Human Skulls as an Artistic Tool: A Movie Can Break Taboos that a Novel Cannot

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Abstract

The novel 'The General of the Dead Army" describes the history of a general visiting Albania several years after the end of the Second World War, when hostilities were apparently over, with the aim of exhuming and repatriating the skeletal remains of the dead soldiers. The novel has been adapted in three movie versions, and different perspectives have been thrown over the drama of a general, losing this time a psychological war, vis-à-vis the intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts he perceives. The movie "The Return of the Dead Army" widely and incisively relies upon skulls and skeletal remains as an anamorphic medium to illustrate how far a deeply eradicated taboo might be broken and reversed, with human bones serving as currencies for message exchange in between the movie's personages. Differences of two diverse artistic works (novel vs. movie) that concur to such an imaging of exhumation and of the setting where this act takes place are discussed under the psychological and artistic point of views.

Keywords: Human remains; Skulls; Cinematography; Narrative strategies; Taboos

Introduction

The novel "The General of the Dead Army" of Ismail Kadare has been published in Albanian in 1963, and thereafter translated in several languages and re-published, including the French and the English versions. The plot is focused on the everyday miseries and passions of an Italian general, visiting Albania with the aim of exhuming and repatriating the remains of the soldiers, fallen during the lost battles of his country's army that invaded Albanian soil during Second World War (WWII). A particular psychopathological condition is depicted, especially through identification and misidentification delusions that gradually occupy the psychic horizon of the general. Believing himself as immortal and identifying his own image with the image of a lost corpse, that of the colonel Z, the general ambivalently pursues in an unrelenting search the fate of the dead colonel, and still conceals the remains of the latter, through dispersing the bones immediately after uncovering his skeleton. This psychic drama of the delusional belief in immortality, the particular setting of a post war environment, and the figure of an army general collecting exhumed skeletons, are the composing parts of this tricky history of psychotic despair.

Different scholars have addressed the issue of a psychotic army officer handling exhumed skeletons in a post war mission, such as the General in the Kadare's novel [1]. Several English editions of the translated version of this novel are available [2,3]. Different perspectives are lent as well with regard to the relations of this author with the previous Albanian ruling regime, and the historical implications together with the political legacy of the messages his prose has brought are a matter of controversy; such discussions are beyond the scope of this paper [4,5].

Interesting as it is, the novel has been adapted thrice, from three different directors. Thus three movies have been shot, reproducing more or less faithfully the author's messages. One of them is a French production, directed from Luciano Tovoli (*Il generale dell' armata morta*; (Italian words for *The General of the Dead Army*) and produced 1983, casting famous stars such as Marcello Mastroianni, Michel Piccoli and others [6].

There are two adapted Albanian versions of this novel shot with more than ten years distance one from the other. The first one was realized in 1976 as a television fiction and the second one screened on 1989 as a full-length film, directed from Dhimitër Anagnosti, entitled *Kthimi i ushtrisë së vdekur* (Albanian words for *The return of the Dead Army*) [7].

Contrarily to the novel, whose narrative medium is the written storytelling addressed by a narrator to the narratee, a movie reproduces dramatic images in situ and alive, thus the events occur directly on stage, something incompatible with the narratives in general according to some authors [8,9].

In the present movie, with the help of some snapshots illustrating the mainstream of this abnormal narratology and its peculiarities, we'll try to show a very unusual role that the human bone and skulls in particular, have come to invest.

Human bones and skulls as a merchandise: taboo reversal in a fiction

The novel itself will give wide space to reader's imagination, but skeletal remains and bones will stay generally at stake, as it were:

'The colonel's tomb… a truly imposing monument – the general continued – *with its statue and those beds planted with red and white roses all around. But it is empty.'* [3; pg. 20]

But the writer is far more explicit a few pages further. Note the

merciless vocabulary he is adapting, pushing the reader into deep meditation:

'I envisage his head as nothing but a skull and teeth – the only details that endure. Do you understand? I feel that I have crossed over into a kingdom of bones, of pure calcium.' [3; pg. 61]

That far might go the narratives of a prose; the movie will obviously be more touchable, incisive, and impressive. Skulls are initially depicted as plastic models, aiming at the instruction of the digging team, who has to get familiarized with things that are considered as obscene for the general public (Figure 1).

What the novel fails to do, is giving the tactile idea and sensation how a skeletal remain, mainly the skull, might become an exchangeable good. There is a team of diggers whose mission is to find out the remains; they are paid to do so. Their professional background is characterized from misery, since such a job will be considered generally with disdain from the general public. Nevertheless, finding and handing in these skeletal remains as a part of job description (and of a contractual relation), will profoundly alter the overall filmic impression regarding the human remains and skulls, objects that have become since centuries important themes of taboos and rituals (Figure 2).

This controversial relation vis-à-vis the human remains and skulls above all, will become the leitmotiv of profound nightmares and psychic drama to the General and other participants in this misadventure. Packing and inventorying skeletons – what is left from human cadavers slaughtered during the WWII – has become inside the movie, a mercantilist way of approaching those objects, which elsewhere are subject to considerable taboos and rituals.

Discussion

Human osteological remains are subject to different approaches, among which archeological, forensic, and legal, are the most doctrinal ones. However, the world of the dead, Hades and underworld, are a very ancient literary and artistic subject, from Gilgamesh to Homer [10]. Rituals and taboos have ever since surrounded exhumations and uncovering of human remains, and strong beliefs and prejudices regarding the issue will be found in all populations, from the savage tribes to the most civilized societies [11]. Skulls have been obviously the most interested part of the skeleton, even in terms of ritual killings or ill-treatments of victims [12,13].

Pending on the surrealistic imaging of human remains, through descriptive narrative in a novel, or via graphic reproduction in whatever form a movie might offer, nevertheless we can trace back considerable differences in the final product. In the present artistic work, we have to deal with a novel (The General of the Dead Army) and a movie adapted from the latter (The Return of the Dead Army), with an obvious incompatibility in messaging right from the title.

The novel will stay stunned rigidly over the figure of the General and of his counter figure (the priest accompanying him during the mission). The narrative hereby is arranged as a linear or a sequential path [14]. The movie instead will be more declamatory, and the taboo over human remains, their uncanny and sacred character, will be almost unrelentingly broken, even reversed; this is the perception of an '*uncanny skeleton*', but perceptual distortions are measurable even with regard to corpses or human molds as well [15,16]. Such perceptive advantages are typical for the cinematographic medium, and anamorphic moments have been considered as representative of this particularity [16,17]. This anamorphism might be lacking to the written material which served as the basis for adaption of the movie "The Return of the Dead Army", although anamorphism has been suggested as present in other written works [18]. Otherwise its presence in this movie will serve towards habituating the spectator with a very unfamiliar theme: skulls, human remains and cadavers, thus will help rendering acceptable something that has ever since provoked abhorrence, remorse, horror and flashbacks, even inside an artistic masterpiece [19,20]. What a deal…

Figure 1: Snapshot from the movie 'The Return of the Dead Army', screenplay and director Dhimitër Anagnosti [7]. An instructor is handling plastic moulds of a skeleton, explaining to the team how to pack the remains inside ad hoc bags (Courtesy of Central State's Film Archives of Albania).
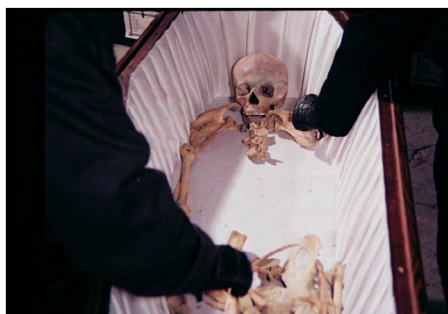
Figure 2: *Snapshot from the movie* 'The Return of the Dead Army', screenplay and director Dhimitër Anagnosti [7]. A schematic gathering of skeleton remains inside an ad hoc coffin is shown, where the skull will still serve the purpose of a cinematographic tool (Courtesy of Central State's Film Archives of Albania).

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