

Play vs. Screen: An Analysis of Shakespeare's Language in Transmediation

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Abstract: This present paper argues the use of visual language as improvement to cover open areas of discussion which go to the very core of Shakespeare's legacy in modern age. The purpose of this paper is to invite the reader of Shakespeare's dramatic texts to analyse his language from the "camera" perspective and to cover a complex picture of the role of the director for the screen adaptation. Casting new light on established forms of media transmission, this paper presents an analysis of different techniques in which Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is transmitted by Franco Zeffirelli on the screen, looking through various cuts from Act 1, Scene 3 in accordance with the play story.

Keywords: adaptations, play, screen, Shakespeare, transmediation.

1. Introduction

Even if Shakespeare's plays were mainly written for the stage, today, many people have their first encounter with his stories through film. But in what manner does the version of the story seen and adapted for screen relate to the version produced to be seen on stage? Firstly, we will investigate the brief history of Shakespeare films that were designed for popular audience and specific problems the process of screen adaptation has raised.

In 1899 appears the first example of the plays on screen when four scenes from King John were filmed in areas of London. In this period of time, as Wechsler (1998: 66) states, the most noticeable features included: "the fixed camera position, the theatrical backdrop and the stylised period dress". Consequently, in 1921, Asta

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Nielsen, one of the world's most famous actresses of the silent era, was taking on the role of Hamlet, recasting the Danish prince as a young girl who is brought up from birth as a boy. By this time in the film era, the setting is beginning to look a lot more naturalistic. Nevertheless, the shots are not changed, they are still constrained by the lack of mobility of the large cameras in use, giving a semi-theatrical feel for the cinema audience.

A part of Shakespeare plays was adapted for the innovative format of film with synchronised sound in the late 1920s and then in the 1930s, following the late '40s. This was not a successful method of transmission, actually, the great innovation in cinema-sound, was actually a limitation when it came to Shakespeare language adaptation on film.

Equally, Cartmell (2010:97) emphasises that the "Sound was bad news for the Shakespeare film" and that most of Shakespeare's language was found to be pretty much "Long, archaic, obscure, or thought-provoking words are a guarantee of box office failure." Yet, Laurence Olivier went on to make two iconic Shakespeare films, in 1944 "Henry V" and in 1948 "Hamlet". Following Olivier, one of the greatest ambassadors of Shakespeare, Franco Zeffirelli, made in 1967 versions of the Taming of the Shrew and in 1968 "Romeo and Juliet", and ultimately in 1990, the remarkable "Hamlet".

Zeffirelli's vision on Hamlet was a great success, but this event did, conversely, involve significant and substantial changes to be made. For instance, the dialogue had to be rigorously cut. Zeffirelli's "Hamlet" version has almost 30,000 words of dialogue, in comparison with a contemporary two-hour film which is likely to have somewhere around 9,000 to 10,000 words of dialogue. Also, the speeches had to be condensed and reduced. For the stage, in Shakespeare plays, the speeches average at least 20 words, whereas, for the screen, a character in a film makes use of approximately 12 to 15 words of dialogue before being interrupted by another character. For a more detailed look at this screen adaptation, we will analyse a particular scene from Franco Zeffirelli's film adaptation, the one where Ophelia's life changes considerably, Act 1, Scene 3. Nicoll (19236:168) observed some of the problems concerning Shakespeare's language in the cinema, precisely in relation to Max Reinhardt's, an Austrian-born theatre and film director, "A Midsummer Night's Dream". Here he discovered two main advantages which the screen texts adaptation holds over stage texts even if the idea of supplementing language with visual symbols was controversial at first look. Nicoll (1936:168) predicted the counter opinions of the reduction of the spectator's imaginative connection with the language.

that certain passages which, spoken in our vast modern theatres with their sharp separation of audience and actors, become mere pieces of rhetoric devoid of true meaning and significance were invested in the film with an intimacy and directness they lacked on the stage [...] the second [...] lay in the ease with which the cinema can present visual symbols to accompany language. (Nicoll 1936:169)

1.1. Methodological Scenery

At the level of methodological scenery, this paper embraces several research methods based primarily on procedures of investigation, qualitative and quantitative accommodating it to Shakespeare's language in transmediation from play text to screen adaptation. Between the methods of research, there will be one to analyse and compile the most relevant theoretical assessments regarding the topic of transmediation in Shakespeare's plays, from a stylist, linguistic and cultural perspective in correspondence with the mediatic impact and cinematic effect on screen adaptation.

Specific methods such as: contrastive textual analysis vs screen adaptation text and evaluation of Shakespeare language are used, with the focus of analysis on one chosen scene from "Hamlet", Act 1, Scene 3. With reference to this case study, an in-depth analysis of different ways in which Shakespeare and Zeffirelli tell this point of the story.

Looking through various screen cuts from Act 1, Scene 3, the findings will reveal what is lost from Shakespeare's language in the heavily cut first phase of screen transmediation.

1.2.1. Shakespeare's Language in Transmediation

Among many mediums of transmission of Shakespeare's language and legacy, perhaps the greatest is the translation and transmediation from a verbal medium to a visual one, facing many difficulties encountered in producing the plays of Shakespeare for the screen.

As Bosman (2009:287) says "Shakespeare is transmitted in the entire world among three global networks":

- Textual Network, composing writers, editors and translators.
- Theatrical Network, composing performers and directors.
- Digital Network, composing a wide range of media and devices.

Although Shakespeare's plays began their journey around the world with performance and travelled the world, taking shape on stage and in real time as an actor, screen adaptations became a new trend with the beginning of the 19th century.

Even today the role of the actor in transferring a play across cultures remains central, but instead, a screen adaptation of Shakespeare's play disguises the text anew, making it once more familiar and more remote for the audiences.

Suhor (1984:34) portrayed this process of representing content as transmediation or the "representation" of meaning across sign systems. He perceived transmediation as a syntactic concept because it contracts "the relationship between different sign systems and the structure of sign systems". For instance, when we are reading a play of Shakespeare on our computer or when we explore the language of Shakespeare from a film adaptation from a media point of view, in these and many other instances we are dealing with Shakespeare's transmediation.

Consequently, Semali (2002:2) outlines the process of transmediation as “The process of taking understandings from one sign system and moving them into another”. Transmediation sustains the “transport” of Shakespeare’s words across, beyond, through media.

An example of the transmediation of Shakespeare’s plays is “Hamlet”-Act 1, Scene 3, reimagined in a screen adaptation by the director Franco Zeffirelli in 1990. While watching the scene cuts, the audience is forced to confront Ophelia’s decisions.

1.2.2. Play Dialogue Vs. Screen Dialogue: a case study

There are major differences between the *play dialogue* and the *screen dialogue* versions approached by the director Franco Zeffirelli in “Hamlet” such as: omission of parts or whole lines excerpts.

In this case study, we will be considering a scene from Franco Zeffirelli’s “Hamlet”, from 1990. This scene serves as base of exploring differences and the similarities between Shakespeare on screen and Shakespeare on stage and it corresponds to Act 1, Scene 3.

For both on screen and on the stage, the scene has three phases:

1. The first phase corresponds to the moment when Laertes talks to Ophelia
2. The second phase corresponds to the moment when Polonius talks to Laertes in a courtyard and Ophelia listens.
3. The third phase corresponds to the moment when Polonius talks to Ophelia.

This scene runs from 11 minutes 55 seconds -the moment when Laertes enters a room and it ends to 16 minutes-the moment when Polonius and Ophelia leave the courtyard of a castle.

For this scene, the script with the dialogue in the film version has been heavily cut in comparison with Shakespeare’s original text for the stage.

Phase	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Franco Zeffirelli’s Hamlet	17 lines	28 lines	25 lines
Hamlet’s original text	51 lines	36 lines	49 lines

Table 1. Comparison of the number of lines in Hamlet Act 1, Scene 3 in the in the 1990 film and original text for the stage

With a detailed look at the three phases of this scene mentioned in the Table 1., it can be seen from the second row that in the original text “Hamlet” for the stage, the first phase has 51 lines, the second 36 and the third 49. In opposition, the first row shows the changes in the film. In this case, the first phase of the scene is most heavily cut, almost down to 17 lines from the original text. Yet, the second phase is mostly intact left with just 8 lines cut. Also, the third phase is cut to 25 lines. The process of lines cutting and it does make a significant difference to the story.

On this table 2, is presented the script of the original Shakespeare's text of the play compared to the film scene by Franco Zeffirelli in "Hamlet", 1990.

- In the left column is the dialogue used in the film.
- In the right column is the original text of the play. The first phase is numbered 14 a-c;
- the text that has been cut is also emphasised in italics

Hamlet dialogue for the screen	Hamlet dialogue for the stage
<p>LAERTES [Dear Ophelia.] (<i>Invented Dialogue</i>) My necessities are imbarqued. Farewell. And sister, LAERTES For Hamlet and the trifling of his favour, Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood, No more. OPHELIA No more but so? LAERTES Think it no more. Perhaps he loves you now, but you must fear,</p>	<p>14 a <i>Enter Laertes and Ophelia.</i> (1) LAERTES My necessities are imbarqued. Farewell. And, sister, <i>as the winds give benefit And convoy is assistant, do not sleep But let me hear from you.</i> OPHELIA <i>Do you doubt that?</i> LAERTES For Hamlet and the trifling of his favour, Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood, <i>A violet in the youth of primy nature, Forward not permanent, sweet not lasting, The perfume and suppliance of a minute, No more.</i> OPHELIA No more but so? LAERTES Think it no more. <i>For nature crescent does not grow alone In thews and bulk, but as his temple waxes The inward service of the mind and soul Grows wide withal. Perhaps he loves you now, And now no soil nor cautel doth besmirch The virtue of his will; but you must fear,</i></p>
Hamlet dialogue for the screen	Hamlet dialogue for the stage
<p>LAERTES (CONT.) His greatness weighed, his will is not his own, For he himself is subject to his birth. He may not, as unvalued persons do, Carve for himself, for on his choice depends The [safety] and health of this whole state; Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain If with too credent ear you list his songs,</p>	<p>14 b 17) LAERTES (CONT.) <i>His greatness weighed, his will is not his own, For he himself is subject to his birth. He may not, as unvalued persons do, Carve for himself, for on his choice depends The sanity and health of the whole state; And therefore must his choice be circumscribed Unto the voice and yielding of that body</i></p>

	<p><i>Whereof he is the head. Then if he says he loves you, It fits your wisdom so far to believe it</i></p> <p><i>As he in his particular sect and force May give his saying deed, which is no further Than the main voice of Denmark goes withal. Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain</i></p> <p><i>If with too credent ear you list his songs, Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open</i></p> <p><i>To his unmastered importunity.</i></p> <p><i>Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister, And keep within the rear of your affection, Out of the shot and danger of desire.</i></p> <p><i>The chariest maid is prodigal enough If she unmask her beauty to the moon. Virtue itself scapes not calumnious strokes. The canker galls the infants of the spring Too oft before their buttons be disclosed, And in the morn and liquid dew of youth Contagious blastments are most imminent. Be wary then; best safety lies in fear; Youth to itself rebels, though none else near.</i></p>
Hamlet dialogue for the screen	Hamlet dialogue for the stage
-	<p>14 c</p> <p>(45) OPHELIA</p> <p><i>I shall th'effect of this good lesson keep As watchman to my heart; but, good my brother, Do not, as some ungracious pastors do, Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven Whilst like a puffed and reckless libertine Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads And recks not his own rede.</i></p> <p>LAERTES</p> <p><i>O fear me not.</i></p>

Table 2. Comparison of the of lines in Hamlet Act 1, Scene 3 in the in the 1990 film and original text for the stage.

The film dialogue captures the essence of what happens in scene Act 1.3, but Ophelia's intervention with the line "Do you doubt that?" would have made a difference because Ophelia's dilemma is salient in this scene and this rhetorical question stands the lack of real awareness and consideration for Ophelia's feelings

from Laertes. Apart from this, the cuts in Franco Zeffirelli's film adaptation are extremely necessary as they make the film more fluid than the play. These changes in screen adaptation for the screen adaptation have a disproportionate effect because the acts are of differing lengths. Hence, by cutting part of the characters words from Act Three, Franco Zeffirelli consents Hamlet to come back the action much more quickly in the film version than Ophelia in the stage acts.

There are film directors like Franco Zeffirelli who see dialogue for the screen itself as the last layer in the composition of a film. One of them is Hitchcock (2013: 56) who points out that "the dialogue should simply be a sound among other sounds, just something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms". But in this situation, the language is removed (like in phase 3) the whole purpose for adapting Shakespeare language to the screen becomes uncertain. As Felheim (1975: 34) states "The whole point about Shakespeare is his wonderful language, but making a "Shakespeare film" without Shakespeare's language is like a silent version of *La Traviata*". Therefore, Paterson (2013: 328) highlights that "If one begins to cut the language, the next question to be raised is how much can be cut, yet the result still be valid as Shakespeare."

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the discrepancies between the screen dialogue and the play dialogue of the same play "Hamlet" can be accounted for by the temporal distance that separates them and by the evolution of the Shakespeare's language in the process of transmediation. In the film version of Franco Zeffirelli, we're invited to explore a sequence of ideas based on the spatial positioning of the characters and their behaviour in correlation with the text breaks. Following this procedure, ideas and thoughts from the original text that are either fixed or void. The form of storytelling of Hamlet, in this case, Act 1, Scene 3, transmits different demands upon us, despite the film scene being divulged in the same order as the play. The play dialogue proposes us to build metaphorical connections between organisms, humans and seasons. The film adaptations of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" asks us to make presumptions about possible power relations and outcomes. In the end, the result is the same, whether it is on the stage or on the screen.

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