Tennessee Williams and the Hollywood Film

Zoltán Dragon

Introduction

A strange skeleton appears in the film version of *Suddenly Last Summer* (directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, adapted from the drama by Williams himself with the help of Gore Vidal). This skeleton is not present in the "source text," and its filmic presence can be regarded as a kind of manifestation of lack: nobody notices it, even though it appears at significant places and in significant moments. Moreover, in an environment that is evidently heterogeneous to its existence, it is obviously "out of place." It becomes an uncanny presence that may even be seen as an insignificant problem; however, it subverts both the mechanism of representation in the film and the general and canonized views concerning the discourse of the adaptation of drama to film. The adaptation of drama to film is, for most critics, absolutely unproblematic, or even self-evident and "natural" (Hayward 4).

However, this strange skeleton appears in a place and manner it should not—at least if one adopts the views advocated by the governing trend in the discourse on adaptation. Its appearance annihilates the strict categories of "fidelity criticism" that evaluate each and every film adaptation according to its being closer to or farther from the "original" text: preserving its status or violating its sacred message (McFarlane 8-9). The skeleton points at a transgression of the rigid and ideologically loaded categories: it discloses a moment of transgression, resulting in a break which exists not merely between two texts, since its power is more radical; and as a result of the transgression of two media a "medial break" becomes visible. However, it is in the interest of both the ideology of representation and the institution of the critical-theoretical discourse on adaptation to cover or hide this break.

Nonetheless a question arises regarding the appearance of the strange skeleton. If the concealing or hiding mechanism of ideology worked effectively up to that crucial point, how did this uncanny skeleton enter the visible register which—to make it more uncanny—is not present at its own origin? Insofar, of course, that we can talk about "origin" or "source" in the present context, which is a point I wish to deconstruct here, via the trope of the skeleton. What does the presence of this skeleton mean? Where does it come from, and what is its aim? Similar questions will be raised and tackled in connection with another example of adaptation in the Williams oeuvre, *The Night of the Iguana*, where the focus falls upon the enigmatic lizard of the title that curiously disappears in the drama, only to appear, as it were, in the film. (When it is mentioned, it is put off-stage, out of view.)

In what follows I will attempt to offer an alternative theoretical and, indeed, practical way to discuss film adaptations of dramatic texts. More precisely, I wish to prove that the film adaptation and the dramatic text on which it is based are simultaneously present due to the medial break, which postulates an intertextual and intermedial space in which there is a possibility to analyze the two texts via their dialogue. My aim is far from providing a rigorous system for such an analysis based on the assumptions of either one of the theoretical discourses (be it filmic or literary). Rather, I wish to lay down the basis of a flexible, or even "adaptable" theoretical framework beyond the rigidity of fidelity criticism.

The Context of Adaptation Theory

As Christopher Orr notes, "The concern with the fidelity of the adapted film in letter and spirit to its literary source has unquestionably dominated the discourse on adaptation" (qtd. in McFarlane 10). According to Robert Stam, "the notion of 'fidelity' is essentialist in relation to both media involved. First, it assumes that a novel "'contains' an extractable 'essence' ... hidden 'underneath' the surface details of style" (57). In other words, this approach takes the literary work as a closed entity, the role of which is to transmit a concrete and coherent message to the reader. However, it is a theoretical commonplace today that a text is far from being "closed": it is an open structure, an endless play of signification, and the act of reading is not a "cracking of the shell" to reach the meaningful kernel, but rather a volatile moment of contextualization.

Another question comes up here: to what should a film be faithful then? "Is the filmmaker to be faithful to the plot in its every detail?", Stam asks. It would lead to "a thirty-hour version of *War and Peace*" (57). Or should the filmmaker conform to the "intentions" of the author? According to Stam, this path would cause further problems, as

> Authors often mask their intentions for personal or psychoanalytic reasons or for external or censorious ones. An author's expressed intentions are not necessarily relevant, since literary critics warn us away from the "intentional fallacy," urging us to "trust the tale not the teller." The author, Proust taught us, is not necessarily a purposeful, self-present individual, but rather "un autre moi." Authors are sometimes not even aware of their own deepest intentions. How, then, can filmmakers be faithful to them? (57)

Instead of the century-old question of fidelity to the source or to the mythical origin of a film adaptation, Stam proposes an alternative model for the analysis of adaptation. He introduces the notion of "intertextual dialogism" into the critical discourse, completely shifting the focus to the texts (literary and filmic) themselves. As he explains, "every text forms an intersection of textual surfaces" as "all texts are tissues of anonymous formulae, variations of those formulae, conscious and unconscious quotations, and conflations and inversions of other texts" (64). In a Bakhtinian vein

Stam asserts that one should restrain oneself from limiting the concept to solely one medium, as texts in general are products of "the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated," and which is subject to the process of dissemination (64).

It is Stam's final theoretical remark that gives me the premise to embark on an alternative project in the discussion of adaptation—the adaptation of drama to film. He says that film adaptations are not only "a kind of multileveled negotiation of intertexts," but with the same token they are also "caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin" (66-67). This is what leads me to Tennessee Williams, and the question of adaptation as an intertextual and—perhaps more importantly—intermedial dialogue.

The Skeleton as the Remainder of the Transgressive Act of Adaptation

The first question that the skeleton, this strange and uncanny body (or more precisely this "ex-body" signifying the lack of a "proper" body) poses is, in fact, its own origin. This question is essential, since the dramatic text that could be regarded as the "origin" does not contain it or any trace of it, which is to say it appears as Real lack. So, what is it born of? If not of the drama, then is it possible that it was born of the difference between the drama and the film, that is, of the break or rupture which is there not only between film and literature, but also between narrative and drama? Or is it the "messenger" of the medial break that was formed in the moment of transgression?

My hypothesis is that as the origin of this skeleton cannot be located in the *Ur*-text, this bizarre apparition becomes the signifier of intermediality, which is the result of adaptation *as* transgression (the forming of the medial break), or even its visual, Imaginary or spectral excess. According to Michel Foucault, transgression is "a movement that aims at the borderline; it is on this narrow line that it appears as a flash, and it is perhaps also there that the whole of its trajectory may be seen, and its origin as well."[1] This phrasing sheds light on the essentially imaginary and visual nature of the moment of transgression: its appearance as a flash or spark reveals its origin. In the case of the skeleton, it can be argued that as a case of visual excess, it calls attention to its own origin that is, however, not the "source text."

The skeleton is not merely the Imaginary excess of the medial break, but it is also an appearance that hides this rupture. In the Lacanian system this is the *objet petit a*, the object whose nature is Imaginary but stands in the place of the Real, hiding the rupture resulting from the transgression of the Real into the Symbolic. In other words, the *objet petit a* is the messenger of the Real in an Imaginary form. As such, it is thus an uncanny object, which is basically an everyday object but, on account of its structural position, it is elevated to a distinguished status. It is strange, foreign and bizarre and, at the

very same time, known and desired; it is the uncanny or *unheimlich* in the Freudian sense of the word: this object is simultaneously both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*.

In this sense the appearance of the skeleton signifies the known (drama) in its unknown or uncanny (*defamiliarized*) form, in a way that covers the lack, i.e. the rupture between the two media--even if this covering or hiding is so dubious. It also means that the rationale for the fidelity critical approach becomes doubtful, since the question here is no longer whether the appearance of such an uncanny object makes the adaptation better or worse compared to the original text, but rather what this appearance does to adaptation. The appearance postulates an alternative system of relations, as it annihilates the categories of "primary" and "secondary" in relation to the texts under discussion: its origin is not the drama, neither can it be the adaptation.

In the film version of *Suddenly Last Summer*, which might be seen as a largely faithful adaptation of the drama in terms of fidelity criticism, a subjective point of view is inscribed into the texture of the film, which allows the spectator to spot the skeleton without directly calling attention to it. According to Walter Benjamin, this is characteristic of the *optical unconscious*: it allows us to see minute details which are forbidden to the naked eye (237). Therefore, we can say that the skeleton is the visual excess of the inscription of the camera, and of its subjective point of view. In this way the skeleton becomes the messenger of the rupture or traumatic Real kernel of the transgressive act of adaptation—hence its haunting effect.

This is the point where the issue of the medial break can be raised. In drama we do not have a point of view in the strict, narratological sense. In the film, however, everything is recorded by the camera-eye, which means that a point of view is inscribed, causing a rupture, which is the very origin of the filmic text.

The dramatic text, as a literary text, in the eyes of most literary critics is one which is intended for performance. However, an assumption running absolutely counter to this is also feasible: according to this view the performance puts constraints on the dramatic text in its very articulation. Following this logic, Keir Elam says that "the dramatic text is radically conditioned by its performability" (209). It means that the written text needs stage-contextualization in order to gain meaning. If we accept this as a premise, we also have to accept that it may equally be true for the case of the film adaptation of the drama. It is only a step from this assumption to see the relevance of Paola Gulli Pugliatti's comment: the dramatic text's units of articulation "should not be seen as units of the linguistic text *translatable* into stage practice," but rather as "a linguistic transcription of a stage potentiality which is the motive force of the written text" (209).

Returning to the issue of the appearance of the skeleton, it becomes clear that it is precisely the lack of the skeleton in the dramatic text that makes it possible for it to appear in the film: in other words, the fact that the skeleton appears in the film calls attention to a lack in the drama. In this sense the skeleton initiates a dialogue between the two texts, which has so far been absolutely neglected by the dominant trend of fidelity criticism. Analyzing the relationship between a drama and its film adaptation

in a dialogic way orients us toward an ever-forming intertextual engagement, in the light of which it can be established that both texts (drama and film) contain one another's traits or marks. It is this kind of approach that reveals the problem of medial break and the issue of intermediality.

Tennessee Williams and Adaptation

Tennessee Williams, as the name of the author, can be regarded as a guarantee for the dialogue between drama and film in the light of the medial break, since his work—both as a playwright and as a scriptwriter—is considerable in quantity and quality. According to R. Barton Plamer, the Williams films created a new subgenre in post-Second World War Hollywood filmmaking (221). In his opinion, it is impossible to talk about 50s and 60s filmmaking without the Williams adaptations which gave birth to the category of the so-called "adult film," different in almost every aspect from the then dominant studio productions (205, 209-10). Working both on Broadway and in Hollywood, Williams thus became the most frequently and successfully adapted of playwrights.

It is in view of Williams's special position that his name can be used as a metaphor for film adaptation as such, even though according to Palmer, Williams the playwright and Williams the scriptwriter are two different authors. Yet even he acknowledges that the notion of adaptation in Williams's work gains a new and wider definition that goes beyond the question of genres to tackle the issue of the media (206). In other words, Williams's work in both fields sheds light on the intermedial space that has been a blind spot in the discourse on adaptation so far. It poses the issue of the medial break that is at the same time a rupture or gap between two (or more) texts *and* the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between them.

Suddenly Last Summer

Suddenly Last Summer is basically an attempt at reconstructing the life of Sebastian Venable in his absence. The story of the missing body is told by Catherine Holly, Sebastian's cousin, who was his last companion on his last journey, and who was witness to his quite uncommon, that is to say, "queer" death. The skeleton appears in the garden of Mrs. Venable's—Sebastian's mother's—mansion; the garden that was artificially assembled by Sebastian. Curiously enough, the garden is designed in such a way that at the center there is a carnivorous plant, the Venus flytrap, which foreshadows the traumatic death of the poet Sebastian, and incorporates its entire scenario as well: in the flashback narration that Catherine performs there is another witness beside Catherine, who/which arrives there before she does, the skeleton. The skeleton thus precedes its own assumed "birth," as it would be logical to regard it the last remnant of Sebastian's body. Nonetheless, like a strange symptom, it precedes its own cause, and thus it signals that there is a deeper rupture than that of the diegetic death of a character.

If the skeleton is regarded as a symptom, the repressed that somehow returned, another question arises: why was it repressed and how? The skeleton indeed seems to arrive in the *mise-en-scène* from the "future," as it precedes its own cause. It is very simply rendered in the film version of *Suddenly Last Summer*, since the image of the strange phenomenon appears well before Catherine presents her flashback of the story of "last summer." It is only in that flashback narrative (quite toward the end of the film) that the spectator is allowed a glimpse of the original place of the skeleton. It is once again just a moment, but one that cannot be missed, as Catherine directs her look toward it; in other words, this time it is noticed. Yet curiously the skeleton's image on the right side of the frame gives way to a superimposed image of the wooden headboard of a tomb, ostensibly alluding to the coming death of the young poet, who runs by these objects on the left side of the frame. But how does it escape the visual representation of this past event and appear in the narrative present thousands of miles away from its birth?

I venture to claim that, very simply, this symptom is what Lacan in his later seminars coined as *sinthome*. The archaic French word denotes a novel tackling of the psychoanalytic notion of symptom, as it is far from being a ciphered message or a riddle that becomes solved and thus dissolved by the end of the analysis. In the case of the classical Freudian symptom, by the end of the analysis, it obtains a place in the context, thereby concluding the interpretation of the problem (qtd. in Zizek 55-84). However, there are numerous cases when the interpretation is finished, the problem is ostensibly solved, yet the analysand just cannot let his or her symptom go: so the symptom *insists*. Lacan's answer to this problem is that as the Symbolic is structured around a lack, the question is not whether this lack may be filled by an interpretation as solution or not, but rather what was *foreclosed* from the Symbolic that resulted in this lack? According to him the foreclosed entity is a key-signifier that returns in the Real (73). The skeleton *qua sinthome* is thus a symptom in the Real that *appears to be Imaginary, i.e. part of the diegetic representation of the filmic reality*. However, having been foreclosed, it *returns in its original form from without* (contrary to the compromise formations of a classical symptom where the form changes), in other words, it *exists by insisting*, or *ex-sists* as Lacanian psychoanalyst Bruce Fink explains (122).

For Lacan the *sinthome* is not a symptom that should be decoded, but a way to organize the subject's enjoyment (*jouissance*) (Zizek 74). To organize in the case of the film should be read in two ways: to secure a place for enjoyment, and literally to *organ*-ize, i.e. to provide organs of the body to bring it into being. This is underscored by the dramatic text, by one of Williams's instructions concerning the setting of the drama: the garden seems to be a collection of "organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood..." (*Suddenly* 113). This is precisely the collection of organs of Sebastian's torn-out body (as the spectator might guess following Catherine's memory flashback). This "garden" is what displaces the missing body and what provides ground for the drama to literally *take place*.

Whose *sinthome* is the spectator faced with? If the *sinthome* "is literally our only substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject," as Zizek suggests, it cannot be Sebastian's, nor can it be that of either of the characters present, as nobody sees it, nobody recognizes its existence (75). The only person remaining is Catherine, the last companion, the witness, the only one who saw the skeleton and the torn-off flesh of the poet. The more so, since the attempt to solve Catherine's problem (her strange cannibal story that just would not let her have peace) is a success only on the surface: this is the typical Hollywood happy end bringing the "ideal couple" of the doctor and Catherine together. However, the falsity of this image must be immediately recognized: the end of the analysis must mean the finishing of the process of transference as well. It means that all the emotional and libidinal ties that held the analysand and the analyst together must be cut so that the analysand can leave freely. Here it does not happen. In other words, *the film simply does not end*, since the only possible ending would have been to make an end to transference and recognize the *sinthome* and identify with it. Instead, everything—including the imaginary body parts, the organs that literally make up the garden, the entire setting—hangs in the air.

To finish the discussion of *Suddenly Last Summer* and to relate the relevance of this *sinthome* to the study of adaptation in the framework of the present essay, I wish to call attention to the organization of the setting, and its allusion to the flashback that is a fantasy manifestation in the film. There is the garden, a collection of flesh and of organs; there is the skeleton, whose function one may guess in relation to the flesh and organs around it; and finally there is a strange plant in the very middle of the garden, opposite the skeleton—the Venus flytrap, which curiously condenses the traumatic death of the poet. It is because of this setting that Catherine can break her silence after the many sudden blocks of memory. It is here that she may recognize her symptom as *sinthome*: not a solution, but the way she can continue her life, to find positive support for her being. She has foreclosed the figure of Sebastian, her key-signifier, which finally returned in the Real of her symptom: she literally performed her fantasy scenario of Sebastian's death (i.e. gone through or "traversed" her fantasy). The final step of *identifying with her symptom* does not come, however, at the end of either the drama or the film: she still addresses herself in the third person singular ("She is here, Miss Catherine is here!") that brings the reader/spectator back to her initial trauma of a couple of years before. Everything is left open, all because of the blindness of the doctor, who simply misses the skeleton, and misses the very point of Catherine's narrative as well.

Nonetheless, leaving the question open may fruitfully be utilized in an analysis of adaptation. I have mentioned that the skeleton is a visual excess, a remainder the origin of which cannot be located either in the drama or in the film. If the spectator recognizes the impotence of the doctor and the falsity of the Hollywood happy end, s/he may immediately find the intermedial space for the dialogue of the texts in order to "solve this symptom" of the drama and the film. The presence of the skeleton can

diegetically be the symptom of a character, but it also may act as the symptom of the transgressive act of adaptation. Moreover, by claiming a place in the diegesis too, it effectively hides the rupture that is precisely the "medial break": the only possible point for the study of adaptation, the intertextual intersection, the point of the transgressive flash.

The Night of the Iguana

Something else, yet strangely similar happens in the case of the adaptation of *The Night of the Iguana*. Although the lizard, unlike the skeleton, is introduced in the title of the play, it does not appear as such in the text, only metonymically, as a burst of light, when Pedro and Pancho, the two boys dancing and doing everything for the *patrona* of the hotel where the play takes place, catch the iguana. The text describes that "there is a windy sound in the rain forest and a flicker of gold light like a silent scattering of gold coins on the verandah" (271). It is completely dark in the rain forest, and when the strange golden light flickers out of this darkness, even the wind is muted. When the shouting of the boys and the *patrona* can be heard again, the iguana is already tied up behind a cactus, so nobody can see it.

The film version, however, shows us all: even before the tour bus led by Shannon arrives at the hotel, on the side of the road a lot of iguanas are held up for the tourists to contemplate. Later on, the above described scene is rendered in a way that we can see both the iguana and the chasing, and later we can also see the tied up iguana—which is nonetheless figured as a frightful creature surveying the scene from under the verandah. Its presence is thus reinforced visually, while the drama hides it: it is doing what the film version of *Suddenly Last Summer* did with the skeleton.

The flicker can be seen in the light of the issue of adaptation *as* transgression, as the flash described by Foucault (see especially the remarks on the relationship between transgression, flash and the night in the quotation above), in this case it is the drama that contains the reference to the medial break. Indeed, the sudden flicker of light and the muted scene, and its adaptation as a chase-scene is the point where the medial break can be best seen. The uncanny light and the silence incorporate the void first inscribed in the very title of the drama (thus the more descriptive title of the drama should be *The Lack of the Iguana*), and this void is practically filled in by the film. The heightened presence of the iguana in the film version thus recalls its complete and uncanny absence in the drama. Thus the iguana in the film is the *objet petit a* of the dramatic text: it literally fills in the lack that constitutes the dramatic text. The iguana in the film is therefore not a simple transmission of the iguana of the drama, since the latter is simply *not there*. It is the visual excess of the transgressive act of adaptation: that is why it can have the uncanny atmosphere (being present via its absence) about it.

Furthermore, the lack of the title-giving animal of the drama refers once again to the issue of the symptom of adaptation: the iguana is *foreclosed* from the dramatic

text. In this sense, of course, the question resembles the one put in connection with the skeleton in *Suddenly Last Summer*: why do the texts hide these uncanny phenomena? Why are they foreclosed from the dramatic texts and why do they appear to create an even more uncanny abundance in the film versions? Moreover, whose *sinthome* can the iguana be?

The answer to this question is relatively simple, as there are visual parallels both in the drama and in the film version of *The Night of the Iguana*. First, the iguana is caught, then tied to a post under the verandah. Then Shannon has a hysteric fit (similarly rendered as the iguana's attempt to flee its chasers), and he is tied up into a hammock on the verandah by the same two boys. Shannon utters his fear many times before this incident: he is chased by a *spook*—his invisible companion haunting him and chasing him from place to place. I claim that the iguana is the material excess or remainder of this imaginary ever-present spook. In other words, the moment the iguana and Shannon are tied up, the analysis begins, and at the end, when Shannon reconciles with the strange spook, he cuts the lizard free as well. Later on, he takes up the character position of his late friend, the husband of the *patrona* of the hotel, and identifies with him.

The apparent happy-end is once again but illusory: whereas the drama suggests relief, the film presents Shannon acting like an *automaton*, acting as if he were the husband, entering a seemingly desirous relationship without any hint of desire: it is the *drive* of the *sinthome* that makes him fill in the lack. That is, he makes the haunting spook the only positive support of reality for himself, identifying with the strange *sinthome*. This creates a discrepancy, or at least sheds a different light on the ending, and, retrospectively, on the entire drama, emphasizing that a break has become visible: a rupture that presents an intermediary space for negotiating the two texts (and, I should add, more than just two texts, as the film adaptation obviously fed upon the Broadway stage production, and the director's previous films as well). Again, a diegetic manifestation takes on the role of opening a space for intertextual and intermedial dialogue, while also acting as a *sinthome* realized in an analytic situation. The only difference between this and the previous example is that here, having traversed the fantasy scenario, the transference is finished, closed, so the identification may happen, whereas in *Suddenly Last Summer*, due to the blindness of the doctor, it was impossible.

Conclusion

What these two examples show is that an inquiry into the ways of adaptation is hardly a simple matter of recounting the basic differences of the dramatic and the filmic texts, and evaluating the nature and the result of the change. It is rather a question of establishing a dialogue on the line of the break between the two texts, and indeed, between the two media. By analyzing the rhetoric of hiding and concealing in both texts simultaneously, the study of adaptation becomes a dialogic study that goes beyond both texts, thus revealing their mechanisms of representation actively inform-

ing one another via an intermedial space that insists (or, rather, *ex-sists*) on the analyzed texts annihilating both the temporal and ideological hierarchies of the comparative-contrasting methodology of the traditional discourse on adaptation.

Notes

[1] Foucault continues: "Perhaps [transgression] is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity" (35).

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968. 217-52.

Bouchard, David F., ed. *Michel Foucault, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977.

Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London: Methuen, 1980.

Fink, Bruce. *The Lacanian Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995.

Foucault, Michel. "A Preface to Transgression." Bouchard 29-52.

Hayward, Susan. *Cinema Studies. Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Huston, John, dir. *The Night of the Iguana*. Screenplay by Anthony Veiller. MGM, 1964.

Mankiewicz, Joseph L., dir. *Suddenly Last Summer*. Screenplay by Tennessee Williams and Gore Vidal. Columbia, 1959.

McFarlane, Brian. *Novel to Film*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.

Naremore, James, ed. *Film Adaptation*. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2000.

Palmer, R. Barton. "Hollywood in Crisis: Tennessee Williams and the Evolution of the Adult Film." Roudané 204-31.

Roudané, Matthew C., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Stam, Robert. "The Dialogics of Adaptation." *Film Adaptation*. Ed. James Naremore. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2000.

Williams, Tennessee. *Suddenly Last Summer. Baby Doll, Something Unspoken, Suddenly Last Summer*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.

—. *The Night of the Iguana. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Other Plays*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.

Zizek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.