

PETER BROOK'S *KING LEAR*: PAGE, STAGE AND SCREEN

Thaïs Flores Nogueira Diniz

Every time the place of an element in a system of signs corresponds to the place occupied by another element in another system of signs, we have an intersemiotic translation. Peirce says that “meaning ... is the translation of a sign into another system of signs, [it is also] a second assertion from which all that follows from the first assertion equally follows, and vice-versa”⁵⁰ (emphasis mine). What underlies such a statement is the idea that every time we translate, we are using signs, and thus, signifying. If we consider the staging of a play, that is, the transformation of a dramatic (literary) text into a theatrical text⁵¹ (performance), we are illustrating Peirce’s idea. Erika Fischer-Litche⁵² in her article, points to the fact that staging is itself a process of intersemiotic translation in the sense that we are translating from one semiotic system—verbal—into another system of signs—performance. On analysing Peter Brook’s 1962 staging of the play⁵³, we are thus dealing with this kind of intersemiotic translation. At the same time, Patrick Catrysse⁵⁴ declares that an adaptation into the cinema can also be seen as an intersemiotic translation. He supports his statement with the argument that the product, the film itself, can be regarded as a translation because it undergoes the same constraints that any translation does. If we refer to the concept of adaptation offered by Dudley Andrew⁵⁵, any “text” (and here I am using the term in a broad sense to include even ideas, thoughts and prior conceptions) can be adapted into films. Recently, however, some theories on translation studies have argued that what we translate is not the “text”, but culture; these theorists disregard the intersemiotic aspect to focus on the cultural one. They try to point out the influences, constraints and forces that have been responsible for the transformations occurring in any text when it is translated, even semiotically.

This paper aims at analysing the process occurred in the staging and subsequent shooting of William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* by Peter Brook. For this purpose, my text will be structured in three parts. The first analyses the so called translation from Shakespeare’s text into the 1962 production at Stratford-upon-Avon. It concentrates on the semiotic strategies used by this director that have characterized the theatrical production as a daring stylization of the playtext, therefore receiving controversial criticism. The second part concentrates on the film adaptation, also by Peter Brook, some years later. According to Michael Mullin, not only Shakespeare’s text but also Brook’s own theatrical production of 1962 served as the source for his film. Strategies used in the film resulted in a production which, in agreement with the challenges of the Avant-garde Cinema of the sixties and seventies, can be placed at the limit of the absurd. The third part deals with the so called cultural translation, which analyses the moment in which both productions are inserted and the effect that eventual historical and social factors may have had on them, either constraining or expanding the “original” text.

⁵⁰ PEIRCE, 1993, p. 99.

⁵¹ Here we are using Keir Elam’s terms. He refers to the written text as dramatic text and to the performance as theatrical text.

⁵² Fischer-litche, Erika. The Performance as an “interpretant” of the drama. *Semiotica*, 64. 1978. p.197-212.

⁵³ This production opened at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon, on November 6, 1962.

⁵⁴ Catrysse, 1992, p. 54

⁵⁵ ANDREW, 1984, p.97.

From page to stage

In an interview with Peter Roberts, Brook said that as *King Lear* is Shakespeare's greatest play, it's the most difficult to stage, and that "far from being an 'unactable play', he believes that its full meaning can only be comprehended existentially—on a stage"⁵⁶. He also refutes Charles Lamb's affirmation that the play could not be staged without becoming ridiculous—"an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick, turned out of doors by his daughters on a rainy night"!--with the argument that the success of the theatre of today lies not in its realistic aspect but in the exploration of resources which increases the spectator's imagination and creates the context of the action. According to Erika Fischer-Litche "it is impossible to express meanings derived from the text of the written play in exactly the same way through theatrical means"⁵⁷. In any case, the theatrical signs, because of their iconicity, bring forth a meaning that is different from, or at least non-existent in, the corresponding verbal signs. In any performance, these theatrical signs function as interpretants of the verbal signs, which therefore become related to them. As a result, a totally new semantic structure comes into being. The performance is then seen as an autonomous work that can be understood and judged only if taken as the result of a larger transformational process and not as a mere transformation of the script. It is simultaneously considered a work of its own **and** a transformation of the script. Thus,

equivalence between a written text and its staging cannot be defined as identity of meaning, neither as the meanings the texts bring forth nor of that of their elements or subtexts. (. . .) The script and the performance can be interpreted and understood with reference to a meaning that is common to both (. . .) equivalence [being] the result of a hermeneutic process in which the reading of a script becomes related to the 'reading' of a performance with reference to meanings that are brought forth by both⁵⁸.

Fisher-Litche's words help us understand and appreciate Peter Brook's production, in the sense that the staging of the text is performed on the basis of norms underlying symbolic theatre, not on the basis of the conventions of realistic theatre. The equivalence is not realistic but it depends on his style, which is resultant of his experimental projects.

Peter Brook has staged his *Lear* with "spareness and simplicity"⁵⁹. He conceived of a play "stripped of the panoply of old fashioned Shakespearean staging"⁶⁰. The stage was bare, without scenery and with only a rough wooden throne, a bench, or a table carried on as needed and as quickly cleared. Upstage two giant white screens rose up in front of the cyclorama⁶¹ to form an abstract backdrop. This setting remained unchanged except for the storm scene".

With the idea that the description of properties is always incomplete in all side texts as compared to the corresponding theatrical signs, let us begin by analysing the storm scene in Brook's production of 1962.

In Shakespeare's text, the storm is announced by the phrases "storm and tempest" and

⁵⁶ WILLIAMS, 1988, p. 6.

⁵⁷ FISCHER-LITCHE, 1978, p. 208.

⁵⁸ FISCHER-LITCHE, 1978, p. 211.

⁵⁹ TAUBMAN, Scofield, 1964, n.p.

⁶⁰ TAUBMAN, Scofield, 1964, n.p.

⁶¹ Cyclorama is defined as a curved plaster, generally painted light blue, on which light is projected in order to give illusion of space and distance, as the sky, for example.

“storm still” which, of course, refer to the effects that a storm is intended to achieve in that scene of the play. These phrases appear at least eight times in acts II and III. As Peter Brook refused to create a realistic tempest, in accordance with his own ideas of the experimental theatre explained in his work, *The Empty Space*, he tried to “translate” it symbolically. According to the description made by Howard Taubman, “the director’s design is based on a couple of enormous grey rectangular panels that, standing diagonally at the sides, frame a similar unornamented grey rear wall⁶²” on a huge stage, like a vast empty heartless earth. Because he could not stage the storm either realistically or totally intellectually, he decided to use a thunder sheet on view, whose vibrations gave a disturbing quality to the sound. This quality was expanded because this vibration could be seen concretely, as if we could watch and not only listen to the thunder. Here there is a description of the storm scene made by Mullin :

The setting remained unchanged until the storm sounds grew louder and three huge rust-colored iron thundersheets, looking like copper, are lowered from above, trembling as they made the thunder. Lit by a harsh white light, Lear spoke as the others onstage mimed the storm’s effects, his speeches and their replies punctuated by the crash of thunder and the wailing of the wind⁶³.

Mullin’s description indicates a very stylised representation of the storm. In the theatrical production, the substitution of the phrase “storm still” for all the iconic signs mentioned above comes to restate Fischer-Lichte’s affirmation that visual images have a meaning beyond that of verbal signs. It also explains the mobility each theatre director has when creating their stage production. In the particular performance referred to above, the thunder sheets on view give the king some source of conflict (which is beyond the text) without attempting to stage the storm realistically, which, for Brook, would never worked.

What had remained constant in Peter Brook’s career in the theatre “were the abrupt changes of gear – between forms, styles, themes, working processes⁶⁴”. These were driven from his passion for experience, in a search for a theatre language of and for our times. Rejecting any notion of obligation to period accuracy, *Lear* signals the end of romantic fantasy and decoration of any kind, of lighting effects and fixed set designs, in search of a prismatic density of expression and form, a truer reflection of the spirit of our age. According to Peter Brook, “[A] play must leave you in a more receptive mood than you were before. It isn’t there to ‘move’ people. . . [Instead of making you cry or have a bath of sentiment]. . . I prefer the notion of disturbance⁶⁵”, he has said.

In brief we can say that Peter Brook’s translation from page to stage represents a new and creative text, in which symbolic theatrical signs function as interpretants of verbal signs and thus convey an expanded meaning.

From stage to screen

Patrick Cattrysse, in his article on film adaptation says:

Film adaptations do not limit themselves to one so-called source. Rather several (source) practices, simultaneously and at different levels, normally serve as models

⁶² TAUBMAN, *Lear*. 1964, 18:1.

⁶³ MULLIN, 1983, p. 190.

⁶⁴ WILLIAMS, 1988, p.3.

⁶⁵ BROOK, apud WILLIAMS, 1988, p. 5.

for the production process. . . Even film adaptations of famous literary texts generally do not limit themselves to adapting the literary source alone. The story. . . may have guided the film on the narratological level, but other aspects such as directing, staging, acting, setting, costume, lighting, photography, pictorial representation, music, etc. may well have been governed by other models and conventions which did not originate in the literary text and did not serve as a translation of any of its elements⁶⁶.

This is the case of Brook's film *King Lear*. Shakespeare's text re-written in prose form has served as one source for the film. But any previous stage production; the familiarity of the director with Shakespeare, for having produced other plays by the author; or even previous film and theatrical productions by different directors and filmmakers have served as sources for his film.

The film that possibly had emerged from Brook's successful theatrical production has a strange beginning. In the previous production, the king had marked each daughter's portion on the unrolled map, a scene that follows the orb ceremony in which each of the two daughters, holding the orb, recite their protestation of devotion, followed by Cordelia who, also holding the orb, confides her fears directly to the audience. She fails the test, and is warned of losing her patrimony, while Kent is threatened by the king's sword. Instead of using some stage business to establish the occasion and invent a ceremony for Lear's division of his kingdom as he did on the theatre production, Brook begins his film with a long pan across a crowd of the king's subjects, showing their faces frozen with fear, the same fear shown by Cordelia. The ceremony begins with a close-up of Lear's face with his eyes taking in everyone in the room when he utters the fateful words: "Know that we have divided our Kingdom". The complex stage scene is simplified. The orb is kept only as an artefact, not as a symbol of power as in the theatre, and Cordelia is kept silent.

As can be seen, some of the changes or transpositions are not made with similar procedures, as asserted by Catrysse. However, according to Roger Manvell, the greatest change that occurs in the adaptation concerns the modification of the text through many cuts, which therefore makes important changes in the narrative. Brook, with the help of the producer, took the play apart and re-assembled it, writing his own prose narrative without dialogue. On being cut to make a two-hour film from the text of the four-hour-plus play, the film departs significantly from Shakespeare's text. The change is yet greater in the sense that the non-localized space of the bare stage is replaced by the rugged winter countryside, which in turn affected the narrative structure. It is the terrain that gives unity to the action by alternating scenes of journeys in wagons-- from one place to the other -- and interior scenes. Each piece of narrative happens in a different place: Lear's, Goneril's, and Gloucester's castles, the heath where the tempest occurs, the beach of Dover and the battlefield. Concerning space, then, Brook tried to employ all possibilities offered by the cinema, using open spaces to substitute for the restricted space of the stage: Denmark's landscapes with their irregular grounds. Vincent Canby, referring to this film, said that it "is set in a time and place where the sun seems to be receding not because of any seasonal course but because the entire universe is moving toward an exhausted end"⁶⁷.

As a matter of fact, however, the most significant shift occurs in the tempest scenes, although some effects are stylised in both forms. In the theatre, the huge iron thundersheets, which trembled and sounded both the thunder that punctuated Lear's speeches and the wind, are examples of this stylisation. In the film, other kinds of stylisation—jump cuts, dissolves, visual discontinuity,

⁶⁶ CATRYSSE, 1992, p. 61-62.

⁶⁷ CANBY, 1964, p. 1.

fades to black, superposed images—are used to create the effect of the storm in Lear’s mind. These are unexpected and totally extravagant.

As Cattrysse has said, “several sources and practices, simultaneously and at different levels, normally serve as models for the production process⁶⁸”. In brief, we may say that Peter Brook’s translation from stage to screen has a lot in common either with the previous theatre production and with the Shakespearean text itself. But the greatest transformations, which make the film also a new and creative text of its own are those cinematic devices used by Brook in order to convey not only the idea of the tempest on screen, but also in Lear’s mind and, by extension, in the audience’s.

Cultural Translation

So far we have dealt with intersemiotic aspects carried over from text to stage and from theatre to film. It is now time for us to pose some questions suggested by Cattrysse in his article mentioned before:

If innovation occurs, does it proceed through the importation of innovative elements from other (artistic or non-artistic) communicative practice? Where do the imported elements come from? And what shape does the importation process take? Does a refusal to import innovative elements lead to the disappearance of the system (the traditional genre or whatever)?⁶⁹

Answers to those questions can be found in Lefevere’s concept of poetics: one of the many filters through which what one artist expresses has to go. Concerning poetics, both theatre production and film have followed the trends of Brook’s time. Following Cattrysse’s idea, “film adaptation had better be studied as a set of discursive (or communicational, or semiotic) practices, the production of which has been determined by various previous discursive practices and by its general historical context⁷⁰”. The new language used by Brook in his stage production is in accordance with his ideas that “the theatre is an organic urge as basic as hunger or sex”. The strategies described are linked to the author’s own expression but also to that of his contemporaries. Following the avant-gardists of the sixties, Brook echoes the playwright’s words in his visual language and thereby suggests the state of mind that finds expression in those words. This expression can be said to be unique and serves to express values, sensibility and world view. By the same token, like many films of his own time, Peter Brook’s tries to call the audience’s attention to the sign, not to the referent. “Apart from electric sounds in the storm scene and the fool’s discordant songs, the film is devoid of music, its oppressive silences broken only by human voices, the rattle of wooden carriage wheels, whinnying horses, the howling of wind, the crackling of fire⁷¹.” In actual fact, the aim of the film is not mimetic, and by employing all possible codes, it is seen as non-rational, experimental and innovative, the silence being an equivalent for the play’s long silences here and elsewhere, with remarkable effect as Taubman points out.

The remarkable thing about a great work of art like *King Lear* is that it speaks to each epoch with undiminished power though new generations seek to reinterpret it in the light of their own predicaments. The Royal Shakespeare Company’s *Lear* is a reflection of our troubled and disoriented world, seen through the smoked glasses

⁶⁸ CATTRYSSSE, 1992, p. 62.

⁶⁹ CATTRYSSSE, 1992, p.67.

⁷⁰ CATTRYSSSE, 1992, p. 62.

⁷¹ JORGENS, 1977, p. 244.

of those who regard purpose vain and hope illusory. It is a *Lear* conceived in the barren, pessimistic terms of the theatre of the absurd⁷².

Brook's staging and filming are ways of translating the Elizabethan belief that chaos will come again, the great chain of being may snap and, the world must run mad. On analysing both translations,

[We] are before some mobile operation screen: the intention of the artist is shaping his own mode until it almost reaches a personal style. All variations of a verse, the successive writings of a short story, the many drafts for a figure or painting illustrate this craftsmanship and expressive process. The choice of each word sometimes responds to determinations of the style of the age, to ideology and fashion and sometimes to deep necessities of an affective root or to an original perception of reality⁷³.

Having in mind Peter Brook's own words that stated he was producing for his own age, we can read Mullin's words, at the end of his article, as a restatement of the idea of culture as the unit of translation:

Viewed as the end point in a collaboration among artists⁷⁴ who lived with the play and tried to interpret it during the 1960s, Brook's *Lear* on film is an important document in the play's critical history, [because it brings us close to Brook's vision and to the acting of Paul Scofield, Irene Worth and Alan Webb (actors in both productions: performance and film)]. . . . The film gives us a raw, sometimes hysterical demonstration of what the "subtext" had come to mean to Brook. Brook's outrage at the war in Vietnam and his own alienation from establishment culture⁷⁵ screams out through the film. . . . As a work of art, it communicates vividly what great actors and a great director thought about Shakespeare's play. . . . Nihilistic, bleak, hopeless, ugly, full of horror and lacking pity, . . . the terror of modern times is the subject, and Brook's film has used Shakespeare as the medium. . . . [W]hether the brutal chilling *Lear* embodied by the film is now true, was true for the 1960s, or will become true tomorrow depends on how we see our world⁷⁶.

Translating in accordance with our world-view represents cultural translation. This is the case of Peter Brook's double translation from page to stage and from stage to screen.

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⁷² TAUBMAN, Lear, p. 1.

⁷³ BOSI, 1991, p.24-25.

⁷⁴ Mullin refers here to the cast, the same for the stage production and the film.

⁷⁵ This is a reference to the rejection Peter Brook suffered in his career.

⁷⁶ MULLIN, 1983, p.195.

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