

THE FILM'S THE THING:
FILM TRANSLATION AND ITS EFFECT ON A SILENT,
EDITED AND FULL TEXT *HAMLET*¹

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Translation is, at its best, a difficult path to tread, especially in a global, multicultural society. A word that defines an object may be in need of careful consideration and modification, not only to convey its individual meaning, but also to place it in the concept or intent when linked with others words forming a thought. The process is particularly complex when pairing a word with an image as is done in film.

In the 1960's, the American television classic, *Star Trek*, added new words as well as additional meaning to old words in the English lexicon. The definition of these words was clearly given in visual images that can still be recalled today. A typical exchange of dialogue may read:

Captain, according to my tricorder, there is no intelligent life
on this planet.
Beam him up, Scotty.
Energise.

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When the Captain says, “Energise”, the person on the screen disappears into rays of flickering lights which ultimately vanish. When the rays of light reappear at another location, they dissolve back into the person. Our sense of reality tells us that this is only possible in science fiction and we willingly believe the images we see. The words “beam” and “energise” **encode** the process of transporting a person from one place to another by breaking down their molecules and re-assembling them. Over time, we anticipate that when the words are spoken, a body will dematerialise and re-materialise. We **decode** the words by associating them with our individual personal experiences which include the images that had defined them. In this encoding and decoding process, an essential element of translating a text, we derive meaning and understanding. However, the case is somewhat different for Shakespeare on film.

With Shakespeare, there is no newly invented text to be connected in a singular way with a particular image. Shakespeare’s imagery is explicit in his text, in language that has been more or less fixed for more than four centuries. A reading of the text that identifies signs and meanings can offer revelations that may easily be employed in the stage performance of the text. As noted by Elaine Aston and George Savona, a iconographic reading of the play, such as that done of *Hamlet* by Anne Ubersfeld in 1978,

points to the ways in which an understanding of the actantial functions of character may provide a beneficial reference point for those involved in stage practice. (40)

Evidence of the power of signs in “stage practice” can be found, for example, in Peter Hall’s comments made to Judith Cook before his 1973 interpretation of *The Tempest*:

I've become very interested in emblematic theatre ... The emblematic, visual side of theatre—if you have a great artist doing it—is immensely potent. (70)

However, the visual language of film, in existence for little more than 100 years, has its own system of signs which are susceptible to historical, cultural, and social changes in meaning. For example, when Hamlet says "To be or not to be/ That is the question", there is no singular cinematic image from any of the film versions that encodes the line or offers us a way to decode it. Here a iconographic reading that can successfully re-shape a stage interpretation may falter when the text is translated into film.

Therefore, Shakespeare's language is subject to negotiation of this incompatibility of sign systems when being translated to a medium for which it was not intended. As H. R. Coursen suggests:

Some of the great "Shakespeare" films, as has often been noted, are the ones the most removed from the specific language of the scripts.... A film "based" on Shakespeare must become a separate work, with its own inner logic and integrity. (35)

As with textual translation, a tension exists between Shakespeare's textual language (intended for the stage) and film's visual language. I believe this definite difference in the iconography of the text and the film, must be reconciled in order for the film to be effective both as Shakespeare and as a film. While it can be argued that Shakespeare on film should retain as much of Shakespeare's text as possible, I suggest that this inclusiveness may not always be necessary or indeed desirable. What could or should be the balance between words and images?

The problem is well illustrated by *Hamlet*, Act 3, scene 3, lines 36-98.² After patently revealing his guilt following the presentation of *The Murder of Gonzago*, Claudius has a moment in which he examines

his conscience. He admits that he has murdered his brother, but “Pray can I not” (3.3.38). He then begins a debate with himself about the possibility of forgiveness for his transgression. He asserts that he cannot ask to be pardoned since he still enjoys the fruits of his crime: the crown, his ambition, and Gertrude. He also ponders the nature of heavenly justice which would demand him to be truthful. He decides nonetheless to try praying. Hamlet, on his way to Gertrude’s closet, comes upon a Claudius who appears to be deep in prayer. The man who has just proclaimed that he could

[...] drink hot blood
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. (3.2.379-381)

draws his weapon (“Up, sword” (3.3.88)) and we the readers, or stage spectators, even though anticipating another violent murder, are relieved that he is finally going to act. We know, as the players do not, that Hamlet has missed an opportunity for revenge and Claudius has missed an opportunity for repentance. In this knowledge lies the bitter irony of the scene. The deeper irony, however, is that Hamlet is caught in the Elsinore trap as noted by Claudius:

O liméd soul, that struggling to be free,
Art more engaged! (3.2.68-69)

The complexity of these sixty-three lines is very evident in the text. Claudius has 39 lines to Hamlet’s 24. The physical arrangement of the text on the page underscores the emotional and dramatic position of two different men involved in a similar moral debate: a rationalisation for their actions. Claudius and Hamlet both have been moved to murderous rage. Claudius seeks a reason to justify the murder of his brother. Hamlet seeks a reason to murder his uncle when it can be justified as revenge. One line in particular physicalises the debate:

"Pray can I not". The word "cannot" is divided in two equal parts, "can" and "not". The "I" serves not only as a signifier of Claudius, but also a physical, visual barrier between ability and inability. The verb "pray" is on the positive side, while "not" is an all-inclusive negative. Furthermore, the text juxtaposes the debates, and the contrasts and similarities in the men's words, attitudes, and thought processes enhance the sharp contrast of the words and the situation. This soliloquy of Hamlet's is the only one embedded in another soliloquy, that of Claudius. Robert E. Woods finds in addition that

Of all the acts of observation in the interior of Elsinore, [this is the] only one [that] is not the result of contrivance. (36)

For Granville Barker, this scene is critical to the entire play:

... upon what happens now - or rather, does *not* happen - the rest of the play depends; from this moment the tragedy and its holocaust are precipitated.... It is upon this master stroke of irony that everything turns; upon a Claudius battling within himself for his salvation and losing, and a Hamlet refusing to kill him lest he should *not* be damned.... Nor are we anywhere given harder or closer knit argument. (116-117)

This "I" changes, however, just as it must in a foreign language translation, when the scene is translated to film. The signs inherent in these two speeches, furthermore, may be difficult to identify. In the text, there is no indication of the physical location of the scene. Claudius has just given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the mandate to take Hamlet to England. It may be assumed, because of the conspiratorial nature of Claudius' act, that these orders would be given privately and therefore, the scene could transpire in a study or any secret space in a castle. After Polonius enters to advise Claudius that Hamlet is on his

way to Gertrude and that he (Polonius) plans to eavesdrop on their exchange, Claudius may stay in this space or remove himself to a space more appropriate for praying. It is the director's choice. It is also a choice whether Claudius speaks to the audience or to himself. These choices are important since, as Ruth Nevo comments, the scene has far reaching effects:

By the time [Hamlet] has (mistakenly) spared the King, and mistakenly killed Polonius; by the time, chastened by the Ghost, he has acknowledged his blunted purposes and has found it in his heart to ask his mother to "assume a virtue, if you have it not," it has become clear, with the brutal clarity of irony, that it is indeed only in the counterfeit presentment of the playhouse, or in the mind of God, that the word can be made flesh or truth transparent in appearance. (165)

However, how can these elements of irony, entrapment, and futility be given effective cinematic treatment that is true to the particular demands of film and the importance of the scene in the play?

A film translation by its nature may, of necessity, alter the dramatic shape of the play text. In addition to the interpretative line taken by the producer, director, screenwriter, cinematographer, and editor, there are various non-literary factors such as the film budget, the intended audience, and time constraints which influence the finished product. Within this product, there is a difference of stage space to cinematic space. Unlike that of the stage, the spectator experience of film is not punctuated by act or scene divisions. Continuity of narrative flow is a hallmark of film that forces the text into negotiation not unlike that of translation of a text into a foreign language. The linguistic devices used in the text, such as metaphor, may be expressed by special sound and visual effects, a screen title, or an appropriate image.

The auditory experience is also affected. The space in which the dialogue is delivered is not confined and the delivery is very different

for the film actor from that of the stage actor. The stage actor has one "take", the film actor may have many before a scene is committed to the final cut. In addition, dialogue that establishes character, space, and action on stage may be supplanted by visual images or sounds. All these factors combine to impact an already complicated text. Yet above all is the necessary intrusion of the camera, altering and re-inventing the spectator's point of view.

The long shot, mid-shot, and close-up select, as stage presentation does not, points of action and reaction which may emphasise or re-define aspects of the text. The close-up in particular focuses the spectator's attention on the face of the actor playing the character. The camera in essence gives a "double" vision: we see through our eyes through the camera lens.

Illustration of these and other problems involving encodings and decodings and the production of meaning in a spectator can be found in an analysis of the prayer scene as envisioned by Svend Gade in the 1920 silent film, Franco Zeffirelli with an edited text (1990), and Kenneth Branagh with a full text (1996).

The 1920 film finds its source in the original Danish legend as it appears in Saxo Grammaticus, and in an interpretation by nineteenth-century American scholar, Edward P. Vining. In this version, Hamlet is born a woman but announced as a male heir to the throne to the people of Denmark when it seems that King Hamlet has died in battle. When the King returns unscathed, he and the Queen continue the deception. In evaluating this film, Robert Ball writes:

... By adaptations and acting appropriate to pictures in motion, the least Shakespearean *Hamlet* becomes the best *Hamlet* of the silent era. (141)

In many instances there are broad differences to Shakespeare's play, such as Hamlet falling in love with Horatio. However, the prayer scene as in Shakespeare is maintained. The time frame of the action is fixed in the Middle Ages. The costumes are what is considered to be

traditional for the period of the play, as is the set decoration. The altar sits atop two steps and on it, there are two lit candles, a large cross, and two small altar cloths imprinted with crosses. The chapel space is physically defined by two stone-like walls and the altar which appears screen left. Our interpretation that the space is a chapel comes from our experience of other spaces similar to this one that show Christian or other religious icons that have classified them as chapels. The altar is shot on an angle which places the spectator just behind it. Claudius falls on his knees before the altar and begins to pray. Because of the limited text interspersed throughout the images, access to Claudius' thought processes is by interpolation. His attempt at contrition is relayed by the attitude of the actor portraying Claudius. Because his eyes look up and his hands are folded, we understand that he is praying, an interpretation also made by Hamlet.

Hamlet enters the chapel behind Claudius, and draws his (her) sword. On the downward swing, Hamlet stops. By his flailing arms and purposeful head turns, powerful non-verbal signs, Hamlet demonstrates the internal battle. He then withdraws, slowly and carefully. After Hamlet's exit, Claudius rises, and his body language clearly indicates his inability to pray. He shrugs his shoulders and leaves the chapel.

Today's audiences may laugh at the gesture because it is so simple and direct, but in its simplicity, the shrug is an easily recognised sign of three of the elements as listed in its definition: "indifference," "helplessness," and "contempt." Furthermore, the bent position of Claudius' body, the hanging of his head, and his slow, shuffling exit underline his inability to be truly contrite. Silently and with only minimal text, Gade captures the irony of Hamlet's not realising that Claudius is far from a state of grace and, if murdered then, would probably not go to heaven.

Gade is able to do this effectively because the text is synchronous with our decoding of the signs used in the film as expressed by the actors. While it is true that silent film acting is closely aligned with

stage acting, it is also true that the use of the camera in this scene keeps the stage elements to a minimum. The mid-shots and close-ups provide a perspective that the stage does not allow and magnifies the signs we see. Because of our ability to read them, these signs produce meaning that extends far beyond the images we have seen. In addition, lacking the advancements in film technology that have hallmarked many films since 1980, Gade employs black-and-white photography and a single lens camera. These allow the director to emphasise the narrativity of the film. For text, Gade employs five sentences in inter-titles:

Oh God, forgive me my despicable murder.
Now I will kill him.
My revenge must hit you more deeply.
You must not die while you are prying.
Then your deed would be forgiven!

These phrases provide a skeletal outline for the visual expansion that precedes or follows their insertion.

In comparison, Franco Zeffirelli's version creates a text vacuum of sorts. *Hamlet* was Zeffirelli's fourth Shakespeare project after the Burton-Taylor *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967), the wildly successful *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), and the opera *Otello* (1986). Because of its radical nature, Zeffirelli's treatment of Shakespeare's text has been well documented. In typical Zeffirelli fashion, with an emphasis on narrativity akin to Gade's, the director makes no attempt to assert fidelity to Shakespeare. Together with screenwriter Christopher De Vore, Zeffirelli states in the film's credits that it is "**based** on the play by William Shakespeare" (emphasis mine). Influenced by Olivier's 1948 production and its focus on the domestic tragedy, Zeffirelli was, however, aware of the problem of translating a playtext to film:

... When you go into the kingdom of cinema, you must obey the laws of that kingdom. You must have a point of view,

make a really precise choice as to what you want to show.
(qtd. in *The Independent on Sunday*)

Subsequently, the director retains only 1178 lines out of a possible 3760 of the conflated texts and deliberately transposes, interpolates, and rewrites the text. The director supports his dissection of the text with strong, logical visuals. However, the ironic nuance of the prayer scene is annihilated in Zeffirelli's 17-line interpretation.

In the prayer scene, Zeffirelli chooses to focus on a Hamlet whose new-found determination is directed more at his mother than the King. Like Gade, Zeffirelli preserves the historical time frame. In this Elsinore, the chapel space is similar to King Hamlet's crypt which opened the film. The altar is awash in a stark white light which seems to come from an artificial source. A huge medieval tapestry of the crucified Christ hangs behind the cloth-draped altar, and Claudius casts long, black shadows on the walls. This time, the altar is shot from behind Claudius, who kneels on a small stool. Hamlet leaves Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with "'By and by' is easily said" (3.2.375), and exits down a dark, circular, stone staircase into an equally darkened hall. While this has been happening, Claudius has begun his analysis of his pangs of guilt. He admits to his brother's murder, but moves straight away to "bow[ing his] stubborn knees" (3.370).

Hamlet stops outside the chapel and notices his uncle is at prayer. He says he will do it now, but, even though he has drawn his sword, he does not come close to Claudius. Hamlet remains behind a stone portico in the dark shadows. This Hamlet does not spend much time thinking about the opportunity for revenge. This Hamlet must get to Mother.

The cast of the film seemed to accept Zeffirelli's economised text. Alan Bates (Claudius) and Paul Scofield (the Ghost) defended him by saying:

Every word you hear is Shakespeare's but [Zeffirelli] has turned the play into a screenplay.... One thinks that if

Shakespeare had known about films, he might have re-jigged the play quite a bit himself. (qtd. in *What's On in London*)

... Since Shakespeare's audience often could not see the actor's eyes or expressions, Shakespeare tended to repeat key ideas or expressions. With the close-ups of film, there's no need. (Stivers 54)

The editing of the text is such that Hamlet's speech is rapid and condensed, giving the impression that the urgency and importance of the situation for him lies in getting his mother to stay away from Claudius. Since Claudius appears to be truly contrite in his deep bending and kneeling before an altar and since the sound of his weeping interjects Hamlet's speech, the irony of the scene is lost in our decoding of the behaviour we see. Claudius is in tears and wracked with remorse. He must be repentant. In a sense, we have been deceived the same way as Hamlet. Despite Edward Quinn's observation that there are "... several instances where a line in the play is rendered visually rather than verbally" (2), the cinematic and dramatic impact suffer from a lack of balance between the visual and verbal. However, this is not to say that a fuller text would produce a more desirable effect.

Among the four Academy Award nominations for Kenneth Branagh's versions of the play was one for "Screenplay Based on Material Previously Produced or Published." This curious title raises questions since the dialogue is all of the possible 3760 lines of Shakespeare's text, a conflation of the First Folio and the Quartos. Branagh was severely criticised for his 232 minute film version of the play:

It is the same length as Abel Gance's silent version of *Napoleon* and quite a bit longer than other epics such as *Gone with the Wind* (219 minutes), King Vidor's *War and Peace* (208 minutes), and *Dr. Zhivago* (197 minutes)... Perhaps

Branagh ... should talk to the Reduced Shakespeare Company.
(Brooks, *The Observer*)

Interestingly, the text is only partially responsible for the film's length. A considerable portion of it is attributable to Branagh's cinematic extra-textual additions: the Fortinbras story line in particular is explained in the fullest possible terms from his first mention to the film's conclusion. Branagh justifies these inclusions by commenting:

It's the full text which means it takes four pages to say you're going for a walk. If the camera was still and you just photographed people saying the words, it would be terribly boring - you need the excitement to hold the audience.³

The overall effect, however, is that these images expand the screenplay that is expanding the text of the play. This expansion is most evident in the prayer scene.

Retaining all sixty-three lines, Kenneth Branagh punctuates the length of Hamlet's speech with extra-textual filmic explanations to maintain both the visual interest and the focus on Hamlet. Claudius is seen entering a confessional, an appropriate space that should emphasise the contrast between the speech and the speaker. In the establishing shot for this crucial scene, the dark confessional of ornate wood is located on one of three stone walls that has been accessed through an ornate iron gate. Claudius is screen left, with a soft white light revealing the left side of his face and his place in a corner of the shadows. He speaks very softly, almost in a whisper. Moving in slowly toward Claudius, the camera reveals that the confessional also includes a black lace-like screen that separates it into two sections, neither visible from the other. Claudius speaks out into the closed but paradoxically open space. The extreme close-up forces us to concentrate on him and what he is saying. The element of surprise is preserved by the sight of a hand entering the frame behind the screen. Claudius is oblivious to

the intruder. The light casts a lacy shadow across Hamlet's face. As Hamlet says, "And so am I revenged" (3.3.73), there is an extra-textual image of his knife blade entering Claudius' ear to his brain with a gush of blood. Yet, Claudius appears so deep in concentration that he cannot sense either the knife blade so close to his ear or the breathing of an agitated Hamlet next to him. As Hamlet moves through the litany of Claudius' sins that include his drunkenness and incestuous enjoyment of Gertrude, there are flashbacks of these actions. When Claudius finishes his "prayer" with "Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (3.3.98), he turns to look at the now-vacant space where Hamlet had been, perhaps wondering if the wayward nephew/step-son had heard him confess.

The extreme close-up of Hamlet's blazing blue eyes moving frenziedly from screen left to screen right indicates that these thoughts are rapid and spontaneous. However, the inclusion of the flashbacks is filmic redundancy. In this sequence, they upset the balance of the two debates and render them as independent of each other. These images with their own signs are not necessary since they do not combine with the other signs to enhance clarity of meaning. If anything, they simply confuse the issue and detract from the decoding process. The sense of irony is sublimated to the cinematography.

Notably, although not indicated by the text, all three films place the scene in a darkened chapel. By identifying the chapel with the signs of the altar, the candles, the tapestry, and the crucifix, and by the actor's kneeling and folded hands, the directors allow us to translate, and thus understand, the religious, contemplative nature of the space and the potential for repentance in Claudius. The film close-ups of both Hamlet and Claudius clearly show the tension between the text and the image by magnifying the actor in character at the expense of other signs. The director is faced with visual choices that are roughly parallel to the linguistic choices faced by the translator. To extract the irony written into this scene, the director must provide encodable and decodable signs in the actor which can provide a frame of reference for

the audience in this sign vacuum. As has been demonstrated, this is not always the case, and lack of attention to this vital aspect seriously erodes not only the scene, but also the scenes that precede and follow it.

Peter Wollen writes in his book, *Signs and Meanings in Cinema*, that

[i]t is only in very rare cases that non-verbal systems can exist without auxiliary support from the verbal code.... One of the main achievements of the Renaissance was to banish words from the picture space. Yet words repeatedly forced themselves back.... In the twentieth century words have returned with a vengeance. (80)

The statement could be descriptive of the problem of how much of Shakespeare's text could or should be translated into images. In Gade's case, he had no choice since sound for Shakespeare on film did not arrive until 1929's *Taming of the Shrew*. Zeffirelli chose to strip the text to the bare verbal essentials and fill the gaps with images to focus on the twin domestic tragedies in Elsinore: "Once you have focused on that story, all the other stories fall like dead branches" (qtd. in *The Independent on Sunday*). Branagh's interpretation offers either "a full exploration of the textures and layers within the work" (Tutty, *Screen International*) on the one hand, or "... A bold attempt to bring out the supernatural, psychosexual, and other nuances of the play that are normally subsumed in an abridged text" (Othenberg 81). The issue is complex and has been debated since film began: Does a director only use the words to support the images, or cut the text and lose a vital dramatic element, or include the full text, which may overwhelm the images, or extra-textual images to "clarify" the text? Essentially, how much translation is needed for Shakespeare on film?

This brief comparison demonstrates the numerous negotiations of only one scene. The text of many scenes must navigate an almost infinite number of similar arbitrations to secure effective expression in

film. Underpinning the entire project of bringing a Shakespeare text to cinematic realisation must be a reconciliation of the play's language and its sign-system with the film's language and its sign-system, not only in the screenplay and production values but also beyond to cinematography and editing. In discussing analysis of text, Terence Hawkes, in his essay "Shakespeare and New Critical Approaches", states

... The semiotic analysis of Shakesperian texts is beginning to afford new insights as well as to confirm older ones. (295)

Applying iconographic methodology to film performance may go far in finding an answer to what could or should be the balance between images and words when translating Shakespeare's plays to film.

Notes

- 1 A portion of this paper was presented at The Australia-New Zealand Shakespeare Association Conference, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia on 14 July 1998.
- 2 All quotations are taken from William Shakespeare. *The Complete Works*. Compact Edition. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, gen. Eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
- 3 Kenneth Branagh qtd. in '*Hamlet* in the Round'. See bibliography below.

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Filmography

Hamlet, und Reichdrama. Directed by Svend Gade. Music by Joachimn Bärenz. Titles by Jens Rademacher. Cinematography by Curl Courant and Axel Graatkjer. 1987 Northern German Broadcasting Company. Germany, 1920.

Hamlet. Directed by Franco Zeffirelli. Produced by Dyson Lovell. Carolco Pictures/ Icon Pictures/ Le Studio Canalñ/ Marquis. United Kingdom/ France/ Spain, 1990.

Hamlet. Directed by Kenneth Branagh. Produced by David Barron. Turner/ Castle Rock Entertainment/ Fishmonger Films. United Kingdom/U.S.A., 1996.