MULTICRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO
SHAKESPEARE TELEVISION ADAPTATIONS

Blanca López Román
Universidad de Granada

In our society videotaped productions are often used at colleges, universities and schools. Students nurtured on television have responded with enthusiasm and they have become an integral part of many courses. We propose that the discussion of some television adaptations of English plays should be included in the program of literary survey courses of the English Departments of our universities. We shall argue that the best approach for that purpose will be multicritical, meaning that alternative Shakespeares should be included in the curriculum.¹ The BBC Shakespeare television series constitutes a good starting point for such a multicritical or inclusive discussion because it is easily available and because Shakespeare’s plays are always included in our literary curriculum. The BBC television Hamlet, (1980, 1990) and the usual critical approaches to this adaptation will be used for the illustration of our multicritical introduction.² Could the television Shakespeare be considered as text? Even though the more obvious answer to that question is negative, we cannot deny that television and film adaptations of plays are reinventions and rewritings of the original texts, with perhaps the only true exceptions of the filming and recording of real theatrical performances. Because of that the analysis of the ways in which videotapes culturally translate and transform Shakespeare may be included as a useful exercise to complement the customary textual study of dramatic texts by undergraduate students. This type of exercise may be useful for increasing the student’s interest in the original texts and this method will be more suitable if the curriculum tends to be cultural rather than specifically literary, or if we take into account the fact that in our society university students are likely to be visually oriented, rather than interested in reading books for pleasure.

The process of cultural translation in the BBC Hamlet has three stages. First the television director will have to interpret the script, to see if what is seen on the screen reflects the writer’s intention. David Self describes this work
in a way not very different from the traditional approaches to Practical Criticism. According to David Self "it is his (the director's) job to understand the play (its plot, structure, characterization background and themes)". All these questions are often dealt with in the customary textual analysis of literary texts following I. A. Richards' Practical Criticism and other recent developments of new criticism. Afterwards it will be necessary to evaluate how the television director has translated the Renaissance Hamlet into the television visual iconic system with strong but supplementary aural-verbal support. Finally the process of television adaptation should be applied to individual plays and illustrated through examples. In our case we shall study the BBC Hamlet (1980, 1990). The only difference between 1980 and 1990 versions of the BBC Hamlet is that the second one is in colour. We shall consider how this play is translated into visual signals and how its complex poetic language is transposed into realism and movement.

For the analysis of the transformation and adaptation of plays for television we partially accept, and also partially modify, the well known assumption of Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author" (1968). Barthes asserts that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' (the message of the Author-God) meaning but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash". The multidimensional space and the blend and clash of non-original meanings exist not only in the original play, but above all in the subsequent television and film adaptations.

The study of television adaptations is a good illustration of the new cultural approaches that have reached the academic world. Gary Taylor has published a cultural history of Shakespearean interpretation and adaptation, whose title is Reinventing Shakespeare. A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present. The book studies all kinds of cultural transformations and transpositions of Shakespeare in text editing, film, television, etc. Gary Taylor himself considers his own book as one typical example of the self-conscious reflexivity of postmodernist literature and criticism, "a single symptomatic exemplar of Shakesperotics in the late twentieth century". We might say that the adaptation of Shakespearian plays for television and film, makes up an important part of Shakesperotics in our society. We believe that the complexity and the extension of the process of
transformation and cultural translation of Shakespeare's plays all over the world, justifies the coining of the word Shakesperotics.

Many other traditionally outstanding publications have dealt with cinematic and television adaptations. For example the well known, Shakespeare Survey. An Annual Survey of Shakespearean Study and Production, devoted one whole volume, number 39, to deal with Shakespeare in the media. It includes a very carefully chosen selection of Shakespearean films, excluding free adaptations and material recording rehearsals. 7

The scholarly orthodox approach of Shakespeare Survey 39 should be complemented, for didactic reasons, with some other more recent books on cultural politics, often written from Marxist points of view. They claim that whole areas of production, in our case Shakespearean production, have been marginalised or ignored in different societies and in different periods, because they fail 'to do justice' to the plays according to the cultural conventions of the establishment of each society. This approach may be illustrated through the book published by John Collick, Shakespeare, Cinema & Society, which includes records of films often excluded from more orthodox lists. 8 This type of less conventional cultural approach becomes specially useful for the study of the transpositions of Shakespearean texts into other languages and into the media.

A very suitable basic text for introducing different critical approaches to students of English studies is Alan Durant & Nigel Fabb: Interface. Literary Studies in Action. 9 It contains samples of analyses from different critical approaches and many exercises for students. Some of the exercises proposed in the book as a new approach to the teaching of English literature, may be adapted for the study of the transformations operating in the language of the television play.

SUBORDINATION OF VERBALS TO VISUAL SIGNS IN SHAKESPEAREAN TELEVISION ADAPTATIONS

In our society, Semiotics, the science of signs, naturally triumphs over literary criticism and because of that television may also naturally triumph over reading books. Taking into account the unavoidable reason of the contemporary importance of the visual sign, it seems convenient that traditional literary criticism should be supplemented by the use of videotapes in which visual signs
play an important part. Semiotics will play an outstanding part in the study of adaptations for the reason that it studies all signs: aural, visual and physical.

In semiotic approaches to theatre the most essential issue is the study of the relationship between the written text and its performance. The written/performance text relationship is, according to Keir Elam, "not one of simple priority but a complex of reciprocal constraints constituting a powerful intertextuality".¹⁰ Each performance selects those aspects of the written text that the actors are meant to transcodify. The intertextual relationship that Elam considers problematic for dramatic performance is even more problematic, and less automatic and symmetrical, when drama is transposed to film and television.

The first constraint that television will introduce into the text of the play is caused by the essential subordination of verbal to visual signals in television drama. When we study a television adaptation of a play, we cannot forget the fact that the finest Shakespeare films of our time, such as the Russian director Grigori Kozintzev's Hamlet and King Lear, the Japanese Director Akira Kurosawa's Throne of Blood (based on Macbeth) and Ran (based on King Lear), do not even have English sound tracks.¹¹ These films are good examples of the extreme critical attitude that completely separates the original text, or the source text, from film or television adaptations. Other more traditional approaches measure television achievement by the extent to which it manages or fails to promote the sense of theatrical experience. A third group intends to translate Shakespeare into the new audiovisual medium in the most faithful way. The best example of this last approach is the BBC Shakespeare television series and particularly the BBC Hamlet.

Egil Tornqvist in Transposing Drama. Studies in Representation addresses fundamental questions about what happens when a play is transposed from one medium or mode of presentation to another. For example if a play written for the stage is adapted for radio, television and film.¹² Tornqvist examines the process of translation in Macbeth and in other non-Shakespearean plays, from the written source text to theatrical performance, and to film and television.

Video and films basically use images, not words as their main medium. On the contrary, Shakespearean drama was originally created to be transposed into a poetic theatre in which language recreates the play in the imagination of
the audience. In Shakespearean drama, words are the most important element. When the play is transposed into television this medium originally requires that the visual signals should be predominant. However television and the Elizabethan stage have in common the fact that they both use diversified acting areas and swift sequence of scenes as well as the possibility of intimacy between actor and audience.

Television also offers the possibility of a stylised universe, where for example, an archer will be received as the representation of a whole army. In the same way Ophelia’s grave will stand for the whole churchyard. Faithful videotapes, like the BBC Hamlet, illustrate the fact that an approach where the visual element is used as functional, or suggestive, is more attractive for a television play than a faithful realistic translation of a Shakespearean performance.

THE TREATMENT OF VISUAL SIGNS AND LANGUAGE SIGNALS IN THE BBC HAMLET

The BBC Shakespeare series, which commenced in 1978 and was completed in 1985, is particularly useful for inclusion in the curriculum of English studies at university level, because it intended to be faithful to the Shakespearean spirit and because some outstanding scholars were consulted and important funds were employed. In addition, it is easily accessible to our universities and it is often used to complement readings and discussions of the plays. The discussion of Shakespeare’s stage-craft is a traditional starting point, which may be supplemented by the study of television adaptations.

Granville-Barker, in his argument in 1936 with Alfred Hitchcock, rejected what he considered unnecessary pictorial indulgence in Reinhardt and Cukor. Hitchcock argued that cinema should exploit Shakespeare stories "to suit its pictorial purpose, without respect for him". The BBC Hamlet is obviously faithful not only to the stories but to the text of Shakespearean plays and contrary to the cinematic method of Hitchcock. The house style of the BBC series imposes that a great part of the Shakespearean speeches and dialogues in Hamlet should be kept. The BBC packet and the BBC edition of the play inform about what they think are necessary cuts. On the whole the final effect of these cuts is to simplify the text by suppressing conceits and some difficult passages.
The great respect that the BBC Hamlet shows to language, is transposed to the television medium through a great number of close-ups, over the shoulder shots and medium shots of actors saying most of the lines and speeches of the different characters. Triangular blocking is also frequently used, with two speakers in the foreground of a shot together with another figure in the rear. The effect of this approach is to make the play realistic. Visual selection is often felt to be a more or less gratuitous intrusion on the viewer that watches on the screen only the face or the upper part of the body. Intrinsically realistic battles or representations of Fortinbras army, court scenes, the ghost scenes, the play-within-the-play or the graveyard scenes will only underscore the smallness of the screen.

Judith Cook’s book, Shakespeare’s Plays, looks at some of Shakespeare’s roles through the eyes of those who have had to portray them on the stage. In our multicritical approach, this book may be used as a good introduction to the study of film and television acting. In the cinema the actor has to forget all projection of the personality built-up of a speech, because, sustaining emotion for more than a few seconds, is superfluous. On the other hand it has also being argued that there is not such a difference between film acting and stage acting. In any case outstanding theatrical performances by well-known actors are often turned into film or television adaptations. Well-known examples, easily available, are Laurence Olivier in his vintage film Hamlet (1948) and Derek Jacobi’s performance that became part of the BBC Hamlet (1980, 1990). Rodney Bennet the director of the BBC Hamlet did not base his adaptation on a film but on an Old Vic production, in which Derek Jacobi played Prince Hamlet very successfully. Together with the use of close shots in settings, reminiscent of Shakespeare’s unfurnished stage, Bennet encouraged a much more theatrical diction, emphasizing the importance of poetic language. Television has the advantage that it includes the possibility of playing upon a much wider range of voices than in the theatre, where for example whispering tones cannot be properly used.

Rodney Bennet translated Jacobi’s performance of Hamlet into the television medium through a predominantly bare stage. He followed the principle that the barer the set seems the more glaring the words become. The BBC television policy for adapting Shakespeare also respects the Elizabethan bare stage in which only a few props were used. However a stylized
background was imaginatively used for other parts of the play, such as the graveyard scene, the play-within-the-play or the final court scene. Stylization also appeared when a few richly decorated panels and some simple pieces of furniture were used as props at the court scenes and in Polonius’ house.

The uncementarial graveyard scene allowed Jacobi’s Hamlet to emerge as passionate and impetuous, not melancholy or hesitant. His Hamlet is inconsistent, with many changes from hysterical frenzy to peaceful calm. When these changes appear within one speech, the usual close-up sometimes make them appear ludicrous. One characteristic example is Jacobi’s hysterically exaggerated gesticulation and shouting in the scene where the ghost appears to him for the first time. In it his mannerisms, suggesting madness, seem excessive. The finest moments of this erratic behaviour appear in the play-within-the-play, where the camera director emphasizes the theatricality of the play through the mask tricks that Jacobi borrowed from his former theatrical performance.

A good description of the adaptation of this latter scene in the BBC Hamlet was made by Kenneth S. Rothwell in his article: "Representing ‘King Lear’ on screen; From Metatheatre to ‘metacinema’".¹⁷ This scene is visually introduced by a histrionic entrance of Hamlet, wearing a cloak and covering his face with a mask representing a skull. Hamlet walks round some empty stools that stand for the stage. The players are distinguished for their masks and their extravagant miming that repeat the miming described in the stage-directions for the Dumb Show. These visual devices increase the theatricality that Shakespeare achieves through the use of sententious couplets in The Gonzago Play.

The viewer is given a number of visual landmarks, in a well-thought-out sequence which manages to make up for the absence of space in television. The visual landmarks that the director presents are the gallery, the stools and the public standing on three sides with Gertrude and Claudius sitting in a central position. Hamlet moves in and out of that theatrical space. Reaction shots, showing the faces of the main actors, and close-ups offer a vivid visual complement to what is heard and said. Rothwell concludes that the close shot "helps the viewer to follow the text as the facial expressions of the speaker and listener can be registered with an intensity that cannot be equalled on the stage".

The sententious couplets of the play-within-the-play show how theatricality works inside Shakespeare’s play. Jacobi’s acting in this scene foretells his performance in the graveyard during the Yorick episode and remind
us of Hamlet as jester. At these successful moments the irony of the Shakespearean text finds its equivalent not only in theatrical performances but on television adaptations.

The BBC Hamlet production works best when Hamlet is closely integrated into the emotional orbit of the other characters. In the long speeches and soliloquies, the usual close-ups medium shots have the advantage of presenting Jacobi’s face reflecting all the emotions of Hamlet’s face. In a real stage that would only be possible for a few spectators sitting inside the stage or very near it.

The television medium reduces the complex meaning of the Elizabethan play. Many cuts are necessary, even in adaptations that pretend to be faithful to the text. Besides television creates an intimate approach to the characters and tends to restrict the complexity of the play to individual psychological problems. Jacobi’s Hamlet on television emphasizes his neurotic behaviour, subject to sudden fits of frenzy. His fits sometimes become ludicrous and cause unwanted laughter on the individual or small group of viewers. On the other hand the collective experience of sharing a play with real actors, and the individual freedom of each person to select what he wants to watch, is substituted by the director who decides the movements of the camera.

The conversational tone is natural on television when the actors are speaking in chambers and antechambers, like in the quiet intimate scenes between Hamlet and Horatio. Tragic speeches with their rhythms, rhetoric and imagery hardly benefit from everyday delivery in naturalistic surroundings. Television reduces the metaphysical complexity and the great variety of range in Shakespearean speeches. The story and the interpretation of character by the actor make up the basic elements to be noticed on the screen. For example, Patrick Stuart, who plays Claudius successfully in the BBC Hamlet, presents a scheming bureaucratic king but cannot convey, for example, the metaphysical implications of the soliloquy when he is alone with his conscience.

The large ceremonial scenes, frequent in Shakespeare and in Hamlet, are difficult for television. Television has to simplify them and reduce the number of characters. In the stylized graveyard scene, the viewer’s imagination has to substitute other possible long shots, which for example in Laurence Olivier’s film realistically show the whole churchyard. Unfortunately, when many close-ups are used, they are often dictated by the medium need of camera
variation, not by the internal needs of the poetry. The obvious effect of close-ups on soliloquies and long speeches is to over-psychologize them. The other possibility, frequently used in Shakespeare films, and which does not appear in the BBC Hamlet, is to interrupt the close-up to explain hidden motives or to add social or other type of commentary. For example the bed-chamber scene, with Claire Bloom playing Gertrude, has Freudian colouring in the BBC play, exclusively through the gestures and performance of the actors.

Background music and sound effects are realistic devices which blend with the words spoken by the actors. One typical example is the ghost scene where the crowing of the cock sounds just once. The usual overlapping of language and sound effects confirm the priority that television often gives to realism. However the BBC Hamlet takes care that music and sound effects do not interfere with the poetic language of the play.

In plays with much abundance of words, silent shots are means of getting relief by contrast. Sudden silence, or the use of functional music, accompany close shots revealing visual signs. For example when Hamlet suddenly interrupts the verbal and physical violence against Ophelia as the camera registers the realization of his excess. His face shows the fear travelling in his mind before he eventually pronounces, quietly, 'it hath made me mad'. Jacobi's emphasis on hath is a recognition of the fits of hysteric madness so characteristic of his interpretation.

DIDACTIC IMPORTANCE OF THE BBC HAMLET

The main achievement of the television Hamlet is obviously didactic because the reading of the text is reinforced through the speeches of the actors, faithfully saying most of the speeches of the original play. However the original text is far too long for a modern audiovisual audience. Because of that we may appreciate the great effort of the BBC play but are sometimes disappointed with the results. The more valuable scenes, from the cinematic point of view, and the more lively moments, are those in which cinematic techniques are employed. This happens when the customary close-up and medium shots of actors, frequent on television, are complemented with other techniques transposed from the cinema. Obviously the best example, both of successful transposition and of the inherent restrictions that television techniques impose on literary adaptations, is the scene of the play-within-the-play. The BBC
Hamlet is a good illustration of the possibility of making simultaneous perceptions, which exist in the theatre, but not in the cinema or on television. Only a very restricted view of The Mousetrap is possible for the spectator on television, because the camera selection is always controlled by the director.

Nowadays there is a great enthusiasm with videocassettes for educational purposes, because the advent of film and videotape have radically redefined the cultural habits of many people. A great number of our undergraduate students tend to read fewer books, and hardly ever go to the theatre. The essential validity of the BBC Shakespeare television series is that it is basically a didactic experiment. On the other hand television helps to bring Shakespeare's text into line with modern drama. Television and videocassettes constitute a second division theatre for people who would go to see Shakespeare in the theatre if they could. Moreover television productions bring Shakespeare to a wider audience and may contribute to reestablish Shakespeare's popularity by translating his plays for modern culture.

We shall conclude our paper by claiming that although the BBC Hamlet (1980, 1990) and the television series, have not solved the problem of successfully adapting Shakespeare for the screen, they are useful didactic experiments for teaching English literature and drama. Consequently, the study of television adaptations may be included in the program of the traditional survey courses for the teaching of English literature. However the old dilemma persists: Do we want good television drama or do we need pure Shakespeare?

NOTES

4.- To evaluate the director's response to the Elizabethan Hamlet we may examine the usual semiotic approaches to Shakespearean television adaptations, together with traditional analysis


14.- The argument between Granville-Barker and Hitchcock is reported and quoted by Anthony Davies in "Shakespeare and the Media of Film, Radio and Television", *Shakespeare Survey, 39*, op. cit., p. 2.


16.- Interviews with Akira Kurosawa on his Japanese adaptation of *Macbeth, Throne of Blood* have appeared in Roger Manvell: *Shakespeare and the Film*, 1971.


18.- The Consortium for Drama and Media in Higher Education, British Universities Film & Video Council periodically publish a newsletter with useful information for teaching English Literature and Drama with the help of the media.