

## knowing when to stop

A novel, a film, a play, a piece of music. In *Oscar: With a sinister hoist, the semaphore flag*, Gabrielle Amodeo takes a micro-canon of Western classics as her starting point. Working through subtraction rather than addition, she deconstructs in different ways Jane Austen's *Emma*, Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies*. Through the resulting works, she prompts us to think about language, communication, and how we relate and respond to classics – if indeed, we can recognise them at all.

The exhibition takes its title from “Oscar”, an intriguingly named maritime letter flag that's one of 26 in the International Code of Signals. Composed of two triangles, one yellow and one red, it's part of an international language and means both the letter “O” and “man overboard.” When hoisted sinisterly (from right-to-left instead of left-to-right) it becomes the semaphore flag, another mode of communicating from a distance. I'm fascinated by the way this code reduces all language to 26 basic sentences, in an effort to represent the most likely things one ship would want to say to another ship. Ranging from benign (K/Kilo's “I wish to communicate with you”) to calamitous (J/Juliet's “I am on fire and have dangerous cargo on board: keep well clear of me”), the boiled-down phrases are not dissimilar to the way Amodeo is currently working – simplifying, extracting, redacting and remaking a series of iconic works.

Take *Hamlet* for starters. It's one of Shakespeare's best known and most performed productions, and in *Takes the skull* Amodeo presents us with a version of its script, in which she has painstakingly cut out all of its lines except for the stage directions. Tacked to the wall, the work makes a double reference to the play's physicality: first, by showing the meters of space that lie hidden within an A5 publication; and second, by drawing our attention to the cues that lie behind lines like *To be, or not to be*. While in most of his plays, Shakespeare's stage directions are concise (largely communicating character entrances and exits), it's been said that this very lack of direction is one of the reasons his plays can be so widely interpreted.<sup>1</sup> Amodeo's reconstruction brings these invisible instructions to the fore, prioritising the subtle cues that we constantly scan for but are rarely conscious of.

Conversely, in *Empty Orchestra* we are handed the words but denied any visual or aural cues. Through a series of delicately rendered pencil drawings, the video work presents us with the subtitle track of Scorsese's 1976 hit *Taxi Driver*. It's meticulously constructed; each subtitle appears for the exact duration that it does on film. However, Amodeo's labour is not my central focus here. Rather, with no other

<sup>1</sup>Alexis Soloski, “Beware of the bear - the dilemma of stage directions.” <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2009/mar/04/stage-direction-shakespeare-stoppard>

signs in the gallery to indicate the work's origins, each viewer will have a different experience, depending on their prior cinematic knowledge. Some may recognise it immediately; others will not and instead follow the story blindly; and a fair proportion will, I suspect, only get the hint if they happen to arrive during the now famous *You talkin' to me?* scene. Without pointers to define who's saying what or when transitions take place, the story itself takes a back seat. However, other aspects of the script are illuminated; Amodeo told me she found that without a human being behind the words, their coldness and brutality was even more shocking.

Such a desire to hear or see our narrator is equalled in *Draw*, in which we listen to an altered audio recording of *Emma*. Rather than focus on what the narrator is saying, Amodeo has removed this surrogate author's voice, so that all we can hear is their sharp intake of breath. Listening to her (or perhaps it's him) gasping without an equalising release is an unusually stressful experience. Placed in a situation of increasingly heightened tension, we wait for them to say something – anything! – to restore its imbalance; a wish which is never fulfilled.

We live in an age of constant repetition, addition, and cherry-picked references, one where there are more than two thousand GIF results for *Taxi Driver* on search engine GIPHY alone. Amidst this tidal wave of information, it's almost impossible to avoid collateral exposure to the classics, but Amodeo's works ask how well we really know them. In 1900, Mark Twain addressed a room full of people and referenced one Professor Winchester as he asserted that a classic is "something everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read."<sup>2</sup> In a world where I can admit that while I've never seen the whole of *Taxi Driver*, I've watched Robert De Niro confront himself in the mirror over and over again thanks to YouTube, it could be argued that such attitudes are only becoming more pervasive.

Operating within this context, Amodeo's works are quietly subversive, as she delicately takes a (sometimes literal) scalpel to classic texts and pop culture, confirming that for many of us, our assumed knowledge is surface-level at best. Rooted in a drawing-based practice, her works add to the canon while simultaneously stripping texts back, offering us something else in their place. By making certain features absent, she draws attention to the presentness of parts we don't always see, and adds a level of frustration by refusing to show us the whole picture. It's in this gap where the magic lies; where the works can hang there, barely recognisable and just recognisable enough. Amodeo knows when to stop.

<sup>2</sup>Mark Twain, "Disappearance of Literature," in *Complete Works of Mark Twain* (Hastings: Delphi Classics, 2013), unpaginated.