

The Split 'I' in Celestino Coronado's *Hamlet*

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Shakespeare has been, and still is, the favourite English playwright for film directors and producers, as the long chapter devoted to a selective filmography of his plays, written by Holderness and McCullough 1994, evidences. The whole Shakespearean canon has gone through the eye of the camera, but, again, the favourite choice has always been *Hamlet*. Holderness and McCullough 1994 include 34 "complete" versions since the year 1900, and Neil Taylor talks about "forty-seven film-versions of the play or part of the play" (Taylor 1994: 180). The popularity of this tragedy among filmmakers is easy to understand, since, being the best-known play by Shakespeare, it is the least risky business from a commercial perspective. Besides, since a long tradition of shooting it has evolved along the present century, the models to follow are greater, a circumstance that makes things easier for both actors and directors.

This profusion of Hamlets in the history of cinema has been responsible, to a certain extent, for the amount of literature concerned with the cinematic rendering of the play; but, when perusing the most influential works on this issue, some absences are, to say the least, strange. That is the case, for instance, of the film directed by Celestino Coronado in 1976, that only deserves a brief reference in Bernice W. Kliman's 1988 *Hamlet: Film, Television, and Audio Performance* and it is not even mentioned in Neil Taylor's 1994 article "The Films of *Hamlet*," two works devoted exclusively to the film history of this particular Shakespearean text. The reasons for these critics' apparent negligence can be traced back to the fact that, because of its length and shooting technique and because this is indeed a rather anti-canonical and experimental film, it is hard to classify and to discuss as a faithful translation of *Hamlet*. Kliman 1988 only mentions Coronado in a note concerning the play-within-a-play effect, where she explicitly says that his film was made for television (Kliman 1988: 61), whereas when giving the credits at the end of her book, she does not mention this fact and just refers to its length—67 minutes— (Kliman 1988: 317). Holderness and McCullough 1994 use the term film, in contrast to video and television productions employed for other versions, contradicting thus the assumptions made by Kliman (Holderness and McCullough 1994: 26). There is no evidence of the film having been made for television, but, quite on the contrary, the video jacket informs that it was premiered at the 1977 London Film Festival, demonstrating that Kliman 1988 is not right when referring to this film.

The lack of consensus about Coronado's rendering can be interpreted as a proof of the lack of real interest critics of Shakespeare on screen have shown for it. It is true that this is not an orthodox adaptation of the play in the manner of Olivier, Kozintsev, Zeffirelli or Branagh, and true that a great percentage of the text has been elided, but this is still *Hamlet*, and a rather refreshing, personal and innovative *Hamlet* indeed. And it is precisely because of the innovative qualities of

the film that the audience may get lost in the story, since Coronado demands to be acquainted with the text to be able to read his version properly.

The film starts with the all-too-famous “to be or not to be”, but instead of having Hamlet delivering it in front of the camera, we just hear the first five lines of the soliloquy as if coming from a radio, and then the voice, not properly tuned in, disappears. This first moment provides the central metaphor that will preside over the rest of the film: the most famous and familiar fragment of the play is defamiliarised since, instead of an actor we have just a disembodied voice, instead of the whole soliloquy we have just the beginning, and instead of a clear image and sound we have just a set of visual and aural interferences. This process of defamiliarisation and distortion provides the interpretative key for the film and that is why it is necessary to be familiar with *Hamlet* to perceive fully Coronado’s reading of that text.

There are several moments in which Coronado seems to be at odds with Shakespeare, but one of the most shocking is perhaps Ophelia’s burial and the subsequent duel between Hamlet and Laertes. No previous reference to Ophelia having a brother has been made and, suddenly, Laertes appears on screen blaming his sister’s suicide on Hamlet. After the harsh dialogue between them, a fight follows and the film ends. Obviously, Coronado here is not translating Shakespeare into images, but using the text for his own purposes. Laertes is not Laertes, but a second Hamlet. In fact, his name is not mentioned in the dialogue, and both Hamlet and Laertes are physically identical. The dialogue, then, is not between Ophelia’s brother and lover, but between two different personalities in Hamlet, what I have called his split ‘I’, and, consequently, the final fight is just an external projection of the internal struggle taking place within Hamlet’s mind. From Coronado’s perspective, then, the whole plot belongs to Hamlet’s creative powers and what we really have is just a character, Hamlet, struggling against himself after a mental breakdown.

This reading of the play forces the director to rewrite the text and to make changes. Apart from the changes concerning Laertes, any reference to the political threat Fortinbras represents, and all the secondary characters disappear. Since everything takes place in Hamlet’s mind, the only necessary characters are himself, Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Polonius and the Players for “The Mousetrap.” The rest of the characters, among them Laertes, Horatio or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are just considered redundant for this microscopic vision and, consequently, are omitted.

The cause of the central conflict in this tragedy, the ghost of Hamlet’s father, still remains in the film, but suffers a process of dislocation. First, as in Olivier’s, he is made the product of Hamlet’s mind, visually signalled by means of a foregrounding of Hamlet’s forehead shot in a close-up and a primal scream as if giving birth to the creature; but, apart from that, this ghost has nothing of the solemn and supernatural countenance shown by the most commercial ghosts of Branagh or Zeffirelli. On the contrary, he is too much like Hamlet, too human and too fleshly to be a ghost, and too young to be his father. The ghost is, in fact, a new instance of the split personality Hamlet ostensibly shows along the film. Hamlet is far from being a unified self, and his contradictory desires and anxieties fight to become pre-eminent in the making of his personality. Technically, this is made possible using twin actors for the different roles of Hamlet—Hamlet, the ghost, Laertes and a player in “The Mousetrap”. By means of this device Coronado conveys the idea that all these roles are simultaneously identical and different and

questions the unproblematic nature of the self and the humanistic notion of the individual as a monolithic identity. Following the theory on the formation of the I provided by Jacques Lacan in his “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” the individual is a mere signifier—a grammatical I—susceptible of adhering to different signifieds. In other words, identity is never definitive, but always slippery and, therefore, provisional.

When choosing this particular interpretation, the filmmaker is following a path already trodden by others. By 1976, there was a rather long tradition of psychoanalytical readings of *Hamlet* that started in 1948 with the film by Olivier and continued in most of the other versions made after him. All these readings, including Olivier’s, are based on the interpretation of the character provided by Freud in his letter to Wilhelm Fliss, where he makes Hamlet the victim of an unresolved Oedipus complex and considers that, because he repressed his desire to kill his father and possess his mother, now he feels unable to act against Claudius since he can see in him just the enactment of his own desire. Claudius, then, is perceived as both an accomplice and a rival in his struggle to get his mother’s love, and this double nature of his father’s murderer makes Hamlet go into hysterics.

Coronado, however, is not happy with just making a film within a well-established tradition. He distorts that tradition and stretches the interpretative possibilities of a particular chain of thoughts. In this case, apart from the fact that Hamlet’s divided self turns into the centre of the whole story, he makes the other characters be a product of his imagination, or at least have a reality created by his mind and different from any other they could have. This way, the director is going a step beyond other psychoanalytical interpretations.

If the tortured Hamlet needs several identities and bodies to be fully appreciated, a unique body is able to stand for the two women in the play, and thus, a single actress, Helen Mirren, performs the roles of Gertrude and Ophelia. This casting allows the informed spectator to perceive a very subtle allusion to the normal practice of having boy actors doubling female roles in the Elizabethan theatre, an allusion explicitly made in the play within a play where the female role is made by a moustached actor; but, within the psychoanalytical framework, it also allows to read these two women as mere projections of Hamlet’s desire for his mother, desire that forces him to apply a single meaning to any signifier ‘woman’, and to see his mother in his beloved. Gertrude and Ophelia, then, cannot be separated from Hamlet since it is him who creates them when thinking them, and they stop existing as independent figures. Lacan explained how Hamlet’s desire for Gertrude is transformed into Gertrude’s desire for Claudius; that is, when deprived of his object of desire (Gertrude/Ophelia), Hamlet is defeated and allows the Other’s desire—in this case, Gertrude’s—to replace his own. In the film, the benevolent Hamlet yields to his darkest side and to his mother’s desire when rejecting Ophelia, but he continues thinking them as figments of his own imagination, a strategy that allows him not to kill and to be killed but just to fight against himself to solve the psychic conflict created in his unconscious. That is one of the most striking differences between Shakespeare and Coronado: whereas the former requires the presence of death on stage following the conventions of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy, the latter discards the tragic end and makes the character accept himself as a divided and problematic being, following the path of psychoanalysis.

If Gertrude and Ophelia are projections of Hamlet's desire, the rest of the characters also conform to the norm established by that mind. Instead of a naturalistic setting, Coronado has conceived a bare space with just the most essential props to let the characters convey the message by themselves and not by some other superfluous signs. The behaviour of the characters, their clothes and gestures and their physical appearance are of utmost importance for the reading of the filmic text. In this case, since they are what Hamlet wants them to be, the spectator can get into Hamlet's mind when watching them, and thus, Gertrude and Claudius are shown as a couple of satyrs, whose only thought seems to be the satisfaction of their sexual desire. The very first time they appear, the sexual allusions are too explicit in their gestures and in the setting: Gertrude is in bed, one of the two Hamlets clearly desires her and she and Claudius share not only lascivious looks but something else. This attitude is preserved in the rest of the film, and, more than about characters, we should talk here about types since they are the projection of an idea and do not evolve throughout the story.

Apart from being a defamiliarising technique, the fact of having these types informs about Hamlet's monomania and helps to show them as unreal figures. That seems to be also the purpose of the extremely theatrical way of delivering their speeches. All the characters, excepting Hamlet, pretend to be bad actors that have not learn the proper intonation for their lines and say them mechanically. Thus, they detach from the action and from a particular level of reality since they do not seem to belong there. In these circumstances, the performance of the play-within-a-play makes the notion of reality even more problematic, since the theatrical event seems to be more real than what it is supposed to be reality. The characters in "The Mousetrap" behave consciously as characters and they even make exaggerated gestures and poses to convey their sense of artificiality, but this kind of performance being made within the context of a theatrical show is not so astonishing as the same performance made outside that context, precisely because it is a sign of unreality and the audience reads it as such.

The contrast between these two levels sends us back again to the realm of Hamlet's mind where reality is confused and mixed up, and where everything is artificial, being a projection of his own obsessions and desires. In this sense, Coronado's *Hamlet* provides a new rendering of Shakespeare's tragedy in the line of Freud, Jones, Olivier and Lacan, but through the insistent use of what can be considered Brechtian alienation effects and the recurrent process of defamiliarisation, this filmmaker is also proposing a quite personal and innovative reading of that tragedy. He is making us conscious of being watching something alien, or if not alien, at least different from a whole tradition of reading Shakespeare, and through that consciousness he is interpreting from a gay perspective, a perspective that necessarily implies the use of a double discourse and a great deal of theatricality to resist the unifying tendency of our canonical culture.

The split 'I', therefore, is not only that of Hamlet trying to cope with his own circumstances, but also the 'I' of the spectator, who has severe difficulties in filling the narrative gaps and struggle to find a coherent self in the film, and that of the director who offers consciously an alternative, multiple and open text as an act of resistance to the usually-taken-for-granted Shakespearean play.

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