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King Lear's Filmic Adaptation: A Chaos?

Flamejada pelo rastro coruscante de seu Anjo instigador, a tradução criativa, possuída de demonismo, não é piedosa nem memorial: ela intenta, no limite, a rasura da origem: a obliteração do original. Essa desmemória parricida chamarei "translucificação." (Campos 209)¹

A wandering barefoot mad old man, in rags, with fixed eyes, slowly leaves the burning castle carpeted with corpses. In a trance, after having survived miraculously, Hidetora, the Medieval Lord, left alone by his family, divides his sons' troops as Moses had done with the Red Sea. The spectral figure is silently observed. This impressive and almost silent image of hell is explicitly visualized in Akira Kurosawa's film, *Ran* (1985), an actual sign of what its title means in Japanese: chaos. This sequence of scenes, accompanied only by a dirge-like music, but pervaded by incredible violence, had been foreseen by the film author many years before, after the 1923 earthquake that devastated Tokyo. In his autobiography, Kurosawa tells us about "every kind of corpse imaginable amid this expanse of nauseating redness ... corpses charred black, half-burned ... in gutters, ... floating in rivers, ... piled up on bridges, ... blocking off a whole street at an intersection" (52). The same sequence is also described in his screenplay for the film. As a matter of fact, the filmmaker suggests that "a terrible scroll of Hell is shown depicting the fall of the castle" and that "there are no real sounds as the scroll unfolds like a daytime nightmare. It is a scene of human evil-doing, the way the demonic Ashura, as seen by a Buddha in tears" (52). The same image of Buddha is unfolded under the last dark reddish light of dusk, at the end of the film, as if to display Kurosawa's contemporary outlook: a visual discourse about isolation and defeat (Prince 288). To many, the pessimism that permeates the film is a consequence of an even more tragic adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. However, on talking about his film, Kurosawa showed that, by contrast

1 "Enflamed by the glittering trace of its inciting Angel, creative translation — possessed by a demonic force — is neither pious nor memorable: ultimately, it intends to break from the source: it is the obliteration of the original. I call this parricidal dis-memory 'translucification'" (translation R. Delcheva).

with his hero, Shakespeare's Lear is simply a fool, a man "more sinned against than sinning," while Hidetora is "continually haunted by his own acts of violence that rise up about him like phantoms" (286). According to the old concept of translation, Kurosawa's film cannot be considered a good translation. It does not remain faithful to the original: not only because the two men possess different pasts, but also because there are many other deviations in Kurosawa's adaptation. Instead of Lear's three daughters, the Japanese lord has three sons; instead of the treachery by an illegitimate son in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the treacherous figure in *Ran* is Hidetora's revengeful daughter-in-law, Kaede.

However, during the last decade, the concept of translation has changed, in the attempt to meet the requirements of a changing environment in which not only language, but also culture, history, and ideology are said to transgress from one text to another. An outstanding figure in this line of thought is André Lefevere, author of several books and numerous articles on translation theory, genre, and literary theories which he believes to be intimately related. He not only inverts the unidirectional vision of the role of translation as a modelling force, but also emphasizes the role of the reception context in the construction of texts and foreign cultures. Furthermore, he makes prominent the role of translation in the creation of a translinguistic and transcultural canon. "In other words," he claims, "translations, produced within the ideological and poetological limits of the target culture, create images of the source" and "also have a translational effect of retroversion when they create canons," hence their bidirectional nature (qtd. in Vieira 128).

One of the most important concepts used by Lefevere is the concept of refraction:² the adaptation of a text to a different audience with the purpose of influencing the way people read the literary work.³ According to him, refractions play an important role in literary evolution, for "writers and their work are always understood and conceived ... or ... refracted through a certain spectrum, just as their work itself can refract previous works through a certain spectrum" (1982, 4). If we assume that texts exist beyond their unique and sacred form and if the spectrum that refracts these forms is described, we can have a basis for a prolific study. Consequently, regulating inter- and extratext elements must be taken into account; meaning becomes the least important element in any analysis,

2 Later Lefevere replaced this term by re-writing. The term refraction is an adequate one because it expresses the idea of the mirror representation of the original. In Lefevere's definition, *Ran* can be seen as a refraction, a translation of a play into another medium, the cinema.

3 Lefevere argues that refraction is a fact, a phenomenon that happens, and that it manifests itself not only in translations but also in many other forms such as criticism, commentary, historiography, teaching, anthologies, as well as children's literature, cartoons, comic strip, filmic versions, television series, etc.

since priority is given to the intrinsic and extrinsic factors which produce it. It is by studying these conditions that a theoretical analysis may operate.

This paper is an attempt to analyse Akira Kurosawa's film, *Ran*, as a refraction, taking into consideration some aspects as modelling forces. First, I will analyse the manner in which the author and refractor⁴ (Shakespeare and Kurosawa, respectively) affect the final product, i.e., the film as a translated text. Secondly, I will concentrate on patronage as another modelling force, and the effect it produces on the original.

According to Lefevere (1992), refractors can repress certain works which go against the predominant vision of what literature must be — poetics, or of what society must be — ideology. But often they try to adapt the work of art so that it corresponds to the poetics and/or ideology of their age. The production of *Ran* can be seen from this perspective. It represents an English Renaissance play "refracted" in order to suit twentieth-century moviegoers. Although it is classified as a *jidaigeki*,⁵ one of the major genres in Japanese cinema, the film owes much to American films, especially to Westerns. *Ran* is inspired by Kurosawa's research on Medieval Japanese history. As Prince points out, "He became fascinated by a war-lord reputed to have three excellent sons and wondered what would have happened if they had been, instead, bad" (284). The film is a chronicle of lust for power, betrayal of the father by his sons, wars, and murders.

In order to adapt the Renaissance English play to correspond to Japanese poetics, Kurosawa introduced many of the stylized qualities of the Noh play in his film.⁶ We may claim that the filmmaker has naturalized the play, instead of transliterating it.⁷ The opening shots evoke the Noh: the "sacred area" appears in the form of an enclosure built around Hidetora Ichimondi's hunting party. Inside, there are the Lord, his Fool, the three sons and the guests. The Noh-like aspect is emphasized by some actors' mask-like make-up and by the Fool's comic dance. Some episodes common for any Noh play appear in *Ran*. The flute played by Tsumuramu, who wears a Noh costume when Hidetora enters his hut,

4 Lefevere refers to refractors as those who refract any work of art. Interpreters, critics, revisers, literature teachers, filmmakers, theatre directors, are all considered to be refractors; briefly all these people who act as translators in the broad sense of the word.

5 A Japanese film genre which is set in the past and deals with the fortunes of lords and samurai.

6 The Noh play is a Japanese lyrical drama with its material often drawn from Buddhist scriptures and its form from the temple ritual dances. It is a drama of soliloquy and reminiscence and, unlike Western drama, it has no development through conflict. For a thorough study of *Ran* as a Noh play, see Collick, Chapters 7 and 8.

7 These terms are used by Lefevere to explain the procedures which either create exotic images by keeping the translated text very close to the foreign culture (transliteration), or make the work more comprehensible by changing the text in order to make it closer to the reception culture (naturalization).

is a reference to Atsumori, a Noh warrior in whom the ghost of a samurai is disguised as the flute-playing reaper. In addition, the motif of a woman driven to madness by her unfulfilled desires is found in Lady Kaede. Finally, there is some association of the Fool with a comic Noh figure whose dance is used to exorcise visiting gods: when the mad Hidetora sees an imaginary Army, the Fool, dancing and singing a Noh song, mocks him.

But what about the force of the original text? In which way has Shakespeare affected Kurosawa's process of creation in *Ran*? We cannot answer these questions unless we know a lot about Japan, its history, and its process of Westernization. In previous times, Japan was structured according to Confucian models which began to break when provincial families challenged and replaced the official Court. At that time the figures of the Samurai and his Lord were brought into the footlights of the power struggle and it was in that society that the Japanese theatre began and the Noh came into being. In that culture, a true Japanese hero was the one who was faithful to his ideals, to his Lord, and to the symbolic figure of the Emperor. In the early nineteenth century, the first references to Shakespeare appeared. At that time, some actual refractions of Shakespeare emerged: some quotations from his plays in Japanese books and anthologies, a *kabuki*⁸ play reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*, etc. One of the prominent refractions was the adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, into a play by Jono Saigiku called *Three Daughters*, set and performed in Osaka in 1892, just after the inauguration of the new Parliament. The coming into being of these refractions coincided with Japan finding itself a backward nation amidst an industrialized world. The country began to react, firstly by becoming able to build up military strength capable of repelling any invaders, then by trying to create a national identity. Simultaneously, Japanese society, anxious to get rid of its past, began its way toward learning about and adopting the ways of the West. Westernism was a goal toward which Japan had to move in order to take its place among the other nations of the world. This partially explains the Japanese tendency to incorporate Shakespeare's writings into its culture. But it was only with the opening up of Japan's borders that Shakespeare became part of the intellectual and cultural revolution. In order to create a modern, yet Japanese society, there were great changes that left the young generation torn between traditional culture, heavily tied to Confucianism and Emperor worship, and what they felt to be the radical

8 The kabuki play is the popular theatre of Japan, as opposed to the aristocratic Noh play. It combines the three main theatrical arts: singing, dancing, and acting, "allied to a virtuosity, particularly in the playing of female parts, by highly trained actors, who, unlike the Noh actors, are not masked. Many kabuki versions of Shakespeare's plays have been presented. It is almost uncanny how masterpieces of the Western theatre could be adapted so faithfully and so vividly into a traditional Japanese theatrical form which took shape during the same age as Shakespeare's. This is an excellent example of the type of mutual illumination that occurs when different cultures meet" (Toru).

potentiality of Shakespeare: individualism and a non-community oriented system of morality with emphasis on self-reliance and personal action. In fact, some nineteenth-century intellectuals used Shakespeare's plays to tackle questions of Japan's identity, but were able to read Western culture according to their own codes of meaning without interference from colonial ideology. In this century, however, political impotence and the search for social fulfillments have been expressed in existential and psychological terms, and Shakespeare's popularity has been replaced by more introspective writings (Collick).

It is important to consider the political atmosphere prior to 1945 because it coloured Kurosawa's career and beliefs. After the war, the Confucian values had gone for good and there was nothing to replace them with. The post-war young generation in Japan found themselves caught in a dilemma similar to their nineteenth-century predecessors. Although more university places were made available for Japanese students and it was expected that Japan had taken its own way, the gap between English, American, and Japanese approaches to Shakespeare had narrowed. The experimental translations of Shakespeare made in the seventies can be viewed not only as an attempt to create a contemporary Shakespeare, but also as a political act. Yet, Shakespeare never recovered the popularity of previous times. In "the case of Kurosawa, his education and experience of foreign writers occurred during the uncertain pre-war period and still carried ... revolutionary associations.... Nevertheless, the political situation in the fifties had a profound effect on the films he produced, even if the standard approach to Shakespeare at that time was infinitely less original and dynamic than his own" (Collick 165). *Ran* represents Kurosawa's attempt to venerate orthodox Japanese culture and at the same time to pay his homage to the foreigner.

So far, we have considered some of the forces which are capable of affecting both the product of refraction and the so called "original" text. Now we shift our emphasis to another force, which Lefevere (1992) refers to as "patronage."⁹ It represents a force which either hinders or helps literature to grow. With the disappearance of *jidaigeki* due to television and the autocratic practices of company producers who forced directors to keep on producing the very dated *yakusa*,¹⁰ most directors fled their companies whose only interest was in the box-office success of the films. Even Japan's finest directors were forced to look outside their companies, even outside the country for financing (Richie 79-80). Given the reluctance of Japanese studios to finance expensive projects, *Ran*, a film Kurosawa had long wanted to make but was not sure he ever would, became

9 According to Lefevere, patronage, in analogy to the Renaissance patronage, is represented by powers (persons or institutions) that, because of status, economic or ideological reasons, hinder or help readings, writings, or re-writings.

10 *Yakusa* is another genre of Japanese cinema where the heroes are models of submission who have to sacrifice individual desires for the sake of the group. The message inherent in the ritualistic *yakusa* film became of less relevance with the rise of a more permissive and more affluent younger audience.

an international co-production. It was perhaps this status of a co-production that allowed the film to retain its independent message and transgress the restrictive demands of the dominant genre. Despite the inevitable "foreign" connection, Kurosawa's project as a specific undertaking is influenced by an immediate social challenge: "the cataclysm of the Second World War and the general cultural upheavals that precipitated it. These events are of central importance to Kurosawa's cinema, where they are revealed, transformed, in and by visual form and narrative style" (Prince xvii). *Ran* represents a radically new aesthetic structure, either by having been financed by foreign sources or by belonging to a different phase in Kurosawa's career, characterized by a tone of despair and renunciation. "The man whose films once proclaimed that willpower could cure all human ailments, now professes that the world is impervious to reform and the artist shackled in his ... ability to compel such change" (289).

Because the film reflects the age of its author and the constraints of an Oriental culture, where tragedy does not have a place, it also has to undergo change in terms of genre. Following Patrick Cattrysse's terminology, Kurosawa made his film as an "innovative" translation, that is, one which could not keep the genre of its original and be transformed into a historical film.

I hope I have answered at least some of the questions asked earlier. Moreover I hope I have subscribed to the bi-directional nature of refractions by showing that Kurosawa's *Ran* simultaneously helped create a contemporary image of Shakespeare's play and hinted at much of Japanese culture. Like any creative translation, as seen by Haroldo de Campos, *Ran* forgets its origin and, leaving a flaming vestige behind, transfigures into an illuminating "other." The vestige is the Shakespeare's play; the other is the new demonic film that arises.

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Orphée à l'écran: Un défi représentatif

"Un film est une source pétrifiante de la pensée. Un film ressuscite les actes morts. Un film permet de donner l'apparence de la réalité à l'irréel" (Cocteau 1989, 70). Dans le cycle orphique de Cocteau, la réalité se subordonne à une esthétique de l'irréel qui s'exprime plus par la représentation et l'imagination que par l'observation du vraisemblable. À en croire le poète du *Testament d'Orphée*, "l'irréel" serait ce qui "déborde nos pauvres limites" (70). Aucun personnage ne fut plus apte à illustrer le dépassement des limites qu'Orphée qui en 1927 donna naissance à la pièce de théâtre, une vingtaine d'années plus tard au film du même nom et enfin en 1960 à un second film: *Le Testament d'Orphée*.¹ Au cours de cet article, nous nous attardons essentiellement sur les aspects de la représentation visuelle qui illustrent l'irréalité du mythe orphique chez Cocteau.

Déjà en 1927, la théâtralisation se joue du mythe classique et du vraisemblable pour se lancer dans l'innovation des techniques de représentation. Ainsi beaucoup de signes visuels forment un système autonome indépendant de l'ensemble du texte. Heurtebise volant dans les airs, grâce à un escabeau dissimulé derrière un portant, Eurydice disparaissant dans une trappe ou la tête d'Orphée tranchée par les Bacchantes qui continuent son discours ... autant de signes qui visent à légitimer l'impossible. Outre les machines volantes, les machines à piège ou la "machine parlante rendant des oracles comme le cheval" (Bory 82), les objets les plus familiers "ont un air suspect" (Cocteau 1927, 14): les gants protègent contre l'insensibilité de la mort, les miroirs se transforment en portes, des statues en personnages, un fil et une colombe en attributs mortuaires... Détourné de son emploi premier, l'objet théâtral subvertit son référent réel. Effaçant cette utilité référentielle et vraisemblable, il s'empare d'emblée d'un statut *figuratif* tant et si bien que les signes culturellement codés — par exemple la colombe pour le Saint-Esprit, les fils des Parques pour la mort — se posent dans un contexte qui leur est non familier, voire étrange.

- 1 On se rappelle aussi l'idée excentrique du départ: Cocteau désirait mettre en scène une histoire biblique sur la naissance de Jésus. En gros, l'histoire fut celle de Marie, Joseph et de leur ange-gardien, chassés par des villageois en colère qui appréhendaient la naissance particulière dont ils seront témoins. Quelques traces de ce projet de départ restent visibles: Marie et Joseph remplacés par Eurydice et Orphée, l'ange Heurtebise et enfin les villageois représentés par une troupe de Bacchantes dans la pièce de 27 ou par une avant-garde hostile dans le film de 50.