

## ADAPTATION AND THE FRENCH NEW WAVE: A STUDY IN AMBIVALENCE

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This essay concerns the multifaceted relation between literature, adaptation, and the New Wave. I will outline the broad history of this relationship as theorized by the New Wave directors/critics, and as put into practice in specific films, simultaneously reflecting on the adaptations themselves and on the methodological question of how to talk about adaptation. I will tie the analysis of exemplary sequences to methodological/theoretical concepts – the “automatic difference,” “activist *écriture*,” the “manifesto sequence,” “hidden polemics” – that strike me as productive in relation to the subject at hand. Both the films and the critical writings of the New Wave directors, I will be arguing, provoked a salutary disarray in our thinking about adaptation, and more broadly, about the relations between film and literature.

### **The Theoretical Revolution**

The *Cahiers* critic/directors who formed the nucleus of the New Wave were profoundly ambivalent about literature, which they saw both as a model to be emulated and as an enemy to be abjured. Haunted by literature’s overweening prestige in a country known for its veneration of writers, the *Cahiers* critics forged the “auteur” concept as a way of transferring the millennial aura of literature to the relatively fledgling art of film. In postwar France, both film and literature formed part of neighboring and partly overlapping “fields.” The dominant discourse in both fields came to gravitate around such concepts as “authorship,” “*écriture*” and “textuality,” in ways that would impact the very conceptualization of adaptation. Novelist/filmmaker Alexandre Astruc prepared the way with his landmark 1948 essay “Birth of a New Avant-garde: The Camera-pen,” in which he argued that the cinema was becoming a new means of expression analogous to painting or the novel. Within this view, film should no longer render pre-existing written texts, whether in the form of a script or a source novel; rather, the shooting process itself should be a form of action-writing performed through *mise-en-scène*.

The New Wave began to formulate its aesthetic principles, symptomatically, precisely around the “*querelle de l’adaptation*.” In a series of articles, Bazin argued that filmic adaptation was not a shameful and parasitical practice but rather a creative and productive one, a catalyst for aesthetic progress. In “Defense of Mixed Cinema,” Bazin mocked those who lamented the supposed “outrages” against

literature committed by adaptations, arguing that adaptations helped democratize and popularize literature, with “no competition or substitution, but rather the adding of a new dimension that the arts had gradually lost... namely, a public.” (7)

In his manifesto essay “A Certain Tendency in French Cinema” (first published in *Cahiers* in 1954), François Truffaut distanced himself from his mentor’s cautious approval of adaptation. Instead, he excoriated the “tradition of quality” which turned French literary classics into predictably well-furnished, well-spoken, and stylistically formulaic films. Since the prestige of the “quality” tradition partially derived from the borrowed luster of its literary sources, Truffaut was striking, in a sense, at the basis of the “symbolic capital” accorded to that tradition. In his “Cinema as Digest” essay, Bazin had suggested that two “quality” screenwriters (Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost) simultaneously “transformed” – in the manner of an electric transformer – but also “dissipated” the energy of their source novels (48-49). Truffaut, in contrast, accused the two screenwriters of being disrespectful to both literature and film. He mocked their claim to have revolutionized adaptation through a “creative infidelity” which produced “equivalencies” between literary and cinematic procedures. What this amounts to in practice, Truffaut argued, is a cynical triage which discards whatever is arbitrarily decreed to be “unfilmable.” The result, for Truffaut, is a flattening out of the heterogeneity of literary sources. But, even more gravely, the search for “equivalencies” for the putatively “unfilmable” passages from the novel masked a profound scorn for the cinema, seen as fundamentally incapable of ever achieving the grandeur of literature.

For Truffaut, adaptation too was a “*question de morale*.” But on another level, he was aiming to establish for the New Wave, to pick up on Bourdieu’s play on a famous phrase from Max Weber, a “monopoly on creative violence.” Indeed, that phrase is especially appropriate to Truffaut’s verbally abusive essays of the period. As Phillippe Mary points out, the New Wave generally, and Truffaut specifically, performed a simultaneous desacralization and sacralization, in a double operation which legitimated one cinema (Renoir, Hitchcock, Hawks) and delegitimated another (the “Quality” tradition). This entailed, in a kind of mediatic version of Sartrean “authenticity,” an attempt from the cinema to conquer greater autonomy. And here the enemy of autonomy was twofold: at once literature, or better the prestige of literature, on the one hand, and the “quality” tradition in film, on the other.

The “French theory” that emerged simultaneously with the New Wave also played an indirect role in these developments by subverting the various hierarchies – original over copy, literature over film, word over image – that “underwrote,” as it were, the devaluation of film. The structuralist semiotics of the 1960s treated all signifying practices as sign systems productive of “texts” worthy of careful scrutiny. The intertextuality theory of Kristeva (rooted in Bakhtin’s “dialogism”) and Genette’s “transtextuality,”

similarly, stressed the endless permutation of textualities rather than the “fidelity” of a later text to an earlier model, and thus also impacted our thinking about adaptation. Barthes’s levelling of the hierarchy between literary criticism and literature, by the same token, worked by analogy to rescue the film adaptation as a form of criticism or “reading” of the novel, one not necessarily subordinate to its source. Derridean deconstruction, meanwhile, dismantled the hierarchy of “original” and “copy.” In this perspective, the auratic prestige of the original does not run counter to the copy; rather the copy creates the prestige of the original. A film adaptation as “copy,” by analogy, is not necessarily inferior to the novel as “original”; indeed, it can itself become the “original” which generates subsequent “copies.”<sup>1</sup>

The Bakhtinian “protopoststructuralist” conception of the author as the orchestrator of pre-existing discourses, in a similar manner, opened the way to a non-originary approach to all arts. Adaptation too, in this view, could be seen as an orchestration of discourses, of talents and tracks, a “hybrid” construction, mingling media, discourses and even technical specializations, where the novel itself constituted just one of the “series” incorporated in the film. Bazin anticipated some of the latter-day theoretical currents in his “Cinema as Digest” essay, where he argued for a more open conception of adaptation, one with a place for what we would now call “intertextuality” and “*transécriture*.” Bazin’s words about adaptation in 1948 ironically prefigured both auteurism and its critique. Bazin saw the “ferocious defense of literary works vis-à-vis their adaptations” as resting on a “rather recent, individualist conception that was far from being ethically rigorous in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and that started to become legally defined only at the end of the eighteenth” (46). Bazin anticipates the poststructuralist prophecy of “the death of the author” by forecasting that “we are moving toward a reign of the adaptation in which the notion of the unity of the work of art, if not the very notion of the author itself, will be destroyed.” (46) Thus Bazin, whose “humanism” later made him the whipping boy for film semiologists, ironically foreshadowed some of the later poststructuralist currents which would indirectly undermine a fidelity discourse in adaptation.

Since the time of the New Wave, adaptation studies have steadily moved away from a veristic “fidelity” discourse toward a more theoretically sophisticated “intertextuality” discourse. In the background of this evolution was a critique of the moralistic language of conventional adaptation criticism, where terms like “infidelity,” “betrayal,” “deformation,” “violation,” “bastardization,” “vulgarization,” and “desecration” proliferated, all implying that the cinema has done a disservice to literature. The standard rhetoric used by both journalists and literary scholars, often deployed an elegiac discourse of loss, ignoring what might be “gained” in the transition from novel to film. It was irritation with the inadequacies of this

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<sup>1</sup> Truffaut’s *Jules and Jim*, for example, became the “original” for Paul Mazursky’s remake *Willie and Phil* rather than the Roché novel itself.

fidelity model that generated a whole new vocabulary for dealing with these issues, resulting in a well-stocked archive of tropes and concepts to account for the mutation of forms across media – adaptation as reading, rewriting, critique, translation, transmutation, recreation, transvocalization, transfiguration, actualization, performance, transmodalization, dialogization, cannibalization, reinvoicing, and reacculturation. The new media, meanwhile, generated new metaphors, whereby adaptation could be seen as a “transcoding” or “reformatting” of the novel. Each term sheds light on a different facet of adaptation. The metaphor of translation, similarly, suggests a principled effort of intersemiotic transposition, with the inevitable losses and gains typical of any translation.<sup>2</sup>

Within the new view, attention shifts from a one-on-one fidelity to a source text to the operations that transform verbal information into audio-visual-written information. Thus source-novel hypotexts (Genette) are transformed by hypertextual selection, critique, concretization, actualization, extrapolation, popularization, transculturalization and so forth. The source text is seen as a dense network of verbal cues which the adapting film text can then selectively take up, amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform according to the protocols of a distinct medium, and as mediated by a series of filters: reigning ideologies, ambient discourses, studio style, economic constraints, auteurist predilections, charismatic stars, cultural values and so forth. In a more Deleuzian language, adaptations redistribute energies, provoke flows and displacements, as the linguistic energy of the literary text is transformed into the audio-visual-kinetic-performative energy of the adaptation.<sup>3</sup>

### **Liminal Zones: the *Ciné-Roman***

As part of its resignification of the hierarchies of cultural prestige, the New Wave dramatically changed the corpus chosen for adaptation. While the Quality Tradition preferred prestigious novels from the classical French realist canon (Stendhal, Balzac, Zola), the New Wave favored less canonical (and often foreign) contemporary writers such as David Goodis and Ray Bradbury. When the New Wave did adapt a classical author, it chose a relatively unorthodox figure such as Diderot, the case of Rivette’s *La Religieuse*. And much as Eisenstein had contemplated adapting *Das Capital*, Resnais, in *Mon Oncle d’Amérique*, adapted (or better chose as his point of departure), the scientific writings of Rene Laborit.

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<sup>2</sup> For a systematic, even technical, exploration of adaptation as translation, see Patrick Catrysse.

<sup>3</sup> I explore these ideas in greater depth in my essay “The Theory and Practice of Adaptation.”

A retrospective look makes it clear that the New Wave threw into profound disarray assumptions about the legitimate forms of adaptation, not only in terms of corpus, but also in terms of aesthetic and production strategies. Whether directly or indirectly, each branch of the New Wave – the *Cahiers* group, the Left Bank, even Cinéma Vérité<sup>4</sup>– changed adaptation practices in its own distinct way. The concept of “adaptation” is manifestly inadequate, for example, to account for the strikingly innovative approach manifested in the *ciné-romans* crafted by Left Bank directors like Resnais and Marguerite Duras. The prestige of literature partially derives from a double anteriority; first, the medium of literature historically precedes the medium of film, and second, the novel precedes its adaptation.<sup>5</sup> But for the theorists of the *ciné-roman*, the film-literature relation did not entail even a *souçon* of subordination. Rather, the *ciné-roman* formed a parallel artistic creation, which takes two simultaneous forms: prose fiction and film. The text is meant for the screen – and in this sense resembles a screenplay – but it also has an autonomous literary existence as well.

At times this lack of theoretical anteriority was literalized through simultaneous publication/release of novel and film. Each medium was seen as having its own invaluable strengths and particularities. Neither text was prior or superior in value; instead, a parallel and criss-crossing movement of creation would benefit both film and literature. Through a two-way artistic current, each medium could energize the other through a process of reciprocal actualization. In the case of the *ciné-roman*, then, it is misleading even to speak of “adaptation” in the conventional sense. Resnais’ practice, for example, was to ask the writer for an original text, in relation to which he was the first and privileged reader, and then, cinematic executor. For Resnais, transpersonal collaboration, somewhat paradoxically, facilitated personal expression. *Last Year at Marienbad*, in this sense, is not an adaptation, but rather a collaborative effort by two artists trying to instantiate their vision of a radically modernist art, while still respecting the specific traits and potentialities of their respective media. We are dealing, then, with a transartistic cross-media collaboration by two artists with cognate sensibilities and modernist aesthetics. It is therefore less a question of “adaptation” than of a dialogic co-creation, a synergistic transfer between a film-literate writer and a literarily-minded director. And if conventional adaptation is like “reheating a meal,” as Resnais liked to put it, then the *ciné-roman* is more like inventing a whole new style of cuisine.

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<sup>4</sup> Here I refer not only to the fact that Jean Rouch can be seen as adapting a different kind of text – Dogon cosmologies, for example, or Hausa rituals – but also to the fact that Rouch’s filming methods influenced the fiction film directors who did the literary adaptations.

<sup>5</sup> Kamilla Elliot also makes this point.

The *ciné-roman* films posed the question of modernism in terms of the specific spatiotemporality of film, and especially in terms of “continuity” as the very kernel of the dominant style. They questioned the aesthetic cornerstone of classical cinema: the reconstitution of a fictional world characterized by internal coherence and by the artfully fashioned simulacrum of a seamless continuity, classically achieved through a series of devices for introducing scenes, for evoking the passage of time (dissolves, iris effects), for rendering imperceptible the transition from shot to shot, and for implying subjectivity and identification, all part of a fluid narrative illusionism. Yet when *Marienbad* was first screened, reviewers praised it, or condemned it, largely in thematic terms. As if entrapped by what Robbe-Grillet had called “*le mythe de la profondeur*”, they glossed the film as an exercise in existentialism, or a critique of elite society, or a lament about the “failure of communication” (a critical cliché of the period), or a meditation on death. Few reviewers caught the inside joke, that the film was essentially a ludic deconstruction of the dominant codes of continuity editing. Resnais and Robbe-Grillet discerned that the key to the dominant form of cinema, the key to its anti-modernism, was its fetish of continuity. Rather than cinema as a slice of life, they revealed it to be, as Hitchcock once put it, “a piece of cake,” or as A’s guardian says of the *mise-en-abyme* painting of “the” château, a “matter of pure convention.”

### **Fidelity and the Automatic Difference**

Jean-Luc Godard’s œuvre also displays a boldly revisionist stance toward adaptation. Godard’s writings and interviews are full of provocatively irreverent, even outrageous, suggestions for new forms of adaptation, simply to film the actual pages of the adapted novel, for example, or to show an actress reading for her role in an adapted play. This irreverence also finds expression in Godard’s actually realized adaptations. In the case of *Masculin féminin* (1965), supposedly based on a Guy de Maupassant story, Godard kept little from the source text beyond the names of a few characters, to the point that the owners of the rights decided that the story had not even been used. *Le Gai savoir* (1968) drew its title from Nietzsche (“*frohliche Wissenschaft*”) but as an essay on audio-visual education, claimed to be adapting Rousseau’s *Emile*. Godard “adapted” *King Lear*, but said, perhaps as a *boutade*, that he had never read the play. (Needless to say, the non-reading of the source renders absurd the very idea of fidelity in adaptation.) And in adapting the sacred word of the canonical Ur-text – Holy Scripture – in *Je vous salue Marie* (*Hail Mary*), Godard sent the Virgin Mother to a decidedly anachronistic gynecologist, thus provoking the wrath of the militant right-wing Catholics who called for the banning of the film. Adaptational infidelity, in this case, was read as “blasphemy.”

Godard, as Philippe Mary points out, has always had a very ambivalent relation to social status and “distinction.” On one level, he was an *héritier*, blessed through family with “considerable economic, cultural and social capital,” yet his paradoxical trajectory was that of a “grand bourgeois who owed his social salvation to a dominated art” (Mary 72). Godard was the heir of both high culture – what Bourdieu calls “restricted production” (39) – and of large-scale production (i.e. Hollywood). From the beginning, Godard systematically marked off his difference from both traditions by being at the same time more popular and “vulgar” than the antecedent tradition – by emulating the B-films of Monogram pictures, for example – and by being more erudite, by weaving in allusions to Nabokov and Faulkner and Sartre. The same ambivalence marks Godard’s attitude toward writing. By refusing to script his films, in the early period, preferring instead to whisper vague directions into the ears of his actors, Godard “oralized what was usually written.” (Mary 184) Godard too, in this sense, was a practitioner of what his admirer Jean Rouch called “*ciné-transe*,” a kind of jazzistic improvisation where writing, in the conventional sense, was subordinated. But at the same time literature came in through the back door, via incessant literary allusion, and in Godard’s later work we find a new kind of refusal of writing, in the sense of his refusal to invent new dialogue, relying instead on a collage of citations.

Even Godard’s most “faithful” adaptation, *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963) based on Moravia’s *Il Disprezzo* (*Contempt*, 1954) is literally disrespectful to its source. We usually assume that filmmakers adapt novels that they admire, yet in this case Godard expressed not admiration but rather indifference and even hostility. Godard expressed “contempt,” ironically, for the novel itself, which he called a “railroad station novel [...] vulgar and pretty, full of old-fashioned sentiments, even though the situations are modern” (*Godard on Godard*, 200). Godard claimed, nevertheless, that his adaptation was both faithful to and different from its source: “I kept the basic materials and transformed a few details, on the principle that whatever is filmed is automatically different from what is written, and therefore original” (Marie 26). Indeed, Fritz Lang echoes Godard’s concept of the “automatic difference” in the film itself. When Prokosch complains that the rushes are “now what’s in the script,” Lang answers: “Of course not Jerry. In the script it’s written, in the film it’s pictures.”

Every medium, we know, has its own specificity deriving from its specific orchestration of its materials of expression. The novel has a single material of expression – the written word – while the film has at least five tracks: moving photographic image, phonetic sound, music, noises, and written materials. In this sense, the cinema has not lesser but rather greater resources for expression than the novel, and this quite independent of what actual filmmakers have actually done with these resources. In this sense, *Contempt* proudly displays the “automatic difference” that comes with the passage from a single-track verbal medium like literature to a multitrack medium like film. Traditional adaptation criticism has tended

to emphasize the cinema's impairments and disabilities *vis-à-vis* film – its putative incapacity to convey tropes, dreams, memories, abstraction – yet on almost any plane one might mention, cinematic adaptation brings a multiplication of registers and possibilities.

Haunted by the prestige (and their own love) of literature, many New Wave directors author what I would call “manifesto sequences” that virtually scream: “look what cinema can do and what literature can not do!” Godard’s fabled reflexivity in this sense, serves the purposes of what Bourdieu-influenced critics call the “autonomization of the cinematic field” and the “monopoly on creative violence.”<sup>6</sup> The opening sequence of *Contempt*, for example, is a virtuoso performance of film’s specific capacities. The only completely honest film, Godard once said, would show a camera filming itself in a mirror (1968-69, 23). Although *Contempt* never achieves such an exacting standard of self-reflexivity, it approximates it by having the pro-filmic camera eye, which in conventional cinema slyly and surreptitiously equates itself with the gaze of the spectator focus on the spectators themselves. It is as if the apparatus itself were nodding at us, in an apparitional equivalent of Brechtian direct address. Instead of identifying unconsciously with the camera through which we see, here we are reminded that films are constituted by looks – the look of the camera; the spectator’s recapitulation of that look; the looks between characters in the fiction; the programmed transfers of looks which carry us from shot to shot – without which the cinematic experience would not exist.

Nothing Godard does here is literally “in” the novel. There is no scene where Moravia describes a camera moving toward a narrator/reader, not any scene where the equivalent characters in the novel exchange precisely that dialogue. More important, there is no way a novel could do what the film is doing. A novel can say “dear reader” and thus address us, but it cannot aim its apparatus at us in the same way. Of course, the novel has been reflexive ever since *Don Quixote*, where Cervantes spoke of printing presses and the “apparatus” of bookmaking. But when a camera aims at us, we as spectators feel looked at, in a way we do not when a writer simply foregrounds the machinery of writing, whether pen or typewriter or computer. Godard’s relentless reflexivity, in this sense, goes beyond a Brechtian attempt to foreground apparatus and technique; it also forms part of an assertion of the autonomy of the cinematic field.

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<sup>6</sup> Among the recent Bourdieu-inflected studies of the New Wave are Genevieve Sellier’s *La Nouvelle Vague: Un Cinéma au masculin singulier*, Jean-Pierre Esquenazi’s *Godard et la Société Française des années 1960*, and Phillipe Mary’s *La Nouvelle Vague et le cinéma d’auteur: socio-analyse d’une révolution artistique*. Whatever my reservations about certain reductionist aspects of Bourdieu’s theories, these specific books – which also cannot be reduced to the Bourdieu influence – have performed an enormous service by repoliticizing a film discourse that had become overly formalist.



Another aspect of this “autonomization” has to do with what Genette in *Palimpsestes* calls “metatextuality” – i.e. the critical relation between one text and another, where the commented text is only silently evoked. (Genette gives the example of the relation between Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* and Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*).<sup>7</sup> In a related conception, Bakhtin speaks of “hidden polemics,” (1984, 196) where an artist conducts a critical dialogue with uncited schools and texts and artists. *Contempt*, in this sense, offers a “metatextual” critique of another (unnamed) corpus of texts, specifically of Hollywood cinema, not only through dialogue and theme but also through technique

*Contempt* is rich in examples of these “hidden polemics, but here I will cite just one, found in the penultimate sequence of the accident that kills Prokosch and Camille. Rather than pursue the Hollywood illusionistic approach of staging an actual (and doubtless very expensive) car crash, Godard evokes the crash in the spectator’s mind through a “library sound” recording of a crash, combined with a panoramic slide over Camille’s farewell message, followed by a shot of Camille and Prokosch in his presumably wrecked convertible. The shot of the wreck is strikingly stylized and anti-realistic. Rather than the actual crash, we are given the carefully arranged spectacle of its highly artificial aftermath. The characters are painted with what is obviously paint rather than blood, and the car is barely damaged, although the rear-view mirror is bent a bit out of shape. The *mise-en-scène* emphasizes the scene’s total improbability. The sports car is caught, pincer-like, between two tractor-trailers facing in opposite directions, an extremely unlikely situation. Furthermore, the dead Prokosch and Camille are shown as facing away from each other, when the elementary rules of physics suggest that any such accident would have impacted on them in identical ways; they would never have ended up facing in opposite directions. Godard’s approach, in sum, is Brechtian and minimalist, characterized by an extreme economy of means. Rather than stage the usual Hollywood Destruction Derby, where cars are destroyed with gleeful abandon, Godard arranges, like a painter, the signs and visual symptoms of an accident, which trigger the idea of an accident in the spectator’s mind. Thus the style itself displays a double marking off of difference, a double *décalage*, first between the film and the novel through an exhibition of technique, and secondly, between Godard’s approach and the conventional Hollywoodian way of filming such scenes.

What we find more and more in Godard’s later work is a dispersive collage-like form of adaptation based on the permutation of multiple intertexts, drawn from the most diverse arts and media, where literature becomes just one source among others available for citation and recombination, but where Godard retains the overall shaping power which coordinates the whole.

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<sup>7</sup> See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La Littérature au second degré*, 11. I first discussed the filmic possibilities of Genette’s literature-based categories in my *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*.

It is as if in the earlier period Godard systematically pursued the analogies and disanalogies between the cinema and specific other arts and genres within individual films— sociological survey in *Masculin féminin*, theatre in *Vivre sa Vie*, poetry in *Pierrot le Fou*, rock in *1 plus 1*, classical music in *Sauve qui peut/(la vie)*, painting in *Passion* and so forth – while in the later films these cross-art comparisons take place within the same film, in a hyperbolization of his early boutade that “you should put whatever you like in a film” (1972, 239). Literary citation now mingles promiscuously with every other kind of citation. Each citation, as Suzanne Liandrat-Guiges and Jean-Louis Leutrat put it, “rather than being subsumed under a single figure, refers back to a subject which is not one, which is dispersed, exploded, spread in fragments. The frontier between text and hors-texte disappears” (38). In a kind of diasporization of adaptation, Baudelaire, Mozart, Goya, Françoise Hardy, Delacroix all mingle and blend in a frenetic *combinatoire* of citations, where no single source text can be found.

### The Amplification of Intertexts

The New Wave, we know, systematically undid the technical and stylistic norms of the “quality” tradition. The directors became, in Philippe Mary’s words, authors not of scripts but rather of “authors of techniques” (242). Of the *Cahiers* directors, François Truffaut was both the harshest critic of the “Quality” style adaptations and the filmmaker most likely to actually do adaptations. But rather than draw on the classical canon, Truffaut drew on second or third-tier writers like David Goodis and Ray Bradbury, in films where style as much as plot was of the essence.

Truffaut’s adaptation of Roché’s *Jules and Jim* provides one of the most striking demonstrations in the history of the cinema of the fact that the filmic adaptation of novels can be an exercise in creativity rather than servility. More than simply an inferior “copy” of an original, the adaptation becomes an immensely creative enterprise, a form of writing in itself. Truffaut had written that there were three kinds of adaptations, those that did the same thing as the novel, those that did something different but interesting, and those which did the same thing, only better (Truffaut “Literary Adaptation” 163). *Jules and Jim* arguably belongs to the third category. It illustrates the contention, on the part of some theorists, that adaptation ideally consists of a reading of the novel and a writing of a film.<sup>8</sup> Truffaut practices what might be called “activist *écriture*.” It is as if Truffaut applied a kind of electroshock to the novel, exploding it into discursive fragments and shards which could then be reassembled and recontextualized and mixed with “alien” materials from other sources. Adaptation for Truffaut is a recombinant practice; he is less

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<sup>8</sup> See my essay on “The Theory and Practice of Adaptation”.

interested in being faithful to the novel per se than to a larger transtext, which includes not only other novels and films but also artistic practices, such as the *avant-garde* penchant for modernist devices such as *montage* and *collage*.

In line with Truffaut's activist "*écriture*," the film also interjects "alien" intertextual materials, many of them added during the actual shoot. One way of looking at adaptation is in terms of the amplification of intertexts made possible by the cinema's multiple tracks. Each track brings with it rich possibilities for intertextual allusion or mimicry. The image track makes it possible to allude to the entire history of the visual arts. The cinema can show a Picasso painting, or mimic Cubist representational procedures, as Godard does in *Pierrot le Fou*. The music track makes it possible to allude to, or mimic, the entire known history of music. The *ouverture* sequence of *Jules and Jim*, in this sense, amplifies the intertext of all the arts that inform the subject of the novel. A shot of a guitar-playing man, for example, introduces a sister art form – music – reminding us again that the film is about the arts and about artists, about music, painting, literature, and cinema.<sup>9</sup> A shot of a Picasso painting ("The Embrace") suggests not only the love theme but also the perennial trope of art as triumphing over time by providing a factitious immortality, a favorite theme in the essays and speeches of Andre Malraux at the time of the film's making. But here Truffaut also draws on his personal knowledge of Roché, and specifically of the fact that he was an art collector and friend of Picasso, who watched him work in his Paris Atelier and who actually owned a number of Picasso paintings. Thus the paintings are not "in the novel" but they are "in" the novelist's experience and therefore worthy of inclusion.

At the same time, the opening sequence constitutes a glorious demonstration of "cinematic specificity," flaunting film's capacity to amplify what is only latent in a verbal medium like the novel. Like the *ouverture* of *Contempt*, the opening credit sequence of *Jules and Jim* provides another example of a manifesto sequence which foregrounds film's specific capacities, constituting a tour de force of affective rhetorical persuasion. Like many New Wave films – for example *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and *Cleo de 5 a 7* – *Jules and Jim* begins by exploiting a device – acousmatic speech (i.e. a heard voice whose source is not shown) – available only to film. We hear a female voice reading a poem, taken from another Roché novel (*Les Deux Anglaises*), which goes as follows: "You told me I love you/ I told you "wait" I was about to say "take me" but you said "go away." The screen remains dark while we hear the (as yet) unidentified voice, which we later realize to be that of Jeanne Moreau. The technique is disorienting since we cannot see or identify the speaker. The poem sets up the theme of melancholy misencounters in love,

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<sup>9</sup> Here Truffaut picks up an important theme in the work of the New Wave directors when they were film critics and theorists – film's relation to the other arts.

anticipating all the mishaps and misunderstandings in the film: the love letters lost or crossing each other in the mail, the missed rendezvous in cafes, and the various other examples of aborted communication. At the same time, a gendered narrational shift takes us from the voice of Catherine (Moreau) as invisible female narrator to the voice of an equally invisible male narrator.

Reflexivity, as we saw with Godard, can form part of a struggle for “symbolic capital.” The credit sequence of *Jules and Jim*, in this sense, also proliferates in reflexive references to the cinema itself. The first shot of Jules and Jim taking costumes out of a trunk on one line underlines their playful attitude, as the pair seem to be trying out new costumes, new roles, new relationships, but on another it reminds us that we are about to see a costume drama, in which actors try on roles and don old-style clothing. Shots of Jules and Jim at play, for example where they each insist at a gateway that the other enter first, remind us of the prankish incidents – for example “the waterer watered” – typical of the early Lumière films. In short, Truffaut gives us exactly the kind of mute filmic vignettes that the prototypes of the characters might actually have seen in the early decades of the century. In fact, the whole credit sequence displays many of the salient features – nonsynchronous dialogue, accompanying non-diegetic music; and comic episodes – typical of a miniature silent film. The sequence “signifies” the silent period, the period in which Jules and Jim grew up and became men.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Return to “Quality”**

Filmic adaptations, like novels, get caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin. Thus the arts ceaselessly spin out new circuits of meanings from ancient forms. Filmic adaptations, in this sense, are “hypertexts” (Genette) derived from pre-existing hypotexts which have been transformed by operations of selection, amplification, concretization, and actualization.

The trope of adaptation as a “reading” of the source novel suggests that just as any text can generate an infinity of readings, so any novel can generate any number of adaptational readings which are inevitably partial, personal, conjunctural, interested. The diverse filmic adaptations of *Madame Bovary*, in this sense, can be seen as variant hypertextual “readings” triggered the same hypotext. Each adaptations sheds a specific light on the novel; the Renoir version transposes Emma’s literariness into theatricality; Minnelli hyperbolizes Emma’s romanticism; Ketan Mehta replaces literary romanticism with Bollywood

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<sup>10</sup> For a much fuller discussion, see my *François Truffaut and Friends: Modernism, Sexuality, and Film Adaptation*.

production numbers; Chabrol stresses the platitude of the provinces. Since adaptations juggle multiple temporalities – for example those of the novel’s production and diegesis, and those of the film’s production and reception – they become a kind of barometer of the discursive trends circulating during the moment of production. Each recreation of a novel for the cinema unmasks facets not only of the novel and its period and culture of origin, but also of the time and culture of the adaptation. Adaptation provides a pre-eminent example of Bakhtin’s claim that “Every age reaccentuates in its own way the works of [the past]. The historical life of classic works is in fact the uninterrupted process of their social and ideological reaccentuation” (Bakhtin “Discourse” 421). With adaptation, a source work is reaccented and reinterpreted through new grids and discourses. Each grid, in revealing aspects of the source text in question, also tells us something about the ambient discourses in the moment of reaccentuation. By revealing the prisms and grids and discourses through which the novel has been reimagined, adaptations grant a kind of objective and palpable materiality to the discourses themselves.

Chabrol’s 1991 adaptation of *Madame Bovary*, in this sense, represents a kind of return to normalcy and a break with the formal audacity of the New Wave. Chabrol would seem to provide an ideal “match” between author and filmmaker. Not only did Chabrol frequently express admiration for nineteenth-century realist writers like Flaubert, but also both he and Flaubert formed part of innovative movements – the classical French nineteenth-century novel and the New Wave – linked to the ideal of “realism.” Flaubert’s “book about nothing<sup>11</sup>” (54) anticipates Chabrol’s defense of “*des petits sujets*,” (2010, 32-33) i.e. modest quotidian subjects as opposed to grandiose themes. Like Flaubert, Chabrol has been the chronicler of provincial boredom (*Le Beau Serge*), middle-class adultery (*La Femme infidèle*), and the self-destructive pursuit of illusory desires (*Les Bonnes femmes*). Like Flaubert, Chabrol can be seen as the ironic anatomist of mimetic desire and social aspiration (*Les Biches*). Like Flaubert, Chabrol is intrigued by intelligent women who tower over the mediocre men around them. The female characters of *Les Bonnes femmes* (1960) and *Les Noces rouges* (1973) all remind us, in their way, of Emma Bovary.

To prepare for his adaptation, Chabrol emulated Flaubert’s own painstaking methods. He looked not only at the novel itself but also at Flaubert’s letters, at critical analyses of the novel, at extrapolations and parodies, and even at Flaubert’s preparatory drafts. Just as Flaubert got physically sick while writing about Emma’s suicide, nauseated by “the taste of arsenic” in his mouth, Chabrol became ill while filming the same scene. In a new twist on Astruc’s *caméra-stylo*, Chabrol’s professed goal was to make the film

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<sup>11</sup> What I would like to write is a book about nothing, a book without exterior attachments, which would be held together by the inner force of its style, as the earth without support is held in the air—a book that would have almost no subject or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible. Gustave Flaubert, (1821–1880). *Correspondance*, letter, Jan. 16, 1852, to Louise Colet.

Flaubert would have made had he had a camera instead of a pen. The very rhythm of Flaubert's sentences was to determine Chabrol's découpage. Since the novel provided a "ready-made script" with indications of angle of vision, Chabrol respected Flaubert's verbal "set-ups" to the letter.<sup>12</sup>

Many critics have noted a dialectic, in *Madame Bovary*, between two styles, one flat and metonymic and associated with the realistic portrayal of a milieu, the other metaphoric and literary, whereby virtuoso romantically-inflected quasi-parodic passages serve to evoke Emma's consciousness.<sup>13</sup> Chabrol generally downplays this "literary-parodic" side of the novel. Chabrol, the *cinéaste* of lost illusions, makes surprisingly little of Emma's illusions. He selects for the voice-over narration the relatively "flat" passages – prose which, like Charles' conversation, is "as flat as a sidewalk" (35) not the bravura "anthological" passages of literary pastiche. As a result, Emma here seems to match her environment; we do not have the sense of a personage whose violent and romanesque imagination scrapes against and transcends her environment.

Literary critics have spoken, in conjunction with Flaubert, of "*le style indirect libre*" (the free indirect style or discourse) as a grammatical-stylistic procedure, an adroit modulation of tenses by which the slow abandonment of pronominal antecedents evokes a slow gliding into an internalized subjectivity. Through the modulation of tenses and modes and parts of speech, the pronoun or proper name ("Emma thought") gradually disappears in favor of the unmediated presentation of a character's thought ("How wonderful to live in a castle in Spain!"). The effect is of a "dolly in" to consciousness, an indeterminacy of narrative voice which mingles distance with interiority, molding a sense of intimate access to a character's mind, but without abandoning authorial agency and attitude.<sup>14</sup>

Flaubert's precise articulation of angle of vision anticipates not only camera "set-ups" but also a favored technique in Robbe-Grillet's novels of clearly marked character vantage points within voyeuristic

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<sup>12</sup> For Chabrol, "fidelity" entailed the detailed reconstruction of the Norman countryside, with extras dressed in period costumes fashioned by Corinne Jorry from portraits by Winterhalter and the Duboffé Brothers. If Flaubert mentioned a specific forest (e.g. the Forest of Argueil), Chabrol tried to film there. This fastidiousness about detail, reminiscent of Flaubert's own careful research into provincial life, even included looking for textiles and clothing in Parisian flea markets, or having it made on handlooms by silk manufacturers.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Novelists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963.

<sup>14</sup> This style, revolutionary in Flaubert's time, has become the virtual norm in much of fiction today, largely because it allows for maximum flexibility in regulating distance toward the character, variously deploying description or narration, direct or indirect speech, interior monologue or "inner speech."

structures. Flaubert's technique, in his proto-cinematic novel, anticipates a signature device of one of the most subjectivizing of directors, Alfred Hitchcock, who also practices, in *The Birds* for example, a rotating point of view among various characters. As an admirer of Hitchcock and a master of manipulation of point of view in his own right, Chabrol disperses the point of view in his adaptation, having it oscillate between various characters. Like the book, the film at times locks us into Emma's perspective and at other times sutures us into the vantage point of Charles, Léon, Rodolphe, L'heureux, and Homais. Like Flaubert himself, Chabrol seems to want to simultaneously embody the perspective of everyone, and of no one. In this sense, Chabrol approximates Flaubert's view of the author as comparable to the "God of creation," invisible yet dispersed into his handiwork. At times, Chabrol creates a filmic equivalent to Flaubert's "*style indirect libre*" through a "variable focus" which moves us in and out of various subjectivities. During Emma's agony, for example, zoom-outs take us away from close-ups of Isabelle Huppert's face to the more distanced perspective of the other witnesses at the scene. And Chabrol uses reported speech to have Rodolphe soliloquize about the elegance of his well-crafted "Dear Emma" rejection letter, thus emphasizing his snide insincerity. By having Rodolphe look at his own letter and "pronounce it good," Flaubert/Chabrol has him echo God's words about the Creation, while also recalling Flaubert's analogizing of lower-case literary creator with upper-case Divinity.

While Flaubert renders Emma's subjectivity through literary parody, as well as through the verbal mimicry of failed vision in expressions such as "Emma strained to see" or "she thought she discerned," Chabrol deploys diverse strategies and cinematic registers to the same end. First, he exploits performance, in the form of Isabelle Huppert's acting, which begins as somewhat bloodless, but comes alive as the film proceeds. The two styles of the novel are rendered, in a sense, as two performance styles. Under Chabrol's direction, Huppert counterpoints two acting styles; one bland and inexpressive, when she is bored and out of sorts, the other passionate and vibrant, with her face flushed with blood. Huppert shows an Emma transfigured by passion; while she normally looks pale and depressive, she comes alive and radiates erotic energy when she is in love. During the deathbed scene, out-of-focus shots render Emma's confusion, visualizing the perturbed vision verbally evoked in the novel. Emma's hallucinations prior to her suicide, meanwhile, are rendered by *Marnie*-like fades to bright red.

Flaubert as a writer was extraordinarily sensitive to sound; his ears were as attuned as his eyes were sharp. In a letter of October 12, 1853 to Louise Colet, Flaubert announced his "symphonic" ambitions in the agricultural fair sequence of *Madame Bovary*: "If ever the values of a symphony have been transferred to literature, it will be in this chapter of my book. It must be a vibrating totality of sounds. One should hear simultaneously the bellowing of the bulls, the murmur of love, and the phrases of the politicians." (Nabokov 156) While literature has an acoustic dimension – in the soundedness of

“inner speech” and its capacity to evoke sound – film has a sound track. Indeed, Chabrol inventoried and recorded Flaubert’s myriad references to sound in the novel – animal noises, church bells, and so on – and used them to “fill out” the soundtrack. We are reminded again of film’s “automatic difference,” and especially of its capacity to incorporate actual performed sounds and music. While Flaubert can mention a Scarlatti sonata which “made Emma dreamy,” a filmmaker like Chabrol has the option of actually playing the sonata on the soundtrack, thus making not only his character dreamy but also making the spectator dreamy, without ever having to use the phrase “making dreamy.”

Adaptations are almost inevitably filtered through the generic conventions of their time of production. In this sense, *Madame Bovary* constitutes Chabrol’s foray into the “heritage genre,” i.e. the wave of quality costume dramas from the 1980s and 1990s, a genre parallel to the “nostalgia” films of the same period. In some ways a reincarnation of the “tradition of quality” tradition so excoriated by Truffaut, the heritage genre, as exemplified by film such as *The Bostonians* (1984), *A Room with a View* (1985), and *The Age of Innocence*, (1993) tended to favor historical and literary themes pursued within a classical aesthetic, usually featuring international stars, aristocratic locales, high production values, and lush symphonic music. It was, in a way, exactly the compromise formation between the popular and the erudite that Chabrol had always sought.

The Vaubyessard Ball sequence offers a good example of the “heritage” style. This four-and-a-half minute sequence, composed of thirty-one shots, begins with a wide-angled shot of the uniformed musicians, revealing an impressive display of wealth and opulence and cultural capital. Chabrol shows Charles’s awkward out-of-placeness in this milieu, for example, by having him confuse the name of the wine being offered him by a servant with the servant’s own name. Emma, meanwhile, tries to distance herself from Charles by walking ahead of him, looking away from him, and waltzing out of his range of vision. While Charles frets about his physical discomfort in formal dress, she eavesdrops on the conversations of other guests, awed by their cosmopolitan banter about gambling, love, and foreign travel. While Charles looks adoringly at her, she ignores him to look with insatiable curiosity at what is for her the brave new world of the provincial aristocracy.

Chabrol handles the Vaubyessard Ball scene quite differently from Minnelli. While, for Minnelli, Emma is the star and the center of attention, for Chabrol, she is an outsider, as she is in the novel, the spectator with her nose pressed against the window, admiring an elite world to which she has no real access. While Minnelli is hyperbolic and spectacular in his treatment of the ball, Chabrol is flat, discreet, understated, almost minimalist. While Minnelli has his camera dance along with Emma, Chabrol has the camera, here identified with Charles’s look, coolly observe her dancing. The sequence orchestrates



interiority and exteriority in a manner which approximates Flaubert's free indirect style. The conjunction of close-shots of her face with conversations overheard by her aligns us with her mental universe; we "see her overhearing," as it were.

Chabrol renders Flaubert's imperfect tense, meanwhile, not through the future tense (à la Minnelli) but rather through a combination of voice-over narration (quoting Flaubert's observations in the imperfect about the predictabilities of provincial life), combined with the *mise-en-scène* of events in the film's present. One such scene presents a typical Sunday, where Léon recites a poem – Lamartine's "Le Lac" – which has to do, appropriately, with the passage of time. The scene demonstrates cinema's special chronotopic capacities by counterpointing multiple temporalities: the romantic time of the Lamartinian "stay-a-moment-thou-art-so-fair" motif ("*O Temps, suspends ton vol*") which favors the mythic eternalization of privileged moments, and the quotidian time of domesticity, boredom, and repetition.

## Conclusion

Many commentators have compared the relation between film and novel to that of a couple. For some, film and literature are like an incompatible couple which cannot live with, or without, each other. Phillip Lopate compares novels and films to the "screwball comedy" couples analyzed by Stanley Cavell, who "marry, divorce, and then, understanding that despite past infidelities they are better off together, submit to the comedy of remarriage" (Lopate 34). Or, to vary the trope, the film adaptation is the illicit, embarrassing, unconfessable partner, the fatal "*femme d'à côté*" who ultimately kills off the legitimate "original" spouse. Here I have tried to go beyond a one-on-one monogamous "fidelity" model in which we declare, thumbs up or thumbs down, the adaptation either faithful or unfaithful. In the end, one might say of novels and their adaptations what Freud said of conjugal bedrooms; that they are inhabited by many invisible participants. In *Jules and Jim*, for example, it is not only the characters who sleep together; it is also the intertexts embodied in Roché's novels, the various memoirs treating the same events and so forth that also "*couchent ensemble*." Here we are reminded of the boutade about postmodern intertextuality: any text that has slept with one text has inevitably slept with all the other texts that that other text has slept with. Art, in this sense, is a textually transmitted dis-ease, a sexual/textual daisy chain of cross-media influence. It is as if the eroticized energies of the novels and memoirs catalyzed the eroticized energies of the film. It is no longer a question of "fidelity," but rather of new forms of energy inspired by various source texts.

By adopting an intertextual as opposed to a judgmental approach rooted in assumptions about a putative superiority of literature, we have not abandoned all notions of judgment and evaluation. But our discussion will be less moralistic, less implicated in unacknowledged hierarchies. We can still speak of successful or unsuccessful adaptations, but this time oriented not by inchoate notions of “fidelity” but rather by attention to “transfers of creative energy,” or to specific dialogical responses, to “readings” and “critiques” and “interpretations” and “rewritings” of source novels, in analyses which always take into account the gaps between very different media and materials of expression.

Copyright law speaks of the “derivative works,” i.e. those work that “recast, transform, or adapt” something that came before. Adaptations, in this sense, make manifest what is true of all works of art – that they are all on some level “derivative.” And in this sense, the study of adaptation potentially impacts our understanding not only of film but of literature as well.\*

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