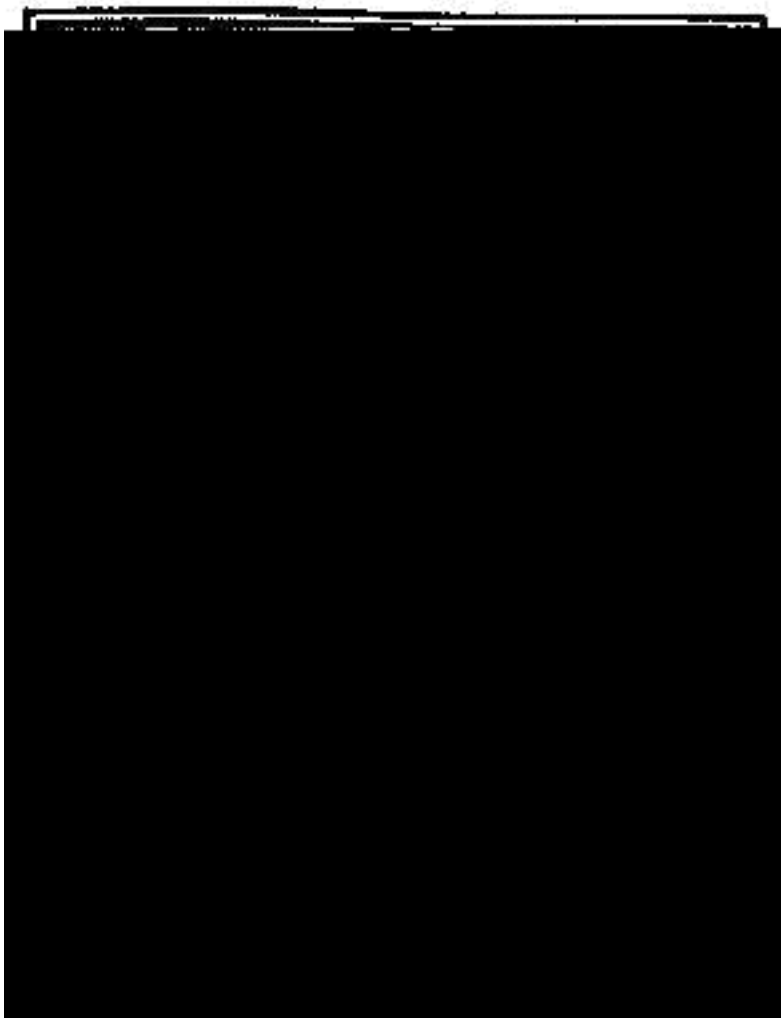
Hamlet

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."[1] 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.

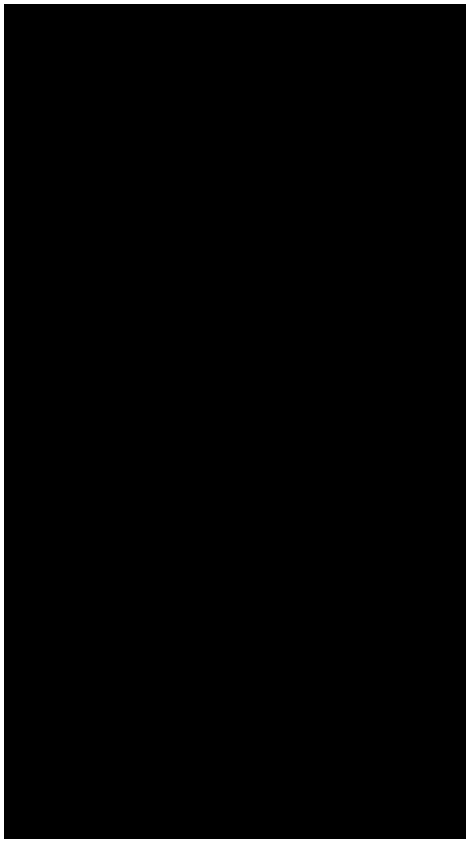
> The theatre was built on the site of an old dissenting chapel, which had formerly stood there, in which a preacher named Banks had held forth, and in the small grave-yard attached to which, the Doctor – for he was popularly dubbed doctor Banks – had been buried some twenty years ago; and his name was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

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.[6]



The Dance of Death

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



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 tape the skull stands for absent Hamlet, it no less re-presents its 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.[7] Significantly, when referring to the identity of the skull, both Hamlet and the Gravedigger/Clown use the past tense: "Whose , it?" Hamlet asks, and the reply is "This same skull, sir, , 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 , , , 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,

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."[8] 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,[9] 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 du.8(t)0n134 4.9(MadgAy-15(A)1i.8(t)0n1l8(t)0n

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 . 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 grav

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.[12] What had become a cliché within the pictorial tradition was, however, revived and reinvigorated in music and literature, where the 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).[13] 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,[14] thus providing a verbal gloss on the physical juxtaposition of Ophelia's body with Yorick's skull. None of the early

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 B (1995) and his marathon

Young Man with a Skull

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 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" . 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.[17] 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,[18] 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 . 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

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."[25]

In view of Yorick's improper behaviour in Branagh's "serious"

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 ; the second when Yorick the jester appears as one of Fadge's (the designer's) painted audience

collapses not Hamlet's, but [illegible]'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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1 George Vandenhoff, [illegible] *A* [illegible] *-B* [illegible] *C* [illegible] *-C* [illegible] *A* [illegible] (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1860), 100.

2 Ibid., 100-101.

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