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CHAPTER EIGHT

Leaves of Brass and Gads of Steel:

Cinema as Subject in Shakespeare Films, 1991-2000

*Nor Fire, nor cankering Age, as Naso said
Of his, thy wit-fraught Book shall once invade.*¹

In early March 1995, a quartet of Danish film-makers drew up a manifesto in Copenhagen that spelt out their agenda for redeeming cinema. Later that month they presented their charter publicly in Paris as part of the celebrations to mark the centenary of the Lumières brothers' first public screening of moving pictures. One hundred years on, they said, it was time to reject the sophisticated illusionism and flashy technical resources of contemporary cinema and return the medium to a vehicle of truth-telling. The concentration was to be on the characters and the story and the location. Nothing else – not the camera, not filters, not effects, not unmotivated sound or light sources, not digital interventions, not studio sets, not self-advertising directors – should be allowed to distract from the 'honesty' of the tale or its telling. Their rejection of much of the standard grammar of Hollywood production was distilled into a set of 'rules' formalised in a document they humorously called the 'Vow of Chastity'. The Vow, signed by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg on behalf of the collective, committed them all to renouncing the decadent pleasures of cinematic wizardry. In a frame of mind that managed to be almost self-satirising in its high-blown expression, but nevertheless entirely serious in intention, they called the movement Dogme95. Their project to pare away the extraneous and distracting clutter of cinematic production in order to recover the power inherent in simplicity and self-denial was both dogmatically conceived and (fairly) dogmatically adhered to in the four films that emerged from the original Copenhagen signatories.

The last of the four original Dogme films was *The King is Alive* (Kristian Levring, 2000), shot in line with Dogme principles from a hand-held camera and using only natural light. The film tells the story of a group of white

European and American tourists whose tour bus runs out of fuel in a disused mining outpost in the Namibian desert. Stranded there, without any obvious hope of rescue, they are in need of a project to help stave off madness. Struck by the tonal appropriateness of *King Lear* to their present situation, one of their number Henry (David Bradley), who was himself once an actor, writes out sections of the play from memory so that they can stage an *ad hoc* production. He casts Gina, a giddy young American (Jennifer Jason Leigh), as Cordelia and eventually takes on the role of Lear himself. When Gina subsequently dies, the other tourists hold an improvised funeral rite over her body, composed entirely of lines from *Lear*. The Shakespearean words, initially adopted as material for a communally distracting game, have become the material of a communally consoling ritual. Over the course of the film the nature of what it means to 'quote' someone else's words shifts. Shakespearean lines start being used not to 'represent' someone else's character but to give expression to one's own. Lear's agonies over the body of Cordelia and Henry's over the body of Gina ('I know when one lives, and when one is dead: / She's dead as earth.' V.iii.259–260) become indistinguishable. In stages, the tourists-turned-actors have appropriated the play not as a means of forgetting themselves and their situation, but as the vehicle for expressing their own aspirations and fears in circumstances that have stripped them of those things upon which they would otherwise have relied for self-definition.

The cinematography for *The King is Alive* has an elegance which derives directly from the operatic grandeur of the desert scenery it depicts. The striking ambience in many scenes depends upon the naturally golden sheen of desert light. The film demonstrates how natural beauty can translate directly into cinematic beauty without cosmetic interventions. The self-denial that lies at the heart of the film production² has an obvious echo too in the production of *Lear* we see in rehearsal. There are, of course, minimal resources, and effectively no audience for this production. Since the characters can only use what is to hand, bar an empty oil drum or two, their principal resource is simply themselves. This is a production that must do without lights, costume department or purpose-built stage. The enforced minimalism of the characters' *Lear* mimics the elected minimalism of their Dogme creator. This reflexivity was deliberate. As Levring said in interview:

I wanted to do something where Dogme and the story were interlinked – the whole idea of putting on a play without a theater, without props. I wanted these things to come together. . . . Everything was chosen from that point of view – even King Lear was chosen from that point of view. The play is about a man who loses everything, and that's very much what it's like when you're doing a Dogme film and that's very much what's happening to the characters.³

The film therefore not only accords with Dogme principles but also itself enacts the implementation of the Dogme agenda.

Dogme's challenge to its signatories was to work to principles that would set them apart from the mainstream of contemporary film production. Even in their will to be set apart methodologically, however, their inclination to explore their own working practices in their films is thematically of its moment. In this chapter four Shakespeare films of the 1990s and early 2000s are considered: *Prospero's Books* (Peter Greenaway, 1991), *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* (Baz Luhrmann, 1996), *Hamlet* (Michael Almerayda, 2000), *Titus* (Julie Taymor, 2000). Each makes its own construction and medium status part of its subject and here I give detailed attention to the reflexive processes of each film. *Prospero's Books* and *Titus* are less immediately accessible upon a first view than the other two and so these receive more extended attention. I will conclude by asking whether such self-absorption is indicative of an age whose ironic self-awareness has stymied any possible interpretation that turns the gaze outward to a world beyond the (movie) theatre. If, on the other hand, the prevalence of self-reference in these films (which for sheer ubiquity surpasses even that of Shakespeare) is not the sign of an interpretive exhaustion, to what purposes is it put?

PROSPERO'S BOOKS (PETER GREENAWAY, 1991)

The self-advertising artifice of cinema against which the Dogme directors wished to define themselves is exemplified in *extremis* in Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*. Where Dogme rejected conspicuous style, Greenaway made conspicuous style the focus. Where Dogme renounced digital intervention, Greenaway showcased the new digital technology. Where Dogme concentrated on story and character, Greenaway made story an irrelevance and smothered character in excessive costumes while literally depriving all but one of a voice. Where Dogme sought to minimise the mediation in an audience's access to character, Greenaway sought to advertise those layers of mediation in extravagant ways. Where Dogme directors wanted to capture something 'honest', Greenaway maintained that no cinematic image can pretend to 'honesty', so it is ultimately more truthful to exaggerate and broadcast the artifice than to minimise it. For Greenaway, the artifice is the film.

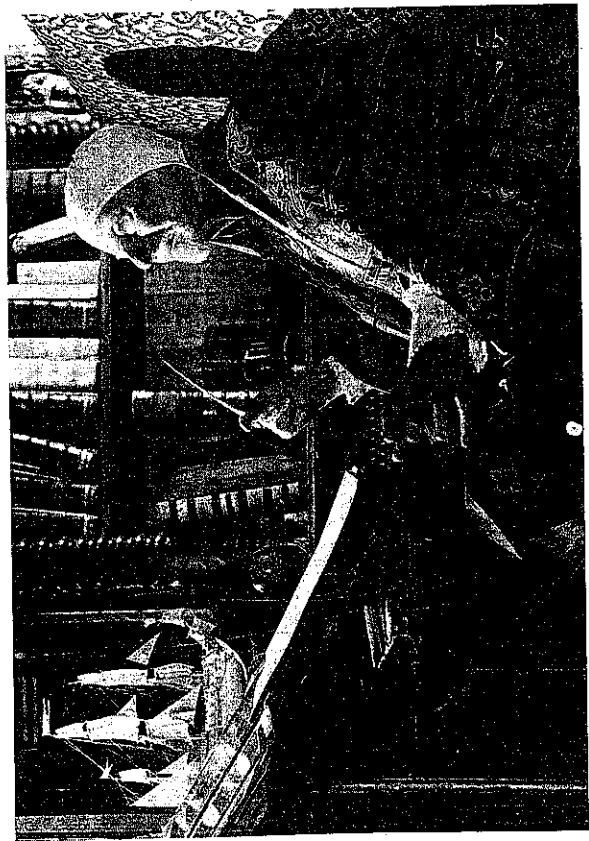
But for all their points of dramatic opposition, both use their films as the means of discussing their own processes and import. *The King is Alive* dramatises a story about mounting a production without resources, even as it puts itself through a comparable process of self-limitation. *Prospero's Books* dramatises (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say 'sequentially

pictorialises', for there is little conventional drama in the film) the story of its own production. The central character sits in his Renaissance scholar's writing cell quietly eliding the functions and associations of Prospero, Shakespeare, Gielgud and Greenaway. The film's principal conceit is that we are watching the processes of composition of *The Tempest*, into which the depicted scholar-playwright seems to be scripting himself as the central protagonist. As he composes his drama, the words that he tries out in his head and those that he commits to paper are made public as the substance of Greenaway's film. Thus there is a proliferation of words not just heard but also seen.

The overlapping encounter between words heard and words seen gives Greenaway the opportunity to explore a set of playful and shifting relationships between the two communicative systems. The occasional contradictions between them helps to suggest that what we are witnessing is not the rehearsed delivery of a text already complete, but rather the gradual emergence of a text from the (stylised) throes of a creative process. The opening word of the play, 'boatswain', for example, is written and uttered many times by the Prospero-Shakespeare figure of the film, sometimes appearing with no punctuation, once with a question mark and once with an exclamation mark, as if the dramatist were still trying to establish what sort of dramatic charge it could most effectively carry. And later textual variations extend beyond the possibilities of punctuation to the replacement of words. At one point, for example, the character Prospero is heard saying to Ariel, 'Thou shalt be as free as mountain air' (my emphasis). There is no textual precedent for 'air' here, which in context, therefore, assumes the role of an experimental pre-Folio draft of the lines. Almost immediately afterwards, however, the shot cuts to the Prospero-Shakespeare dramatist, sitting alone in his writing cell, savouring out loud the lines he has just had his own character speak in role. Rolling the words around on his tongue, he now says, 'Thou shalt be as free as mountain winds' (l.ii.501-2, relined) (my emphasis). On reflection, Prospero-Shakespeare has emended 'air' to 'winds', and so brought it into line with the authorised Folio version. Other variations further illustrate this process of emending the text on the hoof. For example, the deliberate textual adjustment from a spoken version ('Of the mariners, say how thou has dispos'd...') to a written version ('Of the king's ship, the mariners, say how thou hast dispos'd... l.ii.224-5, relined) also brings the text more closely into line with the First Folio. These adjustments make explicit the sense (albeit an artificial, strategic sense) of spontaneous, improvised composition. Prospero-Shakespeare is trying out provisional sound and ink patterns to see what most pleases his eye and ear. As variants are considered and discarded, the text is refined in stages into the known and revered First Folio version. The process we are made privy to in this film, therefore, is the passage of the provisional into the monumental.

Being made privy to the processes of composition recalls a far earlier Shakespeare film that similarly culminated in the emergence of a Shakespearean monument. Georges Méliès' *Shakespeare Writing Julius Caesar* (1907) depicted Shakespeare seated in his study making several unsatisfying attempts to write the assassination scene from *Julius Caesar*. In despair at his blocked imagination, he leaves his desk and papers, paces around the room and then sits in an armchair leaning his head on his hands in the hope of regaining his inspiration. It is while he is sitting in this armchair that his thoughts then take life and are played out before him as the Capitol scene. Finally, after the conspirators have stabbed Caesar and Caesar falls, the scene loses its Roman flavour and returns to being purely Shakespeare's private study once again. Méliès' Shakespeare is left alone once more, evidently delighted by the scene that his muse seems to have delivered to him in neatly finished performative form.

The view of authorship Méliès skittishly proposes in this short film is essentially Romantic in origin. It was Byron who insisted that no books or pens should appear in his portraits since they suggested the prosaic, humdrum trade of books as opposed to the inspired spontaneity of the imagination. Méliès' Shakespeare is in this sense Byronic. It is only by leaving his desk

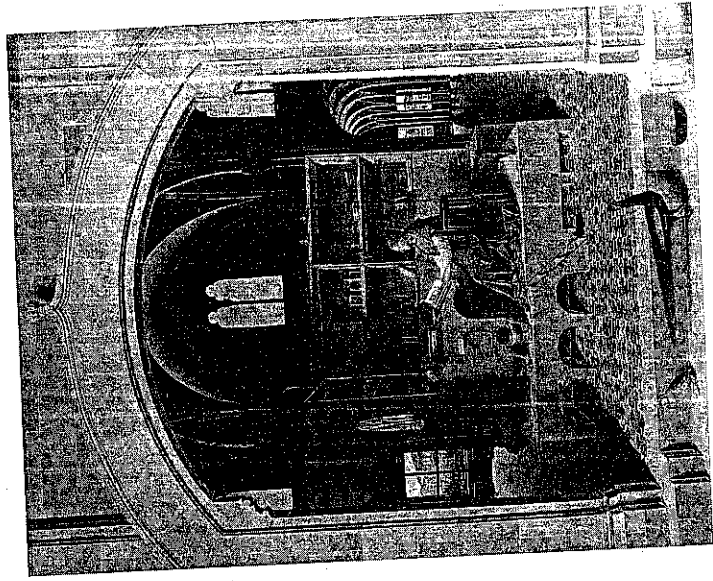


Gielgud's Prospero is presented as a painterly Renaissance doge in *Prospero's Books* (Peter Greenaway, 1991). The design of his writing cell is a direct visual quotation from Antonello da Messina's painting 'St. Jerome in his Study'.

Source: *Prospero's Books* (Peter Greenaway, 1991).

and resting his head on his hands in his armchair, free from all other literary clutter and bookish distraction, that his inspiration can then flow unfettered and his natural genius can find expression. Greenaway's configuration of the Shakespearean dramatist, by contrast, is anti-Byronic, working to a pattern that is ostentatiously learned. Unlike Méliès' Shakespeare, he does not need to leave his books in order to compose. Rather he immerses himself in them the more to write, advertising at every turn his art's dependence on literary study.

Greenaway modelled the look of Prospero's writing cell on Antonello da Messina's painting *St. Jerome In His Study* (c. 1456, The National Gallery, London). This is a portrait of the saint that shows him in left profile, sitting reading at a raked lectern in a study alcove, viewed with a dispassionate detachment through a framing architectural portal. The visual quotation occupies a privileged place among the film's exhausting supply of other artistic and architectural allusions since it sits at its very heart, at the material



Antonello da Messina's 'St. Jerome in his Study', oil on lime, 45.7 x 36.2 cm, c. 1456 (The National Gallery, London). This is the most prominent in a series of Jerome-related references in *Prospero's Books*.

Source: Saint Jerome in his Study by Antonello da Messina. © National Gallery, London.

and intellectual centre of operations. Prospero's study is the visual and narrative anchoring device to which the film constantly returns. Its role is of central importance as the material place from which the rest of the film's action is dramatically conjured. And that same study is also the place that must at some point be abandoned by Prospero if he is to cede his god-like control of the destinies of others, 'abjure' his 'rough magic' and attempt to reintegrate with the rest of fallible humanity. The film's incisive moment in this respect comes when Greenaway's Prospero steps down from the cell, amidst the flurrying montage of closing books. His decision to learn to engage with his world as a participant rather than as an all-determining author and voyeur is thus demonstrated in action by his breaking his quill, closing his book, and leaving his desk and study. The writing cell, both as a place lovingly inhabited, and subsequently as a place resolutely forsaken, thus constitutes the nerve-centre of the film. And its particular design, directly imitative of *St. Jerome in His Study*, evokes a series of pertinent associations.

Prospero's appropriation of Jerome's study space, clothes and writing pose, signalled through the mediation of da Messina, is supported in the film by a series of references to other artistic traditions associated with Jerome (including the broad-brimmed cardinal's hat⁴ and the assumption of the quill by a cherubic Ariel⁵). The cumulative effect of these references is to evoke the saint as a shadowy presence behind Gielgud's scholar playwright throughout the film. The iconography of the robed figure we see studiously engaged at the writing desk in Greenaway's film effectively makes a palimpsest of him: in him both Prospero and Jerome may be simultaneously discerned. The cluster of allusions to Jerome in the film is undoubtedly decadent. In context, however, these allusions are both pertinent and purposeful.

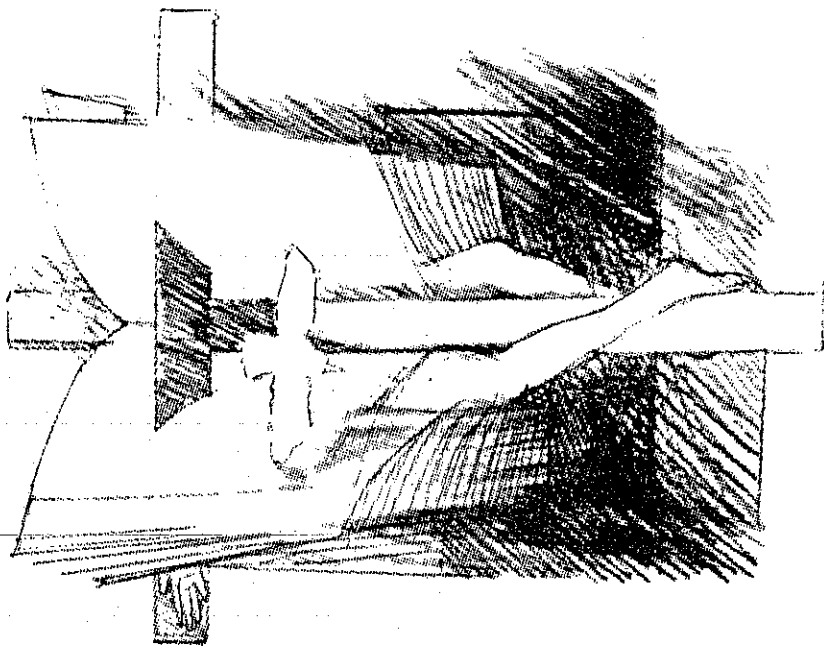
Jerome's life and reputation provide useful referents for a reading of Prospero. Jerome was a fourth-century curmudgeonly scholar and translator. He was known as an avid collector of both sacred and secular texts and even took his books with him when he went as a religious hermit into the Syrian desert for several years. He was astonishingly productive in his work, translating Hebrew and Greek biblical texts into Latin, and making discriminations about the validity and authenticity of the available texts in their various states of corruption. Part of Jerome's bibliographic legacy was a tidy version of the Bible in a language accessible to the educated that was known initially as 'nostra tralatio' ('our translation') and whose later name, the 'Vulgate', reinforced its associations of communal popular proprietorship. In fact it is Jerome's discriminations about the form in which the Scriptures should become authoritatively settled that have largely determined the shape of the Bible we have received from history.

The fact that Jerome is known to have played a determining role in the selection and validating of (biblical) texts for the edification of generations

to come lends significance to the process upon which we see Greenaway's dramatist studiously engaged in his Jerome-like writing cell. Prospero-Shakespeare's discarding of variants in *Prospero's Books*, and determinations about the text that will remain, contributes to the establishing of a monumental text (the First Folio) which will, in its own way, become an article of faith for later generations. The eventual product of Prospero-Shakespeare's judicious textual selections in this film, like the product of Jerome's earlier textual selections, is a book that has been canonised and appropriated by establishment systems. Like the Vulgate, it has taken on a status that makes it part of a shared cultural heritage, communally 'ours' in some properly vulgar way. In the published film script there is even a daring suggestion that a conflation between these two texts (Christian Bible and Shakespeare First Folio) may even have been intended. On Greenaway's skeletally drawn schematic chart of the twenty-four books, reproduced in the film script, the final book is shown entombing a line-drawn image of the crucified Christ who lies literally caught and embedded within its pages. There is both an elision implied in the image between two 'sacred' texts (Bible and Shakespeare's First Folio) and a yet more radical suggestion that the First Folio has, literally, subsumed the matter of that earlier sacred text (swallowing its subject within its own capacious pages). Indeed, in doing so, it may also have supplanted that earlier work in some cultural functions from the perspective of later generations. The drawing of the Christ figure swallowed and fixed by Greenaway's final book, in its range of possible suggestiveness, is self-consciously audacious.

The canonised Folio, produced before our eyes in the course of *Prospero's Books*, does not suffer the fate of the other books from Prospero's prized library. It is one of only two to escape the bibliographic purge that constitutes the culmination of the film. For most of the film the desire to destroy books is presented as a dangerously subversive force, which the imaginative mind of the dramatist chooses to embody principally in his darker creations, Caliban and Antonio. Visually, the film can even be read as telling a simply schematised tale of the good and the bad, identifiable by their reverence or otherwise for books. Caliban grossly defiles them and, in Milan, Antonio orchestrates their burning. By contrast, Miranda's rapt absorption in *The Book of End Plautis* may be taken as evidence of her goodness.

The end of the film, however, mocks the suggestion that the destruction of books desecrates all that is most valuable in life. Following Ariel's daring critical intervention in temporarily appropriating the quill to write in the book, Prospero cannot return to writing his play. Seeing his role as author momentarily usurped by another enables him to relinquish it permanently. He breaks the quill, shuts the book and steps down from his writing cell to participate in the world beyond. His decisive closing of his book seems



The final book on Greenaway's line-drawn chart, reproduced in the published screenplay, has swallowed the Gospel subject within its pages. The audacious implications of this image are explored in *Prospero's Books* partly through the elision between St Jerome and Prospero-Shakespeare, each of whom produces a canonical text of some 'religious' significance.

Source: From *Prospero's Books* by Peter Greenaway, published by Chatto & Windus. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd.

to trigger an extended montage of many other books snapping, or being snapped, shut. The books replace one another in the frame at a dizzying rate. The speed of the sequence, and the sharp clap on the sound track accompanying each percussive book closure, create both visually and aurally the impression of applause, and suggest a causal relationship between the two elided acts. Are we hearing and seeing applause *because* the books are being abjured, *because* they are being shut with an irreversible finality? Is the rejection of books finally being celebrated? Although Greenaway describes the film as 'a project that deliberately emphasises and celebrates the text as

text', it still seems to present the rejection of books as laudable and, at the last, lauded.⁶ At odds with Greenaway's claim, the film seems to celebrate text less as text and more as design artefact – one amidst an array of others. As text, as printed words, it proves expendable. This inversion of what has seemed to be, and what Greenaway announces as, the value system promoted in the film is confirmed in the penultimate sequence when Prospero and Ariel themselves become supremely systematic destroyers of books. As the books are one by one annihilated, the prolonged pyrotechnic display, and accompanying celebratory Michael Nyman soundtrack, proclaims itself the climactic destination of the film's narrative.

In spring 1994, a conference was held at Yale University entitled 'Beyond Gutenberg'. Edward Tufte, known for his graphic design of digitised information packages, delivered a nostalgic paper about the culture of the book. In the course of his paper he held up a beautiful old volume which had been Ben Jonson's copy of Euclid. By this emotive gesture in such a context, he drew attention to the limitations of digitisation by reminding his audience of the beauty, the unique sensuality and the ability to accumulate meaningful associations of books.⁷ In *Prospero's Books*, Greenaway makes a similar gesture by offering twenty-four old and beautiful volumes for the sensory appreciation of his spectatorship. Unlike Tufte, however, Greenaway is not, as becomes obvious, ultimately offering these books to be viewed in a spirit of nostalgia. In the course of the film, they undergo increasingly violating treatment. They are defecated upon, triumphantly slammed shut and finally destroyed by fire and water. The film, itself an extravagantly flamboyant celebration of cinematic and digitised technology, therefore ends in a pyrotechnic orgy of book destruction. In such a film, the place of hard-copy literature cannot but look insecure. From the perspective of the end of the film, the books seem to have been showcased less to highlight their irreplaceable distinctness than to testify to their own demise. There is almost a sense of satisfying teleology about their fate. The scene, after all, is notably lacking any hint of the elegiac or regretful.

In effect, the bibliographical purge at the end of the film literalises the film's unacknowledged metaphor: for words as agents of meaning are consistently devitalised by the film's design, and in the end dramatically and triumphantly destroyed by it. The arrival of the spectacularly showy technology (the Graphic Paintbox) that Greenaway pioneers in *Prospero's Books* gives him an appropriate platform from which to narrate the demise of the book. *Prospero's Books* is a film that not only presides over the progressive neglect, rejection and eventual destruction of the book, but also self-consciously celebrates its own ascendancy specifically at the book's expense. The Shakespeare Folio and the text of *The Tempest* are allowed to survive, but only, as it were, within the confines of the film which becomes their guardian and vehicle of

transmission. In the closing sequence of the film, Ariel jumps on to and then out beyond a piece of parchment. Though it cannot hold the energetic Ariel, this book fragment remains behind as the film's final cinematic simulacrum: parchment on screen can look persuasively weathered but it neither smells like parchment nor crinkles to the touch. This is a film which glories in reminding us what a book is and can do, only then to present itself as the gleeful agent of its displacement.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S ROMEO+JULIET (BAZ LUHRMANN, 1996)

Whereas in Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* Shakespeare's authorship is part-dramatised and part-effaced by an array of competing authorial agents, a paradoxical relationship to the source play and its authoring is flagged in the very title of Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet*. The unprecedented authorial designation in the title – *William Shakespeare's*... – implicitly appears to authenticate the film as authoritatively Shakespearean, as the film that, in effect, Shakespeare's protocinematic imagination might prophetically have written. However, the replacement of the familiar *Romeo and Juliet* in the second half of the title with the funkier *Romeo+Juliet* equally implicitly problematises this effect, unstitching the semblance of Shakespearean authenticity courted by the inclusion of Shakespeare's name. Through the intrusive 'plus' sign in its title, the film symbolically insists upon its distinction from its Shakespearean source and specifically upon its right to a hip contemporaneity not limited by that source. In this contradictory play of Shakespeareanness and unShakespeareanness, the title emblematises the dialectic of the film as a whole which enjoys the contradictory pull, the appeal and the rejection, of those elements in the play that its history in the theatre has enshrined as iconic.

The theatre's role as part of the precursor territory for the film is implicitly the subject of exposition in the film. If *Prospero's Books* in part narrates the demise of the book and the ascendancy of digital technology as the favoured means of recycling Shakespeare, Baz Luhrmann's film joins the fray to narrate the waning of a public performance space as the enduring site for presenting Shakespeare. It is the dramatically derelict ruined theatre on the seedy beachfront (whose surviving proscenium arch still proclaims the words 'The Sycamore Grove') that stands for such a space in the terms of the film.⁸ It was Luhrmann's intention that this structure should act as a memorial to a grandly ornate movie theatre.⁹ In its afterlife as a ruined shell, however, it has been transmuted into a found theatrical space, complete with high arch and platform stage. It not only resembles the ruins of a theatre, but the

improvisatory uses to which it is put confirm its specifically theatrical identity. Here local youths claim it as their own, giving a heightened charge to aspects of their own lives by rendering them performative in ways that correspond to the impressive scale of the stage and the grandeur of its framing.

The theatrical ruin is first introduced approximately ten minutes into the film. In order to appreciate the drama of its effect in the context of the film as a whole, and its tonal contrast with everything that precedes it, it is worth documenting the film's opening sequences.

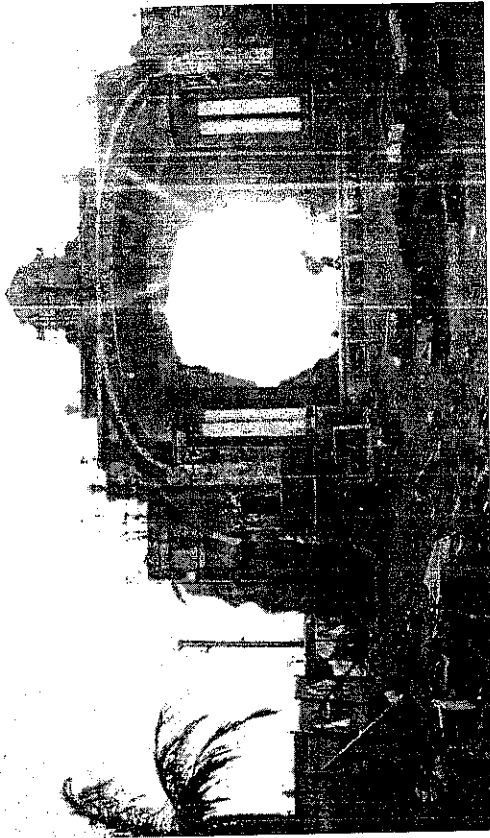
The film opens on a newscaster (Edwina Moore) delivering the play's prologue from within the bounded space of a television screen. For a brief moment the story of the feuding families and the star-crossed lovers seems narratable, containable, amenable to tidy, newsworthy summing-up. As the newscaster finishes speaking, however, the shot speed-zooms directly into the graininess of the screen, exploding the sense of narrative and visual containment implied by the televisually framed opening and breaking apart its frame borders into a far more expansive world. The film now bursts explosively into life, resisting fixity or containment in the manic freneticism of its scene-setting title sequence. As a dizzying onslaught of images maps a dramatic urban landscape (a contemporary world of heightened aesthetics shot principally in Mexico City but called Verona Beach), the newscaster's words from the prologue are now heard again. No longer delivered with the dispassionate detachment of a news anchorwoman, they are now spoken in emotionally laden tones in portentous male voice-over. Just as televisual space has ceded to a version of cinematic space, so a television news voice has given way to a cinematic trailer voice. All the sensationalism and drama inherent in the story that a journalistic training has held at bay is now allowed uninhibited expression. Simultaneously, amidst the whistle-stop tour of character and setting, lines from the prologue are intermittently flashed up on the screen as a series of attention-grabbing newspaper headlines. For all the crazy pacing of the visual introductions and the headily operatic insistence of the soundtrack, the processes of immersion in Shakespearean language are therefore gradual, and surreptitiously repetitive in ways that help acclimatise the car gradually to the non-naturalistic nature of the language.

From the pace and pizzazz of the title sequence, a wipe then transports us into the film narrative proper, to a gang shoot-out at a petrol station between the boys from the house of Montague (Hispanics) and the boys from the house of Capulet (white trash beach bums). This shoot-out comically pastiches stylistic aspects of a Sergio Leone spaghetti Western (sustained close-ups on the still, steely face of Tybalt accompanied by a twangy spare Morricone-esque melody on guitar with breathy, reedy pipes). In its free-wheeling filmic tributes, the scene also mimics the stylish fight choreography of a John Woo film (extreme slow motion shots of a character diving sideways

firing simultaneously from two guns). This is a film which signals clearly and early the pleasure it wishes to take in its own cinematic identity and which aligns itself – in appropriately ironic vein – with a glamorous heritage of savvily self-aware action films. The shoot-out cedes to a city-wide helicopter car chase accompanied once again by the heightened and insistent strains of a soundtrack imitative of Orff's *Carmina Burana*, and it is this sequence that in turn leads into the scene which is to be of central interest here.

The tone changes dramatically as Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio) is introduced. He is discovered at dawn on the beach sitting ruminating beneath the 'Sycamore Grove' arch. This is the first of three appearances of the ruined theatre in the film. Sentimentally lit by the dawn light, he sits perched on the edge of a broad stage lost in an indulgent reverie as, in internalised voice-over, he rehearses his paradoxical platitudes about his love for Rosaline ('O brawling love, O loving hate... O heavy lightness, serious vanity' *Li.174-176*). It is a moment that iconises the particular variety of fragile, almost androgynous, sex appeal that characterised its star. In comparison with the eye-dizzying speed-zooms and ferocious velocity of the editing in the title sequence, the obsessive swish pans of the shoot-out, and the visual and acoustic excess of the chase, Romeo's reverie beneath the ruined theatrical arch cannot but seem both wordy and static. This is, in effect, the first moment of peace in the film. Taken by the poeticism of his own lacklustre words, Romeo even jots them down in a notebook for future reference. And having thus 'scripted' them, he has the opportunity to 'perform' them soon afterwards in conversation with Benvolio further up the same beach.

The shots of the ruined theatre are given more potential symbolic weight than any single image that has preceded them by virtue of the fact that for once the camera is allowed a moment of pause. This is not merely another fleeting contributor to an atmospheric collage of architectural impressions, as previous locations have been. The lingering of the shot works in concert with Romeo's own lingering to suggest there might be something more significant about this place than any yet encountered. As narratively employed within the film, the ruined symbol of a theatre is first introduced as the location in which tired phrases may be recycled by the linguistically indulgent. It also subsequently comes to stand for the site in which dramatic writing destined in time for a more vibrant performance arena may first be tested. In illustration of this, we hear Romeo's words twice: once in voice-over as they emerge from within the proscenium arch and then again a few minutes later – no longer now in space designated 'theatrical' – as he tries them 'for real' on his cousin. In response to Romeo's string of rehearsed oxymorons, Benvolio (Dash Mihok) can scarcely suppress a snigger. It is a laugh that is partly prepared for by Shakespeare. Its significances are, however, here transformed. In the first analysis, this Benvolio's snigger serves as a lightning conductor for potential



The ruined sea-front arch has a desolate symbolic force in *Romeo+Juliet* (1996). It stands like an architectural abortion, a monument to its own evisceration.

Source: *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* © 1996 Twentieth Century Fox. All rights reserved.

embarrassment among an audience. That is, any potential discomfort about the use of heightened language in the context of a hip movie is diffused by being anticipated on screen. More specifically, however, Benvolio's response also implies that there is something contrived-sounding and inauthentic about such phrases when voiced away from the willed artifice of theatrical playing space. Such words cannot simply be transferred from one space to another unadapted, as Romeo has literally attempted to do, without in the process striking the ear as embarrassingly self-conscious. The moment is neatly illustrative of a thesis consistently adhered to in the film as a whole, which itself fearlessly and radically transforms words originally penned for theatrical space.

The particular speech that Luhmann tracks in its symbolic pretence of crossing performance media from theatrical to filmic space is, however, the most self-consciously contrived and unfelt of any in the play, illustrating as it does Romeo's indulgent wish to believe himself in love. To single out this speech to illustrate theatrical language's inability to make the transfer to film unaltered without then sounding overblown, therefore, unfairly weights the dice against approaches to adaptation less radically transformative than Luhmann's tends to be. Reminding an audience how forced or silly heightened language can seem in the unsparing linguistic exposure of cinematic

space is consistent with Luhmann's agenda, which is partly to minimise just such heightened linguistic effects. True to the implications of the gentle derision which greets Romeo's naïve attempt to carry words unadjusted from one performance space to another, the showcasing of Shakespearean language in Luhmann's film is kept strategically economical. It is noteworthy, for example, that the standard theatrical trailer for the film used none at all. This was a film bursting with editorial energy, hip sound, engaging young faces and stunning cinematography: its script was not considered helpful, or even necessary, for its marketing. The hope was to circumvent innate fears of Shakespeare in the movie-going public by rendering his language peripheral to the film's operations. It was a marketing strategy that evidently paid off: the film's box office has comfortably exceeded that for any other Shakespeare film made to date.¹⁰

The ruined theatre's second appearance is as the space in which the Montague revellers assemble in preparation to crash the Capulet party. They use it as their warm-up arena for the real action, and here, crucially, they take the (Queen Mab) tabs that will propel them forcibly into a *mélange* of drug-induced impressions at the party itself. Using theatrical space as the antechamber and rehearsal space for the unfettered cinematographic hedonism of the party once again establishes a clear hierarchical relationship between the two performance arenas. The theatre is necessary as a point of rehearsal and departure. It is, however, clear that it must be left for the drama really to begin and, from Romeo's point of view, for a supposed love to be replaced by a real one. Remaining in theatrical space keeps his love artificial and phoney. By contrast, leaving it enables him to encounter the real thing.

The symbolism of the ruined theatre becomes most explicitly delineated, however, in its final appearance. In all its visual drama it stands within the iconographic scheme of Luhmann's film almost like an architectural abortion, a monument to the fact that the life has been ripped from its middle. Given the desolate force of the structural shell that remains, it is no accident that it is in this space that Mercutio too is eviscerated. It is here that he takes the wound to his middle and then self-consciously performs his own death. Once he has taken his final bow, he himself becomes another forlorn monument to something once vital and now gone as the innards seep from his gaping stomach. His body is left, dramatically framed by the desultory theatre arch until, with deliberate stylisation, the lights are brought down on them both. The symbolic scheme is brutally clear: a human lifeless form is left encased by an architectural one. Meanwhile the living action now continues elsewhere, in a world beyond the theatre, in a medium where old words can yet be revived by being rethought for new contexts (if, in this instantiation, through slightly uneven central vocal performances).

This public performative arena is a form, the film's iconography seems to declare, whose moment is passed and whose power to move or to signify now depends upon its status as a ruined monument. And, as if to reinforce the point, following Benvolio's embarrassment at Romeo's use of heightened language in the early stages of the film, the cousins subsequently stroll off to a seedy pool hall along the front. The name across its door is 'The Globe Theatre', its presence on Verona Beach serving as a piquant reminder of a more traditional acting arena that, with a baroque flourish, this film consigns to faded has-been status. Benvolio's snigger at the *untopicality* of what the film has implicitly labelled *theatrical* forms of language perhaps even extends to the film itself. Certainly it is a film that energetically relishes exploring those aspects of film-making – speed of editing, variety of shooting styles and shooting speeds, split-screen imagery, visual scope and grandeur of effect – which set it apart most clearly from theatre.

And yet it is not just *theatre's* demise over which the film presides, for the ruined space upon which the lights are brought down was once, apparently, itself a *movie* theatre. The ruined space therefore has a double identity and, for those able to see through the apparently theatrical character of the ruin to its authorially determined history as a cinema, the elegy for it implicit in the film takes on another layer of meaning. What might be the purpose of having a ruined movie theatre haunt a key space at key moments in a film that so flamboyantly celebrates its own specifically cinematic energy? At a first take, the image can seem wonderfully inappropriate. Cinema is far from derelict in this film. Placing it as a noble ruin among the washed up and unwanted on a seedy beach can, therefore, seem perverse. However, if the movie theatre is taken not as the general representative of cinema, but more precisely as the representative of a public arena in which films are viewed communally, its demise may be seen as more topically pertinent. Such a socialising architecture is in ruins before the film opens as if in acknowledgement that the primary reception context of films is no longer communal movie theatres but rather the isolated and isolating space of private living rooms. This same space is, of course, evoked by the television screen with which the film both opens and closes. It is the viewing space implied by this television screen – the domestic living room – that symbolically puts paid to theatrical movie-going, that consigns it to its status as a noble ruin. Economically and sociologically it has supplanted it. The relative buoyancy of the rental, sell-through and pay-to-view market for films in comparison with their life on theatrical release may even, therefore, be seen as obliquely allegorised in pictorial terms in the ruination of the movie theatre.

The elision between cinematic and theatrical public space that the ruined monument ultimately represents offers itself as a composite foil to the more private spaces of reception and consumption which Luhmann's film rightly

seems to foresee itself inhabiting. The two 'houses' upon which Mercutio calls down a 'plague' as he stands beneath the theatrical arch carries an additional frisson of disturbing meaning in the context of this double-duty performative space. The eloquence of the lights being brought down simultaneously on Mercutio's dead body and on the scarred architecture of the cinema-cum-'found theatre' contains the film's comment - half victory dance, half monody - upon its own capacity to thrive in comparison with cultural forms that necessarily depend upon communal public space. These, suggest the visuals of the desecrated beachfront, have no future. As the prostitute's suggestive dance for a lone man further along the same beach also implies, spectating pleasures have become socially fractured, solitary. As literally configured by the small screen at the beginning and end of *Romeo+Juliet*, a cinematic world no longer needs a communally receptive audience in a designated public place in order to be summoned into being. It is in fact now more usual, as the elegiac symbolism of Luhrmann's film perhaps forecasts, for that cinematic world to have been wrested from public space and resited in a domestic context where a television screen must serve as its vehicle of delivery. While home movie-viewing thrives, public performative arenas - both theatres and cinemas - are left to crumble in spaces no longer fashionable, memorials to their own outmodishness. In graphically literalised, hyperbolic form, Luhrmann's film shows us one such.¹¹

HAMLET (MICHAEL ALMEREYDA, 2000)

At the close of Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet*, the remnants of the narratively and stylistically explosive drama are reeled back in and squeezed once more into the space of a television frame as the newscaster appropriates the Prince's final words ('A glooming peace this morning with it brings . . . V.iii.304-309). In the sanitised context of the newsroom, the story is once again subsumed into a form that makes it sound amenable to tidily summative phrasing and neat narrative packaging. It is an impression that sits oddly with the heady passion that has characterised the story that precedes it.

The figure of a newscaster that bookends *Romeo+Juliet* as the uninvolved voice of narration and commentary was, in effect, to stage a come-back four years later as the voice of summation (in place of Fortinbras, with a few additional lines from the Player King) at the end of Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*. The film, independently made, was humbler and less technically ambitious than its Bazmark predecessor. Orson Welles had famously shot his *Macheth* (1948) in twenty-one days, describing it as a rough charcoal sketch of the play. It was with the same 'spirit, roughness and energy' that Almereyda said he wanted to make his *Hamlet*. Accordingly, it was shot on small, mobile,

agile super 16 mm cameras, 'fast and cheap' in a New York that is to be taken as a media-saturated version of Elsinore.¹²

Almereyda imagines his Hamlet (Ethan Hawkes) as a present day disaffected teenager and would-be film-maker, trying to impose shape and purpose on the myriad images by which he finds himself assailed in present-day, corporate Manhattan. Ophelia (Julia Stiles) is a surly, depressive but ultimately grimly bully-able waif of a teenager, resentful but silent in the face of the infantilising treatment she receives from her father (who insists on tying her shoe-laces and turns up at her apartment carrying balloons). Her will to find a point of fixity in a baffling and bruising world leads her to an interest in photography and developing. These two quietly 'alternative' and vulnerable-seeming teenagers are ranged against the slickly presented business world that the adults of the 'Denmark Corporation' inhabit: expensively dressed, materially smug and capable of significant brutality. Hamlet slouches through this self-congratulatory world, aware of himself as an introspective misfit in it, and advertising his resistance to its codes and values by parading his obtrusive woolly hat among the expensive suits and studiously casual weekend wear. He does not, however, move unarmed through their midst, but rather wields his pixelvision video camera as a consoling form of self-defence. The world of Manhattan/Elsinore is already caught and replayed obsessively within a series of frames generated by its own taste for surveillance systems. Hamlet contributes to its removal from too direct an engagement with the real by adding his own stream of screened images to its mediated character.

The memory of a person caught on film has, since the earliest days of photography, been thought to have something ghostly about it. Like a ghost, it is an image that exists in separate space from the person it represents and, like a ghost, it can survive even when that person dies. The tenacity with which the inhabitants of Almereyda's corporate Elsinore adhere to photographic, ghostly images of each other - often in preference to the more substantial counterparts of those images in the real world - is partly symptomatic of a pervasive anxiety about the violence that potentially (and actually) characterises real encounters in such a world. Mediated versions of each other, by contrast, are sufficiently sanitised and distanced to be reassuringly incapable of direct brutality. Such captured, ghostly visions of life even become the medium of ironic exchange in this Elsinore. Thus 'The Mousetrap' to which Hamlet invites the court is a filmic montage of found footage and manipulated images from other sources,¹³ and the 'herbs' distributed by this Ophelia in her distraction are the very literal 'remembrancer' of polaroid photographs. The formalised 'giving' of these particularly ghostly, unreal images to the authority figures in this world ironically inverts the habitual relationship these characters adopt to such images. More usually, images of others are surreptitiously and proprietorially 'taken' (ostensibly to ensure

their own security). In fact, so pervasive is the ghostly image in this world (on security cameras, on photographs, on old home movies, as seen in reflective surfaces) that when a 'real' ghost (Sam Shepard as Hamlet senior) arrives, his identity may mark him out as otherworldly but his appearance is not in itself sufficient to do so. Being a shadowy figure on a security screen does not, that is, distinguish him from the range of other shadowy simulacra around him. Instead, he must choreograph a demonstration of his own otherworldliness, which he wryly does by disappearing into a canned drinks machine. In life, Hamlet senior had been erased by the ambitions of his brother and his thrusting corporate capitalism: in death he near-allegorises the animating force of his own extinction by allowing himself to 'be disappeared' by the pervasive representative of just such a thrusting corporate capitalism – a Pepsi dispenser. Trace projections, photographic and cinematographic memories may be the preferred version of messier personhood among the characters in this world, but the real ghost in their midst is able to demonstrate how much more organically *his* is this medium by economically finding some oblique humour in it.

When characters do step out from behind their security-inducing cameras, monitors, telephones and wire-taps to face each other in shared space, their engagements can be far from pretty, as is illustrated, for example, in Ophelia's forcible eviction from the Guggenheim Museum or in Claudius's thuggish assault on Hamlet in the public laundry. Claudius's expensive coat and Armani tie are too thin a civilised veneer to contain the simmering, primitive brutality that lies beneath. Hamlet's obsessive attachment to his camera and to his film-making is perhaps even understandable in such an environment: it helps to abstract him from too frequent or too direct an engagement with an abusive world.

Almeryda's own film-making history has a touch of his Hamlet about it. In 1992 he had himself shot a downtown love story entitled *Another Girl* *Another Planet* on a pixel 2000 camera (a film he later transferred to 16mm for the festival circuit). In fact, it is Almeryda's own camera that Hawkes' Hamlet is seen using in the film for his video diaries. However, despite the peripheral echo between protagonist and director in their shooting format, independence and modesty of operation, Almeryda's own film-making has considerably more panache and control than does that of his Hamlet. Hamlet's films are improvisatory, magpie-ish and a little indulgent. It is part of the condition of his youthfulness that his films should be characterised as much by angularity and attitude as by disciplined design. Almeryda's film, by contrast, is more controlled and its acts of appropriation and reference more purposeful.

Nevertheless, Hamlet's film-making (and film-viewing) offers an eloquent counterpoint to the film that contains him, and Almeryda's film is able to

trade upon Hamlet's filmic self-inscriptions to help delineate his character with efficient economy. Hamlet's willed status as a misfit raging against the system finds expression in his choices of hero. Given his desire to define himself against his moment, these are drawn from a fairly predictable pool. The inevitable photographs of Che Guevara and Malcolm X on his wall, and James Dean's performance in *Rebel Without A Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955) – a film from the 'dissenting mainstream' which Hamlet watches admiringly – establish the romantic tradition of the disaffected and militant rebel with which Hamlet wishes to align himself. In addition, Hawkes thought Hamlet had some kinship with Holden Caulfield or Kurt Cobain.¹⁴ The sheer number of character parallels in play makes of this Hamlet's malaise almost that of an era rather than merely that of a solitary individual at odds with his generation. Levity may not be part of his repertoire, but an earnest sense of spiritual connection to an artistic and political tradition of resistance is. Even the brief film clip of John Gielgud as Hamlet addressing the skull – for all its gestural preciousness as viewed in the context of a contemporary teenage world of woolly hats and public laundries¹⁵ – does place Hawkes' Hamlet in a community of Hamlets, adding a historicised layer to his voice. It also pithily showcases the skull that the sterile and oversanitised world of this gleaming Manhattan would not otherwise easily be able to supply.

Appropriately for a version of Elsinore, Almeryda's Manhattan/Elsinore is a world whose abundance of surveillance cameras and listening devices necessarily collapses the theoretical distinction between public and private space. So unstable is any notion of privacy in the Elsinore Shakespeare scripted that not only might there be (and frequently is) a spy or an eavesdropper behind every pillar or arras, but even the established theatrical convention of the inaudibility to other characters of a soliloquy is brought into question. Thus when Polonius says to Ophelia, 'You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said, / We heard it all' (III.ii.181-182), the obsessively intrusive character of the place just allows for the possibility that the 'all' Polonius claims to have heard really is all. It is not impossible that this might even include the 'To be or not to be' speech delivered shortly after he and the King have put themselves strategically into hiding, specifically to listen to Hamlet.¹⁶ In stage *Hamlets* personal privacy can, therefore, be compromised in ways that even breach theatrical conventions. By comparison, film versions can offer the central protagonist the intimate privacy of the interior monologue whose freedom from prying intrusion remains inviolate. Like many film Hamlets before him, Hawkes' Hamlet often soliloquises in voice-over. He, therefore, has the luxury of enjoying the privacy of the inside of his own head as the one space that remains immune to the variety of surveillance systems – spies, cameras, wire taps – by which he is surrounded.

Yet more pervasive than the CCTV cameras in Almeréyda's Manhattan/Elsinore are the plethora of mirrors, screens and other glistening surfaces that inhibit the perception of depth in anything. The very fabric of this world seems to conspire with its inhabitants to protect its secrets by reflecting back to the onlooker little beyond his or her own image. The pursuit of profundity in a world of gleaming reflective surfaces is necessarily frustrating. Nevertheless, the films this Hamlet makes in his desire to capture and make sense of his world – if at a mediated remove – are grainy, black and white, and self-consciously 'arty' in ways that seem to court a stylish profundity. In his dying moments, through a series of subjectivised flashbacks, he even tries to remake scenes from the film that contains him in his own black and white, narratively more opaque and suggestive mode. Brief selected images from the film – the ghost, Gertrude's weeping face, Laertes in the churchyard, Claudius hitting him in the public laundry, kissing Ophelia – are thus replayed but now stylistically transformed, drained of colour, clarity and context. Fleeting, we see Hamlet's own eye in the midst of these remade images as the force that has teasingly transformed intelligible narrative into something more stylishly abstract and enigmatic. His attempt to appropriate his own story and retell it in a tradition more akin to an abstruse art-house style is as telling about his profound sense of dis-ease amidst the world of corporate Manhattan as are any of his disillusioned words. That his dying impulse should be to recast his own story in an exaggeratedly expressionist aesthetic is perhaps appropriate for a disaffected young man whose most replayed cinematic image in life had been of himself with a gun held alternately to his temple and in his mouth. In his obsessive freeze-framing and reviewing of this image he had seemed to be assessing the artistic efficacy of the pose as much as the psychological necessity to pull the trigger. The question seems to be less whether he should kill himself and more whether the *image* of his killing himself is artistically pleasing. Unlike Shakespeare's Othello, who in his dying moments appears to want to rewrite the substance of his own story to make it accord more readily with what he would like to believe to be true, Almeréyda's Hamlet seems intent on changing only the style of the telling of his.

The line the film takes as its opener is Hamlet's 'I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth' (II.ii.295–296). It is a fair warning of the priorities of this Hamlet who not only announces that he has 'lost all [his] mirth', but who clearly has. And Hamlet's lack of mirth is symptomatic of the tonal priorities of the film as a whole. The loss of the gravedigger scene, for example – perhaps the most obvious locus of humour in the play – emblematises the loss of skittishness in the film more generally.¹⁷ It is, however, noticeable that Hamlet's comment on his own mirthlessness is not here, as it is in Shakespeare, a line spoken to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but rather to himself, or rather to a camera he has turned upon himself.



Ethan Hawkes' Hamlet is introspective, angst-ridden, self-regarding.

Source: Photography from *Hamlet* used under license from Miramax Film Corp. All rights reserved.

Having denied us a Hamlet given to wryness at the wretched way the world is, the film gives us instead a character not just driven by earnest anxiety but even a little vainly self-regarding about his own meaningfully angst-ridden state. Hawkes plays this youthful self-obsession and sense of being romantically pitted against the stream of things with conviction and control, but his character lacks the tonal range that Shakespeare's Hamlet gives us. This is a Hamlet whose engagements with the world tend to be either pained or brooding and a large proportion of which happen at one remove, through the mediation of his camera.

It is the film's triumph that it allows its protagonist sufficient space to pursue his particular artistic choices without either patronising him for the clichéd character of his attitudinal impulses or itself slipping into a comparable aesthetic. Conventionally enough, the *narrative* tension in the film is between Hamlet and Claudius who seem to occupy different worlds – the private and melancholic versus the public and unctuously corporate. The *stylistic* tension of the film, however, is between two competing modes of filmmaking, exemplified by Almeréyda and his youthful alter-ego protagonist. It is Almeréyda's luxury that his film can incorporate the interesting but indulgent self-regard of Hamlet's filmic experiments while still distinguishing itself clearly from them. Hamlet's style of film-making is a contrapuntal force and

inspiration. The opposition the epigraph implicitly establishes between the public stage and private poetry is telling about the two sides of Shakespeare's own professional life in 1593 when he was arguably more poised between being a poet and a dramatist than he would be at any subsequent point in his career. His announced contempt for the admiration of the masses in comparison with the more elevated delights of poetry adheres to the conventional contemporary hierarchies applied to poetry and the stage. In the context of the writing for the stage Shakespeare had himself recently produced and would produce again, however, it cannot but read disingenuously. For in this period, in between drinking at the Castalia spring, he was not himself above pandering to the tastes of the 'vulgas' in the public playhouses.

Titus Andronicus is full of 'villia', of the very basenesses against which Shakespeare declares himself high-mindedly opposed in his preface to *Venus and Adonis*. One of the subjects at issue in the play is the relationship of word to spectacle, of tongue to hand, of language to action, and implicitly of poetry to the stage. The play offers a series of graphic metaphors to dramatise the encounter between these things. The most potent of these is to be found in the sensationally silenced figure of the once poetic Lavinia. Later Shakespeare plays would less controversially be carried by their dramatic poetry – that is by poetry that adds charge to the action rather than, as occasionally seems to be the case in *Titus Andronicus*, stalling, compromising or competing with its dramatic imperatives. In this early tragedy the poetry can sometimes appear to resist a responsiveness to dramatic context. Poetry and action intermittently bump against each other in extreme and unreconciled forms – most notably in Marcus's beautiful but painfully extended mythological ramble when faced by the newly mutilated Lavinia (a speech that poses a significant challenge for both actors in performance). And the play itself even seems invested with a self-consciousness about the percussive choreography of the encounter between its poetry and action. This self-consciousness is perhaps most evident in Titus's absurdist instruction to Lavinia to carry his dismembered hand in her mouth, and the absurdist spectacle that results when she then does. In the fiercely anatomical symbolic scheme of the play, the carrying of a dismembered hand in a silenced mouth can be seen as expressive of the dramatic peculiarities that can arise from attempting to merge action and language. The scene, in all its unsettling ludicrousness, is almost a comically self-aware performance treatise on the potential for clumsiness in the encounter between tongue and hand, poetry and action in this play. The dialogue into which Shakespeare's competing professional allegiances as poet and dramatist explicitly enter in *Titus Andronicus* is certainly both a peculiar and an intimate one.

The potential disempowerment that could be felt by an aspiring poet writing for the stage finds its intense embodiment in Lavinia (identified by

flattering foil to Almercyda's throughout the film. When he dies, the edgy, narratively obtuse style than has been his trademark dies with him and Almercyda's film is left to offer a swift conclusion of the aftermath in its own more conventional linear narrative form. As if to highlight the stylistic contrast, Almercyda even cedes to the most conventional of screen narrative forms by leaving the drama's summation to be told as a piece of packaged broadcast news. In context, the newscaster's slick presentation of plain narrative, literal-minded accompanying visuals and simple moralising about the story told seems like a symptom of the banalising world against which this Hamlet had sought to define himself. Almercyda generously sustains the illusion that in the absence of Hamlet there is no one left in this world to generate interesting visual metaphors about the way things are or to tell odd tales oddly. In the context of such a film, however, this is clearly a willed illusion. Until the final sequence, in which Almercyda seems deliberately to disengage the film's imaginative energy and retreat into automatic narrative mechanisms, his own metaphorical imagination has been consistently interesting and his narrative instincts considerably affecting.

TITUS (JULIE TAYMOR, 2000)

It was as an exciting and daring theatre director that Julie Taymor was known in 1998 as she went into pre-production with *Titus*. One of her innovative and adventurous stage productions had been *Titus Andronicus* in an off-Broadway production in 1994. Her sense of affinity with the impulses and dilemmas of the play was in part rooted in the contemporaneity of the play's examination of violence. As she turned her attention to the subsequent film, however, the creative process the play itself metaphorises might well have had an additional resonance for her. The question the play asks repeatedly – what to do with poetic language in a context that primarily values spectacle? – is one with which she too necessarily had to engage. The specific problem of balancing language against dramatic action is, after all, as pertinent for a theatre director turned film-maker as it must have been for the playwright with poetic ambitions who wrote *Titus Andronicus*.

Titus Andronicus, written and first performed in the late 1580s or early 1590s, was first published in quarto in 1594. The previous year Shakespeare had published *Venus and Adonis*. He prefaced this narrative poem with the dedicatory epigraph: *Vilia miretur vulgus: mihi flavus Apollo / Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua* ('Let the common hordes admire base things: for me may golden-haired Apollo provide copious draughts from the Castalia spring'). The admiration of the multitude was the province of the public stage: the Castalia spring was sacred to the Muses and therefore where poets might gain

Marcus with 'the Thracian poet' Orpheus (II.iv.51) and known in her previous life for her poetic recitations). The excision of the poetic Lavinia's tongue to furnish a play with grotesque spectacle might even be read as a crudely cartooned self-portrait of a writer who knows the convention of valuing the rarified realm of poetry but who here finds himself writing for the 'vulgar hordes' of the public stage. In the silenced Lavinia, Shakespeare finds an exaggerated metaphor for the process of forfeiting poetry to spectacle, refined linguistic abstraction to concrete visual demonstration. Equally, those same processes of forfeit and exchange, of the sacrifice of language in order to embrace new forms of arresting spectacle, were part of the adjustments Taymor herself had to make in negotiating the shift from theatre to film. The silenced figure of the film's Lavinia (Laura Fraser), whose forms of expression have been necessarily translated from a primarily verbal to a primarily visual plane, is therefore hyperbolically expressive of the creative processes to which each of her authors – Shakespeare and Taymor – have, in turn, had to submit themselves.

When Shakespeare's Lavinia is finally empowered by writing the names of her attackers in the sand, Titus looks at her scorings and says:

... come, I will go get a leaf of brass,
 And with a gad of steel will write these words,
 And lay it by: the angry northern wind
 Will blow these sands like Sybil's leaves abroad,
 And where's our lesson then? (IV.i.102-106)

He cannot bear to see Lavinia's painfully articulated words expressed in so transient a medium as marks in the sand. In preserving her testimony by scoring it with a gad of steel into a leaf of brass, Titus rescues it from evanescence and secures for it a form of permanence. In so doing, he symbolically plucks it from the realm of theatre whose identity depends upon its ephemerality and relocates it a medium that endures.

In Taymor's film, Titus's lines about defying the transience of the moment by fixing Lavinia's testimony in a permanent form are omitted. In the new cinematic context, of course, these words have effectively been made redundant since the entire film inescapably enacts the project to make the transient permanent. Taymor's 1994 Theatre for a New Audience stage production of *Titus* in St Clement's Church off-Broadway, with a cast of twelve accompanied only by two trumpets, had drawn plaudits for its stylised control and unflinching but purposeful engagement with the play's violence.¹⁸ As is the way with pieces of theatre, however, when the run came to an end, the production survived only as a paper trail of recollection and review: it is both a stage production's beauty and its sadness that it has no substantial identity

beyond that. Taymor's return to the play four years later, armed now with a film crew and a correspondingly enhanced budget, represented her equivalent of Titus's reaching for a leaf of brass to memorialise in lasting form the precarious expression of an important truth. The runes of the stage production are detectable throughout the film – not only in the presence of Harry Lennix as Aaron (the one actor to make the transfer with Taymor from the stage production), but also in many design decisions first conceived for the stage production.

The most startling of these are the 'Penny Arcade Nightmares', a series of insert fantasy sequences that punctuate both productions, designed to give stylised and mythologised form to the subjective realities of the characters' minds.¹⁹ The prominence and particularity of the boy Lucius's role in the film is another.

In the film, as in the stage production, the boy becomes the mediating eyes through which the drama is seen. The ease of his transfer from stage to screen – complete with his accompanying paraphernalia of 1950s kitchen table and collection of miscellaneous toy soldiers – creates a sense of contiguity between the two performance spaces. The wolf motif on the back of his jacket when he visits the woodcarver's shop in the film joins the film's extensive network of evocations of wild animals that repeatedly literalise the animal imagery of the play. This particular wolf motif with strapped-on udders, however, also directly reproduces the image of the wolf-that-suckles-the-baby-that-founds-Rome that Taymor had designed for the stage production's publicity poster.²⁰ The boy's presence on screen at this moment thus curiously serves partly as an anachronistic advertisement for the production now gone. As the character whose movements within the world of the film are most fluid, it is perhaps appropriate that it should be he who carries into Taymor's film the billboard for the stage production: his spatial promiscuity within the space of the film almost allows for the possibility that he might also have arrived within its frame boundaries from a space beyond.

The only other character able to rival the boy for an ability to slip between worlds in the film is Aaron (whose actor is another interloper from theatrical space). Aaron's spatial freedom is, however, symbolically curtailed when he is buried in a pit and staked to the earth in the final moments of the film: a more resolute image of stasis is difficult to imagine. By contrast, the extent of the boy's transgressive, even potentially frame-breaching, mobility is confirmed in these final moments as he makes a daringly touching bid to break out of the prescribed spaces in which he – and Aaron's baby – have been placed. It is, in this case, an overwhelming sense of compassion which emboldens him to express his lack of respect for thresholds of containment with such gently expressed but nevertheless irresistible defiance. His strategic exit out of the barbarising amphitheatre arena into an unspecified world of promise beyond

therefore epitomises the boy's ability to slip not only material but also emotional boundaries: neither the symbolic solidity of the enclosing amphitheatre nor the collective force of the Goths' desire for 'just' vengeance is now sufficient to hold him.

Taymor repeatedly remembers both the tenor and the detail of the earlier stage production in the tenor and detail of the film. In the processes of transcription for the screen, however, the cinematic gads of steel have also made their own interpretive interventions felt. One of Taymor's interventionist transformations is to take the suggestion of a performativity to the violence in her stage production of it and turn it into the driving impetus of her film. There is plenty of justification for this in the Shakespeare play. Shakespeare's Aaron insists that he has executed a series of *coups de théâtre* almost as an installation artist ahead of his time, carving grief-inducing slogans in Roman letters 'on [dead men's] skins, as on the bark of trees' (V.i.138) and then propping up the corpses, thus decorated, outside their friends' door. In doing so, he turns cruelty into art, and moreover demands for his handiwork an audience of the most morbidly interested variety. Similarly, Tamora and Titus trade acts of vengeance, seeking from the other each time appreciation for the artistry of their latest move and counter-move. Aaron, aware of the competitive game upon which Titus and Tamora are engaged, even concedes that, in response to Titus's 'weapons wrapp'd about with lines', were the empress present '[s]he would applaud [his] conceit' (IV.ii.27, 30). There is incumbent upon them each an acknowledgement of the imaginative artistry and mythological symmetry with which vengeance is exacted. If Lavinia has been used 'worse than Philomel', then Titus will be revenged 'worse than Progne' (V.ii.194-195). As the climax to the show, Tamora and Titus each dress up as part of a theatrical performance laid on in large part for the other's benefit - Tamora as Revenge and subsequently Titus as a cook. And in his role as cook, Titus does not merely chop up Chiron and Demetrius: he goes to the extravagant creative lengths of baking them into pastries that they may be served up with an appropriate flourish. In the Rome of *Titus Andronicus*, it is not enough to perform a barbarous act: that act has to be shaped, sculpted, given artistic design and purpose. Even torture is imbued with its own artistry. Titus and Tamora, therefore, each require the other not only to be a worthy enemy but also a worthy audience for an artistically conceived performance of vengeance.

The play's depiction of violence as a performance in need of an audience permeates Taymor's film to such an extent that Hopkins' Titus even allows himself briefly to register his appreciation for the artistry of his own death just before being impaled by a candelabra. It is repeatedly an attention to cruelty as art and violence as performance that Taymor seizes upon as fertile dramatic material for her adaptation. At its opening, as at the opening of the stage

production, a young boy (played now by the ever fragile-seeming Osheen Jones in a partial recapitulation of his role as the young observer in Adrian Noble's *Midsummer Night's Dream*)²¹ conjures a world of violence through his games with toy soldiers at his kitchen table. The game starts conventionally enough - as innocuous or as dangerous as any little boy's game with his toy soldiers may be considered. However, as his imagination creates ever greater torments to inflict upon his soldiers and for them to inflict upon each other, the game escalates, quickly escaping the control of its playmaster. As it breaks the boundaries of play, the game's disturbing implications start to be played out as grown-up war in the world around the boy. Scared by the explosions and accompanying dust clouds now invading his playspace, he takes cover under the table. From here he is subsequently rescued by a leather-clad figure who carries him down an enclosed staircase (referred to by Taymor - once again part-evoking Noble's film - as a 'down the rabbit hole experience')²² and, by a spatial logic particular to the film, out into an enormous Roman coliseum. In the middle of the coliseum the boy's salvation is celebrated as he is held aloft for the appreciation of the galleried multitude. The multitude to which the scared boy is offered, however, is in this case visually absent. Their cheers are audible but the amphitheatre galleries are visibly empty.

Taymor's specific purpose in showing us empty galleries was to suggest a theatre populated by generations of ghosts, by the collective history of voices whose cheers have responded to, and sometimes determined, life and death for those in the amphitheatre. The ghosts, that is, were to be taken as emphatically present as part of the scene. As she expresses it: 'When you take away the visual presence of the audience, their vocal presence becomes all the more deafening.'²³ The inverse of this, however, cannot be ignored: when you include the vocal presence of an audience, its visual absence becomes all the more eerily conspicuous. And, by my reading of the scene, its visual absence takes on a significance in the context of this film that adds another layer of interpretive interest to the evocation of the ghosts.

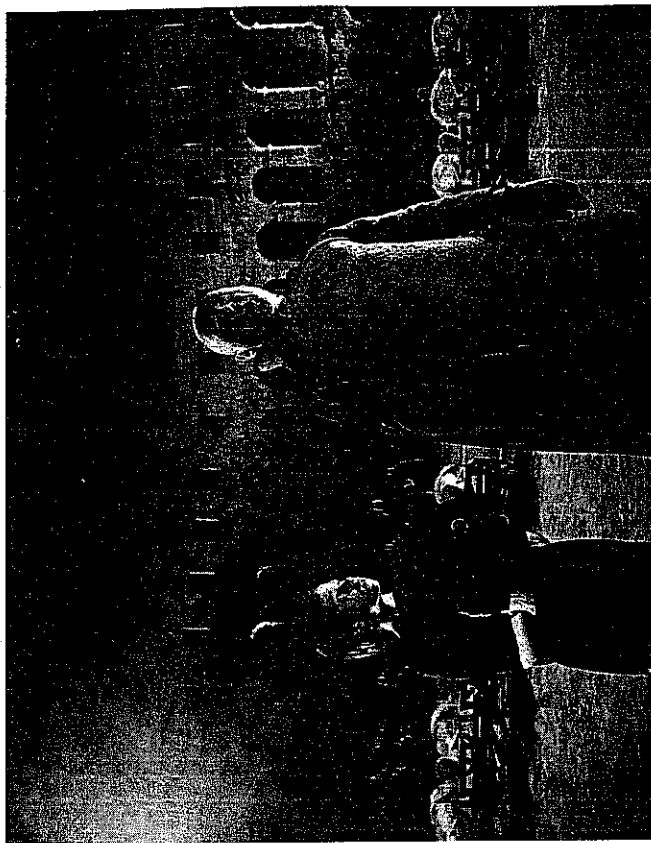
For spectators aware of the film's specific prehistory as a stage production, and of Taymor's history as a theatre director, the empty galleries cannot but be seen as a reflection, conscious or otherwise, upon the current production's distinction from theatre. Cinema, unlike theatre, is in part defined by the dislocation between its playing space and its reception space, between the place and moment in which the actor acts and the place and moment in which the audience responds. The visual absence of the coliseum audience at this point, therefore, advertises one of the defining symptoms of the medium within which Taymor is now working. The spectacular close-up on, and subsequent zoom-out from, the boy's eyes in the opening shot of the film demonstrates with effective economy one of the ways in which *this* production is no longer theatre (in which medium an audience member's focal

length is necessarily fixed by the placement of his or her seat in relation to the stage). The empty galleries, presented soon afterwards, serve partly to refine that insistence on the production's distance from a live production. The sense that there is an audience implicit in this playing space, but one which cannot be seen, graphically illustrates the separation between actor and audience, the necessary sacrifice of shared space, that is part of the process of adapting a play from stage to screen.

Olivier's *Henry V* (1944) explores a theatrical space and the symbiotic relationship established between actors and a physically present audience in its opening and closing scenes, expanding out of the confines of this theatrical world for the intervening action.²⁴ The opening of Taymor's film explores the (literal) architecture of this relationship while removing one of the key players: in her chosen theatrical space there is no audience visually present. Since Taymor was fully accustomed to the physical presence of an audience for her theatre work, the strategic absence of an audience from this theatrical space documents one of the key effects the transmediation has wrought upon the material. Whereas, however, Christian Metz proposes that it is one of the conditions of cinema to pretend not to know that it is being seen,²⁵ the amphitheatre's absent audience reminds us, if anything, how implicitly present we, the *off-screen* audience, are throughout this film. And our self-consciousness about the processes of our own spectating is rendered the more acute by the presence of multiple proxies for us in the film itself.

The most obvious of these spectating proxies is the boy, who, having been carried into the auditorium, then becomes young Lucius through whose impressionable eyes much of the drama is seen. As Titus's grandson, he is the inheritor of a series of lessons about the uncompromising pursuit of vengeance and the performative relish with which it may be exacted. Mostly in the film, he is witness to things being done to other people. He is initially catapulted into the drama, however, by means of something being done to him – an act that, whatever its motivation, feels like a cross between a rescue and an abduction. The associations of the auditorium in which he is held aloft are clear: the Roman coliseum is the archetypal theatre of violence. His own fear at being offered up for the appreciation of the galleries establishes the context of theatrical exhibition within which future troubling events in the drama he is to witness are to be understood.

The performability of cruelty is explicitly enacted later in the film in the scene in which the heads of Titus's two executed sons are delivered to him accompanied by his own severed hand (III.i). The scene is stage-managed by the same leather-clad clown figure who had plunged the boy Lucius into the midst of a performance arena at the film's opening. He now pulls up outside Titus's house in his ramshackle sideshow wagon pulled by a three-wheeler (reminiscent of Zampano's in Fellini's *La Strada* (1954)), a film also evoked



it is in the coliseum that the young boy (Osheen Jones) becomes Titus's (Anthony Hopkins) grandson Lucius in Taymor's *Titus* (2000). The absence of any audience other than ghosts from the theatrical space depicted reminds us of a cinema audience's material absence from filmic performance space.

Source: *Titus* © 2000 Twentieth Century Fox. All rights reserved.

by the peculiar atmosphere of the show that follows). Accompanied on the soundtrack by a circus band of cymbals, accordion, saxophone, clarinet and um-pa-pa tuba, the clown's weirdly whimsical young female assistant hops out of the cart and as part of an extravagantly odd hoppity skippity dance sets out four camping stools in a row facing the cart. The Andronici have been formally designated the audience for the show and they temporarily collude in the game by taking their allotted seats.

With a grotesquely joyous abandon reminiscent of the *Grand Guignol*, the clown and his assistant then lay on their freakshow of horrors. Like theatrical impresarios, they raise the shutter on the side of the wagon and, as they do so, the soundtrack cuts suddenly from its crazy circus skittishness to silence. In the startling hush, their ghoulish exhibition is revealed both to their on-screen and off-screen audiences: the two sons' heads carefully preserved in glass specimen jars, the amputated hand mounted on a velvet cushion, and all three beautifully framed by a ruched silk background and a swish theatrical curtain. This is horror dressed up as a performative confection.

The scene is principally shot from behind Titus, Marcus, Lucius and Lavinia, looking over their shoulders with them at the wagon's grisly wares. The sight of the backs of the on-screen spectators therefore mimics and blends with the backs of the off-screen spectators sitting in the movie theatre. An identification is implied, and felt. We see the heads of the sons as if through the eyes of the father. 'When will this fearful slumber have an end?' (III.i.252) he asks, and the question resonates with us too. We, like him, are near the end of our endurance for the unremitting catalogue of sensational horrors by which we have been assailed. As Titus's shoulders, seen from behind, start to shudder, it is reasonable to wonder how much more suffering could he, could anyone – can we – bear? The shot then cuts to the front of Titus to reveal a man whose shaking shoulders are not those of a man sobbing, as we might have thought, but rather of a man laughing. Released by Titus's response, the scene's sick comedy has space to breathe. 'Why I have not another tear to shed' (III.i.266) says Titus by way of explanation, and his willingness to laugh marks a turning point in his responses to Tamora's elaborately choreographed taunts. Titus has allowed himself to be infected by the warped levity of the scene and will later make use of this new tone for his own projects. However, he can also channel the energy that comes with that levity into serious purpose. The instruction to Lavinia to carry the severed hand in her teeth – a piece of business which interrogates the extremes to which a performance can be taken and still resist farce – is here delivered and acted upon in all seriousness. It is aided by Elliot Goldenthal's weightily melancholic and brooding underscoring that replaces the silence of the unweaving. In a world of ludicriousness, other things may be bleakly funny, but the Taymor/Hopkins collaboration manages to sustain a gravity to the collecting and re(-)membering of Andronici body parts. Even Lavinia's portering role in the communal *exécut* seems, in this rendering, reasonable as a means of including her in the clan's collaborative gathering-up of its own and regrouping in preparation for their own counter-strikes.

The *pièce de résistance* of the Andronici fight-back is the banquet scene. At its beginning, the quietly gruesome scene of the murder of Chiron and Demetrius cedes to a shot of two beautiful pies cooling by an open window where wholesomely white muslin curtains waft gently in the breeze. The comic incongruity of this cut from horror to a pastiche of a picture from a women's cookery magazine is greatly enhanced by the chirpy energy of the 1937 Carlo Buti/Cesare Andrea Bixio hit song *Vivere* (from the famous Italian film of that name) on the soundtrack. In among the film's humorous clashes of periods and styles reflecting Rome's successive waves of autocracy and institutionalised savagery, 1930s Italian fascism plays a prominent role in the film. The references implicit in, for example, the architecture of Mussolini's Government Building and Tamora's (Jessica Lange) shimmering 1930s evening dress are supported in the banquet scene by the seductively lifting rhythms of this

1930s song. *Vivere* (urging its audience to 'live') is ironically employed at the very moment in the film when the characters are unknowingly about to eat each other. More particularly, in the *Vivere* film it is the voice of a father which is heard urging his ailing daughter to live, ironically foreshadowing Titus's gently delivered instruction to his daughter to 'Die, die, Lavinia' (V.iii.46). The late 1930s moment evoked by this soundtrack is decadent, pleasure-seeking and unknowingly on the cusp of an outpouring of public violence. By 1945, Benito Mussolini's body, along with fifteen others (including that of his lover Claretta Petacci) would be hung upside down in a Milanese square, the Piazzale Loreto, where vast crowds would vent their fury by spitting at, kicking and even firing multiple further bullets into the bodies. It was to be a political piece of public theatre that would recall the uncompromising dynamics of the amphitheatre. The *Vivere* soundtrack for the banquet is not only therefore tonally witty in context, but it also purposefully evokes a moment of social and political anacrusis, the blissfully unaware anticipation of a thunderingly ugly conclusion. Titus's banquet is precisely such an anacrusis: mayhem, as Titus's mad dance in his white chef's outfit suggests, is imminent.

The ensuing bloody drama on the banquet table replays the carnage on the boy's kitchen table at the film's opening, with a glancing suggestion that the one is, in effect, caused by the other, that bellicose instincts in children will have their effects on the adult world in due course. Once the scene is littered with bodies, Taymor uses 'time slice' to freeze all the action bar the child's transfixed, wide-eyed observation of his own father first spitting at and then shooting Saturninus. The body count now complete, the environment around the central scene of human attrition shifts for a tonally transformed coda. From within their freeze, the banqueters are magically transported from Titus's Roman villa back into the centre of the coliseum where the bodies of the dead, like those of Mussolini and associates, may, in effect, be offered as trophies to the waiting crowd.

And there is now a crowd in the previously empty amphitheatre. The film's use of the coliseum as its framing symmetry relates the two scenes that take place there. The audience's striking absence from the coliseum in the opening of the film throws into sharper relief its sudden presence in this final scene. However, unlike the hostile and violent crowds that greeted the exhibited bodies in the Piazzale Loreto, the amphitheatre crowds that look upon the bodies of Lavinia, Titus, Tamora and Saturninus in Taymor's film appear to register nothing but a numbed silence. As was announced in much of the film's publicity, in promotional interviews and in the published screenplay, the particular coliseum used for the shoot is in Pula, in Croatia's Istria County. As a known central European architectural landmark, it was a location of which the production crew were justly proud. Its presence in the film is, however, more than simply dramatically striking, though it is certainly

that. Its specific geographical placement cannot help but trigger a range of historical and political associations for anyone who recognises, or who had seen the publicity about, the particular Balkan location on offer.

Since the amphitheatre is in Croatia, the silent extras watching the aftermath of the atrocities in this particular space are locally hired Croatians. The symbolism of these spectators watching a dramatic spectacle of clan on clan bloodshed in 1999 confirms the keenly contemporary spin to the drama's exploration of human barbarity, a spin that Taymor explicitly courted. Croatia's Istrian peninsula, not *directly* affected by the Balkan war (although necessarily partisan in it), was itself effectively part of the amphitheatre stands for the ethnic atrocities perpetrated in Croatia's eastern counties and in Bosnia between 1991 and 1995. The presence of hundreds of Croatians in an auditorium just a few years later watching two clans – now the Andronici and the Goths – brutalising each other for historical reasons therefore carries real-life resonances that add a disturbing topicality to the catalogue of tribal horrors the film depicts. As the shot cuts between the silent faces of the spectating extras observing the staged theatrical carnage before them, it is difficult for anyone aware of the location of the shoot not to wonder whether these same faces might not already have had to look on worse in real life. The audience's absence from the opening scene may serve as a nod to the medium of cinema in which the drama is currently being played, from which an audience is necessarily absent. The particular identity of its 'sad-fac'd' (V.iii.67) presence in the final scene, however, testifies powerfully to the acuteness of the story's ongoing engagements with contemporary narratives of human atrocity. For all its stylised and heightened aesthetics that might, superficially, seem to remove it from the mundanity of the world the rest of us inhabit, this is a film whose references and interests are crucially bound up in the fabric of that world. Its purposeful breachings of the seemingly cool and removed beauty of its own frame borders can even ambush the spectator – this spectator at least – with the terrible force of its psychological and emotional impact.

In the final moments of the film, the boy Lucius deliberately reverses his own fate by picking up Aaron's baby and carrying him slowly *out* of this arena into which he had himself been carried at the film's opening. Throughout the drama he has had to witness (and has increasingly himself participated in) acts of cruelty being rendered performative and it is the coliseum whose architecture and associations have formalised this relationship between violence and entertainment. In removing the baby from the brutalising codes of the amphitheatre, young Lucius breaks the bond and tries to ensure that no further entertainment can be derived from the baby's sufferings. As he carries him out of this arena, the sound of many babies crying on the soundtrack invites us to take the one baby being rescued as representative of

many more born into a space where entertaining spectacle is made of others' suffering. The walk is long and slow, through an arch and out towards a vast landscape beyond which a dawn is breaking. The sugar that the boy had frantically shaken over his toy soldiers at the beginning of the film had seemed ironically inappropriate at the time since there is little that is saccharine in the rest of the film. In this sentimentally conceived exit, however, a little of that sugar seems finally to be candying over some of the play's less forgiving angularities.

Taymor wanted the play's end to be made amenable to redemption. The walk towards the dawn is, she has said, 'a teeny-weeny ray of hope. I felt we needed it at the end of the film, given that we're moving into the next millennium.'²⁶ Richard Burt finds the iconography of this concessionary moment reminiscent of *ET* and, as such, schlocky (which it self-consciously is).²⁷ In the well-advertised context of its Croatian shooting location, however, it is more than this too. The sight of a child being rescued from this setting takes the potential for smaltz that Burt identifies and gives it a weighty centre by merging it with real-world associations. The enduring mythic dimension of such a rescue, a dimension to which Taymor's film points, is in part dependent on the existence of specific real-world examples of such narratives that cumulatively give historical resonance to the myth.

It is worth citing one such. The point in doing so is not to suggest that this particular reference was deliberate. It was not. Rather, it is intended to suggest a reception context for the film that would have been potentially receptive to such images specifically because they chime evocatively with half-familiar stories from the real world.

In 1992, for example, Michael Nicholson, an ITN television correspondent covering the siege of Sarajevo, found himself employed to observe and report on human atrocities to the watching world. So affected was he by the horrors being perpetrated in the region that he broke with the usual rules of journalistic engagement. He arranged for a convoy of babies and small children to be evacuated and himself rescued a child from both the carnage and the passivity of the watching world's gaze by taking her back with him (illegally) to England. It was an act of rare professional folly and, arguably, of personal courage. In 1993, Nicholson published an account of these events (*Natasha's Story*) and in 1997 Michael Winterbottom made his story into a film entitled *Welcome to Sarajevo*, starring Stephen Dillane.

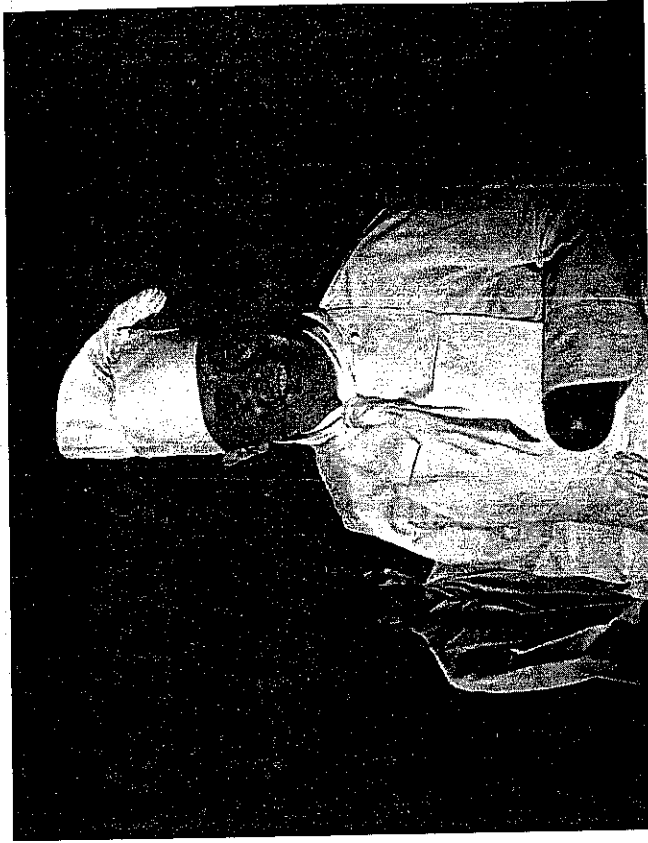
Young Lucius's loss of objective detachment, like Nicholson's in Sarajevo, is incremental. Moreover, his eleventh-hour decisive rejection of his role as observer and unexpected intervention in the fate of the baby has obvious parallels with the story of the news reporter who impulsively steps in to participate in the troubling action he had been viewing. And knowing of such real-world stories in which a child is rescued from clan-on-clan violence – and

in this particular case specifically in a Balkan setting – cannot but add a gritty piquancy to the otherwise sentimental walk at the end of *Titus*.

That the walk out of the amphitheatre can evoke real-world analogues in this way should not, needless to say, be allowed to detract from the far more general resonances about communal responsibility, compassion and hope that the scene also carries. What it can do is enrich its topical engagements with the historically scarred location in which it is performed and, as a consequence, with a troubled world to which the film is subsequently exhibited.

When Taymor first wrote to Hopkins in the hope of wooing him to play Titus, she was already seeking ways of thinking about the story that fused cinematic myth and real life. She described the part to him as 'ranging between . . . a General Schwarzkopf and a Hannibal Lecter'.²⁸ This joyously eclectic mixing of known fictions and known fact – of Hannibal Lecter and General Schwarzkopf, of *ET* (and, more deliberately, of the 1950s American sitcom *Father Knows Best*) and war in the Balkans – joins the extensive catalogue of other incongruous encounters, stylistic, temporal, tonal, to which the movie promiscuously and brilliantly plays host. Style and period are frequently employed as an economical thumbnail sketch of character. At the opening, Saturninus (Alan Cummings) is a maniacal fascist prototype and in recognition of this for his progress through Rome is invested with all the pomp of a 1930s military cavalcade. Titus, by contrast, is a man of old Rome who clings to the traditional orders: as such, he arrives in a chariot. As Titus's psychological defences are subsequently pared away in the course of the film, however, so too are his layers of protective clothing. His armour is first compromised by the undignified presence of a dressing gown over the top and then abandoned as he retreats into his family home in a baggy old cardigan. Eventually he is seen apparently entirely defenceless, naked in a bath. This impression of powerlessness is, however, deceptive since it is from this position of such telegraphed vulnerability that he then emerges to wreak his stylishly warped revenge. Having been stripped of all the usual defences he now reconstructs himself in elaborately theatricalised form. In the last section of the film Titus's wardrobe will no longer catalogue what has been done to him but will now become expressive of what he can do to others. Thus it is that his macabrely skittish decision to dress in a white chef's outfit represents him at his most dangerous.

The play *Titus Andronicus* is invested with an acute self-consciousness about its own dramatic and linguistic mechanisms. In it, Shakespeare may be seen as narrativising his own duelling allegiances between theatrical spectacle and the more rarified delights of poetry written for private consumption, or, in the terms of his dedication to *Venus and Adonis*, between the base things laid on for the 'vulgar' and the poeticism inspired by the Castalia spring. In fact, in its various explorations of the nature of a public performance, of the processes of



Hopkins' wardrobe throughout *Titus* (2000) reflects his level of control of his own destiny. With deliberate theatricality he presents himself as a chef to outdo even Tamora's self-presentation as Revenge.

Source: *Titus* © 2000 Twentieth Century Fox. All rights reserved.

spectatorship and of the role of language and action within such a performance, the play seems as finely aware of its own processes as subsequently Taymor's *Titus* was to be of its. In *Titus*, Taymor explores and documents the particularities of her own transference of performance medium, theatre to film, and includes specifically theatricalised moments, such as the presentation of the bottled heads, to illustrate the play's own systems of theatrical self-reference. Through the shots of the coliseum she offers us two transmuted versions of theatrical space – one visually bereft of an audience and the other in which an audience is visually present but where there is no reciprocal responsiveness between actors and audience. Both versions are expressive about the definitive separation of actor from audience in a work of cinema. In this concern with the potency of performance even in evacuated, deadened theatres and also in her encouragement of a hybridity of performance styles, Taymor allows her interest in the dynamics of both media to percolate richly throughout the film. Like Olivier's *Henry V*, this film has emerged from a practitioner whose medium affiliations are divided and whose film eloquently allegorises those divergent allegiances.

Olivier's *Henry V* is an extraordinary film. However, for historical reasons, it has become organically bound up in the British national psyche in ways that have traditionally placed it beyond compare. It is time to break with tradition in this respect. For the depth and range of its cinematic discussion of the processes of theatre and of film separately and in contrapuntal engagement with each other, *Titus* has a level of ferociously watchable sophistication comfortably beyond the reach even of Olivier's film.

Prospero's Books narrates the demise of the book and the ascendancy of digital technology for the recycling of Shakespeare. *Romeo+Juliet* finds a brutally clear symbol to illustrate the waning status of the theatre – and even perhaps of public cinemas – as the site in which Shakespearean performance can now come alive. Almereyda's *Hamlet* offers competing cinematic styles and shows cases one of them in digitised form on a palm-top computer, demonstrating the manipulability of a performance that can be freeze-framed, viewed and reviewed in reverse or at different speeds, rendered portable. *Titus* both laments the separation of audience and actor in the cinema for the presentation of a Shakespearean performance and mesmerisingly celebrates the power of cinema to reach across the divide in defiance of the spatial and temporal separation. While telling a Shakespearean story these films all draw attention repeatedly both to the (cinematic) terms in which it is being told, and to the (literary and theatrical) terms in which it might have been told, has been told elsewhere, but is not currently being told.

All texts are understood in relation to other texts, made sense of both in terms of what they are and of what they are not. This instinctive process of comparison and analogy is how the defined identity of anything is arrived at, and it takes place on multiple levels simultaneously in ways personally determined by the particularity of each person's experience at the moment of apprehension. What is striking about the films discussed in this chapter, in keeping with many others of the period, is that they are themselves specifically inscribed with a series of intertextual references that suggest particular routes to follow in the interpretive process of comparison and analogy. That is, they themselves configure points of 'like' and 'not like', of similarity and difference, as part of their own textual substance, inviting interpretation by prescribed comparison. And it is not only in relation to other film texts that these films define themselves, but crucially also in relation and contradictorily to other textual systems (architecture, painting, literature, music videos, television news, theatre). Thus they often act as signposts to other forms of cultural expression, to the performance history of their source texts, and to the weight of other media images by which we navigate our way through life. Not

only, therefore, what it means to be *this* film and no other (for example, from the same director, featuring the same star or from the same source text), but also what it means to be a film *at all*, as opposed to some other art form, is consciously part of the identity.

Since the 1990s it has, therefore, rarely been found sufficient to tell a Shakespearean story in film: that story has also had to be inlaid with the story of its own cinematic telling. Such reflexivity could be considered a sign of interpretive exhaustion. It might indicate that film-makers feel they have nowhere else to go but inwards to attempts at self-definition using a string of foils for purposes of clarification. It is possible to criticise them for being self-consciously clever, and for lacking the courage to depart from the prevailing spirit of their moment by rejecting ironic self-awareness. In theory, such a position might be persuasive. In practice, however, these films do not read as documents in exhaustion. In acknowledgement of the fact that their reception will not take place in a vacuum, they playfully wish to participate in determining the network of references that each is destined to provoke in its spectators. Such ludic attempts to identify themselves in playful competition with other cultural forms in which such stories are peddled suggests an excess of energy rather than a lack of it. Bottom-like, they wish to expand their roles, to play the interpreter as well as the interpreted. Thus they are eager not just to dramatise the inherited story but with it the critical terms in which they might themselves be interrogated.

By coincidence, the chronology of the four films discussed in this chapter happens to document Shakespeare's career in reverse – beginning with his final solo act of writing for the stage, *The Tempest*, and ending with one of his earliest tragedies *Titus Andronicus*. If his late play *The Tempest* in part dramatises an artist's elegiac exploration of a moment just before abandoning theatrical control of his environment, *Titus Andronicus* partly dramatises the challenges involved in *assuming* dramatic control, of exploring what theatre is and what it can do. Without needing to be read in exclusively or reductively autobiographical terms, these plays are clearly expressive of challenges that were true not only for the characters but in oblique and thematic ways also for their creator in relation to the processes of creation.

Like most Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, Shakespeare frequently referenced the terms of his trade in his writing. He scripted discussion of plots, performances, acting, audiences, illusionism, and the theatricalised gap between playing and being throughout his writing career. In drawing attention to the tools of their own medium, these films therefore to some extent enact a Shakespearean project. The wonder of it is that for all their introspection they do not drown in their self-reference. *Prospero's Books* – as intellectually stimulating and visually awing as it is eventually emotionally numbing – is perhaps the exception. The others manage still to tell a story of love and

loss, of greed and dissatisfaction, of displacement and revenge, of ambition and hate, of hope and fear. Moreover, they do so in language that as voiced by players of such variety and distinction as Harold Perrineau (Mercutio), Julia Stiles (Ophelia) and Anthony Hopkins (Titus) can still resonate in ways that both move and surprise. Those tempted to herald self-referential films as a symptom of 'endism', as the death rattle of vibrant interpretive performance, may yet be pleasantly surprised.

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- Alfredo Michel Modenessi, '(Un)Doing the Book "without Verona Walls": A View from the Receiving End of Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet*', in Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks (eds), *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), pp.62-85.
- Craig Pearce and Baz Luhrmann, *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet: The Contemporary Film, the Classic Play* (London: Hodder Children's Books, 1997).
- Carol Chillington Rutter, 'Looking Like a Child - or - Titus: The Comedy', *Shakespeare Survey* 56(2003), pp. 1-26.
- Julie Taymor, *Titus: The Illustrated Screenplay* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2000).

NOTES

1. From L. Digges' dedicatory poem, 'To the Memoire of the deceased Author Maister W. Shakespeare'. 1623 First Shakespeare Folio, fol 5r, ll.11-12.
2. There are also, however, some slightly less self-denying helicopter shots in *The King is Alive*.
3. Interview with Rob Blackwelder, San Francisco, 26 April 2001. Transcript published online at <http://www.totentomatoes.com/click/author-1232/reviews.php?critic=others&page=7&rid235295>.
4. The broad-brimmed tasselled cardinal's hat and cardinal's robes worn by Prospero when Miranda and Ferdinand first encounter each other automatically signify 'jerome' in the artistic traditions of the late medieval and Renaissance periods. Writing in Bologna between 1334 and 1346/47, Giovanni d'Andrea had even sought to enshrine the hat quasi-officially as part of the accepted iconography for Saint Jerome: 'I have also established the way he should be painted, namely, sitting in a chair, beside him the hat that cardinals wear nowadays ... Giovanni d'Andrea, *Hieronymianus* (Basel edn, 1514), fols 16v-17r. Quoted in Eugene F. Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p.65. If evidence were needed that the

NOTES

- cardinal's hat is consciously intended to refer to Jerome in this film, it is to be found in Greenaway's reproduction in the published film-script of de la Tour's painting *Saint Jerome* in which the cardinal's hat is clearly present: Peter Greenaway, *Prospero's Books* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991), p.40. In *The Pillow Book* (Greenaway, 1996), the same de la Tour painting of Jerome appears on the publisher's screen as testimony to Greenaway's ongoing interest in Jerome's scholarly presence. The Hieronymite references in that film are rendered fully explicit in the naming of the writer-translator character Jerome (Ewan McGregor).
5. The child Ariel's appropriation of Prospero-Shakespeare's quill in order to write in his book mimics Van Dyck's painting of Saint Jerome (c. 1620), held in the Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam. In that painting, a youthful, naked cherub takes up Jerome's quill in order not merely to inspire him indirectly but, like Greenaway's cherubic Ariel, actually to do the writing for him.
 6. Greenaway (1991), p.9.
 7. See the brief critical discussion of Tufte's paper in George P. Landow, 'We Are Already Beyond the Book', in Warren Chernaik, Marilyn Deegan and Andrew Gibson (eds), *Beyond the Book: Theory, Culture and the Politics of Cyberspace*, No. 7, Office for Humanities Communication Publications (Oxford: Office for Humanities Communication, 1996), pp.23-32. Tufte's gesture is discussed on pp.23-4.
 8. The Shakespearean grove, in keeping with the plethora of other datings and temporal sleights of hand the film performs, is here transmuted into the name of the now ruined theatre. (These beach scenes were shot in the Mexican coastal village of Veracruz.)
 9. 'To the melancholic strains of Mozart's "Serenade for Winds", we discover the ornate arch of what is left of a once splendid cinema.' Craig Pearce and Baz Luhrmann, *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet: The Contemporary Film, The Classic Play* (London: Hodder Children's Books, 1997), p.17.
 10. The film cost \$14.5 million to make and grossed over \$11 million in its opening weekend alone. See Russell Jackson's introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.4-5 for comparative budgets and grosses of this and other Shakespeare films.
 11. Just before delivering the manuscript for this book, I have come across Courtney Lehmann's stimulating new book *Shakespeare Remains* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2002). Among other more divergent areas of enquiry, there are some points of coincidence between her areas of interest and mine. These particularly concern the significance of the ruined theatre in Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* and the ghostly status of all characters in Almereyda's *Hamlet*. It is a matter of regret that there is not time to absorb detailed reference to her argument into this chapter, but for a far more densely theoretical take on some of the same issues considered here, I warmly recommend her book.
 12. Miramax's production notes. Viewed on microfiche at the British Film Institute.
 13. Hamlet's flyer for 'The Mousetrapp' is of an orange swirling vortex, deliberately reminiscent of the advertising poster for Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Through the allusion to a cinematic classic, Hamlet nimbly satirises his own hubris.
 14. Ethan Hawkes' Introduction to Michael Almereyda, *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Screenplay Adaptation* (London: Faber, 2000), p.xiv.

15. I am indebted to Barbara Hodgdon for this point. In her plenary lecture to the Scaena Conference, St John's College, Cambridge (August 2001), she commented persuasively on the striking remoteness of Gielgud's presence as viewed from within Almereyda's film.
16. I am grateful to Mike Cordner for alerting me to this possible reading of Polonius's 'all'.
17. The gravedigger scene was shot but cut in post-production. As a result, the film remained more tonally of a piece.
18. It was Taymor's record of stylised stage violence in her productions of *Oedipus Rex*, *Transposed Heads*, *Juan Darien* and *Salome* that had first led her to *Titus Andronicus*.
19. See Julie Taymor, *Playing with Fire*, updated and expanded edition (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), p.186.
20. The poster is reproduced in Taymor (1999), p.182. I am indebted to Jonathan Statham for alerting me to this point of continuity.
21. Although the parallels in the role of Osheen Jones between the two films are striking, Taymor herself did not know Noble's film and was entirely unaware of Jones's role in it. Taymor, in personal conversation with the author, 11 April 2003.
22. The slight parallels with Noble's film are, however, purely coincidental. See note 21 above.
23. Taymor, in personal conversation with the author, 11 April 2003.
24. See Anthony Davies' elegant discussion of the spatial strategy of Olivier's film in *Filming Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.26-37.
25. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p.95.
26. Julie Taymor, in interview with Alan Cummings. *Interview* (January 2000), p.35.
27. Richard Burt, *Shakespeare After Mass Media* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p.311.
28. Richard Stayton, 'Portrait of Shakespeare as an Angry Young Man', *Written By*, 4, 2 (February 2000), pp.39-43. This quotation p.41.

SELECT FILMOGRAPHY

Films are arranged chronologically. Archive details are given only for those films not commercially available. Where multiple prints exist, archive listings here are not exhaustive. The Library of Congress film archival holdings are available to view, by appointment, through the Library of Congress Motion Picture Division Reading Room. The National Film and Television Archive (NFTVA) is part of the British Film Institute (BFI) in London: their archival holdings are available to view by appointment. I have only indicated the nature of commercial availability for those titles whose distribution is restricted by format or region. Where no details are given, the title is widely available at the time of writing. All films are given here in their English release titles. NTSC (American) format videos are playable on almost all up-to-date European VCRs from PAL-based countries. Region 1 DVDs are playable on multi-regional European DVD players.

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| 1899 <i>King John</i> (GB: British Mutoscope and Biograph Company) | BFI 'Silent Shakespeare' Video & DVD |
| 1905 <i>The Tempest</i> (GB: Charles Urban and Beethohm Tree) | No print survives |
| 1905 <i>Duel Scene from Macbeth</i> (US: AMBC) | Included on <i>Othello</i> (1922) DVD |
| 1907 <i>Shakespeare Writing Julius Caesar</i> (France: Star Films, dir. Méliès) | No print survives |
| 1908 <i>The Tempest</i> (GB: Clarendon Film Corporation, dir. Percy Stow) | BFI 'Silent Shakespeare' Video & DVD |
| 1908 <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (US: Vitagraph) | George Eastman House, Rochester & Folger Library, Washington DC |
| 1908 <i>Julius Caesar</i> (US: Vitagraph) | NFTVA & Library of Congress |
| 1908 <i>Hamlet</i> (Italy: Cines) | NFTVA |
| 1909 <i>King Lear</i> (US: Vitagraph) | NFTVA |
| 1909 <i>Othello</i> (Italy: Film d'Arte Italiana) | No print survives |
| 1909 <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> (US: Vitagraph) | BFI 'Silent Shakespeare' Video & DVD |
| 1910 <i>A Winter's Tale</i> (US: Thanhouser) | Library of Congress |
| 1910 <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> (Italy: Film d'Arte Italiana) | BFI 'Silent Shakespeare' Video & DVD |
| 1911 <i>Henry VIII</i> (GB: William Barker) | No print survives |
| 1911 <i>Richard III</i> (GB: Co-operative Cinematograph Company) | BFI 'Silent Shakespeare' Video & DVD |