country-house settings, the picturesque rolling landscapes of southern England, the pleasures of period costume, and [...] canonical literary texts' in such a way that 'these films engage with subject matter and discourses that have traditionally played a major part in determining how the heritage and identity of England and Englishness have been understood.'³ Although as Andrew Higson rightly points out,

² Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau, 'Introduction', Dyer and Vincendeau, eds. *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.6

³ Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema : Costume Drama since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 1

these films can be read as critiques of heritage Englishness, their appeal to a certain notion of essential, unchanging Englishness with film borrowing an aura of ‘quality’ and ‘art’ tends to create a conservative nationalist vision of the past, enthusiastically promoted in the press (as when, for example, *The Daily Mail* described *Howards End* as ‘one of the better kinds of British film’⁴). The heritage film stresses adaptation as a way in which the nation is reproduced – both in terms of the reproduction of the nation’s image and in the transmission of national memory, which is mapped onto the figure of the (nuclear) family secure in its place in the landscape as the privileged site of national belonging.

In the French context, the most notorious example is that of Claude Berri’s *Germinal*, based on Zola’s novel, and released in 1993. Although critics remarked on the dark palette of the adaptation, suggesting a shift in the genre from the sun-drenched pastoral of Berri’s 1980s Pagnol adaptations, Jill Forbes argues that what all three of Berri’s films share is ‘a deeper message about the perennality of the values of nature and the family. And *Germinal* [...] is as committed [as *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des sources*] to the notion of generational continuity’.⁵ Alongside this emphasis on the continuity of the French family and the French nation through the narrative and production values of the film, *Germinal* also became embroiled in a cultural debate concerning the role of French cinema in the cultural life of the nation. This was largely due to its release coinciding with the acrimonious GATT negotiations concerning the status of cinema in terms of world trade, arguing that ‘the cinema was not simply a commercial enterprise, but an art form expressing a nation’s

⁴ Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, p. 5

⁵ Jill Forbes, ‘*Germinal*: Keeping It In the Family’, in Ginette Vincendeau, ed. *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: BFI, 2001), pp. 104-109. Emphasis on continuity comes from several sources, such as the downplaying of political discussion in favour of family melodrama (particularly through the figure of La Maheude, played by Miou-Miou); and the final voiceover stressing ‘the seeds of revolution’ sown by Etienne Lantier.

history and values'.⁶ *Germinal* was favourably compared to the American blockbuster *Jurassic Park*, seen as the epitome of American cultural imperialism. Against Spielberg's genetically modified dinosaurs, France promoted its home-grown and entirely natural reproduction of its own literary dinosaur: *grand homme* Zola. *Germinal*'s premiere in Lille was attended by French President François Mitterrand and Culture Minister Jack Lang, who travelled there by TGV. Cinema was thus promoted as part of French technical achievement and source of national pride. In this vision, literary adaptation acts an alibi for the cultural worth of cinema. It allows the claim to be made that the cinema incorporates and reproduces the national body, and that this reproduction is worthy of defence from rapacious outsiders (Spielberg's velociraptors in this case). In this vision, adaptation disavows difference in both literary and sexual inheritance: both work to conserve the purity of the national body. Adaptation is understood as a process that incorporates a national literary inheritance into a canonical national cinema. It is against this artistically and sexually conservative discourse that we can understand the political need to re-read adaptation as a process which celebrates difference and opens up the family to new alliances beyond a vision of itself as part of a nation which must faithfully reproduce one generation's values and concerns (read prejudices and hypocrisies) in the next.

Transtextuality and Queer

Recent scholarship on literary adaptation in Film Studies, such as the work of Kamilla Elliott, Linda Hutcheon, James Naremore, Dudley Andrew and Robert Stam has indeed moved away from a model based on analyzing and critiquing differences between novels and films to become a more theoretical consideration of the processes

⁶ Russell Cousins, 'The Heritage Film and Cultural Politics: *Germinal* (Berri, 1993) in Phil Powrie, ed. *French Cinema in the 1990s: Continuity and Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 25-36.

and products of adaptation.⁷ Robert Stam posits the useful and suggestive notion of the ‘transtext’, an idea he develops through a discussion of the role of literary adaptation in François Truffaut’s *Jules et Jim* (1962).⁸ He argues that the inter-relation between Henri Roché, the author of the novel *Jules et Jim* and the model for ‘Jim’, the German-Jewish writer Franz Hessel (‘Jules’) and his wife, the journalist Helen Grund (‘Kathé’ in the novel, ‘Catherine’ in the film) forms a ‘web of writing’ that goes beyond the narrow question of the relationship between Roché’s novel and Truffaut’s film to form a ‘transtextual diaspora’ that includes not only the novel and the film but also other novels by Roché and Hessel and the intimate dairies of Roché and Grund, published in 1990 and 1991 respectively. ‘Although each text is on one level autonomous and self-contained, on another level each forms part of the transtext of this larger body of work.’⁹ For Stam the transtext presents an opportunity for us to move away from a language of ‘fidelity’ and ‘infidelity’ to a language of ‘performativity’ and ‘transtextuality’. This notion of intertextual dialogism, referring to the notion of a play between individual texts and the wider utterances in which all these texts are embedded, offers adaptation not as a simple dyad (between ‘original’ and ‘copy’) but as a series of dialogic turns offering a veritable dance of relations between a wide spectrum of texts. As such, we can begin to assess the potential for reading adaptation as a way of queering texts, that is to say of opening them up to new relations beyond themselves in which their final identities can only ever be provisional and contingent. The vocabulary that dominates discussions of adaptation,

⁷ See for example, James Naremore, ed. *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/ Film debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Dudley Andrew, ‘Adapting cinema to history: A Revolution in the Making’ in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, eds, *A Companion to Literature and Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 189-204; Robert Stam, ‘Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation’ in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, eds, *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 1-52; Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁸ Robert Stam, *François Truffaut and Friends: Modernism, Sexuality and Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005)

⁹ Robert Stam, *François Truffaut and Friends*, p. vii.

whether that of ‘fidelity’, ‘imitation’, or ‘performance’, speaks to the way in which concerns for relations between texts aligns itself with some of the key issues and debates in queer theory. From the political concern of the nation state to espouse the cause of ‘faithful adaptations’ to the lambasting of films as ‘bastardizations’ of novels, adaptation is identified with a conservative desire to arrest and prevent change. Paradoxically, this points to the queer potential of adaptation. In the words of Linda Hutcheon, an adaptation ‘is not a copy in any mode of reproduction, mechanical or otherwise. It is repetition but without replication [...] *as adaptation*, it involves both memory and change, persistence and variations’.¹⁰ Judith Butler asks if there exist forms of repetition that do not constitute a simple imitation, reproduction and hence consolidation of the (patriarchal) law. She argues that the matrices of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality are the result of a regulated process of repetition: ‘in a sense, all signification takes place within the compulsion to repeat’.¹¹ She then goes on to assert that ‘if the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural legibility, i.e. new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible’.¹² Adaptation can thus be read as potentially queer, as it repeats but does not replicate: it offers the possibility of subversion precisely through its play between ‘original’ and ‘copy’.

Although Truffaut’s film ‘mainstreamed’ the sexual activities of Henri, Franz and Kathé, replacing a ménage-à-trois where all the participants shared a bed and sexual activities with serial monogamy where Catherine replaces Jules with Jim, if we

¹⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 173

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2nd edition 1999), p. 185

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* p. 185

turn to the formal qualities of the film rather than the themes, we can sense some of the liberatory and modern(ist) qualities of adaptation, according to Stam: ‘Truffaut’s adaptation of *Jules et Jim* brilliantly demonstrates the capacity of adaptations to exercise creativity rather than servility [...] rather than “copy” the novel, Truffaut applied a kind of electro-shock to it, exploding it into fragments and shards to be reassembled and recontextualized and collaged together with “alien” materials from other sources [...] For Truffaut, adaptation is a recombinant practice of freedom’.¹³

In this article, I will be combining Stam’s argument that adaptation, particularly when involving fragmentation and collage, can apply a kind of ‘electro shock’ to the text, with Hutcheon’s argument that adaptation repeats but does not replicate, and with Butler’s argument that the act of repetition in itself has the potential be subversive – and more crucially, that it is repetition that is key to subversion. Adaptation as process and product can produce normative texts that shore up cultural binaries, but it also contains the potential for radical re-writings and re-readings that can upset cultural hierarchies and open up a process of reading that is contingent, in process, that defies a settling of meaning – in other words, that is queer.

Transtextual Adaptation: François Ozon and Eric Rohmer

Robert Stam’s useful notion of the transtext can be applied beyond his use of the term to explain the relationship between Roché and Truffaut. In the films of one of French cinema’s new young queer directors, François Ozon, it is possible to trace a complex transtext that places his work in a dialogic relation with that of Eric Rohmer and which in this process challenges the conservative values of the heritage film and the literary adaptation. Processes of adaptation and interpretation can be explored via

¹³ Robert Stam, *François Truffaut and Friends*, p. 85

many of Ozon's films: *8 Femmes* (2002) was based on a little known boulevard play by Robert Thomas; *Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes* (1999) on an obscure Fassbinder play, considered part of Fassbinder's juvenilia; Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* is cited in *Sous le sable* (2001); and *Swimming Pool* (2003) pastiches writing by Ruth Rendell and Agatha Christie. It is interesting to note that, rather than adapting major literary novels, Ozon chooses obscure or relatively unsuccessful texts. And it is here, in the use of obscure or unsuccessful texts that Ozon's dense referencing of Eric Rohmer can be understood to perform an important 'resignification within repetition' that for Butler is key to queer subversion of gender hierarchies and compulsory heterosexuality. Given that the majority of his films deal with the amorous dilemmas of heterosexual couples, Rohmer's cinema would seem an unlikely point of departure for a filmmaker whose films have been considered part of a European or French New Queer Cinema.¹⁴ The two films Ozon has made which owe clear debts to Rohmer's work are *5x2* (2004) and *Le temps qui reste* (2005). Rohmer's film making acts as a site for Ozon's films to realise an aesthetics of queer adaptation, one in which inheritance is put to the service of difference and change rather than continuity and futurity, precisely because of how strange and unlikely a pairing it is: Ozon can only make a faulty copy of Rohmer in his repetition. Butler argues that the 'injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent conjunctions which in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are created.'¹⁵ By deliberately foregrounding adaptation as a process that engages with repetition as a site of potential failure as well as success, Ozon turns away from the conservative notion of the inheritance film that holds sway and opens up repetition to

¹⁴ For an extended discussion of Ozon's work in relation to broader issues of representation and politics in queer cinema, see Nick Rees-Roberts, *French Queer Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 8-10.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 185

its own possibility of variance and change, revealing the contingency of identity and is thus potentially subversive in its effects.

Rohmer's film-making however also provides another important reference point for Ozon, in that it also engages with questions of adaptation in such a way as to problematize the conservative nature of heritage cinema's relation to the literary text. He has made four films that are conventional literary adaptations. These are *La Marquise d'O...* (1976), based on the novella by Kleist; *Perceval Le Gallois*, based on Chretien de Troyes' *Le Roman de Perceval* or *Le Conte du Graal*; *L'Anglaise et le duc* (2001), based on the memoirs of Grace Elliott; and, most recently, *Les Amours d'Astrée et de Celadon* (2007) based on the novel by Honoré d'Urfé. However, as Maria Tortajada argues, Rohmer's interest in the interaction between the literary and the cinematic is not limited to such conventional adaptations. Tortajada argues that Rohmer's cinema is not simply a cinema of adaptation in the narrower sense of 'borrowings and reshapings of style and story, characters and other recognised features from a source text' but rather that his 'creative activity [...] works through the absorption and the transformation of a system of value and behaviour borrowed from "libertinage." [...] The literary reference becomes complex: here it is a question of the "libertine constellation", a model which needs to be elaborated on the basis of multiple texts'.¹⁶

So, against the dynamics of the conventional heritage film, which looks to the literary past as the source of unique works by an individual (male) genius which can be taken to express the national, we can read Rohmer's films as an investigation of a certain literary constellation or structure. Although the concept of libertinage is difficult to pin down, given its differing manifestations and generic contours, it has an

¹⁶ Maria Tortajada, 'From Libertinage to Eric Rohmer: Transcending "Adaptation"' in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo, *A Companion to Literature and Film* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 343-357.

overwhelming interest in games of seduction. These games depend on a shared code between the players: the seduction takes place behind a veil, and every word has a potential double entendre, every gesture a potential hidden meaning. 'It is based on complicity and connivance rather than trickery, and it assumes a code which must remain implicit even at the very moment it is used.'¹⁷ Although I would not posit Rohmer's cinema in and of itself as queer, he nevertheless reveals here the way in which heterosexuality, far from being a natural given, is a constantly recreated identity dictated by the rules of social interaction, and thus acts to make us aware of the forces of normalization that regulate social conformity.¹⁸

Rohmer acts as a useful springboard for Ozon. Rohmer's films explore the multiple ways in which sexual relations are codified through texts, and suggest textual adaptation as a mode of questioning heteronormative ideas and behaviours. However, Ozon transposes Rohmer's resolutely hetero-centric universe into one that is also permeated by questions of same-sex desire, producing the 'faulty copy' that Butler sees as key to the art of subversive repetition. Ozon closely adapts themes, motifs, forms and preoccupations from Rohmer's films, in order not to give a clear, coherent reproduction, but instead to make adaptation a site of difference, excess and fragmentation.

5 x 2 is a film that tells the story of crumbling marriage. As its title suggests, the film consists of five key moments from the relationship: first meeting; marriage; birth of first child; dinner party with friends; divorce. It reverses the chronological order of its story-telling: the film begins with the divorce, and traces the couple back through the other events that make up the film until it finishes with their meeting on

¹⁷ Maria Tortajada, 'From Libertinage to Eric Rohmer', p. 347.

¹⁸ In a similar way that Tortajada finds a fluidity of representation through Rohmer's treatment of libertinage, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit posit the idea of a 'Rohmerian salon' in which (heterosexual) love is debated and critiqued rather than unquestioningly accepted. See Bersani and Dutoit, 'Rohmer's Salon', *Film Quarterly* 63:1 (Autumn 2009), pp. 23-35.

holiday in Italy. Alongside this interest in the history of a couple, Ozon demonstrates an interest in the history of cinema, which each of the five scenes from the couple's life filmed in a certain style. As he comments in the press pack that accompanies the film:

I needed to try and make each episode of the film correspond to a different genre of cinema. The first episode is a psychological drama, 'a chamber film'. The second part is more socially aware, a more classic French film. For the wedding section, I turned to certain American films and for the section in which they first meet, I looked to Rohmer's summer films. I wanted the movie to alter during its 90 minutes of screen time so that the tone and issues would shift from chapter to chapter.

Ozon's film problematizes, then, the notion there is one key source from which he is borrowing. Rather, he stresses the magpie nature of his creative inspirations, borrowing from several places to give his film varied texture and tone. This artistic promiscuity would seem to be echoed in the film's discussion of the possibility (or not) of sexual fidelity. Phil Powrie argues that we can read the film's shifts of tone and genre as part of a process of questioning of the representation of the male body and its sexual practices. 'The fragmentation of the male body across time and formal cinematographic structures is compounded by Gilles' bisexual leanings, as opposed to Marion's faithfulness, with the exception of her wedding night, to the idea of the couple'.¹⁹ Gilles's brother, Christophe, is gay and the dinner-party scene engages closely with questions of sexual orientation and fidelity. Mathieu, Christophe's partner, asserts that, 'I don't believe in faithfulness. It isn't possible and it's pretty pointless'. Soon after this, Gilles describes (or imagines?) having taken part in an

¹⁹ Phil Powrie, 'The Haptic Moment: Sparring with Paolo Conti in Ozon's *5x2*', *Paragraph* 31: 2 (2008), 206-222.

orgy with both men and women, at a friend's party, which Marion had chosen not to participate in, but had watched. The ability to reject the need for faithfulness is linked to the availability of a mode of sexual relationality different from that of the heterosexual marriage. Although this in some ways links to problematically clichéd ideas about the sexuality of gay men, in this context it asserts that infidelity can offer new explorations of identity and desire: Marion's defence of fidelity rests on notions of resisting temptation: something we later learn she was unable to do on her wedding night.

How then does this allow us to read Ozon's appropriation of Rohmer in the film's final scene? Given the reverse order in which Ozon's film narrates this story, we know the inevitability of infidelity by the time we arrive at their meeting. While I don't wish to be unfair to the context of Mathieu's remark quoted above, we can see how Ozon has earlier warned us that faithfulness 'is not possible', and the experience of his couple would seem to underline this. Borrowing the feel of Rohmer's summer films, without directly citing any of them, allows Ozon both to borrow his interest in the minutiae of the expression of interest and desire between a couple and place it into a context where fidelity, to either an aesthetic reference, or a partner, is seen as impossible. Rohmer's films, on the other hand, especially the *Contes moraux*, show characters choosing to remain faithful to one partner rather than changing partners. Ozon asserts the inevitability of change, both in documenting the changes through time that his characters undergo, and in the process of adapting one director's or author's work into another's. Adaptation does not prevent and arrest change (the desired continuity of the fidelity model) but rather highlights it. Catherine Grant asserts, there 'is no such thing in discourse as a secret adaptation': in order for us to

analyse a text as an adaptation, its presence must be felt somewhere.²⁰ How does a text assert the presence of anterior texts that may have an influence upon it? One can argue that it is through borrowing genres, stars, settings, and places from earlier sources; through inviting the process of comparison and contrast. Nevertheless, the presence of Rohmer in the film's final sequence is only felt in the resonance of his repeated use of beachscapes in his summer romance films. The use of natural light and the way in which the couple are filmed frontally, together, rather than in close-up, recalls and references Rohmer's techniques, but only in the most low key and oblique of ways – there is, for example, no direct citation or even casting to remind us of Rohmer. Against Catherine Grant's argument, the reference to Rohmer here functions almost like a secret adaptation, a reference for the cinéphile audience member that nevertheless does not function as an acknowledged source in the text.

The presence of Rohmer is however, far more strongly felt in Ozon's next film, *Le temps qui reste*. It tells the story of a young, gay fashion photographer, Romain/ Melvil Poupard, who learns that he has widespread cancer and only a few months to live. Ozon claims in an interview discussing this film that 'Romain is a young man, which gives a dimension of injustice. He is homosexual, which, in the logic of society as it is, implies an absence of filiation, of continuity after death'.²¹ Yet Ozon's film works against this statement to place Romain into a Rohmerian filiation. Not only does Ozon borrow Rohmer's setting of the beach for his final sequence, as with *5x2*, he also borrows stars. Melvil Poupard starred in Rohmer's *Conte d'été* (1996), and even more significantly Marie Rivière plays his mother. She played a mother in *Conte d'automne* (1998), providing a subtle filial link to Poupard through

²⁰ Catherine Grant, 'Recognising *Billy Budd* in *Beau Travail*: epistemology and hermeneutics of an auteurist 'free' adaptation', *Screen* 43:1 (2002), 57-72

²¹ Dominique Widemann, 'Avec *Le Temps qui reste*, présenté à Cannes dans la section Un certain regard, François Ozon livre un film bouleversant de justesse et de pudeur sur le deuil de soi', *L'Humanité*, 30 May 2005

their work in the *Four Seasons* series. However, she is cast regularly by Rohmer: she plays Anne in *La Femme de l'aviateur* (1981). She is having an affair with the pilot of the title, who leaves her a note breaking up with her at the start of the film. She plays Delphine in *Le Rayon vert* (1986), a single woman looking for romance during a long, lonely summer. Finally, she plays Isabelle in *Conte d'automne*, who poses as a single woman in order to try and find a date for her single friend Magali. Despite her happy marriage, the film finishes on a close-up of Rivière's face with an expression of regret as she gives up the chance to explore a relationship with Gérard. Through the casting of Rivière, Ozon references Rohmer's exploration of the discontents of monogamous heterosexuality for Rivière's characters, providing us with a critical distance from the promotion of straight sexual identity as unproblematically happy for women.

Ozon's films take Rohmer's exploration of the discontents and ambivalences of the heterosexual matrix and explode them into 'the new relational modes' envisaged by Ulysse Dutoit and Leo Bersani in their reading of Pedro Almodovar's *All About My Mother* (1999).²² Particularly important here is Ozon's persistent referencing of Rohmer in his use of the beachscape. Here, it is given a queer inflection, and the heterosexual philosophy of love elaborated by Rohmer's characters comes to have a greater fluidity, suggested by the bisexual bodies and pleasures illustrated in both films. Although she does not note the connection to Rohmer, Kate Ince comments, 'the beach [...] is the zone in which the fluidity or flexibility of sexual identity [...] is exercised.'²³ Most significantly, through this emphasis on intertextuality, same-sex desire is no longer cut off from questions of inheritance and filiations. Filiation is not however figured in the form of marriage, an institution

²² Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), p. 103.

²³ Kate Ince, 'François Ozon's Cinema of Desire', in Ince, ed *Five Directors: Auteurism from Asseyas to Ozon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 126

that dominates the minds of many of Rohmer's female characters, but in a map of interwoven connections and alliances. In other words, Ozon's films gesture towards a plurality of relations, both artistic and sexual, as begetters of meaning.

Considering *Angel* as 'queer' adaptation

It is on this note that I would like to advance some suggestions concerning *Angel* (2007). Arguing against Andrew Asibong's reading of the film that it is 'a vacuous [and] utterly alienating cinematic experience' that is more about Ozon's solipsistic pleasures than bearing any 'useful' function, I propose that *Angel* is rather the zenith of Ozon's interest in adaptation.²⁴ Taking the interest Ozon has had elsewhere in using adaptations of different texts to showcase the fluidity not only of artistic relations but also of sexual relations, here the rather static and conventional nature of the adaptation could be related to the stultifying strait jacket of the normative education that Angel Deverell wishes to escape. Against her mother's and Aunt Lottie's acceptance of gender and class hierarchies, Angel asserts her desire to fashion herself: when her publisher asks her to describe her background, she answers, 'please – I don't want anyone to know – nothing I'm describing to you seems real'. Furthermore, she rejects the promotion of female filiation through childbirth. She refuses her publisher's idealization of childbirth – when he objects to her novel's graphic descriptions and tells her that 'childbirth can be a beautiful thing', Angel retorts, 'that's because you're not the one doing the bleeding.' When on her death bed, her mother tells Angel that 'you know I regret not seeing you marry and have a child', Angel replies, 'but I don't have time for a child mother – I have my work', a

²⁴ Andrew Asibong, *François Ozon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), pp. 138-9. Ozon has returned to his interest in Rohmerian transtextual filiations in his most recent film, *Le Refuge* (2009), which features Marie Rivière as a mad woman whom the protagonist encounters on the beach.

statement privileging textual production over sexual reproduction and utterly out of step with the gender norms prevalent in the 1910s, the time of the book's setting.²⁵

With *Angel*, Ozon does undertake a more conventional literary adaptation than elsewhere in his filmography: one based on a book, sharing its title, its main characters, and its narrative trajectory. Indeed, the film is fairly faithful to the book, with few major changes to the story. Why then is Ozon moving into the territory of the conventional literary adaptation? Can we still read such a one-to-one relationship between literary text and filmic adaptation as queer? The answer concerns the process of avowal. Here, adaptation is part of the surface of the text, referenced in all the usual ways, as 'uncloseted' as adaptation was 'secretive' in *5x2*. The film is promoted as 'based on the novel by Elizabeth Taylor', and the new edition of the book proclaims that it is 'now a major film directed by François Ozon' and features an image from the film (of Angel and Esme embracing – surely not an innocent image considering the imbrications of heterosexual reproduction and the aesthetics of adaptation).²⁶

Ozon's adaptation of Rohmer is a process of queer filiation. It fragments and explodes the source text through imagining new possibilities of relationality that don't function in the originals. However, in *Angel*, he appears at first to return to a straight process of adaptation that falls back on the binary opposites beloved of conservative critics of adaptation: original against copy; literature against film; high art against popular culture. *Angel*'s construction of binary opposites is utterly overdetermined.

²⁵ And, of course, given an extra ironic twist through the heroine's name: Angel is determined not to be 'the angel in the house', the usual position of the female heroine in a melodrama. For a further discussion of this figure, see Christine Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film* (London: BFI, 1987), p. 24

²⁶ Elizabeth Taylor, *Angel* (London: Virago, 2008). It is worth comparing this to the cover of the 2006 edition of the book (its last reissue), which in contrast to the highly romantic snow-filled image of Esme and Angel embracing, the latter in a bright red dress, featured a black and white photograph of a young woman staring at the camera, placing more emphasis on the book as character study of a determined young writer, and far less on the romantic image of marriage it also explores.

Angel marries Esme, whose work is austerely modernist, as opposed to Angel's best-selling populist romances. Esme and Angel form an absolute dyad in which gender difference is mapped onto a whole other series of textual oppositions: mass culture/modernism; commercial success/ artistic integrity; entertainment/ art.

This over determined use of binary opposites recalls the epistemology of the closet as explained by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. She reads the closet as a structure that orders 'a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for contestation of meaning in twentieth century Western culture [which] are consequentially and quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition.'²⁷ These sites consist largely of the following binary oppositions: masculine/ feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old, art/kitsch, growth/decadence, urbane/provincial, health/illness, same/difference, cognition/paranoia and sincerity/sentimentality. Each of these terms overlaps incompletely with others, to form a structural textual closet in which 'to discuss any of these indices in any context, in the absence of an anti-homophobic analysis, must perhaps be to perpetuate unknowingly compulsions implicit in each.'²⁸

Both the book and the film *Angel* are in fact concerned with constructing these sets of binary oppositions only in order to 'smudge' them (the derisive term that Nora uses to describe Esme's paintings). The question of what is art and what is entertainment, what is popular and what is elitist, what is modernist and what is melodrama, runs troublingly through the text, unable to be resolved. The impossibility of a neat artistic dyad is underlined by the introduction of a third term – Nora, Esme's sister and Angel's helpmeet, who writes unpopular sentimental poetry. Nora, with her

²⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 74

²⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 74

(largely unspoken) sexual attraction to Angel, and her perennially unpopular poetry moves outside of the neat (if oscillating) oppositions set up in Angel and Esme's relationships between masculinity and femininity, art and kitsch, the elite and the popular. The permeability of borders between supposedly opposing pairs is further enhanced in the sequence where the now insane Angel, wearing gothic clothing and with long, dark hair, visits the mother of Esme's child and the former resident of Paradise House, Angelica. Angelica, polite and well-mannered, wears 1920s clothing and has a controlled blonde bob. The women contrast in appearance yet are twinned in terms of their names and their inheritances: both are linked to the genealogy of Paradise House and Esme.²⁹ The neat structures of the closet are exploded. Even in this conventional adaptation then, Ozon questions rather than confirms the operation of a neat dyad, a process underlined also by the androgynous nature of Esme and Angel's forenames.

Ozon's interest in undermining heteronormative ideology is further enhanced in this film as he undercuts the generic codes of melodrama and romance, the genres this film borrows from, through making Esme and Angel's relationship inherently dysfunctional. Elizabeth Taylor's novel satirizes Angel's romance fiction through having her editors laugh at her literary style, including her excessive use of 'nay' and highfaluting words such as 'coruscating' and 'iridescent'.³⁰ This parody of romantic fiction was felt to be lacking by reviewers of Ozon's film, who tended to dismiss it as

²⁹ This ending was criticised for its neat tying of plot endings that are left ambiguous in Taylor's novel. However, we can see in this moment the origins of Angel's fantasy world and possibly her queer desires as Angelica is set up as the desirable object to imitate, by the fact the Deverell family name their child in her honour. Upon visiting the 'original' Angelica at the end of the film, Angel finds herself to be the imitation, the repetition that will strive to achieve the idealised femininity Angelica embodies. Angel, trapped as she is in within a heteronormative structure, cannot escape the pressure to also perform this idealised femininity.

³⁰ Elizabeth Taylor, *Angel* (London: Virago, 2007), p. 51

empty and shallow.³¹ However, Ozon satirizes Angel's own desire to be in a perfect romance, illustrating both her naive, romantic hopes for her marriage to Esme when she proposes during a rainstorm and a rainbow emerges and the painful truth of female experiences within marriage as she suffers both miscarriage and rape (neither of which occur in the novel). Ozon points out the flaws in the male-female couple while making Nora Angel's true helpmeet, suggesting an alternative source of comfort and love for Angel if only she was not blinded to its possibilities by her romance narratives (meaning both the narratives that she writes and the larger social narratives into which she is written).

The film further undermines the structural oppositions it seems initially to set up by drawing attention to its own artificial construction. Disowning the naturalist slant of much heritage cinema, it does not attempt to reconstruct the world of the book but rather foregrounds its own contingency and materiality, particularly through a process of modernist collage and fragmentation, a manoeuvre that Stam argues provides an 'electro-shock' to the conventional literary adaptation. Ozon draws our attention to the material nature of the cinema, fragmenting his film's general tone of realism with moments of jarring artifice. Several montage sequences are used to illustrate Angel's rise to fame and fortune, such as when, twenty-four minutes into the film, we cut to a scored montage sequence of Angel posing for photographs, receiving prizes, and posing for more photographs, while images of book covers are superimposed in *photo montage* style.³² This formalist attention to the very fabric of cinema is further enhanced through Ozon's use of the anachronistic technique of rear

³¹ For a full discussion of the reception of *Angel* in both the UK and France, see Alice Stanley, 'Representations of Sexuality in the Films of François Ozon', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2010, pp. 99-117.

³² Alice Stanley intriguingly suggests that these sequences with their uses of fades and dissolves of book covers also bear a resemblance to Power point presentation slides suggesting that the anachronistic use of technology works forwards as well as backwards in this film. See Alice Stanley, pp. 106-7.

projection in two sequences, one when Angel is driven through the streets of London and one when she is on honeymoon with Esme. In these sequences, Angel travels past various iconic buildings using differing modes of transport – in a horse-drawn carriage past Big Ben; on a gondola in Venice; on a camel past the pyramids of Cairo; and on a donkey past the Acropolis.

As Laura Mulvey argues, ‘nothing divides the history of cinema into pre- and post-digital so clearly as the world of special effects and nowhere is this clearer than in the disappearance of rear or back projection.’ Rear-projection is achieved through a ‘process shot’, that is to say, one which mixes direct-to-camera action with other more or less synthetic elements. This special effect is achieved using transparencies (also known as plates) and represents an attempt to reconcile the desire for star performances with the need for action sequences. It is a technique associated especially with the Hollywood studio era, where it was used by many directors such as for example Hitchcock (*Marnie*, 1964) or Preminger (*River of No Return*, 1954). Landscape or cityscape footage, often filmed by a second unit or extracted from a studio library, was projected in a specialized studio onto a screen; then as the actors played their scene (with as little extra movement as possible), screen and studio would be filmed together. Mulvey goes on to comment that the technique thus introduces a ‘dual temporality’ into the image: two diverse registration times are montaged into one image. While this is true of any photographic superimposition, the dramatic difference between the documentary nature of the landscape footage and the artificiality of the studio scene heightens the sense of temporal dislocation. Furthermore, as the actors stay still, rooted to one spot, often facing artificial wind or water or vertiginous height, their performances become mannered and excessive:

‘self-conscious, vulnerable, transparent’.³³ Thus the technique of rear-projection introduces into a technical process that attempts to perfectly reproduce the experience of being outside in a particular environment a clumsy visibility of the effort of performance. The appeal of rear-projection for Ozon becomes clear: like the process of adaptation itself, it involves imperfect reproduction. It creates a ‘queer space’ that is neither the approximation of reality of documentary cinema, nor the verisimilitude of fiction, but one that imperfectly imitates both, drawing our attention to the repetition with difference that is at the heart of queer transformations of gendered and sexual identities.

If, as Jeffrey Weeks puts it, ‘sexuality is a historical as well as personal experience’, Ozon’s investment in cinematic and literary history is an excellent vehicle for the expression of sexual themes.³⁴ In his use of anachronistic techniques such as rear projection and his references to a wide array of cultural influences, Ozon introduces a range of histories into his films. While *Angel* may strike one as a bizarre and baroque addition to his filmography, its importance lies in its assertion of the importance of adaptation to Ozon’s wider cinematic project, one that sheds light on the subversive potential of all adaptation. His films straddle yet another binary opposition beloved of French cinema – that between ‘popular’ and ‘art-house’ – and as the work of that oxymoron - a mainstream, queer auteur – Ozon’s films offer us the pleasures of cinematic repetition with the queer possibilities of new relationalities.

³³ Laura Mulvey, ‘A Clumsy Sublime’, *Film Quarterly* 60: 3 (Spring 2007), p. 3

³⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 53