

Les roseaux sauvages: Transcript

Hello. My name is Omar Valdez Rocha. I am a graduate student at Rutgers University in the department of French. In this video, I'd like to talk about the 1994 French movie *Les roseaux sauvages*, or *Wild Reeds* as it was named in English, and more specifically, I'd like to discuss the film's depiction of the Algerian War and the *pied-noir* community in the summer of 1962.

Within the context of movies about the Algerian War, *Wild Reeds* is a unique film. For years, cinema has tried to capture the complexities, horrors, and consequences of the fight for Algeria's independence during the 1950s and 1960s with films such as Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 movie *The Battle of Algiers*, 1972's *Avoir 20 ans dans les Aurès* by René Vautier, and 2002's *Mon colonel* by Laurent Herbiet, to name a few. Fewer films have been made that deal directly with the *pied-noir* experience during the Algerian War.

The *pied-noir*, which translates literally as "*black foot*", is a term to denote an individual of European descent who was born and who lived in North Africa before Algeria's independence and who had to consequently move to Europe after the war. French Algerians were, in general, against the dissolution of what was then French Algeria in 1962. Some even took part in an organization called the OAS, which stands for *Organisation de l'armée secrète*, or Organization of the Secret Army, which not only opposed the Algerian organization called Front of National Liberation, which pushed and fought for the country's independence, but also the French government, as some French Algerians felt they were abandoned and betrayed by the French system when it agreed to

grant Algeria its independence. While some saw the arrival of French Algerians as a return to the homeland, in reality, most arrived to a country they had never lived in before. The historian Jean-Jacques Jordi explains that the exile of French Algerians in 1962 created a new group identity that hadn't existed before; a new community that was forged through the common experience of exile: the pied-noir community (2003: 73).

Là-bas...mon pays (2000) by Alexandre Arcady and *Wild Reeds* by André Téchiné are films that deal directly with the *pied-noir* experience. *Wild Reeds* is unique because the action is set, not in Algeria, Paris, or Marseille, that is, the key places in which the historical events that led to Algeria's independence took place, but in the French countryside. This geographical decentering allows the movie to focus on portraying the individual experience of those who lived through that period, instead of creating a period film that tells us of the historic events that transpired.

André Téchiné is known for employing this approach in some of his latter films. He often sets his movies in a turbulent period of France's recent past but moves away from dealing directly with historical events and instead explores them through the lives of those who lived through the given period. The historical events remain ever-present in his movies but they rarely take center stage. The historical in Téchiné's work serves as an influential background that allows the telling of the individual experience. The movie *The Witnesses* (2007), for example, portrays the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s in France through its main protagonist's struggle with the disease, while the movie *Strayed* (2003) follows a woman and her children as they try to leave Paris and venture into the countryside to escape the Nazi occupation of the capital. Furthermore, the movie *The Girl*

on the Train (2009) explores the resurgence of anti-Semitism in France in the 2000s through a true mediatized incident in which a girl lied about having been the victim of a hate crime. *Wild Reeds* is no exception to this pattern in the director's work. In the film, the individual experience is greatly favored while the historical becomes a living environment through which the individual experiences life.

The Film

At the time of its release in 1994, *Wild Reeds* garnered overall critical and commercial success obtaining multiple awards including the *César*, France's equivalent to the Oscar, in the category of best film, as well as for best director. The film is considered by many to be one of André Téchiné's most personal works to date. It is the coming-of-age story of 4 teenagers, François, Maïté, Serge, and Henri in their last year of high school during the summer of 1962. It is a historical summer since, while they prepare for the *baccalauréat* exam, that is, the obligatory examination in order to graduate from high school, Algeria is about to become independent from France. While distance from the Algerian conflict allows most of the film's characters to continue their lives unaltered, this soon changes as the consequences of the war seep into their provincial town causing conflict, loss, and anger. One of these elements of change is the arrival of Henri, a young *pied-noir* who carries a radio everywhere he goes to listen to war updates. As researcher Fiona Barclay suggests, the film weaves and mirrors the story of the teenagers as they

enter adulthood with a France that, just like the teenagers, is undergoing major changes and is entering a new time in its history (2013: 70).

The Theme of Adaptability

The title for *Wild Reeds* comes from the fable “The Oak Tree and the Reed” (“Les roseaux et le chêne”) by Jean de La Fontaine, a major French writer of the 17th century. In the fable, the oak tree pities the reed for being thrown about by the wind while the oak tree boasts of its capacity to withstand it. The reed replies that it is because of its inability to bend that the oak tree is, in fact, weaker. The reed adapts to the movement of the wind while the oak tree faces it, unbending until it falls. The moral of the story is then to see adaptability as an essential element of survival. In *Wild Reeds*, most characters begin the movie as oak trees but gradually evolve until they become reeds that are able to better adapt to the new social climate.

The first to understand the importance of adaptability for survival is François, Maïté’s best friend and platonic love who begins to discover he is, in fact, gay. Resistant to accept it at first, François gradually comes to terms with his homosexuality with the encouragement of Maïté. An important moment in his quest to understand himself as a gay man comes when François seeks the advice of an older gentleman who is believed to be gay. François’ openness and honesty in his questions to the older gay man about homosexuality shock the man into silence. François’ discovery of his homosexuality

propels him into a quest for knowledge. He searches for answers in order to adapt to his newfound identity.

François also becomes a facilitator of communication between Maïté and the other characters. Maïté is encouraged by François to talk to Serge after his brother's funeral, even though she dislikes him. François also invites Henri to go to the river with the group as they wait for the results of the *baccalauréat*, in which Maïté, a communist known for supporting Algeria's independence is able to interact with the young *pied-noir* at a personal level. Having met by accident the night before and clashing due to their political viewpoints, François' presence becomes a mediator that allows them to see each other as people, and not just as rivals with opposing ideologies. François' own ability for change influences others to change as well, be it in the attempt to communicate with others who think differently, or, as in the case of Serge, the understanding that one can pursue the life one wants and it doesn't have to be dictated by tradition or societal norms.

The Algerian War

While the teenagers show an understanding of the concept of adapting to the changes around them, the adults demonstrate the opposite: they become representations of sameness and stagnation in the film. Madame Alvarez, is not only Maïté's mother. She's also François', Serge's, and Henri's French teacher, while also being an active member of the communist party. No other character in the film has these many ties to French organizations. It is no random fact that she is the teacher of French, either. The character

could be interpreted as the representation of the French government or, more specifically, to a pro-Algerian independence attitude that characterizes the French government during this time. According to Jean-Jacques Jordi, the government's attitude towards the Algerian War changed in 1960 to pro-Algerian independence, a year after Charles de Gaulle became the president of France (62). Madame Alvarez shares, as both a communist and as a teacher the pro-independence ideology of the government. She's unable to see beyond ideologies, the way the teenagers were able to do at the end of the film. As Fiona Barclay notes, her political commitment is so strong and unbending that, when tragedy strikes, she is literally brought down like the oak tree in the fable of La Fontaine (2013: 71). Her sanity is tested as she examines the consequences of not connecting at a human level with those around her, especially with those who may disagree with her at an ideological level.

In the first scene of *Wild Reeds*, Madame Alvarez, François, and Maité attend the marriage of Pierre, one of her former students and Serge's brother. Pierre is a French soldier who is on leave exclusively to get married. When Pierre confesses to Madame Alvarez that he's only getting married so that he could come back to France and have the opportunity to hide and desert with her help, she completely refuses to aid him. Pierre appeals to her communist ties by mentioning that communists used to hide people during the Second World War but Madame Alvarez continues to refuse. He even reminds her of their former sexual relationship to try to convince her to help him. Madame Alvarez refuses by telling him that Algeria will soon be independent and that, if she helped others to desert in the past, it was under different circumstances. Pierre requests help to desert

but he does this without any political affiliation. He doesn't care about the conflict; all he cares about is not to return to war. When Pierre dies in the war months later, Madame Alvarez suffers from depression as she faces the cost and consequences of her unbending will. One could interpret this depression as the guilt she feels for not trying to help Pierre when she could.

Her role as a teacher is also undermined by her political ideology. When Henri writes on his Literature essay about the indifference of the French for the plight of French Algerians, Madame Alvarez tells him that what he says is false and refuses to grade his paper for writing about politics instead of Literature. This refusal to grade Henri's paper points to her refusal to be his teacher as she is completely in disagreement with Henri's view of the conflict. When she asks him to think of the Algerian people, he replies that they would have died of hunger if it weren't for the French. Both find themselves at an ideological standstill in which none will budge, as they both stand at the extremes of the political spectrum.

Henri's problems in school will continue to escalate, as Madame Alvarez becomes uninterested in his fate due to his political leanings, as she explains to her replacement while she recovers from her depression. "Mariani doesn't interest me. You can't care about everyone." (Téchiné, Wild Reeds) Her role as a teacher is thus undermined by her political affiliation. It is this substitute teacher, however, who treats Henri as a student instead of a rival, as he recognizes that he is a young man in need of help and support. When Madame Alvarez tells him she believes Henri to be completely wrong about the Algerian situation, the substitute teacher tells her "You're lucky to know who's wrong

and who's right, what's good, what's bad. I'm incapable of that.” (Téchiné, Wild Reeds)
It is this incapability to judge Henri that allows the new teacher to get close to him and to try and help him succeed. Madame Alvarez was never able to see Henri as a student because she was never able to see past her unbending convictions.

The relationship between Madame Alvarez and Henri is reminiscent of the tensions, differences, and frustrations that arose between French Algerians and the French people of the city of Marseille in 1962. The massive arrivals of over half a million people from North Africa during the summer alone put an enormous economical strain in the city of Marseille (Jordi, 2003: 61). According to Jordi, the government failed to correctly estimate the amount of people the country would be receiving that summer, and it found itself unprepared to properly receive them (2003: 66). By June, all resources allocated to the welcoming of French Algerians had already been exhausted and the city of Marseille was greatly affected (2003: 66). The lack of support, along with the *pied-noirs*' feelings of being scapegoats, of being treated like criminals by the government of Marseille only escalated the situation and the animosity between the two groups (2003: 67). Henri's feelings about the French and the Algerian War, along with Madame Alvarez's animosity towards him could be seen to exemplify the political, social, and economic tensions and frustrations between French Algerians and the people of Marseille during the summer of 1962.

At the end of the film, Madame Alvarez's daughter Maïté, who's also a communist, is able to see beyond all labels and see a person in Henri. This is another example of the adaptability of the young in the movie against the resistance to change of the adults. The

movie ends with the couple making love and parting ways. Henri and Maïté have both become reeds, they have been able to see the loss and the passion in the other, even if for a moment; they have been able to communicate this passion and this loss without minimizing the other's point of view. *Wild Reeds* is a great film because it skillfully presents a complex and painful passage of France's history through the eyes of the youth who lived through the period, a generation who was changed forever by the events that have now become history.

Works Cited

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