
Cinema is a Video Clip on the Internet

Liz Tabish, *A Cinematic Translation of Shakespearean Tragedies*, 2008

<http://www.youtube.com/user/BettyFilms?feature=watch>

Reviewed by **Anna Maria Cimitile**

[T]he past as absolute future.

Jacques Derrida

Liz Tabish's *A Cinematic Translation of Shakespearean Tragedies* (2008) is a series of six short films, each reinventing a Shakespearean tragedy according to a film genre. The films can be viewed on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/user/BettyFilms?feature=watch>), in accordance with the recent trend, spreading among short films directors, to publish work on the web (on this fashion, see Killian Fox, "The Best Short Films on the Web", 19 December 2010, *guardian.co.uk*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/dec/19/short-films-documentary-animation-viral>). The work originated as a student research project in Film Theory on "metaphor and cinematic montage" at university; the main idea was to "combine film genre with Shakespeare's tragedies" (Liz Tabish, email to the author, 20 August 2010). One short, *Romeo & Juliet: A Film Noir*, was shown at the 2008 deadCENTER Film Festival in Oklahoma City.

The subtitles of the films announce the genres chosen for the 'translation':

Othello: A Silent Film

Romeo & Juliet: A Film Noir

Macbeth: A Horror Film

Hamlet: A Classical Hollywood Motion Picture

Julius Caesar: A Surrealist Film

Antony & Cleopatra: A Cult Musical

From the silent film of *Othello* to the noir of *Romeo & Juliet* to the cult musical of *Antony & Cleopatra*, the six films all emulate the feature length film, even if each only lasts 4 or 5 minutes – the duration of a music video. In the translation to cinematic genres, the tragedies lose their most distinguishing feature, what generally scholars, theatre-goers and readers alike agree to consider the real stuff of Shakespeare: its language. In fact, with the exception of *Othello: A Silent Film* – which is, despite the subtitle (or rather, because of it), the only one to retain fragments of Shakespeare's verse, in the form of title cards inserted between one shot and the next – the films completely cut out language. We are only briefly reminded of it when, in the film of *Macbeth*, there are overlapped, quick close up shots of a mouth moving as if speaking – an apt cinematic reinvention of the second set of the witches' prophecies. In all the shorts, Shakespeare's language is replaced by soundtracks, one song for each film, playing to the end and lasting the length of the film from opening titles to credits, so that the films could really be seen as music videos, secondary material for the promotion of the music product.

Indeed, in some shorts the cinematic translation of the Shakespearean tragedy seems to be the apposite visual version of the story told in the song: this is the case of *Romeo & Juliet: A Film Noir*'s story of interracial love with respect to Tom Waits's *Alice* and of *Othello: A Silent Film* with respect to Rufus Wainwright's *Evil Angel*. But even in the other films interesting, if less evident, connections between song and story are produced, from *Hamlet*'s story-in-yellow of Ophelia with the Cure's *Charlotte Sometimes* to *Antony & Cleopatra*'s story of glam-rockers he-Cleopatra and Antony with Brian Eno's *Baby's on Fire*. Even when the resonance between the Shakespeare story and the song is not evident or there is no immediate connection between the lyrics and the playtext, the soundtrack contributes to the translation of Shakespeare. In the case of *Macbeth: A Horror Film*, Radiohead's *Paperbag Writer's* uncanny, introductory instrumental part and the rhythm of the song as a whole are a perfect match for the fast motion shots of the film; together with the latter, the song offers an apt rendering of the plot – made of encounters with witches and bloody assassinations, repetitive to the point of madness – of *Macbeth*. In some cases, the resonance of image, sound and the Shakespearean story is of a more undefinable nature, which opens up to the subtle play of intertextuality; in one case, the Shakespearean language actually re-enters the film by way of an uncanny and surprising 'de-tour'. Tom Waits's *Alice* tells of an obsessive, inappropriate love (that of nineteenth-century writer Lewis Carroll for young Alice Liddell) whose resonance with the Shakespearean story of the two "star cross'd lovers" is produced by some suggestive phrases in the lyrics. "I disappear in your name", "a secret kiss", or even "I will think of this / When I'm dead in my grave" are intriguingly evocative of the textual and metaphorical space of *Romeo and Juliet*, in a song that may also recall, for the ear familiar with the Shakespearean texts, *The Tempest*. The choice of songs and singers opens to intertextuality by way of other, longer 'de-tours': Tom Waits is the author and singer of *Romeo Is Bleeding*, which is contained in the album *Blue Valentine*, where he also sings *Somewhere* from Robert Wise's 1961 film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story*; and Rufus Wainwright features in Burt Bacharach's *Go Ask Shakespeare*, a song that beside the title contains reformulated lines from Shakespeare.

Partly due to the project of experimenting with genres, Tabish's shorts abound in echoes and resonances, mainly from classic films although not exclusively from those: if *Othello: A Silent Film* evokes Dmitri Buchowetzki's silent *Othello* of 1922 (only consider the way the Iago figure pays homage to Werner Krauss, who played in the same role in that film), *Macbeth* bears some resemblance to the 2003 official video of the soundtrack song. Originality not being the stake or goal here, the films cast Shakespeare into the present by placing it across different genres, media and aesthetics (cinema, the music video, the film trailer, the internet upload) and by delving into the archive of cinema and its 're-membrances' (adaptations and the genre film). Shakespeare is in the present as reinvented past, but its pastness is displaced as it is made coincide with cinema's past, in/as the future of early modernity. As subject matter, it gets reinvented in the encounter with the genres

of the filmic transpositions and with the lyrics as well as the music videos of the songs; at the same time, the passé feel of the genre film makes the ‘actualization’ of a peculiar type, increasing our awareness of a polychronic Shakespeare in the sense given by Katherine Rowe in her discussion of a multimedia Shakespeare (“‘Remember Me’: Technologies of Memory in Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet*”, 2003) or by Jonathan Gil Harris with reference to the early modern material culture (“The Smell of *Macbeth*”, 2007; *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*, 2009).

Tabish’s translations of Shakespeare are silent films for the present era. They bring the era of early cinema into the present – they all do, from the “silent film” of *Otello* to the equally ‘silent’ “cult musical” of *Antony & Cleopatra* – or, which is the same, they cast the present in the old speechless world of... ‘new’ silent films. The resulting Shakespeare happens here and now – but this present is polychronic too – in a move that is at the same time retro (looking back to old film genres) and up-to-date (using YouTube as a vehicle for cinema, contributing to the reciprocal redefinition of their aesthetics), producing a multiple time/space for the adapted Shakespeare texts; “here and now” gets deeply affected by that looking into the dark backward and... surface of old/new media.

The horror film of *Macbeth* and the surrealist *Julius Caesar* are, in my opinion, the best in translating, in the new medium and genre, the Shakespearean tragedies. More specifically, there is one shared feature which contributes to this: in both films, the characters look straight into the camera, as if they were addressing the audience, and in so doing they bring us into their reality, making us feel interpellated in a more direct way by the tragic events and the ethical questions the playtexts raise. In *Macbeth*, moreover, it is as if the place of the audience coincided with Macbeth’s place and with the camera spot. This is a black and white film, where red is the only colour, used to highlight the blood spots on the blade and Lady Macbeth’s hands. The setting is a path in the forest, which comes our direction; the dagger hangs mid-air in the foreground, almost as if it were there for our exclusive, not for any character’s, gaze; apparitions look at us, and Lady Macbeth runs up the path and away from us as she madly rubs her bloody hands, only to turn our way again and again, showing us the proof of her guilt. Like the witches, Lady Macbeth looks towards us with her face-mask. In a similar way, in *Julius Caesar* the Romans, who wear animal masks, also look at us as they advance towards the camera/the audience/their victim. Indeed, the gaze from masks is the most disturbing and the most engaging for audiences.

I wish to conclude with one last remark on *Julius Caesar*; in the colour film we get a glimpse of the contemporary, small and somewhat desolate American town suburb; this is disturbingly inhabited by the figures in white Roman tunics and wearing masks, who, besides evoking the men-animals of surrealist taste (only think of Jean Cocteau’s films), also resonate with Hobbes’s *homo homini lupus* and makes me think of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. The feral citizens of Rome are here; the news they bring from the past is that the time is forever out of joint.



Fig. 1: Liz Tabish, *Macbeth: A Horror Film*. Still captured by the author from the dvd, *A Cinematic Translation of Shakespearean Tragedies*. Courtesy of the artist.