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Miscellanea

No Hamlet, Two Hamlets:
the Shakespearean Tragedy Directed
by Carmelo Bene and Celestino Coronado

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Abstract: The Italian artist Carmelo Bene and the British director Celestino Coronado have worked intensively on Shakespeare and in particular on *Hamlet*, but giving opposing interpretations of the work. In his *Un Amleto di Meno* (1973), Carmelo Bene, taking as starting point Jules Laforgue's *Hamlet, ou les suites de le pitié filiale* (1877)**,** redefines the drama of Hamlet,refusing to see him as a man who wants to escape his destiny. In Bene's adaptation, Hamlet disappears from the stage. By contrast, Celestino Coronado, in his film version in 1976, underlines the presence of Hamlet on the screen, casting twins, Anthony and David Meyer, in the role and working on the idea of a Shakespearean *Doppelgänger*. This paper aims to analyze the specific elements of the two adaptations of *Hamlet*, in which there is the common presence of the Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Key Words: Adaptation, Carmelo Bene, Celestino Coronado, Shakespeare, *Phoné*, Lacan, Psychoanalysis, Laforgue, *Doppelgänger*.

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This article will discuss cinematic and television adaptations of the Shakespearean repertoire. I will examine two versions made in the '70s, both conceptually belonging to the experimental, independent cinema; *Un Amleto di Meno* (*One Hamlet Less*, 1973) by Italian author Carmelo Bene and the British *Hamlet* (1976), adapted by Celestino Coronado.

These two works will be analysed together due to the particular relationship that they have with the character of the Prince of Denmark. This relation is so dissimilar in the two films that they seem almost opposite. Carmelo Bene works by removal, eliminating Hamlet from the stage in one of his Shakespearean adaptations. Celestino Coronado, on the other hand, puts on the screen, and at the same time, two 'Hamlets', interpreted by the identical twins, Anthony and David Meyer.

1. Carmelo Bene and *Hamlet*

Before turning to Carmelo Bene's film version of *Hamlet*, it is necessary to focus briefly on the relation between Bene and Shakespeare.

Apart from *Hamlet*, the Italian actor-author-director tackled other several works, 'adapted from' Shakespeare: for the stage he directed and interpreted *Romeo e Giulietta* (1976), *Riccardo III* (1977), *Otello* (in 1978 as *Otello o la deficienza della donna* and in another version in 1985), *Macbeth* (1983 and 1996); There were also versions for television and radio: *Riccardo III (da Shakespeare) secondo Carmelo Bene* (1977), *Macbeth - horror suite* (1996) and *Otello o la deficienza della donna*, posthumously broadcasted in 2002 but filmed during the *mise-en-scène* in 1979, and radio adaptation of *Romeo e Giulietta* (1975) and *Otello* (1979).[1]

Focusing his attention on the television productions, in 2004 Alberto Soncini noted that "Carmelo Bene ha dimostrato come non si dia (o meglio, non si possa dare) l'*autore* di un testo e anche come sia necessario, prima di tutto, 'disimparare' e, infine, come non si possa altro che sottrarre e svuotare il testo medesimo. [...] In tal senso senso le apparizioni televisive hanno rappresentato l'imprescindibile corollario, a volte fortuito e imprevedibile, di questo fondamentale progetto" (Soncini 2004: 50).

He also points out: "Un'appendice, quella televisiva che, sulla scorta della teoria artaudiana, ha inteso nell'ordine, demolire alle fondamenta il teatro della rappresentazione (ma senza sostituirlo con il 'non-teatro', che a sua volta ne legittima e ne conferma esistenza e senso), liquidare le 'avanguardie storiche' e, con esse, la tirannia del testo e dei significati a vantaggio del proliferare infinito dei significanti. In altre parole, ha insegnato a *fottersene di Shakespeare*" (2004: 50).

The approach of "fottersene di Shakespeare" could perfectly apply to Bene's versions of *Hamlet* and *One Hamlet Less*.

The history of the Prince of Denmark was material for five stage versions that Bene made in about thirty years with different variations and different sources of inspiration (the main one

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[1] On Carmelo Bene and Shakespeare's plays see Bartalotta 2000.

was that of Jules Laforgue). Apart from *One Hamlet Less*, Bene produced at least three others stage versions, including *Homelette for Hamlet: operetta inqualificabile* (1987), and radio adaptations.[2]

One Hamlet Less is, within this context of three decades of Shakespearean productions, characterized by a continuous process of re-writing of the role of *Hamlet*. This represents an important development within Bene's project of demolition and abandonment of the theatre of representation. *One Hamlet Less* is his last film for the cinema and is different to the point of being almost antithetical to his previous works, such as *Nostra Signora dei Turchi* (1968). It is full of images, 'visions' of great impact and, as Bene used to say, of 'several voices'.

The credits of *One Hamlet Less* acknowledge that the screenplay is adapted not only from Shakespeare's masterpiece, but also from Jules Laforgue's *Hamlet, ou les suites de le pitié filiale* (1877). Here, the French poet and writer shows Claudio killing his brother, the King and father of Hamlet, and becoming the lover of the queen, but also shows a Hamlet who is not interested in revenge but who would rather stage a drama in Paris.

As regards Carmelo Bene and Shakespeare in Italy, John Francis Lane writes: "He presented Hamlet as a travelling player who was engaged for most of the performance packing bags at Elsinore to go on tour to Paris" (Lane 1979: 306).

This is a consideration that, although exact, could be considered very narrow because it does not take into consideration the fact that it is in the character's lack of interest in revenge that is the sign of the physical removal of Hamlet from the stage.

Serializing Bene's adaptations of Hamlet, through the various versions for theatre, television, film and radio-CD, Alessandro Bertani notices that Bene never felt obliged to fathom or to enrich the work (Bertani 2004: 44). These versions represent, instead, a search for the satiric vacuum, for the *phoné* or the eternal sound which are typical of Bene's poetics and far from the character of Hamlet in the written tradition.

It must not be forgotten that for Carmelo Bene, to quote his aphorism, "lo scritto è il funerale dell'orale, è la rimozione continua dell'*interno*" (Bene 2002: V).

The influence of Jules Laforgue in Bene's removal and in the elimination of the myth of Hamlet seems obvious and necessary. We are faced with a mythological circuit founded "sui valori della 'pietà filiale', dell'onore antico e su quelli dell'Io costruito sui fantasmi della *scrittura*" (Grande 1973: 155), considering the film as an attack on established duties, required by a

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[2] On Carmelo Bene and Shakespeare on stage see Petrini 2004. In his book, Petrini analyses the different versions of *Hamlet* which Bene adapted for the stage in 1962-1975.

metaphysic of writing, substantiated in the tradition and in the uncritical unacceptability of the comedy of myth, seen as a game of repressive and pervasive writing.

In this context, primary importance must be attached to the role of Hamlet's dead father, to his ghost and to his appearance to the Prince of Denmark. Hamlet, after the revelation in a dream about his father's death, reflects on what happened and what to do. The drama of the protagonist is not what is familiar in the well known literary tradition, but, in Bene's opinion, it is more the drama of "a moment", when the whole story itself becomes a ghost (that of the father), the key-note for Hamlet's entire life. It is the father that poses the dilemma of 'To be or not to be', a dilemma that has been made clear, implicitly, since the beginning. Hamlet has to decide whether to be forced *to be* without *existing* or the have the *knowledge* of *not being* (while, however, he *exists*).

Hamlet imagines that "l'orrido, orrido, orrido evento" has happened and immediately discovers the aesthetic pleasure of it. So he is torn between the freedom of aesthetic enjoyment and literary fame, and the duty of *filial piety*, that, however, he wants to concretize not into revenge, but into making it the subject for an art work, matter for poetry and theatre.

In this way, Bene's Hamlet rebels against the repetition of acts consecrated by tradition and literature, or of the *literary alienation*, as Grande writes: so the character, who wants not to be subordinated any more to the literary forms of his existence, discards Ofelia, always semi-naked, wearing nurse's headgear and thick glasses, and her love, repeated every day, without renewal. Hamlet prefers to leave for Paris with Kate, the Prima Donna of his company, and, above all, he shreds the sheets of the Shakespearean monologues, kept in his library. In *One Hamlet Less*, the disintegration of the text con be observed, with, for example, the most famous monologues (again 'To be or not be') declaimed by Horatio, to whom Hamlet has delivered the first page that he shredded.

It is impossible for Hamlet, however, to save himself from the dissolution, from the death to which he is condemned by the myth and by the literary circle waiting for him. He cannot deny the literary sense of the already written, which is, for Bene, the death of the oral. The whole is reduced to a simple 'one Hamlet less'.

Carmelo Bene has always considered himself as a 'Hamlet of the 20th century' and, in his mind, this character is a symbol, the image of the most honest men of theatre, because he denies himself to the stage but becomes the stage himself, author-character-actor who reflects on

himself, who parodies himself, who psychoanalyses himself, in a Lacanian way, joking on his role of avenger and preferring that dreamer singer-actor.

In depriving the stage of Hamlet's literary tragedy, Bene continues his path of purification of the literary text, working on deprivation, producing as a final outcome *Hamlet suite* (1994), almost a CD version of Hamlet's 'drama of the moment', with only voices and thus without pictures. Bene's course aims to get to the 'teatro della *phoné*' that can be understood as the achievement of the visual effect of the surface, the main research conducted by Carmelo Bene on the stage: a very particular use of the voice, the research on the sound and on voice amplification, using the microphone. Gaetano Luporini, an assistant of Bene, states: "Carmelo Bene crea la forma phoné, corredata da una sofisticatissima strumentazione audio con risultati sonori mediamente improntati ad una intensità che supera assai il livello fonico di una normale recitazione" (Luporini 1995: 168).

Bene himself explains his *modus operandi*:

Nel mio primo decennio scenico, senza nemmeno il filo d'un microfono, mi producevo *come* dotato d'una *strumentazione fonica amplificata* a venire, esercitando le medesime costanti orali d'una ricerca elementare irrinunciabile: la *verticalità* (metrica e prosodia) del *verso* (e del verso libero), gli accenti interni nel *poema in prosa*, il canto *fermo* (dal gregoriano al *lied*, di contro al belcantismo vibrato), il *parlato d'opera*, l'*intenzione* musicale, la *dinamica* e le *(s)modulazioni* di *frequenza* nelle contrazioni diaframmatiche, la non mai abbastanza studiata *cura dei difetti*, l'*ampiezza* del *ventaglio timbrico* e le *variazioni tonali*, lo *staccato*, l'emissione (petto-maschera-testa-palatale) della voce, etc., ma sempre costringendo altezze e picchi (dentro) il diagramma monotòno della *fascia armonica* (a rivestire dell'alone il suono) e del *basso continuo* mai disinserito; l'inspirazione e il fiato trattenuto, il guizzare vocalico esasperatamente tratteggiato a dissennare la frastica del lògos (fin dalla prima edizione del *Pinocchio* come infortunio sintattico): donde quel *recitarsi addosso*, *magico* che non sfuggì ai più sensibili ascoltatori. Una palestra fondamentale, questa, "pre-amplificata" come in un *campo lungo*; ancora meno, a volte: quasi un delirio (dis) articolato dietro un cristallo. (Bene 2002: XXXIII-XXXIV)

Inside *phoné* theatre there is a 'being' and a 'not being' or an 'expression' and 'contemplation', as Luporini states. Bene, and more precisely his voice, rises in the solitary tragedy of his being and of his existence, and, with a coincidence of presence and absence, exorcises the figure of the Ego-subject. This is a concept that Y. Brunello, quoting Umberto Artioli, considers modelled on a vision of life and art very close to that established by Paul Fort, by Lugné-Poe and other French symbolist artists and theorists in the late XIX and the early XX century.

2. *Hamlet* by Celestino Coronado

If Bene denies the tragedy of Hamlet, Celestino Coronado focuses his version on multiplication. Realized with a paltry budget of £2,500 for the Royal College of Art (London), in 1976 and presented at the London Film Festival, Coronado's adaptation of *Hamlet* is based on the concept of the double. The character of Hamlet is one, but doubled for two actors, Anthony and David Meyer, physically identical. The same lead actress, Helen Mirren, performs two character, Ophelia and Hamlet's mother Gertrude in an explicit vision of the Oedipus complex. But, in addition, the whole film is full of elements that refer to the theme of the *Doppelgänger* and the dichotomy dream/nightmare.

In Coronado's work, Kenneth S. Rothwell sees almost an application of the method that Roland Barthes applied to Balzac's short-story *Sarrasin* in *S/Z*: in that case, the French philosopher considered the experience of reading and the relationship of the reader with the book as a subject in relation with the movement of the language within the text. In his view, the classical critics had never properly considered the reader, but the reader is the space where all the many aspects of the text meet each other. Indeed, the unity of a text lies not in its origin but in its destination. The study becomes the focal point and model for a literary criticism constructed on many levels, thanks to its analytical concentration on the structural elements that constitute the literary level. This study, done by Coronado almost following Barthes' way, de-segments and re-segments the text to focus itself on the dysfunctional connection of Hamlet with Ophelia and Gertrude, imagining a post-structuralist and post-modernist vision of the Shakespearean text (see Rothwell 2004: 193).

Daniel Rosenthal states: "As Hamlet lies in Mirren's lap during the ten-minute 'Mousetrap', we accept, without editing or elaborate trick photography, that both characters co-exist in the same shot. The impression that disgust and desire for Gertrude have so infected Hamlet's feelings for Ophelia that he can not distinguish between the two women is overwhelming" (Rosenthal 2007: 36).

It is a version based on the concept of the double, which, in addition to its connections with Barthes, is also inspired by Lacan. Where the double is not only referential in the presence of two "Hamlets", the same (naked) ghost of his (their) father is a *Doppelgänger* himself, starring Anthony Meyer who is presented to a sleeping David, saying: "I am the father's spirit".

Again, as in Bene, Hamlet analyses himself, but, unlike Bene, he does it through the Shakespearean monologues that, in Bene's adaptation, were barely mentioned by Horatio.

In Coronado's version, the "To be or not to be" soliloquy is one, a real monologue, but with two characters, with David Meyer/Hamlet talking to himself, but talking at the same time to his *Doppelgänger* Anthony Meyer/Hamlet. Duplication of key elements creates a kind of circularity of the whole, a coincidence between the beginning and end, both "in thunder and lights with Hamlet stretched out on a white pallet, his face a death mask" (Rothwell 2004: 193).

Coronado will work again on Shakespeare, filming, with a higher budget, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1984) in a version by Lindsay Kemp and his company, with pantomime, ballets and opera to replace the Shakespearean text.[3]

3. Conclusions

The two cinematic versions of Carmelo Bene and Celestino Coronado can be inserted in a context of reading the Shakespearean production through experimental cinema and psychoanalysis. In Bene, with more consciousness, Hamlet is almost a "psychoanalyst" of himself and seeks in this way to escape his literary fate. In Coronado the psychoanalysis of the character happens because of the constant talking to himself, to his *Doppelgänger*, so that psychoanalysis is not conscious, but an expression of the dysfunction of the character, in a the dual and dichotomous contrast between repulsion and desire.

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[3] On Celestino Coronado see again Rothwell 2004: 192-218, Collick 1989: 80-106, where the author analyses only Coronado's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, compared to Derek Jarman's *The Tempest*, starring David Meyer as Ferdinando, son of Alfonso, King of Naples.

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