TRANSLATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S WORDS INTO IMAGES: GRIGORI KOZINTSEV'S FILM ADAPTATION OF "HAMLET" WITHIN THE HISTORY OF HAMLET ON SCREEN.

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Hamlet is probably the most filmed of all Shakespearean plays. One of the major Soviet filmmakers, Grigori Kozintsev´s (1905-1973), filmed it in 1964 as part of the celebration for Shakespeare's 400 years anniversary. The result is considered the play's finest foreign screen adaptation. The greatest Shakespearean actor of last century, Sir Laurence Olivier, said that it was not himself but the Russian Innokenti Smoktunovsky who played the Hamlet of a century. In this paper, I intend to briefly place Kozintsev´s *Hamlet* within the history of *Hamlet* filmic productions and to highlight some its characteristics.

Silent *Hamlets*

Since the early days of the movie industry, in the very first years of silent cinema, *Hamlet* has been eyed by filmmakers. More than a dozen productions were made, of which I will comment a few, considered, for different reasons, historically remarkable.

In 1987 Sarah Bernhardt (1844—1923) played the role of the melancholic prince in the theatre; some years later, in 1900, she played Hamlet again, this time having a scene filmed for the purpose of advertising the theatrical production. This short Hamlet scene was Bernhardt´s cinema début: in a five minute rendition of *Hamlet*, fifty six year old Bernhardt performed an energetic duel scene between Hamlet and Laertes, the latter being played by Pierre Magnier. A single, stationary camera recorded the duelists and the few bystanders that surrounded them, all dressed in Elizabethan costumes. Apart from preserving Bernhardt's interpretation, this short scene is noted in the history of film as the first successful attempt to synchronize image and sound (not yet dialogue which would take

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twenty nine years to be done, but the sound of the fencing swords being played on a phonograph). A historical curiosity about this scene is that it did preserve for posterity Bernhardt´s gracious movements, which were greatly impaired five years later, when she presented *La Tosca* in *Teatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro*, in Brazil. The leg injured at that time was amputated ten years later, confining Bernhardt to a wheel chair.

Of course it is difficult today to see Bernhardt´s short scene as a film, in the same way that we cannot consider Sir Herbert Beerbohn Tree's *King John* (1899) as a film, even though it was the first Shakespearean scene ever to be recorded on film. Bernhardt´s and Tree's are, nevertheless, pioneering Shakespearean experiments in the new media, serving the purpose of advertising theatrical performances. In the case of Bernhardt, the scene was shown as an attraction in the *Paris Exposition* in June 1900. Soon, other well known actors, actresses and opera singers, followed Tree's and Bernhardt footsteps, having their performances thus recorded, among which the famous French baritone Victor Maurel (1848-1923) who was filmed singing arias from *Falstaff*.

It was in 1920 that silent cinema finally produced a major rendering of the play on the screen: *Hamlet, the Drama of Vengeance* is a seventy-eight-minute production which deserves commentary not only for its length but moreover for its daring artistic undertaking. It curiously starred a Dane and (again) a woman as protagonist: Asta Nielsen (1881-1972), today undeservedly forgotten, but then considered the first great international film star (for her 74 films done between 1910 and 1932), and whom Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich revered.

Nielsen, also the producer of the film, undertook *Hamlet* as a personal project. Mixing Shakespeare's plot and other sources, she impersonated a melancholic prince who had "material reasons" for being so upset: he was, in reality, a she, a princess forced to

disguise as the male heir to the throne. Nielsen's big and dark eyes, her thin lips and slender, boyish figure constructed this androgynous Hamlet to perfection.

The idea of Hamlet being a woman did not, evidently, come from Shakespeare; neither did it spring from Bernhardt´s or Nielsen´s conceptions. Surprisingly as it may sound to us today, in nineteenth century Victorian England there was a widespread belief that Hamlet was, in reality, a woman. One of the works that disseminated this view, the most important is the book by Edward Vining, *The mystery of Hamlet* (1881), translated into German in 1883. It was this book which gave screenwriter Erwin Gerard the idea for Nielsen's script. The existence of a cross-gender prince gave room to sexually charged scenes between Hamlet and Horatio as well as between Hamlet and Fortinbras. In Nielsen's film, Fortinbras's role is greatly expanded: he is also a student of Wittenberg and Hamlet's great friend. But the true love couple of the picture is formed by Hamlet and Horatio: the last scene shows Hamlet confessing his love to Horatio and dying in his arms.

Nielsen's *Hamlet* opened, thus, new grounds for translating the play onto the screen. Film critic Lawrence Guntner has interpreted the role of Fortinbras in Nielsen's film in political terms: after World War I, "these reconciled sons of hostile fathers [Hamlet and Fortinbras] stand for the wish for reconciliation between the youth of Europe" (GUNTNER IN JACKSON p.118). Also according to Guntner, many of the conventions that, throughout the century, would be used when adapting *Hamlet* to the screen were first established by Nielsen's production: "an androgynous, understated, sometimes comic Hamlet; a visual code that counterpoints indoor and outdoor scenes; a lengthy funeral procession at the close of the film; a radical reworking of Shakespeare's text; the use of conventions from contemporary film genres (in his case the scenography and lighting of Expressionism); and

the casting of an established star as the prince to insure a financial return." (GUNTNER IN JACKSON p.118).

Bearing in mind Guntner´s observations, when we approach two of the most important screen *Hamlets* of our century – Olivier's (1948) and Kozintsev's (1964) –, we but confirm their pertinence: both Olivier and Kozintsev followed Nielsen's footsteps in contrasting indoor and outdoor scenes, in emphasizing the funeral procession (Olivier opens his film with it; Kozintsev emphasizes a military funeral), in making significant cuts to the text, in employing elements from other film genres (Olivier's model is the film *noir* while Kozintsev´s is the epic), and in casting stars for the main role (Oliver, having then emerged from the great success of *Henry V* and Innokenti Smoktunovsky, known to have been captured by the Germans, imprisoned by Stalin and freed by Khrushchev, bringing, thus, political significance to the film).

An English *Hamlet*

"No one had ever filmed Shakespeare successfully before." (COLEMAN, p. 158), writes Terry Coleman of Olivier ´s *Henry V* (1944). Even to those that disagree with this view, *Henry V* remains a Shakespearean and cinematic triumph, bridging the gap between theatrical and filmic Shakespeare. After its commercial and critical success, Olivier went on to film a cut version of *Hamlet* (1948), which he had expressly said he would never do. His biographer Terry Coleman tells us that while *As you like it* (with Olivier and Elisabeth Bergner) was showing at the movies, Olivier made the tactless deprecating curtain speech about the cinema in a matinee of *Hamlet*: "It makes me very happy that you have come here today instead, perhaps, of going to some pantomime or movie, which might seem a more amusing way of spending the afternoon." (COLEMAN, p. 84). Later, in an interview for the *Observer*, Olivier spoke again against the cinema: "I don't really like Shakespeare

on the screen at all – the shot is too big for the canon. The latter plays, like *Lear*, are too big even for the theatre. Bu the real trouble with *Hamlet* is that I could never play it again in a cut version." (COLEMAN, p. 84)

But Olivier did play *Hamlet* in the cinema and in a very cut version, less than two thousand of the almost four thousand lines of Shakespeare's longest play. The cuts were made by Olivier himself – he never let anyone touch the text. Most of the comic scenes, including those with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as well as the passages with wider political implications which referred to the Fortinbras's plot were eliminated. Olivier was then 41 and impersonating the 30 year old prince to a 28 year old actress, Eillen Herlie, who played Gertrude; not only that, but he also dubbed the voice of the Ghost, having recorded it and then played it back at a reduced speed to give the passage a haunting quality. The general conception of the film had a lot in common with Olivier's previous performance of the play in the theatre, in a 1937 production at the Old Vic.

That was the first time Olivier played the melancholic prince; he was directed by Tony Guthrie and the text was uncut. For the production, Olivier and Guthrie went to see Professor Ernest Jones and emerged from the meeting with what would become the most popularized view of the tragedy in the twentieth century. Olivier writes in his memories: "ever since that meeting I have believed that Hamlet was a prime sufferer from the Oedipus complex – quite unconsciously, of course, as the professor was anxious to stress." (OLIVIER, p. 109) Dr. Jones, following Freud's interpretation, saw the prince's isolation and delay in acting as symptoms of an excessive developed intellect fixed on the mother figure. For Jones's, Hamlet offers "an impressive array of symptoms: spectacular mood swings, cruel treatment of his love, and above all a hopeless inability to pursue the course required of him." (OLIVIER, p. 109).

Surprisingly, at the time, the “Oedipal treatment of the play, (…), went almost unnoticed by the audience and critics. Even Hamlet’s lascivious kissing of his mother was little remarked.” (COLEMAN, p. 83). But a few years later, when Olivier approached the play again, the psychoanalytical conception of the play was noticed by critics and public and remained dominant to twentieth century reception of the play.

The film is heavily influenced by Dr. Jones’s theories, for instance, present in the emphasis on the enormous bed which reappears several times in the course of the film. Dr Jones’s conception is also and perhaps foremost present in the beginning of the film. *Hamlet* opens with a voice-over narration by Olivier defining, in Shakespeare’s words, the tragic flaw of the hero:

> So oft it chances in particular men,
>
> That through some vicious mole of nature in them,
>
> By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,
>
> Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
>
> Or by some habit grown too much; that these men -
>
> Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
>
> Their virtues else - be they as pure as grace,
>
> Shall in the general censure take corruption,
>
> From that particular fault... (*Hamlet*, Act I, scene 4)

To these words, Olivier adds a final statement, which twists the Shakespearian classical definition of tragic flaw and aligns the film with Jones’s interpretation: "This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind." Olivier’s Hamlet’s becomes not a hero, but rather, a victim of indecision.

Hamlet earned twice as much at the box office as *Henry V* and as early as 1956 it was broadcast on American television. It was responsible for introducing, worldwide, a whole generation to the play, which contributed to the view that Olivier's *Hamlet* was the definitive rendering of the play.

Sixteen years later, however, a Russian *Hamlet* caught the imagination of a selected audience. Using the translation of poet Boris Pasternak and the music score of composer Dimitri Shostakovich, Grigori Kozintsev created a 149 minute *Hamlet*, heavily cut, as Olivier's had been, but nevertheless a masterpiece of cinematography which offered quite a different reading of *Hamlet*. Form that of Olivier's. The Russian film is even today held by many Shakespearean critics to be the best filmed *Hamlet* in existence.

The Russian *Hamlet*: the presence of the people outside Elsinore

The Russian *Hamlet* bears some similarities to Olivier's film, the most remarkable being the fact that both are shot in black-and-white and both employ a dark gloomy castle with long corridors and staircases for the scenery. But, while the castle is fully shown in Olivier's, becoming almost a character, in Kozintsev´s it is depicted in fragments and also and moreover, we get to see the outside of the castle, the villages, the roads, the sea.

A possible explanation for this difference in rendering the castle is that in Olivier's psychological thriller, the long corridors and stairways suggest, as many have noticed, the labyrinths of the hero's mind, while in Kozintsev's, they have been interpreted as indicating the subtle and intricate ways of politics. Watched by guards and dogs, the Russian castle abounds in foreign and native courtiers, who act more like spies and eavesdroppers. As Kozintsev writes: "the architecture of Elsinore does not consist in walls, but in ears which the walls have." (KOZINTSEV, p. 225). Denmark is constructed in both films a prison, as the Hamlet says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in act 2, scene ii (by the way, the scene

was cut in Olivier's version, while highlighted by Kozintsev.) Denmark, in Olivier's film, is represented by an enclosing, suffocating and visually claustrophobic castle, a prison of the mind and of the passions; in Kozintsev´s, it is a political prison even though portrayed in the wide-screen, and thus not perceived immediately as such; the idea of imprisonment is suggested though by the stone walls, the iron weaponry and the wooden wheel, and specially and foremost by the contrast created between the outside and the inside of Ellsinore's castle.

Furthering this difference, Olivier's film privileges and concentrates on the family romance; Kozintsev chooses, instead, to stress the political plot. There are at least two ways in which Kozintsev develops the political implications of Hamlet's position as prince of Denmark: he focuses on certain visual motifs and he develops many scenes involving other characters – Claudius machinations, Laertes´s rebellion, Fortinbras's military movements crossing Denmark, and specially and moreover the courtiers and the common people walking outside the castle.

Of the visual motifs, the images of the sea and of stones are foremost and reappear throughout the film. The sea motif suggests the idea of infinite, of freedom as well as the march of time, the ebb and flow of history. The stones, present in the castle walls, suggest imprisonment and immobility, forces against which Hamlet must fight. For the understanding of how these contrasting images work, let us glance at the opening scene.

Instead of opening his *Hamlet* with the traditional scene on the battlements and the return of the ghost, as in Shakespeare's text, Kozintsev opts for an interpolation of almost three minutes in which we see the movement of the ocean, the rigid castle walls, the galloping horses; black flags are thrown through the castle's windows and when the prince reaches the castle, it is a gigantic wooden wheel pushed by common people that gives

access to the castle. No words are spoken. In this stony world of ceremonies and silent commoners, one man will speak for the country, will have a definite role in making things change, in unmasking the courtiers and the king: the galloping prince who arrives at the castle for his father's funeral and his mother's hasty marriage. It is him who must break the wheels of government mechanism, who must reverse the movement of the gigantic wooden wheel in order to free his country and his people from tyranny.

The first words that we hear in the film are those of the tyrant. Claudius's first speech is being read to the people outside the castle, as a governmental announcement. (Kozintsev later used the same technique for conveying Lear's first words.) Then, the director repeats parts of the speech, this time when Claudius himself addresses his state council. In a piece of formal oratory, the new king diplomatically balances the inherent contrast between mourning and marriage, festivity and military preparation. At the end of the council chamber scene, the director focuses on empty chair: it is Hamlet's vacant place, an indication that the prince does not agree with what is going on in the kingdom.

Differently from Olivier who stressed the physical isolation of Hamlet by leaving him alone for his first monologue at the end of the council scene, Kozintsev chooses a paradox for the deliverance of Hamlet's first monologue: solitude in the multitude, a prince walking among flatteringly courtiers/spies. Walking among the courtiers, Hamlet thinks and speaks to himself. As the director explains "we hear the words of his thoughts, but the sleuth who clings to the door hears nothing. He has nothing to write down in his report: steps, quiet. But all the while, Hamlet things – it is his only weapon – and this is where the danger lies for Claudius." (KOZINTSEV, p. 250) This, thus, is in a nutshell Denmark's political atmosphere.

Outside the castle, common people live: they push the wooden wheel which raises and lowers the portcullis; they gather to hear royal proclamations; they walk on the road after Hamlet's return from the ship voyage or in the graveyard where Ophelia's funeral is held. No matter how high the political sphere stands, how apart from the existence of common people the king stands, all political decisions affect them; the commoners are silent and remain so throughout the film but they are nevertheless the all-important witnesses to a story that deeply concerns their lives and the fate of their country.

Through a contrast with the commoners – this is how Kozintsev understands and films Shakespeare's tragic universe, this is the director's unique contribution to the play. Both in *Hamlet* as well as in *Lear* (1972), the Russian director included the poor, emphasizing the close relationship between the high circles of power and those who suffer under it. In *Lear*, the commoners are even more present than in *Hamlet*: they open the film, reappear throughout the story (markedly in the scene on the heath and in those which king and the *poor naked wretches* share the dry and sad land and close the picture. It is a *Lear* in context, a king among his poor people.

In the case of *Hamlet*, the motivation for the presence of the commoners is basically the idea that the fate of the whole society is affected by power struggles. *Something is rotten in the state of Denmark*. This something forces people *to bear the whips and scorns of time, th´oppressor´s wrong, the proud man's contumely, the pangs of disprized love, the law's delay, the insolence of office and the spurns that patient merit of th´unworthy takes*; common people must bear a *weary life,* a *sea of troubles,* a *thousand shocks that flesh is heir to* (Act 3, scene 1). Maybe this is why the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy is absent from Kozintsev´s film, as its content is made present in the film overall conception.

At the end of the movie, Hamlet does not sit on the throne to die, as Olivier's prince, but walks outside the castle and looks at the sky and the sea. A bird flies, symbolically indicating the idea of release from this world and bringing to mind the scene of Ophelia's body floating under water while another bird flew free in the skies; the body of the prince is carried beyond the drawbridge, outside the castle walls. The circle is, thus, complete. Hamlet is free and has freed his people from the prison of tyranny; Kozintsev spoke through Shakespeare's play "against all the states that were jails". (KOZINTSEV, p. 124).

These are some of the reasons why the Russian can be read as a political *Hamlet*, while Olivier's film remains a family romance. Olivier's hero is a powerless, alienated and entrapped prince, trying to escape his own bad dreams, while Kozintsev´s hero is an energetic political prince, whose conscience fights the poison in society, the infection running in the bloodstream of the whole country. The Russian *Hamlet* refuses the idea of a man who could not make up his mind, a being so full of doubts and vacillations that he can but turn his eyes only to his very soul, and proposes, alternatively, a Renaissance prince coming to terms with his own consciousness as well as with the fate of his country, fighting all forms of tyranny even at the cost of his own life. This is why the Russian Hamlet is viewed even today as the best adaptation of the play in a foreign language.

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