Shakespeare in the Box: Gregory Doran's *Hamlet* (2009)

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Abstract
A constant in the history of film since its inception, William Shakespeare's Hamlet, Prince of Denmark *has been delivered to filmgoers throughout the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries in various adaptation schemata of the three versions of the text available for free interpretation and reprocessing. While Laurence Olivier's, Franco Zeffirelli's and Kenneth Branagh's acclaimed 'multimodal rewritings' seem to have acquired critical consensus, tens of other* Hamlet *films are launched regularly, placing the young Dane's tragedy in the most unexpected settings or periods of time. A telling example is Gregory Doran's 2009 filmed theatrical performance, which places Elsinore in a modern-day British society under constant surveillance, probably with a view to transposing the old Elizabethan habits of espionage and control of the population in a manner both accessible and relatable to the contemporary viewer. This paper contends that, by using surveillance devices, such as CCTV or hand-held cameras, and by redesigning King Hamlet's ghost as the ultimate embodiment of the watchful eye of the (divine?) authority, the film brings to the fore the timelessness of the Shakespearean themes.*

Keywords: *Hamlet, Shakespeare, surveillance, authority, adaptation*

Introduction

Throughout time, many directors have adapted Williams Shakespeare's plays for the screen, perhaps with a view to acquaint the public at large with the Bard's works by providing more accessible versions to the audiences and by highlighting certain timeless issues that his plays seem to develop on and that the viewers can relate to. As Gheorghiu puts it, "the adaptations range from mere relocations in time and/or space to complete transformations of the source-text up to the point where the latter can be recognized only by those who are well-acquainted with Shakespeare's works" (2015: 14). Nonetheless, it is safe to say that most of these adaptations, whether they are faithful to the source-text or not, prove to be useful tools in educating their consumers and at least introducing them to the poet's writings.

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Hamlet, Prince of Denmark is among the most frequently adapted plays, the most famous filmic productions belonging to Laurence Olivier, Franco Zeffirelli and Kenneth Branagh. The last is notable for its spanning four hours and covering the play line for line. More recently, however, Gregory Doran has provided a different perspective on the play, setting it in a modern-day society and bringing forth the idea of surveillance that increasingly affects people's lives, thus making the issues present in the Shakespearean hypotext relatable to the viewer.

Doran's 2009 *Hamlet* is "a stage-to-television transposition of his 2008 Royal Shakespeare Company production" (Lefait 2013: 1), featuring David Tennant as Hamlet, Patrick Stewart as King Claudius / Ghost, Penny Downie as Gertrude and Oliver Ford Davies as Polonius. Due to Shakespeare's universality, it can be said that "producers of adaptations of his plays have set them in the most unexpected locations," as well as "placed the characters and their original stories in settings that can easily qualify as contemporary British or American topoi" (Gheorghiu 2015: 15).

Consequently, although this spatial and temporal transposition has been exploited in many contemporary TV series and films, it is still suitable for yet another adaptation of *Hamlet*, as it focuses on surveillance, referring at the same time to the present-day society and some of its main concerns (Lefait 2013: 1). As David Tennant puts it in an interview, setting the production in a not-so-specific modern time has its advantages, as it "allows the audience to watch and see people that they recognize, rather than seeing people from another time" (Rokinson 2009: 302). Perhaps for this reason the character of Cornelius becomes in Doran's adaptation Cornelia, an African-American woman, just as, in Kenneth Branagh's production, Voltimand is played by a Trinidadian-born actor.

Hamlet as surveillance adaptation

According to Sébastien Lefait, "the presence of a surveillance subtext in *Hamlet* calls for appropriation for at least two reasons" (2013: 2). The first reason is cultural, and it can be explained through the debate on the installation of CCTV devices as a means of keeping the population safe that had been going on for quite some time in Britain at the time the film was released (Lefait 2013: 2). In this way, issues of present-day Britain are presented via the Shakespearean play, proving that they can be referred to as universal issues:

> Doran's adaptation of the play to current events thus emphasizes the way in which Shakespeare links 'the oppressive practices of political performance and surveillance at Hamlet's Elsinore' to the condition of citizens in interventionist states (Hackett 2013: 11), thus engaging in a characterization of the surveillance society of twenty-first century Britain. (Lefait 2013: 2)

The second reason Lefait considers is aesthetic, his hypothesis being that "this new optical context is that of a visual culture extensively shaped by surveillance practices, a view that reinforces Burnett's remark that 'in a terror-haunted world, film itself might constitute an optical disciplinary mechanism' (Burnett 2006: 32)" (Lefait 2013: 2). As such, Doran's strategy continues "a development initiated by earlier filmic versions, […] exploiting the natural resemblance between the cinematic apparatus and contemporary surveillance devices" (2013: 2) in *Hamlet*, a "play of monitoring, watching, eavesdropping, and trap-setting" (Hawkes 2002: 70 q. in Lefait 2013: 2). In short, the idea of surveillance is suitable for the adaptation of this play also because of its themes and the issues it deals with.

Gregory Doran resorts to using surveillance "at the level of his TV film's visuals" as well as using it "as a prop within his adaptation" (Lefait 2013: 3), as we see Hamlet himself using cameras for recording himself and addressing the viewers, perhaps in order to leave behind clues about himself, or as a key device in the unmasking of Old Hamlet's murderers.

> I propose to call this process "surveillance adaptation", which means not only that the director adapts the surveillance content of the play, but also, and primarily, that he adapts the play to a contemporary scopic regime that derives part of its essence from the spread of surveillance practices in everyday life. The expansion of surveillance, from a diegetic to extradiegetic feature, is a way of reinvestigating the paradoxes of watching explored in *Hamlet* in light of twenty-first century visual culture. (Lefait 2013: 3).

Although the word 'surveillance' makes one think strictly of modern devices such as cameras, the technique is present in Doran's adaptation of *Hamlet* through various means.

CCTV cameras as surveillance devices

The film begins with the live surveillance camera footage of the change of the guards on the corridor, the viewfinder marks framing the CCTV image, which Lefait calls a "primary surveillance shot" (2013: 6). The idea of surveillance is also emphasised by Marcellus's words, as he claims that "[t]his same strict and most observant watch" (I. I. 71) is taking place on the grounds of Elsinore.

> The shot includes a different colour pattern from the next shot in the TV film. It gives a high-angle point of view on a corridor in the castle of Elsinore and includes rectangular viewfinder marks at the corners of the screen, complete with a cross at the centre. (Lefait 2013: 6).

The high-angle point of view provided in the primary surveillance shot may suggest that there is a higher power behind the camera, gazing down on its subjects and watching their every move. This authority can be associated with Claudius himself, the new King of Denmark, keeping a close eye on his people, or to the ghost, also on the watch, mostly keeping itself hidden, just like the people in front of the CCTV monitors. Even so, the shot provides a subjective image, as people and objects are actually seen through the lens of the surveillance device, and not directly:

> A primary surveillance shot, in other words, may reflect nobody in particular's point of view, if there is nobody behind the control monitor to which the camera is linked (Niney 2004: 192). If someone watches a surveillance tape, the primary surveillance shot may also convey a delayed subjective point of view. Alternatively, it may reflect unidentified subjectivity, if the shot suggests that someone is controlling the CCTV unit without revealing their identity. (Lefait 2013: 6).

It might also be the case of unidentified subjectivity, if we consider the fact that Claudius, Gertrude and, especially, Polonius seem to know a lot about Hamlet's whereabouts, as revealed in a discussion they have in the main hall of the castle. They all agree that the young prince spends a great deal of time in that very space, which, incidentally, is equipped with a CCTV camera. David Tennant comments on the act of watching by saying that "[t]he whole idea of Polonius as this spymaster general and it being a surveillance society made a lot of sense because we live in a surveillance society. We are constantly monitored

and people are constantly watching each other" (Rokinson 2009: 302). In other words, everyone knows what everyone else is up to.

Hamlet eventually destroys the surveillance device in the main hall of the castle, in an attempt to divert the watching eye from himself. "Now I'm alone," he says, addressing the viewers. Hamlet's action of getting rid of the CCTV camera through which his uncle and mother, and even Polonius could keep an eye on him, can be considered an act of defiance of the higher authority that rules over Elsinore and over his own life. He is, thus, seemingly breaking free from the authority's control over him, taking matters into his own hands and eventually managing to unmask his father's murderer(s).

Defying authority – breaking the fourth wall

Authority seems to be continually challenged in Gregory Doran's adaptation of *Hamlet*. For instance, another instance of going against authority, that is similar to Hamlet's destroying the CCTV camera, is the continuous breaking of the fourth wall which separates the world of the stage/film from the real world (e.g. the audience) and which also sends back to the idea of surveillance – the watching eye 'knows' that someone is watching in return. This is done especially by Hamlet, who, most of the time, looks straight into the camera while speaking, as if directly addressing the public and, at the same time, the 'power' that sits in front of the CCTV monitors, watching his every move and listening to his every word. For example, during his first soliloquy, Hamlet does not follow the model introduced by Laurence Olivier, which suggests that the actor is not supposed to look directly into the camera while uttering the words, but slightly to one side, to an object or location that is not seen by the viewer. David Tennant combines the two, the result being an eerie performance, mixing Hamlet's rage directed towards his mother and his uncle with his sorrow caused by his father's passing, while defiantly directing his words towards the invisible authority that is watching him.

Early in the film, the CCTV cameras (made obvious once again by the viewfinder marks) catch the court leaving the main hall after Claudius's announcement of his marriage to Gertrude, followed by Hamlet walking in and delivering his first soliloquy. While speaking, Hamlet often turns to the camera, directly facing the audience as if to emphasise certain elements of his speech while pouring his soul out to the viewer. Therefore, it may be said that the viewer acts as a sort of

confidante for the young prince, the only person listening to his woes. Another example, as previously mentioned, would be when Hamlet breaks the fourth wall after destroying the CCTV camera in the main hall, making a point that he knows he is being watched and he can prevent the all-knowing eye from further observing his every move, since the power now belongs to him, as well as conveying the idea that authority is nothing without its tools (in this case, the cameras).

Another character who breaks the fourth wall is Claudius, but he does so for an entirely different reason – he *is* the authority and wants to prove it to the viewers. This scene occurs after the famous "Mousetrap", when he can be seen on screen uttering words of repentance and regret for the "foul murder" that he has committed, kneeling in prayer:

> […] What then? What rests?
> Try what repentance can: what can it not?
> Yet what can it when one cannot repent?
> O wretched state! O bosom black as death!
> O limed soul, that, struggling to be free,
> Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay:
> Bow, stubborn knees; and, heart with strings of steel,
> Be soft as sinews of the new-born babe!
> All may [yet] be well. (III. 3. 64-72)

All this time, Hamlet stands behind him, dagger raised and ready to strike him down as an act of revenge, a crooked prop crown on his head suggesting his being unfit for the role of king. But Hamlet eventually changes his mind, refusing to send the repentant Claudius to heaven, and leaves hastily. It is only a moment later that Claudius stops his fervent praying, looks into the camera and continues, with a little smirk on his lips, "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: words without thought never to heaven go" (III. 3. 97-98). Thus, he demonstrates to the audience that he is the one in charge and that he has just managed to trick Hamlet into believing his little 'show' of regret. The image has an even greater impact on the viewer as Patrick Stewart plays both the new king and the ghost, thus associating the father-figure image of Claudius with the image of the actual father, although Claudius is described by Hamlet as the exact opposite of the former king:

> Look here upon this picture, and on this,—

> The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
> See what a grace was seated on this brow;
> Hyperion's curls; the front of Jove himself;
> An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;
> A station like the herald Mercury […]
> This was your husband.—Look you now what follows:
> Here is your husband, like a milldew'd ear
> Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes? (III. 4. 54-66)

Polonius too resorts to this technique of breaking the fourth wall, mostly when trying to prove Hamlet's madness. More precisely, while watching the young prince, he often turns to the audience to comment on Hamlet's actions. One such example occurs after the famous 'nunnery scene', which has been moved along with the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy to "its place in the First Quarto" (Rokinson 2009: 295). Polonius reveals himself to Hamlet and starts a conversation with the young prince after having just spied on him together with Claudius from behind the two-way mirror.

> POLONIUS [aside].
> How say you by that? Still harping on my daughter: – yet he knew me not at first; he said I was a fishmonger: he is far gone, far gone: and truly in my youth I suffer'd much extremity for love; very near this. I'll speak to him again. (II. 2. 92)

In this way, Polonius tries to convince the audience that Hamlet has indeed gone mad and that the prince's love for his daughter, Ophelia, is the cause, while also conveying the idea that he, along with Claudius, and perhaps Gertrude, is the authority that keeps its eye on the prince and has the power to decide whether he has indeed gone mad or not. Polonius's words might as well be a subversive method of trying to actually plant ideas into the viewer's mind, reinforcing the subject of Hamlet's madness, which is in fact, heavily debated by scholars.

The authority behind the two-way mirror

Another means of conveying the idea of surveillance on screen is the use of the two-way mirror behind which Polonius and Claudius hide during the nunnery scene in order to watch the events unfold.

During this scene, the mirror functions as a window through which the watching eye(s) of the authority keep Hamlet under scrutiny and analyse his behaviour to determine whether he is indeed mad or

not. Through its double nature, it conceals the presence of the two men, while also allowing them to watch the scene on the other side unfolding. It is, however, the mechanical sound of the surveillance camera that prompts Hamlet to ask Ophelia of her father's whereabouts, and not the knocking sound that draws Hamlet's attention in Kenneth Branagh's famous four-hour adaptation. This particular moment serves to remind the viewers that the world of Elsinore as represented through Doran's vision is, after all, a surveillance society based on CCTV devices, much like our own present-day society.

Cameras as props – unveiling the truth through surveillance

CCTV Cameras are not the only recording devices that can be employed for surveillance. In Gregory Doran's adaptation of *Hamlet*, cameras are also used on screen, this time as props such as the one Hamlet operates for two reasons.

First of all, the prince uses his camera in order to catch on film the reactions of Claudius and Gertrude during the "Mousetrap", the resulting film consequently serving as evidence of the king and queen's betrayal of Hamlet's father. While the actors put on an unforgettable performance in front of the two accomplices, Hamlet's focus is on the faces of his uncle and mother, his camera zooming in on them in order to capture their reactions. This time it is Hamlet who takes on the position of authority gazing upon the guilty and catching them red-handed, and his gesture may as well be considered yet another act of defiance of the 'real' authority, that of the king, who is now, in his turn, under scrutiny. What is more, the recording may also be regarded as an unspoken confession from Claudius and Gertrude.

The second reason why the prince records himself with his handheld camera might most likely be with a view to preserving his image and his words as a sort of video log, or video diary. He does so during his soliloquy in Act IV, Scene 4 – which has been shortened in the film – after his encounter with Fortinbras's army. Combining his words with the act of breaking the fourth wall in the recording, Hamlet offers an uncanny rendition of the soliloquy, laying emphasis especially on the last two lines: "O, from this time forth, / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (IV. 4. 65-66). Therefore, the recording might function as a means of preserving a proof of his promise to avenge his father's death, despite all impediments, after seeing the Norwegian army ready to fight for even less than that.

King Hamlet's ghost – the ultimate surveillance device

Last but not least, it is important to mention how the King's ghost fulfils its own role as a surveillance 'device', for it is inferred in the film that it keeps an eye on Hamlet's every move, even though it is not always seen on screen.

The first time it appears is at the beginning of the film – however, it cannot be seen on screen; instead, the viewers are able to watch the reactions of Horatio and the guards to this peculiar sighting, all from the ghost's perspective. Therefore, King Hamlet's ghost can be interpreted as the all-watching eye on the grounds of Elsinore, the ultimate surveillance device. In this case, the ghost and the film crew's camera are one and the same, reinforcing the idea of surveillance that lies at the core of Doran's adaptation. At the same time, it is here that images of 'real' life alternate with CCTV footage in order to convey the idea that the ghost could not be captured on screen. Thus, the ghost can be considered the highest authority among those who take turns watching, because not everybody can see it – it chooses the ones before whom it appears and, as it seems, it would rather not be noticed by the 'other authorities' at Elsinore, namely Claudius, Polonius and Gertrude, keeping its existence hidden from the ones that wronged it.

Furthermore, the ghost appears before Hamlet in moments when the prince seems to deviate from his quest of revenge. One such instance occurs during the closet scene from Act III, Scene 4 (Lefait 2013: 5). When Hamlet speaks his mind to his mother, accusing her of marrying his uncle so soon after his father's death, the ghost appears, reminding the young prince of his task: "Do not forget: this visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (III. 4. 111-112). This could mean that the ghost is always watching and, as such, it becomes another embodiment of authority in relation to Hamlet.

It is safe to say that the ghost is the real authority at Elsinore because it knows about things going on at the castle that not even the new King and his advisor know about, being able to always go unnoticed – unless it chooses to be seen by certain people – yet, perhaps, holding secrets and knowledge that no one else has access to.

Conclusions

One could say that Gregory Doran's 2009 *Hamlet* is indeed a surveillance adaptation of the famous play, the idea of surveillance, however, being rendered using various methods, instead of just the usual recording

devices. Ranging from the classic to the more unconventional, and skilfully combined with Doran's vision of the Shakespearean hypotext, these devices help in creating a brilliant image of authority and defiance in a modern-day society to which the viewers can certainly relate.

Hamlet, together with the entire court of Elsinore, are therefore transposed in an environment which is more similar to our own present-day society and especially to that of Great Britain, where the adaptation was, in fact, created. Moreover, through this reworking of Shakespeare's text, Gregory Doran addresses the issue of authority that arises as a result of using surveillance devices, which may take different shapes, but stressing, nonetheless, that this authority can be – and is – continually challenged by the people. At the same time, through his adaptation, Doran provides a different perspective on the role of the ghost, which is not only a device meant to spur on Hamlet's revenge, but also a means of surveillance, one that goes above everything and everyone else at Elsinore, having access to more information than Claudius, and thus reinforcing the idea that King Hamlet is the true ruler of Denmark.

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