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Scotland with a Pinch of Westeros? The Case of Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth*

Abstract

The paper discusses the resemblance between Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* and its cinematic adaptation directed by Justin Kurzel (2015) with respect to the image of Scotland in the geographical and historical sense. To this end, tools derived from translation studies are employed, such as the notion of intersemiotic translation, interpretive resemblance and interpretants. It is argued that alterations introduced in the adaptation are motivated by psychological reality and coherence of the plot, making the representation of medieval Scotland believable. In this respect, Kurzel's production differs from many other cinematic versions of *Macbeth*, exploiting mostly the universality of the crime and madness motifs.

Keywords: cinematic adaptation, interpretant, intersemiotic translation, relevance theory, resemblance

1. Introduction

Sir Sean Connery, who played Macbeth in a 1961 Canadian TV production, admits that it has a reputation of an unlucky work due to its being “deeply drenched in sorcery.” Not daring to utter its real name, actors therefore refer to it as “the Scottish play.” Taking into account that *Macbeth*'s Scottishness has often been downplayed or dropped altogether in favour of the universality of the crime-remorse-madness motif, it seems that this name (i.e. “the Scottish play”) may not always be applicable, for example when the setting has been moved to an East London social housing estate (theatre performance directed by Felix Mortimer and Joshua Nawras) or feudal Japan (the famous *Throne of Blood* directed by Akira Kurosawa, starring Toshirô Mifune). No wonder then that in her characteristically entitled essay “Out damned Scot: Dislocating Macbeth in transnational film and media culture,” Courtney Lehmann claims that in many cinematic productions Scotland becomes “Scotland,” “a powerful metonymy for a place that is everywhere and nowhere in particular” (311).

Shot on the Isle of Skye (the Inner Hebrides), with the characters speaking Shakespeare's verse, Kurzel's movie does not dislocate *Macbeth*, thereby creating strong expectations of historical authenticity and fidelity to the original play. Naturally, such expectations do not arise when the main protagonist is a samurai or wears biker boots. As *The Guardian* reviewer Danny Leigh notes, the film's "gimmick there is no gimmick: according to historical record, the setting is the Scotland of 1057, a place of cruel violence where crowns are made from bone and dogs lap at the blood of kings."

Scholars dealing with adaptation (e.g. Stam 2012) tend to undermine a default expectation of maximal similarity to the original text, calling it "the chimera of fidelity" and denying it the status of a methodological principle (75). Drawing on the intertextuality theory by Kristeva, rooted in Bakhtin's dialogism, they prefer to look at the relation between the original and adaptation in terms of "endless permutation of textualities" (Stam 2005, 8). Despite reluctance to recognise any scholarly value in the expectations of faithfulness, it is pervasive among the audience. A possible explanation for this is offered by Venuti, who evokes Bourdieu's notions of elite vs. popular taste. Elite taste requires application of specialised knowledge to appreciate a cultural object per se, which may involve recognising its intertextuality. Popular taste, on the other hand, is catered to by providing the viewer with the possibility of identifying with characters as real people, i.e. by vicarious participation in this object. It might be the case then that the majority of viewers watching *Macbeth* the movie (and other adaptations) represent the popular taste, expecting it to correspond to historical facts and resemble the plot of Shakespeare's play as closely as possible. Even a quick look at Internet forums and social media where viewers express their comments and opinions suggests that indeed such expectations are widespread.

It should be noted that these two layers of expectations may not be easy to satisfy simultaneously, as Shakespeare's vision of medieval Scotland is not accurate to historical detail in the first place. Much as Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* were a source of information for Shakespeare, he subsequently transformed it, combining facts from the lives of three Scottish rulers to create Macbeth's character. As Anna Cetera (203) writes in her commentary to *Macbeth*, this "marks the triumph of literary fiction over history" (trans. A.P.) and sheds light on Shakespeare's intentions as a playwright. The bard had a penchant for psychological nuances and, on the practical side, was King James's subject and member of The King's Men. What he wrote had to please the king, who had authored *Daemonologie*, a three-part diatribe against sorcery, claimed descent from Banquo and was married to a Dane. Consequently, Shakespeare tampered with those historical facts that could potentially disconcert the king, such as the role of Banquo in Duncan's murder or Macbeth's victory over the Danes.

All in all, it can be stated that although Shakespeare's aim was to inspire reflection on power and the human mind among his contemporary audiences rather

than chronicle the Scottish past, his image of medieval Scotland is psychologically and historically plausible, which is all that can be expected of a literary work. In the following body of this essay Kurzel's vision will be examined against this background with the help of selected theoretical tools originating from translation studies. The aim of this analysis is at least partially utilitarian, as a film version may be more accessible to secondary school students than a theatrical staging. Judging by some reviews in which Kurzel's *Macbeth* is likened to *The Game of Thrones* and Scotland to Westeros – the fictional location of the blockbuster HBO series (e.g. the *Radio Times* interview), class instructors should perhaps be wary of recommending this picture as a credible representation of Shakespeare's play and medieval Scotland. Or perhaps a "pinch of Westeros" does not threaten the authenticity of Scotland? In what follows an attempt will be made to address this question. First, some general notions on translation and adaptation will be presented, to be subsequently applied in the analyses of selected aspects of *Macbeth*.

2. Adaptation as Translation

In his seminal paper "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" Roman Jakobson distinguished the category of intersemiotic translation or transmutation (next to interlingual and intralingual translation), defining it as "interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems" (233). Although not very precise as it stands, this definition opens the possibility of applying translation studies methodology to the analysis of films as adaptations of literary works, an example of which is a film based on a play. The parallels and differences between interlingual and intersemiotic translation should be carefully considered before any further claims are ventured. Naturally, the use of the cinematic mode of presentation itself requires making creative decisions about issues which are not specified in literary texts, such as casting specific actors, intricacies of camerawork, light, etc. Stam is therefore right to observe that "the myth of facility," according to which "the director merely films what's there" (2005, 7) is ill-founded, since many elements are simply not "there" and others need to be creatively transformed to fit the visual medium. Intersemiotic translation is definitely much less restrained by the form of the original than interlingual translation and involves greater responsibility for the final outcome on the part of the filmmakers. That said, it should be kept in mind that the parallel between the two types of translation still holds, as the interlingual translator does not merely translate "what's there" either. According to Venuti (90), both translations and adaptations are "second order creations," and the relation between them and their source texts should be seen as hermeneutical.

Jakobson's tersely formulated definition of intersemiotic translation was developed by Aguiar and Queiroz, who incorporated into it Charles S. Peirce's

concept of a semiotic triad, in which a sign relation is explained in terms of three elements: a sign, its subject matter, referred to as object, and its effect, referred to as interpretant. On one of the possible readings of the sign relation applied to intersemiotic translation, sign is identified with the target text, object with the source text and interpretant with the effect exerted by the target text upon the audience. In this model, then, the relation between the adaptation and the original is construed in mentalistic terms, as it arises as part of the recipient's (a viewer's or a critic's) interpretation of both works. This kind of perspective appears to be the most promising in adaptation analysis and is represented by the two approaches presented below.

One of the most systematic accounts of adaptations applying translation studies methodology has been offered by Lawrence Venuti, according to whom the most important analogy between translation and adaptation is that both are decontextualised and then recontextualised. In the case of adapting a written text to a visual medium, however, these processes have to allow for a greater number of elements constituting the final product (mise-en-scène, directing, acting styles, music, etc.). The many dimensions of filmmaking require decisions on issues which are neither specified nor even capable of being inferred from the text (90).

The notion which is crucial for accounting for the relation between an adaptation and the original is that of an interpretant, a term overlapping in meaning albeit not synonymous with the one introduced by Peirce. Here it is defined as a category that mediates the interpretation process between the source and the target. Venuti distinguishes two kinds of interpretants: formal and thematic, with the former being involved in establishing a relation of equivalence in the content, genre and style and the latter corresponding to codes, values and ideologies that filmmakers may highlight or confront in their communication with an audience (95). Applying the notion of interpretants, the analyst focuses on shifts, additions, omissions and other elements that mark the difference between the original and the adaptation. An illustrative example relevant for the present consideration is that of Franco Zeffirelli's adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), in which among the omitted elements were the servants' dialogue about violence in love and sex, and a fragment of Romeo's text in which he reveals his interest in the physical side of love. On the other hand, the characters' eroticism is portrayed through their costumes and a particular manner of taking the shot. According to Venuti, these omissions and shifts point to a thematic interpretant by virtue of which heterosexual love is idealised and romanticised, and so is Romeo and his attitude to Juliet. The filmmakers' decisions are thus not mere alterations of the original play but carefully thought-out moves resulting from the need to recontextualise the story of Romeo and Juliet's relationship in a way consistent with their vision.

The approach to translation developed by Ernst-August Gutt has not been so far extensively applied to adaptation analysis. Drawing on methodology proposed within relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson), Gutt suggests that the relation

between the translation and the original can be captured in terms of interpretive resemblance. This notion was originally put forward with the view to accounting for all uses of language based on resemblance relations, such as – among others – various kinds of quotations. Like quotations, translations can bear different degrees of resemblance to the original utterance. Indirect quotations do not reproduce the exact form of the original message, yet they can be used to communicate the same message effectively. Within the relevance-theoretic framework, interpretive resemblance between utterances or texts is captured in terms of their shared implications, i.e. assumptions the hearer can mentally represent on their basis. Applying this concept to the source text–target text relation, Gutt claims that the translator intending to convey the same message to the target text audience as was communicated by the original produces a target text which preserves the explicatures and implicatures of the source text, where explicatures are understood as assumptions developed on the basis of the linguistic form of an utterance and implicatures are assumptions inferred from the text and context. On the strong reading of this postulate, all explicatures are rendered as explicatures and all implicatures are rendered as implicatures, without any shifts between them. As Gutt himself admits, such a strong expectation of preserving interpretive resemblance can rarely be fulfilled since it is generally impossible to guarantee that readers of different cultural background will arrive at the same implicit meaning of a text. A common practice is therefore to shift information from the implicit to the explicit level (less frequently the other way around; cf. also Vinay and Darbelnet). On the weaker version of the postulate, which seems much more plausible to attain, the expectation is that “the sum total of the explicatures and implicatures of the translation must equal the sum total of the explicatures and implicatures of the original” (Gutt 100). As will be shown below, many of the differences between the original and adaptation can be straightforwardly accounted for as shifts between the explicit and implicit content.

3. *Macbeth*: Interpretants and Interpretive Resemblance

In this section three aspects of the film will be analysed with respect to its hermeneutic relation to the play, namely selected decisions inherent in filmmaking for which there is no basis in the literary text, addition of a scene and an alteration within a well-known element of a plot. The methodology presented in the previous section – the notion of interpretant and the sum total of explicatures and implicatures will be employed in the analysis below.

Decisions which have to be made by filmmakers on a fairly arbitrary basis concern all the visual elements, many of which are scarcely described in stage directions or not described at all. As was mentioned before, *Macbeth* was filmed in Scotland, among the raw beauty of Isle of Skye landscapes, the choice of location

therefore can be seen as neutral, as it does not steer the interpretation away from “the Scottish play.” An interesting element of *mise-en-scène* is Inverness Castle, presented as a wooden building of modest size located on muddy ground, which stands in stark contrast to the magnificent royal Dunsinane Castle shown later. Considered as a formal interpretant, this contrast can be taken to emphasise the difference between Macbeth’s position as Thane of Glamis (later of Cawdor) and as King of Scotland, thereby providing a psychologically credible explanation for his greed, ambition and ability to kill Duncan. Only a psychopath does not need any motivation to kill; Macbeth is not one as is evidenced by this monologue, in which he scrutinises Duncan’s personality and rule, as well as his own attitude:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
 Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
 Who should against his murderer shut the door,
 Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
 Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
 So clear in his great office, that his virtues
 Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu’d, against
 The deep damnation of his taking-off;
 And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
 Striding the blast, or heaven’s cherubin, hors’d
 Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
 Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
 That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
 To prick the sides of my intent, but only
 Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself
 And falls on th’ other. (Act 1, scene 7)

Using relevance-theoretic terminology, it can be stated that the magnitude of Macbeth’s social promotion from thane to king is part of the implicit import of the original play. Learning from Macbeth’s words about his doubts and ambition, the reader is encouraged to think that the temptation must have been huge, and that it was the decisive factor that made the protagonist a murderer. The visual contrast between his place of living as thane and his royal seat communicates this assumption explicitly – not only is the viewer encouraged to imagine this difference, but they are given direct evidence of the material property Macbeth gained by becoming King of Scotland.

Another minor visual element closely connected to the previously discussed one is the appearance of the three witches, who look like ordinary peasants rather than practitioners of magic. In other words, there is nothing (or little) in their appearance that would suggest their supernatural power. This in turn can be treated as a thematic interpretant used in order to undermine their credentials, so to speak, as prophets who can foretell the protagonist’s future, in this way shifting the burden of responsibility for murder on Macbeth and his wife.

The opening scene shows Macbeth and his wife at the funeral of a child that was a few years old. As is known, the play does not provide any explicit information about their deceased children. On the other hand, all the other protagonists playing significant roles in the plot do have children whose presence is also significant – Banquo's son Fleance was supposed to have been killed with his father, Duncan's sons fled to England and Ireland following their father's murder, and Macduff's children were slaughtered on Macbeth's order. The fact that nothing in the play is said about Macbeth and his wife's children can be treated as an example of "thematic silence" (Kurzon), i.e. withdrawing information about a specific state of affairs which would be highly relevant if communicated. It can be thus hypothesised that if the opening scene is treated as a thematic interpretant, it strengthens the implicit assumption that the protagonists, like numerous other rulers in the Middle Ages, hoped for their dynasty to survive. This interpretant may be seen as indicating that the filmmakers adopted the perspective of historical realism in their production.

Considering Lady Macbeth's obsession with denying her femininity, revealed in the fragment below:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here;
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. (Act 1, Scene 5)

the opening scene can also be analysed as a formal interpretant, on the assumption that this monologue encourages the reader to infer that Lady Macbeth's obsessive behaviour is caused by the loss of a child in the past. Then, this inference would be realised on the explicit level in the film, constituting the instance of a shift between implicit and explicit communication rather than addition.

The last fragment to be analysed here concerns what is perhaps the best remembered fragment of *Macbeth*, namely the fulfilment of the witches' prophecy:

Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane Hill
Shall come against him. (Act 4, Scene 1)

The original stage directions at the beginning of Act V, Scene 6, announce the arrival of "Malcolm, Siward, Macduff, and their Army, with boughs." The filmmakers

chose to portray this scene differently – the woods are set on fire and wind blows the ashes towards Dunsinane hill, a great alteration as it might seem at first glance. When approached as a formal interpretant, it provides equivalence with the original, by playing the role of a military trick that led to the downfall of Macbeth. Besides, using fire in this scene may be motivated by the need to provide coherence in the movie plot: fire appears on the screen several times, e.g. in the funeral scene and in the scene when Lady Macduff and her children are killed. For a contemporary viewer even superficially familiar with medieval war tactics, burning woods presents a more convincing image than an army of warriors hiding behind boughs. Thus, if treated as a thematic interpretant, the scene can again be seen as a factor highlighting the filmmakers' intention to stick to historical authenticity. In relevance-theoretic terms the relation between the original scene and that deployed in the adaptation can be explained as two different visual images prompting the same inference in the audience, namely that Macbeth was finally outwitted by a trick performed on him, and – as I am inclined to think – that words should not always be understood in their literal sense.

4. Conclusion

This article has addressed the issues of how representative the image of Scotland presented in Justin Kurzel's adaptation of *Macbeth* is for the real Scotland of the Middle Ages and how it corresponds with the original play. Scotland so understood is not only a geographical location, but primarily a medieval state troubled with dynastic fights spurred by ambition and desire to eliminate pretenders from other clans. Although some of the filmmakers' decisions may appear as departures from the original play, possibly motivated by the need to highlight similarity to popular productions such as *Game of Thrones*, a closer analysis indicates that the various additions and alterations play the role of formal and thematic interpretants in the adaptation. Especially significant is the observation made in the analysis that what was considered as thematic interpretants, i.e. the addition of the funeral scene and replacing the army with boughs by fire, points to the filmmakers' intention to enhance the historical credibility of the adaptation. Taking a relevance-oriented stance on the role of interpretants it can be concluded that they tend to mark shifts between implicit and explicit import of the play rather than introduce genuine alterations. Despite superficial differences, this version of *Macbeth* can be said to meet the widespread expectation of realism and fidelity to the original. As was underscored, the perspective adopted in this analysis is that of a viewer and her interpretation of the relation between the play and its adaptation. Needless to say, other viewers may have different interpretations.

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