



Studia
Filmoznawcze
30
Wrocław 2009

Lynn A. Higgins

Dartmouth College

NOTHING TO DECLARE: ADAPTATION AND THE STAR PERSONA¹

Dudley Andrew observed in 1984 that “Unquestionably the most frequent and most tiresome discussion of adaptation (and of film and literature relations as well), concerns fidelity and transformation.”² Since then, Film Studies has steadily gained stature as an independent field of study, and Andrew and other scholars have liberated cinema from reliance on literature for its academic legitimacy. Measuring a film’s adherence to its literary “sources” is no longer a primary criterion for assessing an adaptation, and in fact evaluation has largely been supplanted by more analytic approaches. Reformulation of adaptation studies in terms of intertextuality has permitted acknowledgment of the obvious: that any given film can be traced to a heterogeneous variety of origins. Identifiable literary sources are still worthy of attention, to be sure, but at the same time, other trans-textual itineraries lead to other places. A film might be seen to adapt a director’s personal narrative, for example, or a musical theme and its variations, or an actor’s previous roles, or all of these and others simultaneously. Rejecting outdated notions of the monumental “Work” in favor of a more plastic conception of the “Text,” Roland Barthes put it this way:

The text is plural. [...] The plural of the Text depends [...] not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called *the stereographic plurality* of its weave of signifiers. [It is] woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?), antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony. The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text.³

¹ I am grateful to Katharine Conley, Margot LaPorte, Rebecca Leffler, Ted Levin, and Jason Lewallen for illuminating conversations about Adjani and *La Repentie*.

² Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory*, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 100.

³ Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” [in:] *Image—Music—Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, NY: Hill & Wang, 1977, pp. 159–160.

When it becomes clear that a film can echo and reflect and transform a multitude of predecessors, the curiously moralistic underpinning of critical discourses that emphasize fidelity and unfaithfulness, betrayal and violation is discredited.

My goal here is to investigate a component that has no roots at all in a film's literary precursor: the actor. Specifically, I propose to assess the contributions of Isabelle Adjani to Laetitia Masson's 2002 film, *La Repentie*, adapted from Didier Daeninckx's novel of the same title.⁴ Adjani's presence in *La Repentie* inevitably creates meaning that supplements and disrupts the film's relation to its literary source. While all adaptations – especially those featuring celebrity stars – function in similar fashion, Masson's film is exemplary in the way it deliberately solicits and incorporates this surplus meaning. If Daeninckx's novel is the ostensible origin of the film's anecdote, Adjani's image overtakes and transforms it entirely, making Masson's film as much an adaptation of its star's public persona as of the novel. In fact – and we will return to this point below – Adjani's very adaptability becomes the film's story.

Regardless of how varied his or her screen career might be, a celebrity star such as Adjani brings along a lot of baggage in the form of previous roles and a star persona as it has been disseminated in movie reviews, interviews, photographs, fanzines, websites, rumors, and the like. Moreover, the actor's physical presence – her personal appearance and style of movement, for example, along with features of her face and body as these are magnified and rendered mythical in the media – are inevitably (and literally) “incorporated” into every role. An actor's extra-curricular activities as well, for example her sentimental and political engagements and public statements (especially if scandalous) are not irrelevant. In short, the actor's physical immanence and public image do not simply distance a film from its putative written origins, they also create a separate, cinematic genealogy, thus posing a challenge to any coherent or linear understanding of adaptation.

La Repentie begins in a prison. Karim (played by Samy Nacéri) visits Joseph, and the two men decide that Karim will track down the woman they have both loved and who denounced Joseph in exchange for her own freedom. Details suggest that the three accomplices had masterminded a heist that ended in violence. A young woman steps down from a train. Seen from the back, her face hidden, she enters the Paris-Montparnasse station, retrieves a small suitcase from a locker, and heads for the restroom where, viewed in extreme close-up, she applies makeup and assumes a disguise. She then hurries to the counter to purchase a ticket for “the first train leaving for the seaside.”⁵ Karim is close behind. For the spectator, this young woman is not in the least incognito, however, despite her efforts: she is Isabelle Adjani, in her first screen appearance following a six-year career hiatus.

⁴ Didier Daeninckx, *La Repentie*, Editions Verdier, collection Folio Policier, 1999.

⁵ [“le premier train qui part vers la mer.”] Laetitia Masson, dir. *La Repentie*, ARP/France 3 Cinéma, 2002. All translations from the film are my own.

Once in Nice, the woman invents names for herself – Jeanne Deschamps, Christine Delarue – but without identity papers, she is unable to find work. On her way out of the chic shops from which she is turned away, she spitefully steals small items. Hidden among the vacationers, she sleeps in a lounge chair on the beach, keeping close tabs on her small suitcase, which has by now become a visual reminder of the “baggage” she carries from her past. With Karim still in pursuit, she crosses paths with Paul (Sami Frey), who seems as anchorless and melancholy as she, and who hires her to be his companion, installs her in the luxurious hotel where he himself resides, buys her expensive clothing, and escorts her to an elegant party. He shows her his house, where shrouded furniture seems to await the return of his wife, for whose suicide he feels responsible. They encounter Paul’s parents and his acquaintances, including a woman (played by Aurore Clément) whose relationship with Paul is ambiguous. But an invisible barrier isolates the pair from other people: they seem to evolve in slow motion, as if in a dream, or as if they are too bruised for normal interaction; they speak elliptically, communicating with glances. Gradually, against the grain of their self-protective wariness, they will fall into sympathy and even love, and each will accept the other’s story.

The fugitive woman’s flight morphs into a quest. She visits her father and sister, but they shun her. Has she betrayed them too? Finally, Karim catches up with her and confronts her with a gun. In the ensuing tussle, Paul accidentally kills Karim. Paul and the woman flee across the Mediterranean, where she locates her Moroccan mother, but is again rejected. She wanders into the desert, still trailing her suitcase. When the police arrive and identify her as Leïla, she acknowledges the killing she did not commit and is taken away. Paul will wait for her. The film’s reviews speak of the redemptive power of love.⁶

Masson’s *La Repentie* is a recognizable version of Daeninckx’s novel, whose story moves from prison to the Montparnasse station to the seaside (Brittany, this time) and finally to Nice, and it features a woman recently released from prison and on the run, a black-market job in a restaurant, a son in hiding, and a diver with a guilty secret. Daeninckx emphasizes the crime genre (a choice reinforced by the novel’s publication in the *Folio Policier* series), while Masson foregrounds her protagonist’s existential voyage. Nevertheless, the film recreates the novel’s melancholic, slow-moving mood and its spirit of almost tragic fatalism. In both the novel and its adaptation, the past impinges on the present in the form of a vengeful pursuer. In both, a character (Leïla, Stelio the diver) achieves a kind of redemption by taking the rap for a crime s/he did not commit.

Although the anecdote is recognizable, the locale, many of the details, the overall significance, and the ending of the story are quite different. For starters, in keeping with Daeninckx’s usual interest in sociological contexts, his protagonist’s crime

⁶ For example, see Corentin Clément’s review in *Trois Couleurs* #2 April, 2002, pp. 2–3.

was political: she denounced her accomplices in order to shorten a life sentence for her participation in a violent anti-capitalist movement. Neither her real identity (Brigitte Sélian), nor the false one (Isabelle Lanier) given to her by the authorities as part of a witness-protection program will safeguard her from pursuit and reprisal. Like Masson's protagonist, Brigitte-Isabelle encounters a man who wants to help her, who falls in love with her, and who has a painful past: Stellio's job as a diver is to raise sunken ships from the deep waters of the Atlantic. Once, in a fit of panic, he let a fellow diver drown. Unlike Adjani's character, however, Brigitte has a child, whom she has kept in protective hiding in a small Mediterranean town. After Brigitte's rape by her restaurant employer, Stellio agrees to drive her across the country to find her son. But as they reach their destination, they are run aground by Brigitte's shadowy pursuer, and Stellio is killed. He perceives his dying moments as a replay of the shameful deed that haunts him.

Certain aspects of the novel make it already cinematic, as if Daeninckx foresaw the possibilities for adaptation to the screen. Descriptions – of people's bodies and faces, their postures and clothing, of the diving gear and maneuvers, of the meals Isabelle serves in the restaurant, the spatial dynamics of conversations and of the coastal geography, and so on – are spelled out in meticulous, easily-visualized detail. What is more, numerous references to specific films pepper the text. The theme music from *Pépé le Moko* can be heard in the restaurant (p. 51). Isabelle contacts her son using a telephone card imprinted with a scene from *Les Tontons Flingueurs* (55, 58). A hack journalist is referred to sarcastically as "Citizen Kane" (61), and when he recounts a recent "scoop," his drinking partner suggests that the story could be adapted into film (62). The potential of deep-sea diving as a metaphor for bringing submerged material (the past, hidden identities and secrets) to the surface could easily have been transposed to cinematic representation, but in the desert setting of Masson's adaptation, it is Adjani's small black suitcase that assumes analogous metaphorical weight.

Despite Masson's adoption of Daeninckx's title and her more or less straightforward transposition of the novelist's plot and mood, however, continuities linking the novel and its adaptation are subverted by the insistent image of Isabelle Adjani. In fact, Masson reports having disliked the book. She resisted pressure from her producers until she met Adjani, by whom she was enchanted and inspired.⁷ One can hardly overestimate the importance of casting choices to a finished film, and yet adaptation studies have largely failed to ask what the actor contributes to filmed versions of literary texts. An actor does not simply materialize or actualize a pre-determined essence, does not simply "incarnate" a scripted role, as French usage

⁷ *La Repentie* press booklet, ARP Sélection, 2002, unpaginated. In an interview with Producer Michèle Halberstadt on the DVD, neither woman even mentions that the film is an adaptation of a novel.

would have it. As a component of visual storytelling, the actor is always more than a simple added ingredient. Robert Stam, one of the few to have raised the issue at all, formulates it this way:

Although the novelistic character is a verbal artifact, constructed quite literally out of words, the cinematic character is an uncanny amalgam of photogenicity, body movement, acting style, and grain of voice, all amplified and molded by lighting, *mise-en-scène*, and music. And although novels have only character, film adaptations have both character (actantial function) and performer, allowing for possibilities of interplay and contradiction denied a purely verbal medium.

Evoking terms I have been using to describe Adjani in *La Repentie*, Stam further observes that “[i]n the cinema the performer also brings along a kind of baggage, a thespian intertext formed by the totality of antecedent roles.”⁸

A significant part of Adjani’s reputation rests on her heritage roles, the most memorable of these being Queen Margot (in Patrice Chéreau’s *La Reine Margot*, 1994), Camille Claudel (in the 1988 eponymous film directed by Bruno Nuytten), and Victor Hugo’s daughter (in François Truffaut’s 1975 *Histoire d’Adèle H.*). She began her career at the Comédie Française, and subsequently brought the French theatrical canon to television in productions such as Molière’s *L’Avare* and *L’Ecole des femmes*. Then after starring with Sharon Stone in *Diabolique*, a 1996 remake of Henri-Georges Clouzot’s 1955 *Les Diaboliques* (both adapted from Barbey D’Aurevilly’s *Les Diaboliques*), she disappeared. Until *La Repentie*. Since then, she has logged additional heritage performances in Jean-Paul Rappeneau’s Occupation comedy, *Bon Voyage* (2003); the Countess Almaviva in Jacques Weber’s 2008 version of Beaumarchais’ *Figaro*; and a leading role in Benoît Jacquot’s 2002 adaptation of Benjamin Constant’s *Adolphe*. She has even been among the handful of stars to incarnate Marianne, the symbol of the Republic. One would be hard put, then, to find a more quintessentially French star than Isabelle Adjani.

Yet while she is notoriously protective of her private life and especially her children, Adjani has not hidden the fact that her mother is German and her father an Algerian immigrant. Nevertheless, her family origins were more or less ignored in the early years of her career. She first mentioned that she is a *Beur* [French slang term for a second-generation North African] in a 1979 interview with the *New York Post*, and did not talk openly about it in France until seven years later. In 1986, provoked by growing anti-Arab sentiment in France, she spoke about her roots in an interview with Harlem Désir, president of the anti-racist “SOS-Racisme” movement. At that time, she revealed her Arabic middle name, Yasmine. Shortly thereafter, there were rumors that she had contracted AIDS and even that she had died. “They can’t call me a dirty Arab,” she declared in an interview, “so they’ve found other

⁸ Robert Stam, “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation,” [in:] James Naremore, ed., *Film Adaptation*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 2000, p. 60.

ways, rumors for example.” Finally, she appeared on national television to disprove the rumors, but she felt compelled to complain: “What’s terrible is to have to come here, on television, to say that I’m not sick, as if I had to say that I’m not guilty.”⁹ Not long afterwards, she made a trip to Algeria to bear witness to the riots and governmental repressions there.

Neither Adjani’s nor Daeninckx’s popularity protected *La Repentie* from failure. It is unlikely we can determine with any certainty the reasons why the film met neither commercial nor critical success. This can doubtless be attributed in part to Masson, who does not seek a broad public and whose previous films – including *En Avoir (ou pas)* (1995), *A Vendre* (1998), and *Love Me* (2000) – reached only very small audiences and met negative public reception. For example, Jean-Michel Frodon of *Le Monde* was not only unimpressed by the star’s much-publicized reappearance; he believed that the Adjani myth never existed in the first place.¹⁰ Reviews of the film express – explicitly or covertly – a recurrent theme that can be summarized in the words of one such reviewer, “*La Repentie* fails to materialize the promised fantasy.”¹¹

The fantasy in question was that of Adjani’s return to the screen after the six-year absence that followed *Diabolique*. In the intervening years she had removed herself from the spotlight, she says, in order to become herself, a process that included undergoing a psychoanalysis, about which she explains: “There was nothing to declare. I dived into the unknown. I became myself a stranger [une inconnue] in order to find myself.”¹² Elements of Masson’s version of *La Repentie* plausibly evoke Adjani herself: the character’s emergence from a long absence (after her time in prison), her mixed heritage, her return to North Africa, perhaps even the disappearance of the character’s son (who was already in hiding in the novel). This is not to say that the film is biographical. As Adjani herself puts it in an interview, “This film was made for me, but not from my life [...] The film’s source is not to be found my origins.”¹³ I would nevertheless maintain that at least part of the discomfort provoked by *La Repentie* derives from tensions within Isabelle Adjani’s persona that cast a shadow on her status as a “French” star.

Richard Dyer has contributed to our understanding of the cultural work performed by stars by hypothesizing that “star images function crucially in relation

⁹ This story is recounted by Miriam Rosen in “Isabelle Adjani: The Actress as Political Activist,” *Cinéaste* 17.4 (1990), p. 24.

¹⁰ Jean-Michel Frodon, “Le Retour rituel d’Isabelle Adjani, star en quête d’identité,” *Le Monde*, 17 April, 2002.

¹¹ [“*La Repentie* ne réussit pas à matérialiser le fantasme annoncé.”] Jean-Baptiste Devolder, review of *La Repentie* for filmdeculte.com. Consulted on August 4, 2008 at <http://archive.filmdeculte.com/film/film.php?id=183>.

¹² [“Il n’y avait rien à déclarer. Je rentrais dans l’inconnu. Je devenais moi-même une inconnue pour m’y reconnaître.”] Gérard Lefort interview with Isabelle Adjani, “Moi et pas moi,” *Libération* 17/04/2002.

¹³ [“Ce film a été fait pour moi, mais pas à partir de ma vie. [...] L’origine du film n’est pas dans mes origines.”] From *Libération*, “Moi et pas moi.”

to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to ‘manage’ or resolve.”¹⁴ The star thus embodies and defuses hostilities and anxieties, rendering them invisible. Dyer’s conception of stars brings to mind Claude Lévi-Strauss’s analysis – for example in his famous dissection of the Oedipus story – of how myths work to structure contradictions and mediate oppositions.¹⁵ That the scholar of stardom should echo the anthropologist is no surprise, since a star is a kind of myth, functioning to sooth or mask social tensions by maintaining the stability of established categories of thought and keeping reassuring distinctions in place. Put more simply, actors become stars when they embody widespread concerns (conflicts, contradictions, fears, etc.) and permit their public to address these concerns indirectly.

In an essay about Isabelle Adjani written before *La Repentie*, Guy Austin builds on Dyer’s insights by showing how Adjani’s star image “manages” her European and North African origins, making them seamlessly compatible and thus calming anxieties about what is French and what is not. The public absorbs or subordinates her incipient foreignness, Austin suggests, and maintains the compatibility of potentially conflicting registers by acclaiming her as a French icon.¹⁶ I would add that Adjani excels at melodramatic self-martyring roles: she frequently incarnates characters who are fragile but iron-willed, who reconcile opposites and transcend incompatibilities, thus becoming forces of nature. The semes of her myth include her porcelain pale skin and her eyes as blue as the Mediterranean water and sky. As Dyer and many others point out, her image, especially her fetishized face, is “luminous” and almost saintly. Each of her appearances builds her myth through the figure of the worshipful close-up that erases the distance between character and star. Written descriptions of her contain the rhetorical (and often extravagant) equivalent of such close-ups. For example: “light is concentrated, as in a portrait, on the slender white oval in the center of the frame, the sacralized face of Adjani.” Her eyes, of “a deep blue, with connotations of the sea, aquatic, evoke supernatural creatures [...] such as fairies, mermaids, and Sirens, and emanate a poetic, even cosmic aura.”¹⁷

Such nearly hysterical hyperbole suggests that something more is in play here than simple admiration of a fine actor and beautiful star. To amplify the perspectives brought by Dyer and Lévi-Strauss, we might thus invoke René Girard, who reminds us of what is at stake in maintaining our cultural myths. When our conceptual cat-

¹⁴ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, Revised Edition (London: bfi publishing, 1999. Orig. 1979), 34.

¹⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” [in:] *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1967.

¹⁶ Guy Austin, *Stars in Modern French Cinema*, London: Arnold, 2003, pp. 92, 97–106.

¹⁷ [“la lumière se concentre, comme dans un portrait, sur le mince ovale blanc, au centre du cadre, le visage sacralisé d’Adjani.” [Her eyes] “un bleu profond, à la connotation marine, aquatique, évocatrice de créatures surnaturelles [...] telles que fées, ondines et autres sirènes, et qui dégage donc une résonance poétique, cosmique.”] Agnès Peck, Isabelle “Adjani: Ombre et lumière,” *Positif*, May 2002, 26.

egories begin to erode, situations turn uncanny and identities become nauseatingly ambiguous. In such instances of what Girard calls “sacrificial crisis,” a scapegoat or other ritual catharsis is needed to restore epistemological and metaphysical boundaries. Girard shows us how, when contradictions are not mediated, when crucial distinctions break down and categories blur, the resulting risk of chaos can be both narrative and social.¹⁸ This, I think, is what happens in and around *La Repentie*.

When Adjani plays a role other than that of a native Caucasian French woman, her iconic traits become problematic and require careful narrative negotiation. *Ishtar* (1987, dir. Elaine May) demonstrates how the coherence of Adjani’s star myth can be risked and then restored. The film is a comedy, in which two mediocre but eager songwriters on tour in Morocco get mixed up with Shirra Assel (Adjani), a resistance fighter in a liberation movement against the Emir of Ishtar, who is backed by the CIA. Adjani’s performance in *Ishtar* followed closely upon her outspoken interventions in public debates about French policy in Algeria, and the abovementioned rumor that she had contracted AIDS. Austin and other commentators have construed this malicious incident as a form of backlash against the star who dared, in her public statements, to transgress ideological boundaries and cast doubt on her ethnic loyalties. As Adjani herself commented upon the episode, “I started talking with SOS Racisme about my origins. Until then, people had felt that the name Adjani had pleasant connotations of vacations in Italy. Then, I think I was suddenly no longer perceived as a pure-blood in the French collective unconscious.”¹⁹

Ishtar works narratively to restore the peaceful coexistence of the traits that define the star’s image after a crisis of instability and contradiction. Harmony is achieved at the end, when Shirra attends a cabaret performance and is reduced to tears of joy at what a wonderfully adorable singer her new lover is. The revolution has been won, and the blue-eyed, porcelain-complected, teary-eyed, halo-encircled blond French woman, complete with white sweetheart collar and signature tears, replaces the fierce but alluring revolutionary, who is thus reassuringly revealed to have been... Isabelle Adjani in disguise. In fact, the actors break out of their roles at several points, and eventually the characters dissolve entirely: we do not see Shirra at that table, any more than we believe the hapless onstage performers, who, as we have known all along, are Dustin Hoffman and Warren Beatty (who was romantically linked to Adjani at the time). Anachronism and comic metalepsis, while drawing attention to *mise-en-abyme* effects, serve to reaffirm the star’s recognizable image.

Where *Ishtar* resolves Adjani’s contradictions by restoring her essential Frenchness, *La Repentie* stages a progressive dismantling of the star’s pure French iden-

¹⁸ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

¹⁹ [“]’ai commencé à parler à SOS Racisme de mes origines. Jusque là, on trouvait juste que le nom d’Adjani avait une jolie connotation de vacances italiennes. Puis, tout d’un coup, je crois que je n’ai plus été perçue comme un pur produit dans l’inconscient collectif français...”] *Première*, April 2002, p. 82.

tity.²⁰ This time, as the film progresses, distinctions dissolve incrementally. Adjani's role fails – or refuses – to stage a return to stability. When the anonymous woman boards “the first train leaving for the seaside,” she initiates a seamless metamorphosis of Charlotte-Anne-Isabelle into a Moroccan fugitive, Leïla. This transition occurs across several registers: through color contrasts, variations in rhythm, and sound, and especially through Masson's and Adjani's use of dance. The film contains four dance sequences. The first is unmarked (i.e. it is unproblematically “French”): when the woman visits Paul's house, she uses music from her Walkman to overcome his cool aloofness. In the three remaining dance scenes, Adjani's character slowly molts her French identity and becomes Moroccan.

The second dance, on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, suggests, both visually and musically, a nascent yearning toward the Maghreb. In this scene, as elsewhere, her somber garb sets her apart. Here, Adjani is dressed entirely in black from head to toe, as if she was veiled. With her dark sunglasses, her disguise is unsettlingly juxtaposed with the exhibitionism of her dance. The song, Jeff Buckley's “The Last Goodbye,” contains a fleeting instrumental passage that opens a momentary downward modal sweep of unison violins in a style typical of Maghrebi string orchestras. This musical passage, almost parenthetical, breaks the continuity and texture of the song, initiating a progressive slippage toward other harmonies, other identities. The accompanying dance – exotic, free, erotic and exuberant – was entirely improvised by the star herself. At this moment of intense physical presence, character and actor merge (photo 1).

Observing that “[h]ow one moves differs from one culture to the next,” dance scholar Ted Polhemus suggests that “Dance [is] the distillation of culture into its most metaphysical form.” And Shobana Jeyasingh, a Malaysian choreographer working in Britain, describes her own dance numbers as performances of cultures and trans-cultural identities. In words that resonate strangely with *La Repentie*, she writes, “It is difficult to chart the landscape of my country for the simple reason that it is being created and imagined even as we board the train. [...] Those of us who have been part of the great post-war migrations are only an extreme example of this imaginary home making.” Jayasingh counts herself among “those who illuminate the dynamism of journeys, the constant packing and unpacking, the constant loss and recovery and loss again.”²¹

²⁰ Adjani's North African roots are highlighted in the film by the presence of another well-known actor of mixed heritage: Samy Nacéri's mother is French and his father, like Adjani's, is Algerian, and both stars grew up in the Paris suburb of Gennevilliers. See Lionel Cartegini and Olivier de Bruyn interview, “Adjani-Nacéri, Double Mixte,” *Première*, April 2002, pp. 76–84.

²¹ Ted Polhemus, “Dance, Gender and culture” (pp. 171–179) and “Imaginary Homelands: Creating a New Dance Language,” by Shobana Jeyasingh (46–52) [in:] *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, ed. Alexandra Carter, 1998.

In *Love Me*, an earlier film by Masson, the opening sequence shows Sandrine Kiberlain dancing barefoot on the beach to an Elvis Presley song, “Heartbreak Hotel.” This opening sequence is separated from what follows by its overexposed luminosity and by the fade that ends it. It is the only moment where Kiberlain’s character appears in full possession of herself, neither fleeing, nor catatonic, nor amnesiac. In *La Repentie*, Adjani is similarly uninhibited and self-contained. She too dances barefoot, oblivious of the spectator as she performs her dance that is part high-spirited self display, part ritual salute to the sea. The moment dramatizes the tension between her physical freedom and her recent incarceration, and pre-figures while it mimics her eventual flight and capture, evoked in the film by the appearance of several strolling policemen, first on the soundtrack, then in the image. Their passage signals the abrupt end of the dance and the character’s retreat back into anonymity.

A day or two later, after meeting Paul, she will wander the streets of Nice at night and be drawn into a Moroccan wedding, where she will join in another dance (photo 2). Here, the cultural discontinuity is fully realized, as the woman is drawn progressively into the rhythms and modal melodies of a dance that is both communal and Other. Before leaving for Morocco, she will attempt to blend into the North African marketplace in Nice. When she marks her face with henna (in what is perhaps a memory), she is, if anything, less disguised than in her dark sunglasses (photo 3). Finally, in their Moroccan hotel room, she will wear an embroidered blue caftan and share a final dance with Paul. In the hotel, startlingly, they order a breakfast of coffee and buttered *baguettes*. She is never more exotic than in France, and never more French than in Morocco. At the end of her pilgrimage, she will be yanked back against her will to France, which she will experience as an exile and imprisonment.

This is not the kind of stuff that reinforces Adjani’s image as a French star. Here, on the contrary, she crosses borders, breaks down categories, obliterates distinctions, and privileges metamorphosis and difference over identity. For a public seeking images that will reconcile opposites and resolve oppositions, Adjani in *La Repentie* creates, rather than reduces anxiety. In fact, the role provoked a sort of “sacrificial crisis” in her career.

Which makes it instructive that Adjani’s next brush with Arab identities is radically different. Shortly after *La Repentie*, she played a cameo role in François Dupeyron’s *Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran* (2003). That film involves an elderly Turkish shop owner, Monsieur Ibrahim (Omar Sharif), who befriends an abandoned Jewish teenager. One day, the two watch a film being shot in their street. For those in the know, the scene evokes Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le Mépris* (1963), with Adjani in blond wig taking the place of the first actress who incarnated the Republican Marianne: Brigitte Bardot. In this brief sequence, Adjani succeeds in reconciling what Guy Austin calls her “dark side” and her “whiter than white” side. Noting that

in *Le Mépris*, Bardot plays at being Marilyn Monroe, Dyer expands on this racial theme by observing that “[b]londness, especially platinum (peroxide) blondness, is the ultimate sign of whiteness. [...] blondness is racially unambiguous.”²² Omar Sharif’s character responds to her both passively – he fantasizes being stranded on a boat with her – and aggressively: he overcharges her for a bottle of mineral water. In other words, he plays the stereotyped leering foreigner (albeit with a dose of self-irony) to her blonde Venus. The film will go on to enact a charmingly warm and fuzzy fairy-tale of inter-ethnic reconciliation, but Adjani’s cameo presence in this moment of self-conscious social critique places the walls firmly back into place between Arab and French. *Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran* was a smashing success.

* * *

Linda Hutcheon wisely reminds us that the term “adaptation” refers both to a product and also to a process²³ (or as Barthes puts it, “*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production*”²⁴). As a process that unfolds over time, adaptation is thus also a story. That story can be defined in terms of the emergence of an artifact from its starting point in another artifact. In certain instances, such as *La Repentie*, this definition fits both the protagonist’s efforts to “adapt” her identity to varying conditions and the production of the adaptation itself, from novel to film. In other words, the anecdote of *La Repentie* functions as a meta-narrative or allegory of (and thus as a commentary on) its own process of creation. For both the character and the film as a whole, identity is a destination, not an essence or origin. The protagonist’s story, like that of the filmmaking/adaptation process itself, consists of constructing identity and difference in a series of stages that measure an ever-increasing distance from her/its point of departure.

This continuous renegotiation of identity is itself an important dimension where Masson’s and Adjani’s *La Repentie* diverges conceptually from Daeninckx’s. In the novel, Brigitte has an original, determining identity for which “Isabelle” is an alias and a disguise. Consequently, the narrative journey “Isabelle” undertakes consists of returning to her origins, in other words of re-becoming Brigitte. Her actions can be measured by their proximity to her original identity; her trajectory can be traced by measuring how faithful she is to her “true” self. As a figure for adaptation, this would be the most conservative model, where the criterion for authenticity would be conformity with or fidelity to an essential, original version, which is taken to be real, authentic, univocal, and true.

²² Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 2nd edition, London & New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 40.

²³ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York & London: Routledge, 2006, XIV, pp. 15–22.

²⁴ “From Work to Text,” p. 157 (his italics).

In Masson's film, on the other hand, Adjani portrays a character whose self is in a continuous state of becoming. Her only name is whatever she declares it to be at any given moment. Her only origin is the beginning of the film; her only point of departure is the train station. If Daeninckx's protagonist is defined by an essential identity ("Brigitte") from which she diverges and then returns, then, Adjani's character is defined existentially, by the sequence of choices she makes. The pseudonyms she chooses – Delarue, Deschamps – literally describe the road she follows and the field she crosses in her quest for autonomy (freedom from prison, as well as from any source text or predetermined or imposed meanings). She is in a permanent state of difference; on the run, but never catching up with herself. Maybe this is why Karim at one point walks by where she sits without seeing her: he shows her photo – Talk about fixed identity! – in all the hotels, but no one has seen the depicted woman. Of course not. She no longer exists (if she ever did). She is not revealed at the end to "be" Leïla as much as she *becomes* Leïla along the way. Her path from Paris to Nice and then to Morocco materializes as a function of her flight/quest. If she thought her parents might provide some elusive (illusive) anchor or origin, she is quickly undeceived. When the police – iconic enforcers of univocal meanings – identify her by name, she neither acquiesces nor objects, as the name no longer seems to matter.

When she goes off the path and into uncharted desert, she trails her baggage but is not defined by it. She has nothing to declare: she escapes pursuit by existing only in the present moment. In fact, when her suitcase finally falls open, it does not contain contraband, stolen items, money, jewels, drugs, nor any of the illicit items the plot might suggest. All it contains is a collection of disparate garments, remnants of past and possibly future guises. Her identity is dispersed, literally blowing in the wind. As she heads into the desert, she is followed by a little girl, to whom Paul gives his companion's red party dress. This girl suggests that it might even be possible to transfer identities to other people, in cyclical fashion, thus launching new stories. This narrative suggests a more radical conception of adaptation, one to which the title surreptitiously points: the *Petit Robert* dictionary explains that a "*repentie*" deriving from the verb *se repentir* (to repent), refers to a repentant woman, a reformed criminal. So far, so good. As a noun, though, a *repentir* refers, in the arts, to a correction or adjustment made during the initial process of painting (as contrasted with a "repainting," which is executed afterwards).²⁵ This definition is appropriate to the film's protagonist, whose identity undergoes continual adjustment or adaptation as she invents her itinerary.

²⁵ ["Changement apporté, correction faite en cours d'exécution (à la différence du *Repeint*, fait après coup)."]

La Repentie is a highly stylized and self-conscious film. It is also self-reflecting. The protagonist's lack of a stable name, and the way her story converges with the star's biography reinforce a certain merging of actor and character. In other words, as she portrays the vicissitudes of betrayal (of her comrades) and fidelity (to her quest for a self), the Adjani character shows herself to be... well... adaptable. With all her metamorphoses, this protagonist is both Adjani and not Adjani. The film deconstructs metaphysical conceptions of the coherent, continuous, unitary self by allowing play with boundaries between star and role as well as along the continuum of the character's varying stages of evolution. This produces a situation in which the extent of the adaptation's adherence to its literary predecessor is mirrored by the character's fidelity and betrayals in the narrative and by the star's troubling "betrayal" of her star persona. The unfulfilled fantasy mentioned by the reviewer thus reveals the outlines of the star myth and its implications for notions of stable, recognizable identity, whether of individuals or Texts.

What is more, is this adaptability not at the very heart of the actor's profession? An actor is inherently a figure of changing identity or, if you will, of calculated "betrayals" of any singular, fixed, "true" identity. The actor – especially one with a superstar face – engages in a never-ending process of seeking (while never quite succeeding in becoming) someone else. In other words, she must paradoxically betray her "self" in order to become herself. In this sense, *La Repentie* tells a tale about becoming more authentic by assuming multiple and consecutive roles. Of course, she adopts guises more than disguises; we always know she remains Adjani (whoever that might be...). Focus on the actor in adaptations can thus help us escape the constrictions of approaches that adhere to the literary text as a privileged point of origin. Instead, *La Repentie* asks its spectators to witness the unfolding of a discourse on fidelity in three registers: a character betrays comrades in her quest for her self; the film strays radically from its "source" text; and Adjani does the same in relation to her star myth. The "promised fantasy" does not materialize. She is not the Adjani we thought we knew, that we came to see. Moreover, she is not the same Adjani at the end as at the beginning. And the film has told the story of her adaptation.

NIC DO DODANIA: ADAPTACJA A GWIAZDA EKРАНU

Streszczenie

Artykuł zadaje pytania o rodzaj znaczeń i sensów, które gwiazda ekranu wnosi w adaptację dzieła literackiego. Rozważany jest przypadek aktorki Isabelle Adjani, grającej w filmie Laetitiai Mason *La Repentie*, będącym adaptacją powieści Didiera Daeninckxa pod tym samym tytułem. Film

francuskiej reżyserki stanowi przykład umyślnego pozyskiwania i włączenia nadmiaru znaczenia, reprezentowanego przez wcielającą się w główną rolę Isabelle Adjani. Jeśli powieść Daeninkxa jest rzeczywistym źródłem filmowej anegdoty, wizerunek aktorki podporządkowuje ją sobie i całkowicie przekształca, sprawiając, że film Masson jest w równym stopniu adaptacją osoby samej aktorki, jak i zekranizowanej powieści. W rzeczywistości więc zdolność adaptacyjna Adjani staje się treścią filmowej opowieści.

Przełożyła Joanna Nadolna