

## PASCALE AEBISCHER

### Yorick's Skull: *Hamlet's* Improper Property

In the mid-nineteenth century, at a provincial performance of *Hamlet* at the Rochdale Theatre in Lancashire, Hamlet was played by a pretentious actor whom George Vandenhoff in his memoirs identified as Mr. C--, “a most solemn and mysterious tragedian, of the cloak-and-dagger school.”<sup>1</sup> The grave-digger in the production, on the other hand, was played by Richard Hoskins, a “low” comedian who thought the Hamlet in question ridiculous.

The theatre was built on the site of an old dissenting chapel, which had formerly stood there, in which a preacher named Banks had held forth, and in the small grave-yard attached to which, the Doctor – for he was popularly dubbed doctor Banks – had been buried some twenty years ago; and his name was familiar yet. So, after answering Hamlet's question –

“How long will a man lie in the earth ere he rot?”

Dick proceeded in due course to illustrate his answer by Yorick's skull; and taking it up, he said, in the words of the text –

“Now here's a skull that hath lain you in the earth three-and-twenty years. Whose do you think it was?”

“Nay, I know not,” replied Hamlet, in his sepulchral, tragedy-tone.

“This skull sir,” said Dick ... “This was DOCTOR BANKS'S skull!”

And the word skull he pronounced like a bull.

Of course the house was in an uproar of laughter and confusion. The victimized tragedian stamped and fumed about the stage, as well he might, exclaiming, “Yorick's, sir, Yorick's!”

“No,” said Dick, coolly, when the tumult had subsided, taking up another skull, and resuming the text –

“*This* is Yorick's skull, the king's jester; but” (going off again) “t'other's Doctor Banks's, as I *told* you.”<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, Vandenhoff tells us, the performance in question ended in a fight in the grave between Hamlet and the Gravedigger rather than Hamlet and Laertes.

Another theatrical anecdote is far closer to our own time. I happened upon a first trace of the story when I was researching Ron Daniels's 1989 Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production of *Hamlet* at the Shakespeare Centre Library in Stratford-upon-Avon. In the middle of a stack of archival material about the production, I found a memorandum, dated 9 May 1989, that read: "If André Tchaikovsky isn't actually playing Yorick this year, please can we have his skull back in the Collection for future reference, or whatever you do with skulls of dead pianists." The story I managed to piece together from this point of departure is what follows.<sup>3</sup>

In 1980, André Tchaikovsky, an Oxford-based musician, saw Michael Pennington's performance of the role of Hamlet. He was so taken by the macabre dialogue in the graveyard scene that on his way home he told his companion of his intention to bequeath his skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company so that he—or at least a part of him—might appear as Yorick in a future production of *Hamlet*. A few years later, the Property Department Manager for the RSC, William Lockwood, received a call from an undertaker who asked whether the RSC might be interested in the cranium of a deceased client. Horrified, Mr Lockwood passed the question on to Terry Hands, who was the RSC's Artistic Director at the time and who promptly accepted the bequest. Ten days later, to Lockwood's discomfiture and the evident delight of the department's dog, Mr Lockwood received a parcel containing the freshly processed golden-toothed skull of André Tchaikovsky. After extensive airing, it found a provisional resting-place on a shelf in the Property Department.

André Tchaikovsky's first genuine chance to star as Yorick came in 1989, when Mark Rylance started to rehearse the title role of Hamlet in Daniels's production. A rehearsal note dated 13 February records: "Mark Rylance has asked whether it would be possible to use the

real skull that was donated to the RSC as Yorick's skull?" The Property Department complied, and Tchaikovsky appears to have spent one month in the rehearsal room preparing the role of Yorick. On 23 March, however, the first indication of trouble is casually mentioned in a rehearsal note: "we will be using the real skull for Yorick but will need a stand by in case of accident." What accident? Although Tchaikovsky must have been aware that playing Yorick would entail being "knocked about the mazard with a sexton's spade" (5.1.85-6),<sup>4</sup> Rylance's desire to grant Tchaikovsky's wish seems thus to have been paradoxically checked by a simultaneous desire to honour the dead. Eventually, squeamishness about the rough handling of real human remains seems to have triumphed. Claire van Kampen, the production's musical director and later Mark Rylance's wife, remembers that

As a company, we all felt most privileged to be able to work the Gravedigger scene with a real skull....However, collectively as a group we agreed that as the real power of theatre lies in the complicity of illusion between actor and audience, it would be inappropriate to use a real skull during the performances, in the same way that we would not be using real blood etc. It is possible that some of us felt a certain primitive taboo about the skull, although the Gravedigger, as I recall was all for it!<sup>5</sup>

On 7 April, Tchaikovsky was finally defeated in his quest for on-stage remembrance, though touchingly the understudy ordered to replace him was to be an exact look-alike: "We are no longer using the real skull as Yorick but would like to use a cast of it (complete with teeth)."

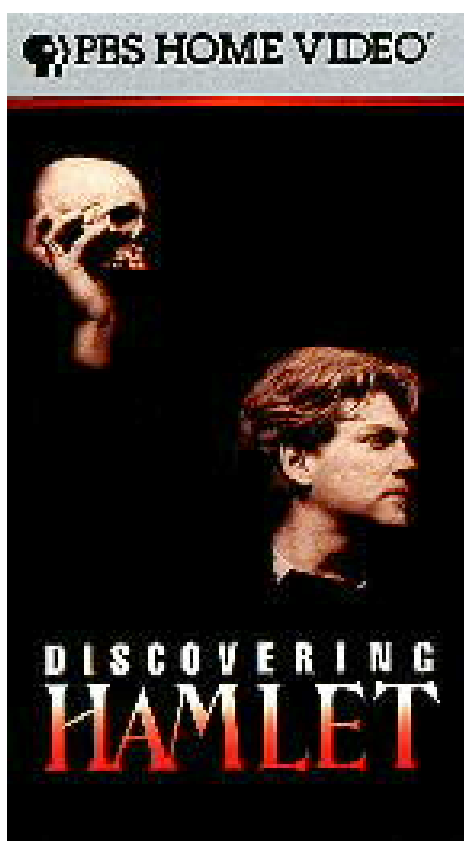
What both of these stories show and what I want to explore further in screen productions of the play, is what I like to call the unruliness or impropriety of Yorick's skull as a property. In both stories, the skull stops performing its simple role of "property" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* sense of "a stage requisite, appurtenance, or accessory," and threatens to move from the position of accessory, or object, into the position of principal, or subject. The main danger of the skull as a theatrical signifier is its polysemous denotative and connotative richness. On a first level, it is an iconic sign that straightforwardly stands for the fictional referent of Yorick's skull, the king's jester. As such, it connotatively invokes the

tradition of the dance of death, which in Holbein's illustration features Death wearing a jester's cap grabbing hold of the hand of the queen: the skull as the "antic death" linking Hamlet's "antic disposition" with his recognition of his own death.<sup>6</sup>



Hans Holbein, "The Queen" (*The Dance of Death* 1538),

For although Hamlet's own reflections over Yorick's skull never explicitly evoke the possibility of his own death but displace his own mortality onto "my lady" (5.1.184) in an uncanny flashback (or is it a flashforward?) to the death of Ophelia, the notion that the skull is a reflection of Hamlet and a foreshadowing of his imminent death is widely accepted. It is obviously this concept that underlies the cover-design of the documentary video-tape recording the rehearsals for Derek Jacobi's production of *Hamlet* with Kenneth Branagh in the lead, which is tellingly entitled *Discovering Hamlet*.



Olshaker/Jacobi/Branagh video cover

Here the parallel disposition of the skull and Branagh's face make it clear that the discovery of Hamlet must happen through a contemplation of the relationship and similarity between hero and skull. The spine of the video-cover is even blunter with the emblematic picture for the "discovery" of Hamlet reduced to the skull held up in Hamlet's hand. It is the task of the culturally knowledgeable consumer to work out the metonymy linking the skull to Hamlet's absent head and thus to the discovery of Hamlet's mystery. Thus already in its first, and most straightforward, meaning, the property manages to stand for Yorick as a fictional character, for iconographic Death in general, and as such potentially for all the separate identities that Hamlet attributes to it (Cain, a politician, a courtier, a lawyer, a buyer of land, Alexander, or Caesar), and for "antic" Hamlet himself.

If on the spine of the *Discovering Hamlet* tape the skull stands for absent Hamlet, it no less re-presents its *own* absence. Following its usurpation of Hamlet's place on the cover, the skull is elided in the documentary itself. All we see of Yorick is a four-second clip that is

accompanied by a voice-over of Derek Jacobi talking about the production in general.

Yorick's skull in fact signifies its own absence and lack: lack of the lips that Hamlet has "kissed I know not how oft" (5.1.179-80), the absent presence of Yorick, young Hamlet's parental surrogate.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, when referring to the identity of the skull, both Hamlet and the Gravedigger/Clown use the past tense: "Whose *was* it?" Hamlet asks, and the reply is "This same skull, sir, *was* Yorick's skull, the king's jester" (5.1.166, 171-72, emphases added). Past and present are collapsed in this object that both is and is not the jester who has been dead for twenty-three years. As such, it replays the tragedy's earlier collapsing of past and present in the ghost that both is and is not Hamlet's father and that, Barnardo says, is "so like the King / That *was and is* the question of these wars" (1.1.113-14; emphasis added). Both the ghost and the skull are theatrical signifiers whose presence points to an absence, whose present points to a past, thus blurring the boundary between life and death no less than the Gravedigger/Clown's "pocky corpses" that may be "rotten before [they] die" (5.1.156).

The skull as a "property" is also an object of disputed ownership: if it *was* Yorick's skull, is it the Gravedigger's now or is it Hamlet's? In the RSC production that rehearsed André Tchaikovsky's skull in the part of Yorick, the property was very clearly appropriated by Mark Rylance's Hamlet, who cradled it in his arms and carried it into the duel scene like a talisman, setting it down on a mantelpiece from where its empty eyes could witness Hamlet's death. The ghost's injunction "Remember me!" was thus transferred to Yorick and transformed from a command of revenge into something more akin to a *memento mori* that faced and helped Hamlet face his own death. On another level, the skull of Tchaikovsky and/or Yorick had the effect of doubling Hamlet's quest for revenge and confrontation with death with Mark Rylance's desire to honour the last will of Tchaikovsky, who became the company's own uncomfortable *memento mori* and ghostly father clamouring for posthumous remembrance. Because the property disturbingly kept its extrafictional and extratheatrical identity as the property of André Tchaikovsky the pianist, it resisted the company's attempts

to appropriate it as an accessory. Instead, it became an “improper property” that defied theatrical decorum. In a company such as the RSC that uses non-Grotowskian methods, decorum dictates that theatrical signs that pertain to the human body (be it objects such as bones or blood or physical expressions such as pain or orgasm) should stay at a distance from their referent, a distance which, as Claire van Kampen put it, is bridged by “the complicity of illusion between actor and audience.”<sup>8</sup> Only when the real skull, with its real identity as André Tchaikovsky’s head, was replaced by an identical-looking fake was the company able to adopt the property as an iconic sign that could stand primarily for Yorick rather than Tchaikovsky. Only once it had been fitted with a special hole in its base, custom-made to make it balance on the gravedigger’s spike,<sup>9</sup> could it be a decorous, “proper” accessory that performed its work on stage as a means through which the audience may understand Hamlet’s frame of mind. How easily such an appropriately distanced property can change its “owner” and slip back into improper signification beyond the theatrical frame of reference is, however, apparent from the story of Dr. Banks’s skull. Even with a fake, the fact that the skull is a potentially polysemous signifier that is fairly indiscriminate in its signifieds (anything from a lawyer to Alexander the Great is possible) means that it can at any moment disrupt the fictional framework of the theatre and find a signified in reality. The skull as a property is thus particularly prone to producing what Martin Esslin dubs “‘involuntary’ semiosis” because, more than most other “material objects on the stage or screen,” a skull “may contain signifiers that the originators of the performance (the designer, the director) did not intend to be perceived.”<sup>10</sup>

The skull’s uncertain ownership is compounded by its uncertain occupancy of fictional space. If it remains unclear to whom Yorick’s skull belongs, the playtexts make it even more difficult to know where it belongs and what space belongs to it. We must assume that if the Gravedigger/Clown finds Yorick’s remains as he is digging a fresh grave, the plot of the new grave is Yorick’s old grave. But Yorick’s is not the only skull that is found in the plot: he

seems to have shared his grave with at least one other anonymous person. Ownership of the grave is further complicated by the Clown's assertion that the grave belongs to him and Hamlet's insistence that it must belong to the person the Clown is digging it *for*. The grave turns out to be "common," another way in which death in the play is represented as a leveller that makes a "King ... go a progress through the guts of a beggar" and another way in which the graveyard scene problematises the distinction between "the dead" and "the quick" (4.3.30-31, 5.1.120).

In its physical juxtaposition of Yorick's dirty remains—"his fine pate full of fine dirt" is obviously smelly (5.1.101-2, 191)—and Ophelia's "fair and unpolluted flesh" (5.1.229), the grave becomes the space where the cultural *topos* of Death and the Maiden is played out. In the visual arts, this motif reached its creative (and erotic) apex in central Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century. In Niklaus Manuel's "Berner Totentanz" (1516-19), for instance, Death was figured seizing a citizen's daughter from behind, his bony fingers plunging into her *décolletage*.<sup>11</sup> Of the roughly contemporary illustrations of this motif by Hans Baldung Grien, "Der Tod und das Mädchen" (1517) concentrates specifically on the erotic potentialities of this theme.



Hans Baldung Grien, *Death and the Maiden* (1517)



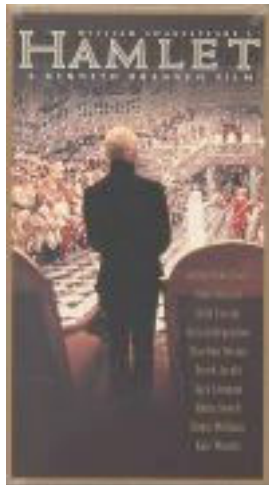
By the time of Hans Sebald Beham's portrayal of "Tod in Narrengestalt und Mädchen" (1541)—an engraving that in its combination of Death as a jester, a virtuous maiden associated with the flowers in its background, and a motto reminding the viewer of the transitory nature of beauty, is remarkably close to Shakespeare's graveyard scene—the visual-arts motif had lost its eroticism and much of its iconographic power.<sup>12</sup> What had become a cliché within the pictorial tradition was, however, revived and reinvigorated in music and literature, where the *topos* transcended geographical and linguistic barriers, finding one of its most memorable and erotically-invested expressions in Romeo's question to the seemingly dead Juliet "Shall I believe / That unsubstantial death is amorous, / And that the lean abhorrèd monster keeps / Thee here in dark to be his paramour?" (5.3.102-5).<sup>13</sup> In the graveyard scene, this poetic motif inherited from the visual arts is picked up in Gertrude's reflection on the substitution of the grave for Ophelia's bride-bed,<sup>14</sup> thus providing a verbal gloss on the physical juxtaposition of Ophelia's body with Yorick's skull. None of the early editions of *Hamlet* provides a stage direction indicating what happens to Yorick's disinterred cranium, but theatrical and cinematic expediency has often dictated its return into its grave alongside the body of "One that was a woman" (5.1.128). Like the fashionable early modern tombs that superimposed a sculpture of the living body over its decaying *alter ego* the *transi*, Yorick's and Ophelia's two stages of physical decay then provide a continuity with the living bodies of the sparring Laertes and Hamlet who join them in their grave (that is, if we accept the Q1 stage-direction that stipulates that Hamlet "*leaps in after Laertes*").



**Archbishop Chichele's "transi" tomb (1427) in Canterbury Cathedral**

If Yorick's skull is disturbingly polysemous on the page and the stage, it can be equally promiscuous in its signification on screen, where its value as a shocking property that is all too "close to the bone" is often exploited through close-ups. In Laurence Olivier's 1948 film of *Hamlet*, the editing of playtexts and film takes us straight from Ophelia's graceful Millais-inspired death to the gloomily comic scene of the Clown's digging of her grave. Eileen Herlie's voice-over describing Ophelia's "muddy death" (4.7.158) thus links the poetic beauty of Gertrude's speech and of Olivier's/Jean Simmons's cinematic portrayal of "the most beautified Ophelia" (2.2.109-10) to the earthy reality of the grave, from which the Clown retrieves Yorick's skull. While the Death-and-the-Maiden nexus is suggested through *montage, mise-en-scène* jolts the audience into a recognition of Hamlet's own connection with the skull when, a few seconds later, Hamlet's shadow enters the frame, his head exactly covering Yorick's skull on the ground [see video clip 1].<sup>15</sup> If in Hamlet's subsequent gentle musings over the remarkably sanitised skull and his final casual disposal of it in the grave there is little sense of disgust or of the potential difficulty involved in containing this property, this splendidly simple cinematic trope in which Hamlet's death is literally foreshadowed is a prime instance of the prop's extraordinary semantic power.

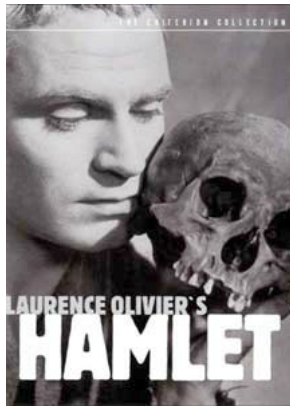
Whereas, to appropriate Horatio’s phrase, the skull in Olivier’s film is “a property of easiness” (5.1.66), in Kenneth Branagh’s films—both *In the Bleak Midwinter* (1995) and his marathon *Hamlet* (1996)—Yorick ceases to behave. The first indication that the Yorick of Branagh’s “completer than complete”<sup>16</sup> film of *Hamlet* is up to more antics than he is normally allowed can be seen once again from the cover of the video-tape. Surprisingly, if we compare this cover to the video-covers of the films directed by Richardson and Olivier as well as to the cover of the Jacobi documentary, Yorick is not featured on the front of the cover. Instead, the back of the cover includes a skull in one of the eight small inset photographs that frame the publicity blurb.



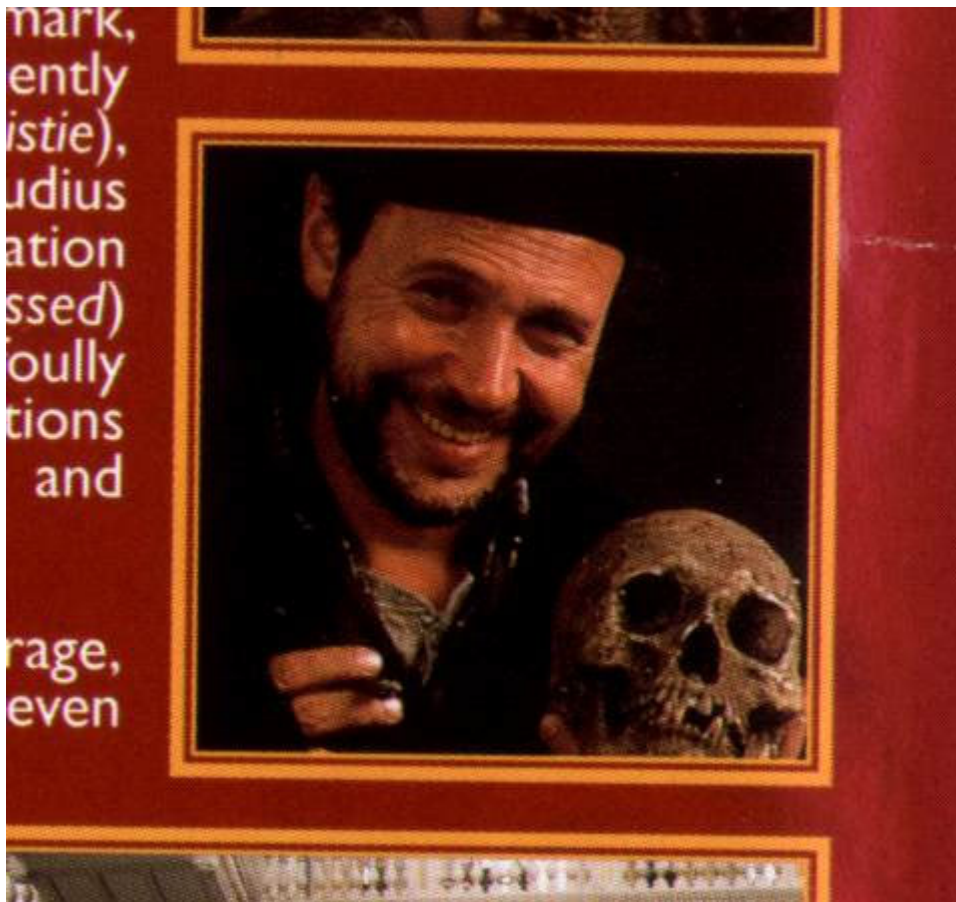
**Video cover of Branagh’s 1996 *Hamlet***



**Video cover of Richardson’s 1969 *Hamlet***



Video cover of Olivier's 1948 *Hamlet*



There, instead of being engaged in its habitual deep mutual contemplation with the hero, the grinning skull is held by the grinning Gravedigger (played by Billy Crystal), both of them facing the viewer. This pose gestures to the Renaissance fashion for paintings depicting a young man with a skull, in which the young man normally *presents* the skull rather than contemplates it *à la* Hamlet.



**Franz Hals, *Young Man with a Skull* (ca. 1641)**

Just as the Gravedigger on Branagh's video-cover has displaced Hamlet as the stereotypical young man with a skull, it appears on closer view that Yorick, too, has been displaced from this emblematic picture by a rival skull. To a careful observer it furthermore becomes apparent that the still on the cover does not correspond to any moment represented in the film. The little picture on the cover, then, represents a triple displacement in which Gravedigger, skull, and still all re-present without presenting the emblematic scene a viewer would expect on the evidence of most other *Hamlet* video-covers and film posters. Surely, with a director as aware of intertextuality as Branagh, such a teasing frustration of expectations is no coincidence. On his video-cover both Hamlet, who turns his back on the viewer, and the skull are set up as elusive theatrical signifiers that point to a multiplicity of referents. While Branagh's platinum-blond Hamlet with his duel involving a spectacular descent from a balcony clearly evokes Olivier's film performance, and while the august collection of former and future Hamlets in Branagh's cast-list presents the viewer with a whole selection of Danish Princes, skulls also emerge as simultaneously specific and general

signifiers in this film. Thus, in an early scene, Branagh's Hamlet scares Polonius by putting on a crude skull mask, so that "antic Death" literally becomes one of the masks Hamlet puts on as part of his "antic disposition" [see video clip 2]. As a mask, the face of death on a living head lends emphasis to the tragedy's repeated questioning of the boundaries between life and death at the same time as its potential to hide different heads behind its front implies the promiscuity of death.

This implication is strengthened in the film's graveyard scene, where the five dirty skulls unearthed by the Gravedigger make death seem particularly "common." In Branagh's screenplay Hamlet's wry thought that "if there were any more of these bloody things [the Gravedigger] could set up a skull shop" stresses this point.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless it is here, amidst this proliferation of skulls that one skull becomes specific enough to disrupt the spatial and temporal setting of the scene, the fictional framework of the film, and even the continuity of the screenplay. Yorick is set apart from his fellow ex-persons, to use Branagh's term,<sup>18</sup> both in terms of space and physiognomy. Left behind after all the other skulls have been packed up, Yorick's buck teeth make his identity all too apparent to Hamlet. Two brief flashbacks underline the hero's recognition of the skull, taking the viewer to the living Yorick, impersonated by the notoriously buck-toothed stand-up comedian Ken Dodd, playing with the boy Hamlet and amusing the royal family [see video clip 3]. In harmony with the play, these flashbacks help blur the distinction between the dead and the living, the past and the present, and strengthen Yorick's role as a father-figure for Hamlet. At the same time, however, the flashbacks are dangerously disruptive. On the one hand, the skull's identification with Dodd's grinning face creates a semantic problem when Hamlet orders it to "get...to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come" (5.1.183-85). In the film's juxtaposition of the live Yorick's heavily made-up face with these lines, the point of Hamlet's misogynistic injunction that links this scene to his condemnation of women's "paintings" (3.1.143) in the nunnery scene is blunted. On the other hand, while the

flashbacks are long enough for the audience to recognise Ken Dodd as the model for the property's buck teeth, they are too brief for the viewer to move beyond that recognition into an involvement with Hamlet's nostalgic memory. In the figure of Ken Dodd, the flashbacks violently introduce an extrafictional referent into the scene in a way reminiscent of Richard Hoskins's evocation of Dr. Banks. It is true that in the light of early modern examples of dignitaries who commissioned tomb sculptures of their own decomposing bodies years before their actual death,<sup>19</sup> there is something peculiarly "authentic" in the fact that the skull was modelled on Dodd and given to him at the end of the shoot as a souvenir of the production and personal *memento mori*.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that in this case the extrafictional referent for Yorick's skull is very much alive is a key instance of the "life-in-death" theme that haunts this production more than any other. Old Hamlet's scripted appearances as a Ghost are complemented by several cinematic flashbacks that present him alive or in the process of dying. A brief inset representing Hamlet's bloody imagination during Claudius's prayer scene shows Claudius being stabbed in the ear by Hamlet's dagger.<sup>21</sup> Ophelia's burial, as Carol Rutter has perceptively noticed,<sup>22</sup> is furthermore modelled on the genre of the vampire film, a genre with which Branagh demonstrated his familiarity in his film of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994) and in which corpses are disruptively alive. Even Russell Jackson's film diary seems singularly preoccupied with the coming alive of dead bodies. The entry for 23 February reads: "The morning starts with Hamlet lying in state. Billy Crystal (First Gravedigger) has arrived for make-up consultations, and comes on set while Ken is in the coffin: Billy gets up the stepladder beside the catafalque and the corpse sits up to chat."<sup>23</sup> On 1 March, Kate Winslet is performing dead Ophelia when "A runner from the production office comes with a telephone message from L.A. for Kate, but we don't know where she is, so messenger departs—then we remember she's in the grave."<sup>24</sup> The following day, the diary records a different incident in the graveyard in which the actors "corpse." Whether metaphorically or almost literally, corpses, heralded by Ken Dodd's lively Yorick, are

disturbingly alive in Branagh's production. Not even in the screenplay does Yorick behave properly and "play dead:" as if it had not been up to enough mischief in the film itself, the skull does an additional little comic turn in its script, where it refuses to stay put once it has been disposed of. At least, this has to be inferred from the fact that although Hamlet apparently "throws the skull down" in disgust at its smell, a few lines down, Yorick seems to have popped back into his hands, for as Ophelia's funeral approaches, Hamlet once more "throws the skull to the FIRST GRAVEDIGGER."<sup>25</sup>

In view of Yorick's improper behaviour in Branagh's "serious" *Hamlet*, it is hardly surprising that he is similarly vivacious in *In the Bleak Midwinter* (or *A Midwinter's Tale*), Branagh's comedy about the making of an amateur *Hamlet*. With the graveyard scene not part of the film *per se*, Yorick nevertheless manages to negotiate a central position on the video-cover (what's new?), where, in a black-and-white group photograph of the cast, his pink face conspicuously sticks out.



Branagh's *In The Bleak Midwinter/A Midwinter's Tale* video cover



If he fears no more the heat of the sun, this is mainly because he is equipped with sunglasses that irrepressibly gesture towards life. In fact, Yorick has rarely been livelier than in his two brief appearances in the margins of this film: the first when an auditioning ventriloquist performs “Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio” (5.1.175-76) with a dummy Hamlet and skull, while another skull is perched on the director’s pencils [see video clip 4]; the second when Yorick the jester appears as one of Fadge’s (the designer’s) painted audience members to watch the performance of *Hamlet* [see video clip 5]. Pastiche seems the only way to deal with the irrepressible Yorick within the framework of a comedy.

Yorick, in fact, has become such a well-known icon that his representation on stage and screen is by now no less clichéd and vexed than Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy. *Shakespeare in Love* provides a prime example of how instantly recognisable Yorick is and how easily this property can be appropriated. When Joseph Fiennes’s Shakespeare enters the back-stage space at Whitehall, there is a very brief moment in which Will Kempe is shown holding a skull before throwing it into a prop-box [see video clip 6]. The screenplay glosses this moment as “he looks at the skull ... in other words he reminds us of Hamlet.”<sup>26</sup> What the gloss omits is the skull’s habitual semantic excess, for Yorick doubles here as both the skull and the clown/jester in full costume and make-up who is looking at him. The skull’s later, and unscripted, re-appearance in the film as a weapon with which Burbage—historically the future Hamlet—is knocked unconscious, is yet another instance of the property’s semantic richness and potential unruliness [see video clip 7].

The property’s combination of cliché and openness to pastiche might well be the rationale behind Michael Almereyda’s decision to cut Yorick from the graveyard scene in the most recent screen *Hamlet*. In a film that consistently seeks to frustrate expectations and defy clichés, the tragedy’s unruly property is relegated to the margins. Even in the screenplay, which, unlike the edited film, does contain a substantial part of the graveyard scene, Yorick is conspicuous through his re-presented absence. The skull is, presumably, the “something”

referred to in the stage direction that immediately precedes the gravedigger's "Here's a skull that hath lien you in the earth" and that reads "*he [the gravedigger] returns to the grave, pokes at something with his toe.*"<sup>27</sup> But instead of picking up the skull in order to enter into a profound contemplation of mortality, the screenplay's Hamlet "*kneels a moment, then stands up into frame wearing a rubber Halloween skull mask*"<sup>28</sup>—both a displacement of Yorick's skull onto commercial Halloween skeletons typical of the film and an intertextual reference to Branagh's similar use of a skull mask in the 1996 film. Although this scene was filmed as scripted, Yorick's near-appearance in the graveyard scene was eventually edited out along with most of the graveyard scene. In his "Director's Notes," Almercyda records that although during filming "the scene seemed to fly,"

in the editing room it became clear that I'd failed to get it right. The tone and timing were off, and the whole episode seemed to sidetrack Hamlet's response to Ophelia's death. The movie worked better with the prized scene cut out. But we kept a vestige of Jeffrey's [Jeffrey Wright playing the Clown] performance, a chorus from the Dylan song, as a wistful souvenir.<sup>29</sup>

If the kicked-at "something" and the rubber skull mask are in themselves oblique signifiers for the ever more absent Yorick, the song that recalls their erasure sets the deferral of meaning at yet another remove, becoming an enactment of post-structuralist *différance* at the same time as it encapsulates Hamlet's and *Hamlet's* search for elusive, unrepresentable, meaning, for "that within which passeth show" (1.2.85).

Significantly, the only time within the final cut of Almercyda's film that Yorick appears as himself, the skull flickers across Hamlet's television screen, profoundly contemplated by Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson in an ever-so-brief clip of the silent film of 1913.<sup>30</sup> Yorick's present absence, in this latest, self-consciously post-modern appearance, evokes the end of the Victorian stage tradition, the beginning of *Hamlet* on screen, and Yorick's own problematic status as a theatrical property. Almercyda's is a Yorick in quotation marks, a Yorick that is and is not there, a sign of a sign of a fictional referent that

collapses not Hamlet's, but *Hamlet's* past with its present. Even if Yorick's skull no longer features as an actual property, its image through the years seems to have only gained intertextual semantic richness.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> George Vandenhoff, *Leaves from an Actor's Note-Book; with Reminiscences and Chit-Chat of the Green-Room and the Stage, in England and America* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1860), 100.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.
- <sup>3</sup> My thanks to Roger Howells, the former Production Manager for the RSC, and to William Lockwood, the RSC's Property Department Manager, for contributing anecdotal evidence.
- <sup>4</sup> All references to the play are to G. R. Hibbard, ed. *Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- <sup>5</sup> Letter, 19 August 1999. With thanks to Claire van Kampen for answering my questions on Mark Rylance's behalf.
- <sup>6</sup> See Eleanor Prosser, who explains that: "In Shakespeare's day, 'antic' did not mean 'mad.' It was the usual epithet for Death and meant 'grotesque,' 'ludicrous'." *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), 151. For Holbein's "Dance of Death," see Francis Douce, ed. *The Dance of Death: In a Series of Engravings on Wood from Designs Attributed to Hans Holbein* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1902).
- <sup>7</sup> Martin W. Walsh argues that "the piggyback-riding, child-kissing Yorick is close to pure invention on Shakespeare's part, and one need not appeal to modern psychology to find in Yorick a parental surrogate, particularly striking given the androgynous character of the traditional fool." "'This Same Skull, Sir ...': Layers of Meaning and Tradition in Shakespeare's Most Famous Prop." *Hamlet Studies* 9 (1987), 74.
- <sup>8</sup> Letter, 19 August 1999.
- <sup>9</sup> Rehearsal note, 7 April 1989.
- <sup>10</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Field of Drama: How the Signs of Drama create Meaning on Stage and Screen* (London: Methuen, 1987), 46.
- <sup>11</sup> Niklaus Manuel's original "Berner Totentanz" is lost, but copies of the frescoes are preserved in Albrecht Kauw's 1649 watercolour in the Historisches Museum in Bern.
- <sup>12</sup> William R. Levin glosses the engraving (whose title is inadequately translated as "Death and the Lady") as follows: "In this engraving Beham depicts a young woman in elegant dress walking in a garden. Beside her is a vase containing a tall lily, symbolic of purity and virginity, indicating the lady's virtuous character. Lurking dangerously close to her, however, is Death, dressed as a jester, holding an hourglass from which the measure of sand has nearly run. The woman is oblivious to his presence, but the viewer sees him as a grim reminder that, as the inscription (OMNEM IN HOMINE VENVSTATEM MORS ABOLET) indicates, Death destroys all human beauty." *Images of Love and Death in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Michigan: University Publications, 1975), 71. In-depth discussions of the topos of Death and the Maiden in early modern Europe are provided by Jean Wirth, *La Jeune Fille et la Mort: Recherches sur les Thèmes Macabres dans l'Art Germanique de la Renaissance* (Geneva: Droz, 1979), and Karl S. Guthke, "Renaissance und Barock: Der Tod und das Mädchen – und der Mann." *Ist der Tod eine Frau? Geschlecht und Tod in Kunst und Literatur* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1997), 94-143.
- <sup>13</sup> Jill L. Levenson, ed. *Romeo and Juliet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For a discussion of the transition of the Death-and-the-Maiden motif from the visual arts to literature in the mid-sixteenth century, see Wirth, 91-93.
- <sup>14</sup> For a discussion of "the conceit of Death as usurping Bridegroom" see Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 58.
- <sup>15</sup> This superimposition of shadow and skull was first commented on by Robert A. Duffy, for whom it introduces "the thematic significance of the scene to follow." "Gade, Olivier, Richardson: Visual Strategy in *Hamlet* Adaptation," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 4.2, 148.
- <sup>16</sup> Geoffrey O'Brien, "The Ghost at the Feast," *The New York Review of Books* 44.2, 15.
- <sup>17</sup> Kenneth Branagh, *Hamlet by William Shakespeare: Screenplay, Introduction and Film Diary* (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), 145.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

- <sup>19</sup> Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 232.
- <sup>20</sup> Russell Jackson's film diary records the care taken to make the skull match its model ("A close-up of Doddy with teeth displayed to match our shots of skull") and the gift of the skull ("Has photos taken of his name on a chair-back (which tickles him pink) and Yorick's skull—which he is given as a memento." Branagh, 201.
- <sup>21</sup> The directions in the screenplay read: "He puts the long thin dagger through one of the grille holes and moves it very slowly to a centimetre away from CLAUDIUS's ear. He puts the palm of his hand against the hilt ready to hammer it into CLAUDIUS's skull....And he does! We see the blood spurt before an abrupt **cut** [sic] we are back in real time as before—CLAUDIUS still praying—HAMLET fine-tuning his revenge." *Ibid.*, 102.
- <sup>22</sup> Carol Chillington Rutter, *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage* (London: Routledge, 2001), 51-52.
- <sup>23</sup> Branagh, 192.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-50.
- <sup>26</sup> Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, *Shakespeare in Love* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 13.
- <sup>27</sup> Michael Almereyda, *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Screenplay Adaptation by Michael Almereyda* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 108.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.
- <sup>30</sup> Kenneth Rothwell explains that "[t]his most complete (59-minute) film of *Hamlet* yet then made [sic] allows a glimpse into late Victorian theatrical codes as interpreted by an actor many considered the greatest Hamlet of the century." *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17. It is yet another instance of the absent presence that surrounds appearances of Yorick that Almereyda's screenplay does not identify the extract but simply refers to "snippets from a silent film 'Hamlet'" (Almereyda, 51). Furthermore, although Almereyda dedicates a whole appendix to the subject of "An Inventory of Ghosts (*Hamlet* on Film)," he does not list this film in his account of cinematic predecessors. Almereyda thus subjects both Yorick and the Forbes-Robertson *Hamlet* to a simultaneous re-presentation and erasure that are symptomatic of his film's attitude towards all its (re)sources, whether textual, cinematic, or material.

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