

Chapter 6

Ripley Under Ground and Its Illegitimate Heirs

Wieland Schwanebeck

The French setting of *Ripley Under Ground* (1970), Patricia Highsmith's second book of the so-called 'Ripliad', resembles that of Claude Chabrol's 1960s and 1970s satirical attacks on the bourgeoisie. In *La femme infidèle* (*The Unfaithful Wife*, 1968) and *Que la bête meure* (*This Man Must Die*, 1969), Chabrol settles numerous scores with the respectable upper middle-class who hide a range of skeletons in their closets. One of *Ripley Under Ground's* most striking images--Ripley slaying someone in his wine cellar with a bottle of Margaux and observing in fascination how blood and wine mingle in a puddle (*RUG* 66-67)--would not feel out of place in either of these films, particularly because the novel's emphatic insistence that it was a *good* bottle suggests that Ripley "does everything, even homicide, in style" (Sutherland 2015, n.pag.).

Highsmith's homage to Chabrol and his cynical portraits of the well-to-do may be a small intertextual nod towards the director, who had at this point produced his own adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), although without disclosing his source. The screenplay for *Les biches* (*The Does*, 1968), an enigmatic psychological thriller, was written by Paul Gégauff, who had already adapted the first Ripley novel into *Plein soleil* (*Purple Noon*, 1960) for director René Clément. In *Les biches*, Gégauff and Chabrol rework the story, substituting the homosocial pairing of Tom Ripley/Dickie Greenleaf for two women. The young painter Why, whose name evokes the mystery of her character, falls under the spell of the rich Frédérique, who first seduces her, then lures her into the decadent boredom of her bohemian circle and finally into a love triangle with the architect Paul--a constellation which mirrors the

queer triangle of *Plein soleil* more than it does Highsmith's actual novel (where Ripley is in equal parts repulsed and bored by Dickie Greenleaf's girlfriend, Marge). In the duel of the 'does', Why asserts herself by using Ripley's preferred strategies: mimicry and scheming. Like Ripley, Why is caught in the act of transforming herself into the object of her desire, and she completes her absorption of Frédérique's identity by murdering her. Chabrol's and Gégauff's overlooked adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is an appropriate point of departure for a study of *Ripley Under Ground*, especially since it stresses the problem of (il)legitimacy and the ubiquity of intertextual echo effects in the field of adaptation studies. The question where adaptation starts and ends in the adaptation *industry* has recently been gaining more attention, "the largely stable and unitary book of Gutenbergian print culture" having been fractured "into a panoply of intellectual property [...] rights", with the result that that in the wake of poststructuralist attempts to 'kill' the author, "it was not so much meaning that multiplied infinitely, but the legal regimes to prescribe and control authorised use of book-derived content" (Murray 2012, 30). In spite of the popularity of Barthes' and Foucault's readings of the ideological dimension of the 'author function', the postmodern literary environment has found it hard to rid itself of traditional notions of originality and authenticity, and the discipline of adaptation studies remains permeated by the powerful author figure as much as it does by the on-going denigration of adaptations as inferior 'copies' of their 'original' source texts. *Ripley Under Ground* not only exposes these arbitrary binaries; its own adaptation history is similarly haunted by the specter of illegitimacy. In my reading of the novel and its adaptations, I will draw upon recent efforts in adaptation studies to read the process of adaptation itself in the vein of Derridean 'hauntology', that is: as a spectral process which conjures up the 'ghosts' of the pretexts (Pietrzak-Franger 2012) and which creates "a new 'slanted' perspective, an *unheimlich* or uncanny re-viewing of a work" (Grossman 2015, 11).

Forging ahead

As sequels go, *Ripley Under Ground* has proven a hard one to love. While ‘Part 2’, in popular culture, is frequently associated with either just delivering a lazy rehash of the ‘original’ that puts the same story in a new environment or with going for a distinctly ‘darker’ feel and opening up the story for epic complications (and thus for more future installments), *Ripley Under Ground* does something altogether different. Highsmith abandons both the plot structure and the tone of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and puts her most enduring creation into an entirely different milieu, which may be part of the reason why a number of critics regard the second Ripley novel as the weakest one, and why even some of Highsmith’s most fervent admirers express their reservations (Symons 1992, 198; Handke 1996, 176). At the same time, *Ripley Under Ground* retains a special status within the Ripliad. The events of this book much more than those of its predecessor continue to haunt the protagonist throughout his subsequent adventures--nowhere more so than in his swansong, *Ripley Under Water* (1991), when two Americans dig up the remains of Murchison, the unfortunate art collector whom Ripley has killed with the wine bottle.

The Talented Mr. Ripley, with its suspenseful plot of identity theft and murder, contains very little to prepare the reader for the satirical deconstruction of the art-world which permeates the sequel, other than its dénouement. The episode to which Tom Ripley owes his freedom at the end of the first book arguably anticipates the Derridean world of *Ripley Under Ground* and its twisted take on the strange relationship between original and copy. With the police suspecting him of being involved in the mysterious disappearance of Dickie Greenleaf, Ripley is saved by the paradoxical signature conventions that Jacques Derrida investigates at length: “The signature invents the signer. [...] That first signature authorizes him or her to sign. This happens every day, but it is fabulous” (Derrida 2002, 49-50). Ripley’s unlikely account of

Dickie's disappearance is confirmed when, in a truly *deus ex machina* turn of events, luggage deposited by Ripley in Dickie's name is found and the fingerprints and signature match those of Dickie. Unbeknownst to the police, however, the 'permanent signature file' deposited at the bank as well as the finger print sample in the police archives (which the authorities use as their point of reference) have also been forged by Ripley. As a result, the police tautologically derive authenticity from the existence of a copy which they take to be an original, confirming the signature's paradoxical status as a force that "staunches the wound that its very possibility opens" (Burke 1995, 290). Ironically, Ripley's reaction on hearing that he has been confirmed as Dickie's sole heir shows that he himself still believes in superficial notions of authenticity and is willing to trust an exquisite piece of writing paper at face value: "Was it a joke? But the Burke-Greenleaf letterpaper in his hand felt authentic--thick and slightly pebbled and the letterhead engraved" (*TMR* 272-273). He is finally stripped of such illusions in *Ripley Under Ground*, a multilayered declaration of love to the ideas of copy and forgery.

Fifteen years after the publication of the first novel (though only a few years have passed within the fictional universe), the former small-time crook has become "Thomas Ripley of Villeperce-sur-Seine, husband of Heloise Plisson" (*RUG* 9), "jobless, rather well-off, and married" (153). Together with his wife, the daughter of a millionaire, he has settled down in the village of Villeperce. Belle Ombre, the luxurious estate bestowed upon the young family by the in-laws, will be the fixed point in Ripley's future adventures, never failing to satisfy its owner who "had longed for leisure and a bit of luxury when he had met Dickie Greenleaf, and now that he had attained it, the charm had not palled" (94). The nervousness of the struggling young confidence trickster has given way to the casual arrogance of the cosmopolitan with no future financial worries. Like the aforementioned Chabrol films, Highsmith's Ripley novels are increasingly preoccupied with emphasizing the flawless surface structure of their settings and the belongings exhibited in them. The only 'romantic' relationships affirmed as workable

are those involving the world of objects; in the latter, we can confidently include not only Ripley's trusted commodity of a housekeeper, but also his wife, who never protests her place in the world of Ripley's prized objects and who personifies several misogynist stereotypes. *Ripley Under Ground* is even less of a classic crime thriller than its predecessor, and its plot threatens to fall apart towards the end, thus betraying its patchwork nature. Highsmith had adapted the novel from an unfilmed teleplay, *Derwatt Resurrected* (Wilson 2010, 263), and had also worked in elements from an earlier short-story, *The Great Cardhouse* (1949).¹ The novel sees Ripley invest part of his considerable capital in a London-based art dealership which sells pictures of the late painter Philip Derwatt and which runs art schools and other merchandise in his name. At Ripley's suggestion, the consortium keeps Derwatt's death a secret in order to sell more of 'his' works (which are, in fact, produced by a hired painter named Bernard Tufts), and Ripley has to defend the enterprise against a number of threats. First, an American collector doubts the authenticity of several paintings, and later Bernard discovers his conscience, threatening to go public with his knowledge. It is a double-layered and darkly humorous book, at times rather farcical--indeed, the plot bears similarities to *The Art of Love* (1965), a Paris-set Hollywood comedy featuring plenty of Technicolor, slapstick, and innuendo, and starring Dick Van Dyke as a young painter whose work rises in value when he is mistakenly believed dead, which leads him to remain in hiding in order to sell more pictures.

However, Highsmith's plot goes beyond the customary shenanigans of farce. She also draws upon the case of Dutch art forger Han van Meegeren (Wilson 2010, 295) to postulate an aesthetics of forgery and to break open the dichotomy between the presumed original and the copy. *Ripley Under Ground* not only invites doubt regarding the trustworthiness of the presumed original, it also asks what purpose the distinction between original and forgery serves in the first place. The novel arguably celebrates its *own* status as a copy, operating with

a number of doubling effects to rival literature's ultimate sequel, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and what Alice Found There* (1871), that magnificent hall of mirrors, where duplication and inversion reign supreme. Highsmith's book effects a forger's performance in which a multitude of intertexts and echoes of literary role models have been incorporated. There are plenty of references to the world of music (*RUG* 172, 195-196, 225), distorted Shakespeare quotations (138), and an unlikely evasion from the police force with an idea Ripley borrows from a Sherlock Holmes story (198-199). Ripley himself reads Julio Cortázar's 1959 short-story collection, *Las armas secretas* (148), the literary source of Michelangelo Antonioni's meta-cinematic classic *Blow-up* (1966). These echo effects find numerous structural equivalents on the levels of plot and character. Bernard is not only a somewhat bizarre rendering of the trope of the tormented genius, but also the double of the late painter, Derwatt; a carbon copy of the first novel's Dickie Greenleaf (his cousin Chris) pays a visit to the Ripley family; Bernard's climactic suicide is prefigured by his own simulation of it; Ripley twice plays the role of Derwatt (and becomes responsible for the death of two people) and his lifestyle mirrors both Dickie Greenleaf's *dolce vita* existence in Mongibello and his delight in artistic dilettantism. Moreover, there are two burials of Murchison, two 'resurrection' scenes and two substantial travel episodes. By appropriating this wealth of intertexts, the narrative, filtered through Ripley's consciousness, feeds a book of doublings and copies that in an inconspicuous manner flaunts its own allusive texture and undermines the division between original and copy. As a consequence, the novel can easily be misunderstood as simply a poor imitation of a successful title. In actual fact, however, it illustrates Roland Barthes's well-known dictum (formulated at the same time as when Highsmith composed her novel) that there is no such thing as a genuinely original *écriture*, and that a text is "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable

centres of culture.” (Barthes 2007, 315) In *Ripley Under Ground*, Highsmith’s imposter discovers the art market as a new playing field for his masquerades and draws our attention to the fragile quality of a system founded on questionable binaries and the denigration of the copy (which actually *constitutes* the idea of the auratic original).

Prominent forger Eric Hebborn, whose life exhibits some astonishing parallels with that of Tom Ripley (Schwanebeck 2014, 168-169), caused quite a stir with his posthumously published *Art Forger’s Handbook* (1997). In this book, Hebborn argues that there is no fundamental difference in quality between originals and forgeries, and that the dominant status of the original is very much dictated by the laws of the market: “What counts about a picture is not its aesthetic merit but its market value. In this it is exactly like a banknote.” (Hebborn 1997, 189) The aptly named “Buckmaster” gallery, which Ripley runs with his fellow conspirators Jeff and Ed (Highsmith’s versions of Tweedledum and Tweedledee), favors a materialistic, distinctly non-idealistic take on the world of objects, one that contrasts with the romantic view of artists-as-creators which is voiced by several of the novel’s antagonists, including the painter and the devoted collector, whose belief in the original remains unshakeable:

“I cannot understand your total disconnection with the *truth* of things,” Murchison said. “An artist’s style is his truth, his honesty. Has another man the right to copy it, in the same way that a man copies another man’s signature? And for the same purpose, to draw on his reputation, his bank account? A reputation already built by a man’s talent?” (*RUG* 63)

Murchison (whose method of establishing Derwatt’s signature style and of seeing through Ripley’s masquerade recalls Giovanni Morelli’s morphology of detail²) has a point, though

the novel does not take him entirely seriously. Like Bernard, he does not die an unblemished noble fighter for the just cause, for he fails to recognize *all* of the Derwatt forgeries (*RUG* 37). The gap between Murchison's idealism and Ripley's own hands-on approach to the art-world proves too large to bridge, so that Ripley has no qualms about killing Murchison when he threatens to go public with his knowledge.

On the level of homosocial bonding--a motif which runs through all five of the Ripley novels-- , Ripley's other object of desire is Bernard, though for a change his infatuation is less of a homoerotic nature. The protagonist rather seeks a kindred spirit, someone to partake in his celebration of fraudulence, mimicry and insincerity--a pairing which echoes the bizarre tableau of domestic bliss that Highsmith serves in *The Great Cardhouse*. This story (which *Ripley Under Ground* adapts, or rather: appropriates and absorbs) concludes with a travesty of a happy ending, when Mademoiselle Duhamel, a mediocre pianist who passes for a virtuoso, bonds with Monsieur Montlehuc, an art lover who only takes pleasure in "collect[ing] the most perfect imitations, and only the imitations, of the great artists" (*GC* 114), and who is a sham himself: a "fragment of a man" (127) reassembled as prosthetic patchwork. If Ripley is holding out for a similarly blissful union with his fellow fraudster, Bernard, he is in for a disappointment. Bernard still adheres to a romantic artistic ideology of originality and authenticity and is unable to subscribe to Ripley's life of fraudulence. His clients do not see Bernard as an artist; for them, he is "the old workhorse" (29) that keeps Derwatt Ltd. alive with his efforts. Bernard's artistic dissociation from himself in favor of the Derwatt style must sound to Ripley like an echo from his own past. Just as Ripley had gradually withdrawn from his own identity in order to grow into a better version of Dickie Greenleaf, Bernard notes how Derwatt takes over his personal and artistic life. "[M]y faking, my forgeries", Bernard reports,

“have evolved in four or five years the way Derwatt’s painting might have evolved. It’s funny, isn’t it? [...] You can’t imagine how strange it is to paint like--Bernard Tufts. His painting hasn’t developed as much. It’s as if I’m faking Tufts now, because I’m painting the same Tufts as I did five years ago! [...] In a way, I have to make more of an effort to be myself than I do to be Derwatt.” (111-112)

But while Ripley, in the first volume, saw the return to his *own* name as the real tragedy,³ Bernard goes nearly mad trying to get out of the Faustian pact and to regain control over his old life. This talented painter, depicted as hopelessly naïve, is not capable of survival within the poststructuralist universe of the novel, where it is the utterly citational and adaptable moving signifiers like Ripley who prosper and who make a mockery of artistic integrity. Bernard’s death is thus far from dignified; it is rather--to use Marx’s well-known aperçu--the mere *paraphrasing* of a tragic event, and thus farcical.⁴

Eventually, Ripley returns to his tested strategy of the first novel, producing proof of authenticity by means of another forgery passed off as authentic. This time, he slips into the disguise of Derwatt to swear to the authenticity of the suspected paintings (*RUG* 201-202), and permits himself daydreams about a world where the forgeries have taken over: “If one painted more forgeries than one’s own paintings”, he muses, “wouldn’t the forgeries become more natural, more real, more genuine to oneself, even, than one’s own painting? Wouldn’t the effort finally go out of it and the work become second nature?” (20) Ripley and his partners place Derwatt signatures on all the articles they sell, thus keeping alive the signature machinery, which feeds on the Derridean idea of iterability, with the possibility of forgery written into it right from the beginning.⁵ Hebborn notes in his *Handbook* that “no sooner was the practice of signing works of art introduced than forgery followed” (1997, xiv), a lesson that is certainly not lost on Ripley. Clément’s *Plein soleil* contains a scene that, in hindsight,

seems to anticipate Chabrol's and Gégauff's illegitimate adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, as Ripley projects his victim's signature to the wall of his hotel room in order to practice his forgery. It not only indicates that Ripley himself is a palimpsest (Miller 2015, 64), it also provides an almost uncanny mise-en-abyme of the filmmaker's work.⁶ The theme of the illegitimately appropriated signature was arguably in the air at the time of *Ripley Under Ground*'s publication, and no-one would have felt this more acutely than Highsmith herself. At the time of writing the novel, Chabrol made *Les biches*, his unlicensed adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and on the other side of the Atlantic, Warner Brothers, the studio behind *Strangers on a Train* (1951), released *Once You Kiss a Stranger* (1969), a remake that acknowledges Hitchcock's influence and signature more than it does Highsmith's. In the spirit of the character's very own signature habit, *Ripley Under Ground* flirts with the fundamentals of poststructuralism. One *non-sequitur* episode of the novel sees Ripley look up the verb *to forge*. By consulting the dictionary--the most radical example of self-contained referentiality--, he seems to be on the trail of Derrida's infinite deferral of meaning, while also coming to terms with the common threads that run between forgery and *all* craftsmanship: "To forge. Old French *forge*, a workshop. *Faber*, a workman. *Forge* in French had only to do with a workshop [sic!] for metal. The French for forgery was *falsification* or *contrefaire*. Tom already knew this." (RUG 163) Later, when Ripley has completed his full contamination of the Derwatt signature, he tells his wife in French about the Derwatt masquerade and, in doing so, avails himself of seemingly inconspicuous term: "The word in French sounded so innocent and gay: he had 'représenté' Derwatt twice in London." (220) As an aspiring Derridean, Ripley knows, of course, that there is *nothing* innocent about representation (or adaptation, for that matter).

The Specter of Illegitimacy

Throughout Ripley's subsequent adventures, memories of Bernard and the squandered potential of this unsurpassed forger talent return to haunt the protagonist. The persistent dream of an 'aesthetics of forgery' becomes not only manifest in the undiminished popularity of the fake Derwatts, but also in Ripley's satisfaction at no longer being able to "tell the Derwatts from the Bernard Tufts" (*RUW* 122). When Highsmith's hero, in *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* (1980), ascertains with satisfaction that the pseudo-Derwatts have found their way into the showy art collections of the elite (255), the signatures of Derwatt and Tufts have long since merged into one. The later Ripley novels keep returning to the tableau of Ripley gazing contemplatively at his favorite fake Derwatt above the fireplace in Belle Ombre: "Logically, 'The Red Chairs,' a genuine Derwatt, should have the place of honour in the room over the fireplace. Typical of him that he had put the phoney in the choice spot, he supposed." (*RUG* 55)

Unconsciously, Ripley's adaptation history affirms the special status which *Ripley Under Ground* retains among the novels, even though none of the existing film adaptations has drawn considerable critical attention anywhere. The most well-known and acclaimed Ripley films may be based on the first and third novel, respectively, but the specter of *Ripley Under Ground* and its themes is never far off; indeed, the novel's adaptation history itself appears to be haunted by the problem of illegitimacy and authorial signatures, which is again prefigured in the book itself. In an attempt to drive Bernard into suicide, Ripley--whom Bernard believes to be dead at this point--follows him like a ghost around Europe, with the result that Bernard tumbles through the streets of several European cities "as if he had seen a ghost" (226). He eventually plunges to his death outside the gates of Salzburg, the city of Mozart--an intertextual nod which paraphrases the plot of *Don Giovanni* (1787) and which also allows Highsmith to add another footnote to her novel's 'failed genius' subtext. Ripley is left behind

not only to bury the body but to completely obliterate it. In one of the most graphic scenes in all of Highsmith's writing (one that is stretched over several pages), Ripley burns the remains of Bernard until they turn "jelly-like" (241), then crushes his skull and removes the teeth. In the process, Ripley learns that complete annihilation is impossible and that everything leaves a trace, be it the reddish sheen of Murchison's blood (75), the composted remains of Murchison's corpse (79-80), the paper on which Ripley practices Derwatt's signature (196) or the incombustible remnants of Bernard's jewelry: "Something would remain" (250).

The problem of annihilation and the signature machinery also permeate *Ripley Under Ground*'s first cinematic adaptation, though it has seldom been acknowledged as one. The first director to show interest in the novel was Wim Wenders, who contacted Highsmith's publisher, only to learn that all of her novels had already been optioned by different producers and studios.⁷ This could not stop Wenders from paying homage to *Ripley Under Ground* when he eventually *did* get the rights to a different Highsmith book. The resulting film, *Der amerikanische Freund* (*The American Friend*, 1977), was to continue in the vein of Chabrol's illegitimate, 'bastardized' manner of adapting a Ripley book, for it does not limit itself to the plot of Wenders' 'purchase', *Ripley's Game* (1974), but contains a number of elements from its predecessor, or to quote Highsmith: "[Wenders] mingled two books for *American Friend*. One of them he didn't buy." (in conversation with Peary 1988, 105) With *The American Friend*, we enter the realm of what Julie Sanders calls appropriation, where "questions of intellectual property, proper acknowledgement and, at its worst, the charge of plagiarism" abound (Sanders 2016, 43). Unlike adaptations, appropriations do not draw attention to their sources, which corresponds to what Ripley does. After all, impostors (proud as they are in their work) must camouflage their shady origins and fake credentials.

The American Friend supplements its source novel's plot about the gradual corruption of a dying everyman (who also happens to be a picture-framer) with Ripley's own involvement in

the art scene. The film cuts out Bernard, the middleman, and has Dennis Hopper's Ripley in cohorts with the aging Derwatt, who forges paintings that Ripley successfully sells to European auction houses. Derwatt's appearances (in the first and last scene) literally *frame* this highly meta-cinematic film, which went with *Framed* as its working title. Its opening sequence sees Ripley walk into Derwatt's studio, bringing not only the money that the painter has been eagerly waiting for, but also a lot of intertextual baggage. We see Derwatt scolding Ripley like an angry father for not having visited any sooner, and at the same time, we see director Nicholas Ray (an Old Hollywood veteran highly revered in Europe yet virtually ignored by the studio industry at this point) telling off Dennis Hopper, the eccentric New Hollywood prodigy who had directed *Easy Rider* (1969) and whose first feature film credit was as Goon in Ray's *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). Derwatt/Ray, who has been testing his vision in the moments before Ripley's arrival (and who will later wear an eye-patch), is mocked by Ripley for his impaired vision ("I told you I've got a good eye.") and responds with all the embitterment of a visual artist barred from exercising his talent: "Take care of [your eye]. A new one is hard to buy." Derwatt/Ray's reaction evokes the famous story about the one-eyed king who was looking for an artist to paint his impediment both truthfully and beautifully. He turns his partial blindness into an advantage by striking the pose of a gunslinger, raising his hand like a pistol and taking aim at Ripley the cowboy (fig. 6.1). Filmmakers, like assassins, must *shoot* things.

Fig. 6.1: Derwatt takes aim at Ripley (*The American Friend*).

Casting Ray, who was terminally ill at that point and whose last days Wenders would later document in *Lightning Over Water* (1980), reveals in a macabre way the novel's ghoulish subtext about the (intertextual) ghosts that haunt Bernard, the caricature of the sensitive

artistic soul but also a ‘dead man walking’. Throughout the film, further meta-reflexive moments abound. Clear parallels are drawn between the occupation of the picture framer Jonathan and the director who is ‘framing’ moving pictures. It is no coincidence that Ripley and Jonathan exchange a still-life for an animated picture in Jonathan’s shop. The complex intertextual structure and media subtext of the film (which includes several Hitchcock motifs and a color composition inspired by Edward Hopper) have been well documented (see Fleig 2005, 139-239), and the notion of the original creator is quite *physically* present due to Wenders’s casting of several directors from his cinematic pantheon in small cameo roles. The ‘ghost’ of *Ripley Under Ground* is also present in another Wenders film: the distinctly postmodern pastiche of *The Million Dollar Hotel* (2000), which happened to compete against Anthony Minghella’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* at the 2000 Berlin Film Festival. In this mythological puzzle film, Wenders revisits the fictional universe of the Ripliad. Not only do the names of his central pairing, Tom-Tom and Eloise, reference the Ripleys of Belle Ombre, the film’s mise-en-scène is brimming with allusions to Ripley’s adventures. Tom-Tom’s room is decorated with a toy skeleton and a poster of Venice (props which could be taken from Ripley’s personal museum in Belle Ombre); the disappearance of his best friend, the amateur painter Izzy Goldkiss, clearly recalls the Dickie Greenleaf episode and later, when Izzy’s paintings propel the film’s detection plot, we are in *Ripley Under Ground* territory again. As though it tried to make belated amends for Ripley’s cold-blooded disposal of his fellow art-lovers in the first two books, *The Million Dollar Hotel* ends with Tom-Tom’s suicide and lends him an air of the martyr--a trope to which *Ripley Under Ground*’s only ‘official’ feature film adaptation (2005) also pays homage.

There is a lot in this last filmic version of the novel to indicate that its director, Roger Spottiswoode, had at one point also worked for the James Bond series (*Tomorrow Never Dies*, 1997). The camera is as much in love with vulgar notions of commodified beauty as in the

Bond franchise, and there is little here to indicate the increasingly refined taste and perverted sense of grandeur that propels the Ripliad. Pepper's Ripley is a simple-minded hunk moving through "an overdetermined London that is superimposed on its 'swinging' past" (Miller 2015, 64), a gigolo infatuated with fast cars and with a knack for seducing women. When the police search a train for him, he withdraws to the toilet facilities in order to make love to Heloise. The film, commonly derided as "[the Highsmith adaptation that] stars *Battlefield Earth's* Barry Pepper" (McKiver 2016), failed to secure a wide release anywhere and was critically panned on its release. Its production history is difficult to sketch, but its lead actor has gone on record to say that the film "was never meant to be a Ripley film, but I think after we filmed it they decided to call it a Ripley film" (Pepper qtd. in Bibbiani 2011). This may be a bit of an exaggeration; after all, the film retains significant portions of the novel's character constellation and plot development, in spite of adding a lot of black humor.⁸ In hindsight, it even appears to draw attention to the dialectic relationship between Bernard and Ripley by way of rather prophetic casting. In the role of Bernard, the film features British actor Ian Hart, who would go on to play Ripley in the BBC's radio adaptation of all five novels in 2009. The film's satirical take on the Christ-like elevation of artists into Chosen Ones is also very much in line with Highsmith's work. Hebborn, in his *Art Forger's Handbook*, points out that the demystification of an original and the unmasking of inauthenticity always amount to an apostasy. He notes with great irony that the forger himself should also pay this type of tribute to the original: "[W]e are content to act as if we are only artisans, not perhaps as pure in heart as the anonymous craftsmen who built so many of the world's wonders from pyramids to cathedrals but, nevertheless, like them serving with simple and single-minded devotion." (Hebborn 1997, 39) Highsmith's Bernard Tufts completely meets this standard: His super-elevation of the deceased Derwatt borders on the veneration of a saint, causing Ripley to grumble "[that Bernard] thinks more of Derwatt than most people do of Jesus Christ" (*RUG*

53). In Spottiswoode's adaptation, Ripley's encounter with Murchison is framed like a theological debate. Casting Willem Dafoe in the role of Murchison invokes the necessary connotations, for Dafoe achieved fame in the 1980s by playing two martyrs: Sgt. Elias in Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) and Jesus in Martin Scorsese's controversial *Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). The adaptation plays with these intertexts and invokes other theological reference points--the Derwatt painting discussed in the film is not *The Clock* (as in the novel), but a triptych dedicated to the Faustian pact with the devil. In the course of the confrontation, Murchison sustains wounds like those of Saint Sebastian (the patron saint against enemies of the Church), wounds which in turn are reminiscent of the iconography of stigmatization. He eventually drops dead to the ground, in a shot reminiscent of the crucifixion scene--the dignity of the moment, however, is undercut by him losing his toupee (fig. 6.2). Ripley, by contrast, is an arrogantly beautiful incarnation of Lucifer, pleasurably re-enacting the fall of man. The image of him snacking on the forbidden fruit in his newly discovered Garden of Eden forms a visual leitmotif throughout the film.

Fig. 6.2: Murchison's death as a travesty of martyrdom (*Ripley Under Ground*).

These scenes are not adapted verbatim from Highsmith's source text, but they are quite in line with her inversion of the Lazarus myth. Having fallen into the grave he has dug for Murchison, Ripley resurrects himself not with the help of divine intervention, but by "dig[ging] upward with his fingers like a mole" (*RUG* 174).⁹ The religious subtext is also present in *A Gift for Murder* (1982), the last adaptation of the novel I would like to discuss, where Murchison's being battered to death with the wine bottle evokes the iconography of a baptism.¹⁰

When Highsmith Met Ripley: *A Gift for Murder*

The most nuanced and playful adaptation of *Ripley Under Ground* (or any Highsmith novel) may well be one of Tom Ripley's most well-kept secrets. *A Gift for Murder* is an episode of the *South Bank Show*, a cultural magazine produced by ITV in Great Britain and hosted by Melvyn Bragg. The fact that *A Gift for Murder*, directed by Jack Bond, was never released on DVD means it usually gets overlooked by scholars investigating the Ripley films, but it manages to engage remarkably well with all of the source text's key themes, in spite of its short running time. The film's central conceit is to link a number of the novel's key episodes with a portrait of its author, Patricia Highsmith. The latter comes to London to be interviewed by Melvyn Bragg, and her journey intersects with Ripley's, who is in London to settle the Derwatt business. Ripley's encounters with Murchison and Bernard are intercut with the conversations between Highsmith and Bragg, and what emerges is a multi-layered statement about originality in which the intellectual creator crosses paths with her own character. Unbeknownst to each other, they use the same moving walkway at Heathrow airport, they catch the same train, and they check into the Savoy Hotel together, allowing Ripley to observe Highsmith signing her name. It is a subtle allusion to Highsmith's well-publicized identification with her own character; she was known to sign her books in his name on occasion (Wilson 2010, 194). Later, the pair rides the hotel lift together, their eyes averted like in the famous Bruno/Miriam encounter in *Strangers on a Train*, with the effect that the scene plays like 'Strangers on an Elevator' (fig. 6.3). *A Gift for Murder* thus puts Highsmith and her creation on the same plane of reality, to the extent that it is hard to say whether Highsmith cameos in the world of her characters, or whether it is the characters who drop in on her.

Fig. 6.3: Strangers on an elevator (*A Gift for Murder*).

The power struggle between the author and her creation underlies several incidents in the film, but overall, the two emerge as allies, as strange bedfellows who engage in similar activities. When Murchison voices his suspicion that Derwatt is being forged, the film cuts to Bragg asking Highsmith about her publishing history (implying a nexus between forgery and writing), and she later recounts that her first published short-story involved the theft of a library book. In the context of the story's satirical take on the commodification of the art market (as suggested by the plot-line about the Derwatt franchise or by a bar-room pianist's bored rendition of the obnoxious *Doctor Zhivago* theme during the Highsmith interview), this is a double-edged allusion. A material thing like a book can get stolen, but the same is true of stories, a point not lost on Highsmith, who in her novel conceives of art "as an act of innovative incorporation rather than as an act of individual genius" (Dill 2014, 380). Ripley's constant getting away (or his different screen incarnations, for that matter) ensures his longevity as a serial hero, and by implication, the crimes that Ripley commits in order to protect his associates are also done to ensure his *author's* well-being. The point that they are 'partners in crime' is repeatedly made throughout *A Gift for Murder*. Before Ripley even contemplates the killing of Murchison, it is Highsmith who almost runs him over in her cab. No wonder that she becomes evasive when Bragg asks whether she might consider punishing Ripley in a future book: "I hadn't thought about it."

In the course of the narrative, Ripley is the more knowing character of the two, seemingly aware of his birth-mother's presence, while she does not acknowledge *him*. He stares at her in a bar as she sings his praises and later sneaks into her hotel room, overhearing Bragg's interview with her. She recounts how she felt "that Ripley was writing [the first book]", and as if to add visual proof to this verbal claim, he sets down at her desk and starts typing the next chapter of *Ripley Under Ground*. This playfully postmodern, Frankenstein-like rendering

of the author/character relationship is certainly ahead of its time. It received much more critical acclaim when it was done in post-millennial highbrow farces like the Peter Carey novel, *My Life as a Fake* (2003), in which a poet's literary alias comes alive and escapes him, or *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), in which an IRS agent learns that he is a character in a novel written by a reclusive author who is not too far removed from Highsmith. In all of these narratives, the creature attempts to liberate itself from its creator. "I'm Tom Ripley", the protagonist insists at one point in the film. "I exist. It's as simple as that. I exist." While *A Gift for Murder* does not constitute the prototype of a conventional, feature-length literary adaptation, it engages more than any other Highsmith film with the various myths surrounding the author and with the binary distinction between original and copy that permeates not only her work but the whole adaptation business. The film thus interrogates the economy of adaptation in more than one sense. It squeezes most of the book's key incidents into its brief running time, and it also contains a number of key lessons on the marketability of artistic properties, a subtext about aggressive business expansion that runs through the whole Ripliad (see Wagers 2013).

The various incarnations of *Ripley Under Ground* continue to substantiate the novel's poststructuralist agenda. Derrida, who wrote at length about the arbitrary ways in which we make sense by resorting to signatures and names (especially in *Signéponge*, 1975), certainly would have appreciated how Ripley's name, throughout Highsmith's novels, becomes a *telling* name in the phonetically deformed invocations of his acquaintances: To the Italian police, he is "Signor Reepley", or *replay* (TMR 197), to his own wife, he is "Tome" (RUG 143 and 218), which is closer to *tomb* and thus to death. This resonates with one of the key lessons from *Signature Event Context*: a signature introduces the possibility of "absolute disappearance", for legibility and iterability are determined by "the absolute absence of the addressee" (Derrida 1991, 90). Ripley, in turn, would have appreciated that he has been called

upon to bury some of the dirtier secrets of the film industry. Two failed action adventure movies produced around the turn of the millennium (when cinema began to rediscover Highsmith's hero) credit their screenplays to one 'Ripley Highsmith', who now has his own IMDb page.¹¹ It may just be an in-joke which turns Tom Ripley into an Alan Smithee-like signifier of artistic failure, but there are worse fates one can imagine for a hero so utterly at home in the realm of forgery, plagiarism, and corruption.

Works Cited

- Bahners, Patrick. "Patricia Highsmith und die Macht des positiven Denkens." *Merkur* 58.7 (2004): 569-579.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." 1967. Trans. Geoff Bennington. *Modern Criticism and Theory*. Ed. David Lodge. Harlow: Longman, 2007. 313-316.
- Bibbiani, William. "Barry Pepper Talks *True Grit*." *Crave* 6 June 2011. 9 Dec. 2016. <<http://www.craveonline.com/film/interviews/168239-barry-pepper-talks-true-grit>>.
- Bickerton, Emilie. *Eine kurze Geschichte der 'Cahiers du Cinéma'*. Trans. Markus Rautzenberg. Zurich: diaphanes, 2010.
- Burke, Seán. "The Ethics of Signature." *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader*. Ed. Seán Burke. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1995. 285-291.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Signature Event Context." Trans. Alan Bass. *Between the Blinds: A Derrida Reader*. Ed. Peggy Kamuf. New York; Chichester: Columbia UP, 1991. 80-111.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Declarations of Independence." *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. 46-54.

- Dill, Scott. "Visions of Violence: Christianity and Anti-Humanism in Patricia Highsmith's Ripliad." *Christianity and Literature* 63.3 (2014): 373-390.
- Fleig, Horst. *Wim Wenders: Hermetische Filmsprache und Fortschreiben antiker Mythologie*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2005.
- Grossman, Julie. *Literature, Film, and Their Hideous Progeny: Adaptation and ElastEXTity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Handke, Peter. "Die privaten Weltkriege der Patricia Highsmith." 1975. *Patricia Highsmith: Leben und Werk*. Eds. Franz Cavigelli and Fritz Senn. Zurich: Diogenes, 1996. 169-180.
- Hebborn, Eric. *The Art Forger's Handbook*. London: Cassell, 1997.
- Marx, Karl. *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*. 1852. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2007.
- McKiver, Tony. "Injustice for All: Ripley's Game Remembered." *The Quietus* 14 May 2016. 9 Dec. 2016. <<http://thequietus.com/articles/20136-ripleys-game-reassessed>>.
- Miller, Jacqui. "The Tremors of Forgery: The Palimpsest of Tom Ripley's Identity." *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 33.2 (2015): 56-66.
- Murray, Simone. *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation*. New York; London: Routledge, 2012.
- Peary, Gerald. "Patricia Highsmith." *Sight and Sound* 75.2 (1988): 104-105.
- Pietrzak-Franger, Monika. "Conversing with Ghosts: Or, the Ethics of Adaptation." *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts*. Eds. Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner. Berlin; Boston: de Gruyter, 2012. 70-88.
- Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. London; New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Schwanebeck, Wieland. *Der flexible Mr. Ripley: Männlichkeit und Hochstapelei in Literatur und Film*. Weimar; Cologne; Vienna: Böhlau, 2014.

Schwanebeck, Wieland. "The Painter's Hand and Hitchcock's Silhouette: A Study of Signatures." *Constructions of the Gendered Self across the Media*. Eds. Ulrike Kohn, Sophie Spieler, and Wieland Schwanebeck. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2015. 87-159.

Sutherland, John. "Introduction." *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. By Patricia Highsmith. London: Virago, 2015. n.pag.

Symons, Julian. *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*. New York: Mysterious Press, 1992.

Wagers, Kelley. "Tom Ripley, Inc.: Patricia Highsmith's Corporate Fiction." *Contemporary Literature* 54.2 (2013): 239-270.

Wilson, Andrew. *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith*. London; New York; Berlin: Bloomsbury, 2010.

¹ The story, written in 1949, appeared for the first time in a magazine in 1963. Highsmith never included it in an anthology of her short fiction, possibly because she had recycled so much of its content in *Ripley Under Ground*.

² With an uncanny eye for detail, Murchison observes that the color spectrum of the later Derwatts contradicts his stylistic development. He also suspects foul play because there are only Derwatt *paintings*, but no drawings in circulation, and to Murchison, it is the drawing (as a form of *étude*) that comes closest to a genuine artistic signature: "You might say, you can forge a signature or a painting more easily than you can forge a drawing" (*RUG* 60). Similarly, where Morelli studied details like hands in order to conclude whether or not a painting was genuine, Murchison 'reads' Ripley's hands to conclude that he has impersonated Derwatt: "I noticed Derwatt's hands. [...] And people think I don't notice little things." (66)

³ When he abandons his life as Dickie Greenleaf, the protagonist muses that "identifying himself as Thomas Phelps Ripley was going to be one of the saddest things he had ever done in his life" (*TMR* 189).

⁴ "Hegel once remarked that all big events and persons of world history happen twice, as it were. What he forgot to add was: the first time as grand tragedy, the second time as rotten farce." (Marx 2007, 9, my translation)

⁵ According to Derrida, iterability is the condition of the signature convention: a condition which requires reproducibility yet at the same time "absolute singularity", and which means that the form of the signature "must

be able to detach itself from the present and singular intention of its production” (Derrida 1991, 107). A summary of Derrida’s investigations into the field of signatures is given in Schwanebeck 2015, 112-117.

⁶ The scene also seems prophetic of some of the more hostile reactions to Clément’s film. When it was released, Clément was attacked by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* for adopting Nouvelle Vague techniques while emulating the surface gloss of American studio films (Bickerton 2010, 54).

⁷ Wenders had originally been interested in the rights to *The Cry of the Owl* (1962) and *The Tremor of Forgery* (1969), having already put the title of the latter on a movie billboard in *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* (*The Goalkeeper’s Fear of the Penalty*) in 1972, as he recalls in his memories of *The American Friend* (reprinted in this volume).

⁸ Much of this comes from screenwriter Donald Westlake, who also wrote *Two Much* (1975), one of the most twisted and darkly humorous impostor novels of the postwar era.

⁹ In the Gospel according to St. John, the actual resurrection of this man is brought about by Jesus Christ; with Highsmith it is, by contrast, the Jesus revenant (Bernard), who buries the ‘bad’ Lazarus (instead of helping him to rise from the dead). A more detailed reading of Highsmith’s ‘Vulgate travesty’ is given by Patrick Bahners (2004).

¹⁰ *A Gift for Murder* also puts Murchison’s killing into the context of apotheosis and immortalization. The scene of Ripley wrapping Murchison’s body in plastic sheets recalls an earlier shot of religious statues which are covered by the same material.

¹¹ I am indebted to John Glen, director of *The Point Men* (2001), for providing me with some background information on the making of this film.