

Filmed Versions of Shakespeare

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The purpose of this lecture is to show the results of the analysis of four film adaptations/translations of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, produced in the last two decades and directed by filmmakers belonging to different nationalities. These are: Grigori Kozintsev's *Korol Lear*, (Russia, 1969/70); Peter Brook's *King Lear*, (Great Britain, 1970/71); Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*, (Japan, 1985) and Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear*, (France, 1987). Such films can be considered as iconic signs of each other – because they are related so as to suggest similarities – and also as intersemiotic translations – because they represent works translated into a semiotic system – film – different from the system of the play. The analysis confirmed the hypothesis that the cultural element proved responsible for the possibilities open to the artistic creation in the intersemiotic translation. Departing from one sequence in each film, some relevant aspects that emerged while the films were studied will be presented.

Kozintsev's Lear

The first scene in Kozintsev's film is a totally new creation; there is nothing similar in Shakespeare's play: a host of ragged, starving and ailing people, walking amidst stones, towards the gate of the castle, where Lear, in order to "express [his] darker purpose", is surrounded by his vassals. It represents a vivid example of an intersemiotic

translation. In this sequence, a verbal image of the Renaissance text is translated into a visual one. The word *stone* appears quoted a few times in the text. However some qualities associated with this element, as its hardness and sterility, pervade the text. Kozintsev has appropriated them and transformed them into one of the most impressive images of his film. Rocks, gravel, pebbles – thus some different varieties of stone – cover the ground, symbolizing the sterility of Lear's kingdom, and of its laws as well as his daughters's harshness. The peasants are as dumb as stones and their presence is felt only through their steps on the stony land, where Lear undertakes his progress towards self-knowledge. His world is, from the very beginning, a barren one, made up of loose stones. This is the place where the mad king, his faithful and blind jester, and his godson, disguised, met a group of walking people, whom Lear is going to join later. The meanings created by these images concentrate at the end of the film when Lear's dilacerating and anguished cry is heard: "Howl, howl, howl! O! you are men of stones"! (IV, iii, 258) Lear is standing by a stone wall when this cry of grief is heard. The verbal language of the dramatic text reappears in the speech in the scenario and in images, created by Kozintsev's scenery.

Shakespeare has been criticized for what is considered his disdain for social problems, and his concentration on questions related to the individual. However, in the text, there are many vestiges of Lear's interest in social issues. During the tempest scenes, the king begins to identify with the poor and homeless, and becomes aware of how little he has worried about them. Thus the text indicates the king's late discovery that richness must be distributed among the indigent, whose sufferings he had neglected.

In his turn, the Russian filmmaker strongly emphasizes this aspect, when he begins his film with a crowd of hungry beggars. Because Lear comes to total distress, he begins to understand the situation of the poor and to identify with the people. In this sense, because the film can

create a dialectic relation between the actor and the audience, who are motivated to draw critical conclusions, it seems Brechtian. The spectator is able to perceive, through intellectual participation, that it would be possible to create a more just society, which Lear, however, has not tried to do. Through this and many other resources, the film induces a critical reflexion about social problems. The Russian director translates some Renaissance concerns into those of Soviet Russia. If in the time of Shakespeare, Lear's tragedy includes the loss of all his land and his daughters's abandonment, in the transposition to modern Russia, the king's tragedy includes also the loss of his social class.

Kozintsev's decision to emphasize the social problem may be attributed to the historical and cultural aspect of the intersemiotic translation. He translated from a Renaissance culture where man was the measure of all things into another, that of the Soviet Russia, where the people represent the utmost preoccupation. Because the director was born in post-revolutionary Russia, and lived under the Soviet regime, he produced a film that subliminally denounces people's suffering, caused by authoritarianism and greed for power.

Peter Brook's Film

It is said that the tempest scene in *King Lear* is one of the most difficult to present on stage either because it also symbolizes the torments in Lear's mind or because it becomes somewhat ridiculous when presented realistically. In Brook's film this scene is exemplary as an instance of intersemiotic translation. It results from the translation of the 1962 "Royal Shakespeare Company" staging of *King Lear*, produced in Stratford, into the cinema. Both are stylized productions but create images quite different from each other. In the theatrical production, Brook used a bare stage, almost without scenery and with only a rough wooden throne and a bench or table easily removable. Upstage two giant white screens form an abstract backdrop. "As the storm sounds grew

louder, three rust-colored iron thunder sheets descended from the flies above, trembling as they made the thunder. Lit by a harsh white light, Lear spoke as the others onstage mimed the storm's effects, his speeches and their replies punctuated by the crash of thunder and the wailing of the wind" (Mullin, 190). This stylization is translated on to the screen through cinematographic resources such as jump cuts, dissolves, visual discontinuity, fades to black and superposed images.

We know that Peter Brook, enormously influenced by the other arts, was concerned with the object being presented from many perspectives, and analysed in each of its fragments. Following the trends of the experimental theatre of his time, he tried to call the spectator's attention not to the object but to the reference. His intention was to represent the tempest in Lear's mind as well as in the spectator's imagination. The psychological space created for Lear would determine the world we could see on screen. Like Lear, the spectator also becomes perplexed with the close-up replacing the long or medium shot, with the fragmentation through framing, with the discontinuous editing and with all the non-conventional strategies and codes used by Brook. This contemporary way of representing the tempest seems to reflect the negative existential world view, which is the product of people's belief in a disintegration of the traditional order.

A sense of meaningless life and the loss of traditional ideals predominate in the XXth century. These feelings become incorporated in cultural and artistic production, including the theatre, which assumes a defiant position in this century. Questions resulting from these feelings, such as the quest for self-knowledge and the belief in values that proved unstable could already be found in Shakespeare's text. However, Brook took them to extremes, making use of daring resources to express them. One of them is the convention for dialogue of the two-shot in profile that Brook uses in a very innovative fashion: a shot of Lear looking frame right, followed by a shot of him looking frame left. The cut in this

manner, not between two actors but between opposing views of Lear, conveys the idea that he is talking to himself. This visual metaphor expresses Lear's perplexed quest for identity. Once more the cultural and historical aspect exerts its force. Pervaded by disillusionment with the enfeeblement of religious faith and by hopelessness in a social progress, and permeated by recurrent acts of barbarism, the disordered world of the sixties collapsed before the bewildered eyes of man, who had to face a world deprived of logical and moral values. In order to face it Brook began to express Lear's anxiety through chaotic images, disobeying conventions and affronting the audience.

The purpose of the use of these cinematic resources was to shock the audience, so that they are disturbed by a kind of interior disruption in their repressed unconsciousness. The intersemiotic translation presented to them is effected by a messenger of hopelessness, of disbelief in the restoration of either order or of human values, which used to underlie all tragedies.

Ran, the Japanese King Lear

Akira Kurosawa accomplishes his intersemiotic translation in a different manner. He re-writes the text and ascribes speeches to characters that remind us of Lear's play. The warlord, Hidetora Hichimondi, is clearly a transposition of the Renaissance monarch; Kyoami, similarly, replaces the Fool. But some other characters do not correspond exactly to the characters of the play. Lady Kaede, for example, incorporates many characters, for she, alone, assimilates Goneril's and Regan's evil. Her behaviour is so despicable that none of Lear's sons-in-law could surpass her. Moreover, there is no sub-plot.

Kurosawa's translation effects many changes which are necessary for making it accessible to a Japanese audience. The daughters were transformed into sons, Jiro, Taro and Saburo, because it would be

unacceptable in Japan to have women inheriting property. Moreover he changes Lear into a Samurai lord whose lands had been conquered through war and domination over his neighbours. Jiro's wife, Lady Kaede, is the protagonist and her main intent is to revenge her family, who had fallen victims of Hidetora's imperialist conquest.

The Japanese director tries to let his film be shaped by Japanese art, culture and tradition, even when he deals with a Western text, such as King Lear. He makes use of techniques, elements and themes of the Noh Japanese theatre. His film can be defined as a "jidai-jeki", a kind of historical film which turns to the time of the Samurai. In terms of cultural translation, this could perhaps be considered the most representative change operated in the intersemiotic translation which thus also emphasizes the fact that cultural elements were responsible for several changes effected in the translation.

The scene chosen to represent the film begins with a dialogue between Kaede and her husband, Taro, in which she incites him to take power, defying him to act as a sovereign. Next, Kyoami, playing a role similar to the Fool's, mocks the man controlled by a woman. By dancing and singing, Kyoami imitates the banner, a symbol of power, and mocks Taro, who retains it. It is clear that Kaede, behind the scenes, seizes control of everything.

This scene illustrates the aspect chosen to be studied by the Japanese filmmaker: the transmission of power, a central concern in the Renaissance play. This theme carries out implications such as hereditary privilege, and the questions of authority and subjection of women – all of them dealt with by Kurosawa.

Kurosawa's film, like the previous ones, could also be approached from an order/disorder point of view. Both contexts, those of the Renaissance and of Japan, – like most societies – are similar in the sense that they are subject to a patriarchal order. In a society like this, woman has two

choices: either she totally submits to man, performing the role of a sign, adapting to the image created for her, or usurps power and rebels against the order imposed on her.

In some aspects, Shakespeare's characters seem to follow the trail of subversion. This path is illustrated by Goneril's and Regan's rebellious attitude, and by Cordelia's refusal to yield to her father's whims. However, at the bottom, the play can be seen as very traditional because of the re-establishment of the patriarchal order: Cordelia, supposedly rebellious, maintains her obedience, although shifting it from father to husband. Moreover, poetic justice is achieved through Goneril's, Regan's and Edmond's deaths, seen as punishment for their rebellion.

Kurosawa's film presents examples of women's two extreme attitudes. Sue, the second son's wife, follows the path of submission. She preaches forgiveness and unconditional love, according to the teaching of Buddhism. In contrast, Lady Kaede follows the second path: she is greedy for power and therefore seduces her brother-in-law, taking possession of the castle. In contrast with Sue, the prototype of submission, and with Cordelia, who embodies family order, Lady Kaede questions the whole system. On making her his protagonist, Kurosawa breaks up the traditional patriarchal pattern, and uses the woman figure, traditionally submissive, as an instrument of subversion.

The films presented till now show some preoccupation with a kind of order, be it existential, social or familiar. For this reason, it can be said that in a way they stress the tragic aspect of life, which is absent from the next film.

King Lear, by Jean-Luc Godard

Godard's film can be considered as a totally different translation. The relationship with the play is shown in few ways. The film has the

Shakespeare title and grants the playwright a fictitious masculine heir. Only part of the dialogue and of the main plot, involving a "mafioso" named D. Learo, derive from the text. Godard fragments and modernizes Lear so that what is left is only a vestige of the play.

Lear's lines are issued in contexts totally different from Shakespeare's play, which gives them new meanings. Moreover, the filmmaker's intention is not to "naturalize" his highly intellectualized text, and not to provide the possibility of a complete understanding. As he himself explains, through subtitles, the film is only "an approach", "a study", "a clearing". There is nothing definite in it, it is suggested. It consists of a conglomerate of images, texts, voices, allusions, quotations and puns. Godard translates the order, momentarily broken in the Renaissance text into the order/disorder of the contemporary world, represented by the film, where plot, sequence, order, and understanding are lacking.

Because he is not concerned with the restoration of any kind of order, Godard's film does not convey the tragic vision of life found in Brook's, Kozintsev's and Kurosawa's. Therefore it exemplifies a translation which does not preserve the genre of the tragic dramatic text which inspired the cinematic creation. Besides banalizing Lear's story, it ignores important aspects and emphasizes minor ones, transforming the whole work into an ironic parody of the tragic text, or an anti-tragedy. The film thus represents a complete transformation, illustrating a translation/negation of genre. It translates Shakespeare's tragedy, with its sublime vision of man, into a trivial story taking place in a banal world. Instead of focalizing man's major interior conflicts, it has as its main subject the paltry controversies of our contemporaries, which can include a disagreement between a film director and a producer, and also some Hollywood gossip. Modern culture is then seen as limited and trivial, without any similarity to the greatness conveyed by the tragic vision. Concerning both subject and form, the play is treated in an unconventional manner.

The Renaissance play, belonging to the genre tragedy, thus changes into a caricature of the literary form. The sublime is transformed into the absurd, seriousness into triviality and there is inconsistency between subject and style. The film has been transformed into parody or at least into non-tragedy.

Because its author is not concerned with the restoration of any order, because the main concern of the film is triviality and also because modern artistic trends privilege a new mode of thought, shifting towards fragmentation, breach and discontinuity, the genre of the film is not tragedy any more. Godard becomes an ironic witness of the mediocrity of the contemporary world.

The conclusion we arrived at points to cultural elements as responsible for the possibilities open to artistic creation resulting from intersemiotic translations. As Godard's text cannot maintain the tragic tone and vision of the Renaissance, his film is transformed into something that does not belong to a definite genre and cannot even be taken as a tragedy.

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