CHAPTER 5

“Shakespeare in the Extreme”: Ghosts and Remediation in Alexander Fodor’s Hamlet

My body’s gone / But my eyes remain / Hovering, witnessing / Cold as a ghost.

—Marillion, The Invisible Man

Shot entirely in high-definition digital, premièred at the Cannes film festival and subsequently released in DVD format with a 12-page booklet and extra material, Alexander Fodor’s experimental low-budget adaptation of Hamlet (2006) blatantly presents itself as some kind of “Shakespeare in the extreme.” And, indeed, Fodor’s film contains many elements that could be classified as “extreme” when compared to Shakespeare’s Hamlet: Polonius becomes Polonia (Lydia Piechowiak), a scheming femme fatale who would not be out of place in a film noir, and goes as far as to seduce a Reynaldo-turned-Reynalda with luscious cherries and red wine; Ophelia (Tallulah Sheffield) is a drug addict who relies on her elder sister Polonia for her drug supply; Horatio (Katie Reddin-Clancy) switches gender; Laertes (Jason Wing) is a vicious Cockney thug; the Ghost (James Frail) is omnipresent. Yet, if by “extreme” one means a drastic distance from Shakespeare’s language, Fodor’s version can hardly be said to be so radical: it does not alter the lines from the play it keeps, except when it needs to meet the changes it introduces in terms of gender and kinship. (For instance, Polonia is referred to by Ophelia and Laertes as “sister.”) This chapter explores the double-edged notion of “Shakespeare in the extreme” in Fodor’s film. It argues

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that this is a strategy of remediation that predominantly insists on the “out-of-jointedness” of time and space, and that it articulates itself as a process that frequently evokes ghosts, including, as the film performs a series of self-allegorizing moves, the ghost of the “original” and, more generally, the ghost of a (Shakespearean) textual corpus that refuses to stay put.

Not unlike other recent Shakespeare films, the paradigmatic example of which being perhaps Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996), Fodor’s *Hamlet* attempts to grab the viewer’s attention from its very outset. The initial scene, which takes place before the opening credits, borrows the cinematic style of supernatural thrillers to introduce us to one of the film’s most striking revisions of the “original”: Ophelia’s addiction. We see Ophelia rummaging through a closet in the dark, presumably looking for drugs; we hear an enigmatic offscreen voice that leads her through a corridor that vaguely recalls the terrifying interiors of *The Shining* into a brightly-lit room (i.e., the “ghost room,” as the director calls it in the DVD commentary); we see her picking up a hypodermic needle lying on a table and shooting up a dose of heroin; we then witness her violent untimely death while the Ghost, clad in a retro, long black leather coat, crosses the room and watches impassively. It is worth adding that after injecting heroin and experiencing a supreme moment of bliss, Ophelia turns her head around more than once, and begins to act as if she could hear, along with the viewer, the crying of seagulls. Combined with the extra-diegetic splashing of waves that obsessively reverberates in the background, this aspect of the scene invites a rereading of her predicament within the sequence. It suggests, that is, that Ophelia is simultaneously in the ghost room and elsewhere, perhaps under water in the throes of death while dreaming of one last fix as a means of escape.

This scene re-presents itself in its “proper” place later on in the film. (This time it is not an uninterrupted sequence but is part of a montage; it alternates with the dialogue between Claudius and Laertes in 4.7 in which they finalize their “cunnings” against Hamlet [4.7.128]). It ends with a final shot of the dead body of Ophelia lying on a beach, a body whose pose is strikingly similar to the one she adopts in the ghost room. Yet the repetition of the Ophelia sequence is far from signifying the reassertion of the truth of the “original”: Ophelia’s death is in fact a “muddy death” (4.7.155), a death by water. Reiteration is a process of transformation. What we witness is a compressed visual remediation of Ophelia’s fate, almost a photographic still frozen in time, which is superimposed upon the previous radical re-imagining of the last moments of Ophelia’s life. Neither of these instances of death erase the other. They uncannily coexist. To adopt the theoretical considerations on performance developed by W. B. Worthen in relation to