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# Interpreting Shakespeare: The Dramatic Text and the Film

Robert Ornstein

...I'd like to talk about the relationship between my experience of filmmaking and my thinking about the teaching and interpreting of Shakespeare. Film-making has had an extraordinary influence on my awareness of a play as a work of art, or rather as a series of artistic choices. When we read a play as a literary text, it already exists as a finished product, and we try to understand it as such. It would not ordinarily occur to us to wonder why it has a particular form—why it begins and ends in this manner rather than other equally possible ways. When I made the film *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, I began, of course, with a literary text, with a selection of Frost's poetry. But, in a sense, I also began with a blank page, with the questions: "How shall I handle the poetry cinematically? How shall I present "The Hill Wife," for example, in film?"

To answer these questions, I have first to define what it is I want to do. I am not translating the poem into another medium, but rather using the medium of film to present the poem and to interest an audience in the study of the poem as literary text. Rightly or wrongly, I think of myself as engaging in a creative act which is parallel to the creative act of a poet or dramatist. And if I'm lucky, I become more sensitive to the creative act that shaped the literary texts I am working with.

The more one becomes aware of the nature of film— of the freedom it allows and the limitations it imposes—the more scrupulous one becomes about dealing with literary texts in film. There is a perfectly natural desire to try to impress an audience, even to dazzle them with one's ingenuity and originality as a director. (I feel this intention all too often as I watch the Welles *Macbeth* and *Othello* films.) One would like to use visual images to project literary ideas and experience without competing with that experience and without usurping it. If one "acts out" the drama of a poem in film in a completely visual way, one doesn't need the lines of the poem at all, and the audience will not pay much attention to those lines even if a narrator provides them.

You have to figure out a means by which a visual image counterpoints a literary text, enhances and serves it, but remains subservient to it. When visual techniques substitute for imaginative responses, one gets distortion or contradiction of one kind or another. Take, for example, Polanski's choice to have *Macbeth* actually see a hallucinatory dagger in his film of *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* sees (and we see) the hallucinatory dagger, but he does not hear (and we do not hear) the hallucinatory voices when *Macbeth* murders Duncan. That's illogical; and if you show the murder without dubbing in the voices, you cannot have *Macbeth* afterward describe the voices he has heard—and a very great dramatic moment is lost.

I was teaching *Macbeth* not long ago, and we were discussing in class the

apparent contradiction between Macbeth's horror at thinking of killing Duncan and his ability to perform the murder. A student in the class offered that there was no real contradiction because Macbeth was unable to kill the sleeping Duncan, and murdered him only when Duncan awoke and saw Macbeth poised with a dagger over him. The only trouble with that explanation is that it applies to Polanski's film, not Shakespeare's play. In fact, it is a dreadful reduction of the spiritual drama of Macbeth's tortured decision to kill.

By inventing and showing a murder scene, the Polanski film can prompt us to consider why Shakespeare omits that scene from his text. And any consideration of that moment makes clear to us that Polanski did not simply flesh out Shakespeare's plot and force us to witness the bloody deed. Polanski radically altered the nature of the deed and its spiritual meaning. In Shakespeare's text, Macbeth exits as he says of the bell: "Hear it not Duncan, for it is a knell/That summons thee to heaven or to hell." Immediately afterward, Lady Macbeth enters and speaks with excitement of the deed her husband is about to commit. Instead of seeing the murder the audience sees Macbeth's tormented anticipation of the deed, his wife's intoxicated expectation of the deed, his response to the deed when he enters again, and her terrified reaction to his response. Shakespeare's artistic choice is perfectly logical and necessary. One cannot show the murder and then immediately afterward have Macbeth rehash the murder for his wife when the audience has already lived through the experiences he is narrating. Obviously, in Shakespeare's mind, the drama of Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's responses to the deed is far more powerful and meaningful than the murder itself. Polanski's version of the murder scene is a travesty of Shakespeare, not only in its gratuitous bloodiness, but in its substituting for the terrible inevitability of Macbeth's action the "bad luck" that Duncan awoke at the wrong time. Shakespeare's point is that the noble Macbeth who slaughtered enemies on the battlefield *could and did* murder the sleeping Duncan, though the spiritual price of the deed was utterly shattering to him and his wife.

It is true that one would not accept in a film the confined settings that are customary in a stage production of a play. That does not mean, however, that the freedom a camera provides commits a filmmaker to showing what a playwright chooses to omit—for example, the murder of Duncan. There are many ways, after all, of handling a play on film. One possibility is to achieve a reasonable compromise between photographing the play as a play (which is nearly always an artistic mistake) and completely transforming the text of the play into a script for a film. The Olivier *Hamlet* (and to some extent the Welles *Macbeth*) are compromises which treat a great many scenes in the same way a stage director would, and avoid extensive and expensive outdoors location photography. Although the Olivier film uses a real castle for a setting, it makes no attempt to depict the daily routine of a medieval castle with its myriad of servants and retainers, cooks, stableboys, etc. All the superfluous detail which Shakespeare did not care about, Olivier omitted by hewing closely to Shakespeare's text and stage traditions. The BBC television series *The Age of Kings* proved, I think, that one can photograph the history plays effectively, using the resources of a camera but confining the action to studio settings that were not elaborate.



It pays to remember that Shakespeare wrote for a stage that did not have or require elaborate scenery. Forgetting or ignoring that fundamental fact, Polanski not only shot *Macbeth* in a real castle but also embroidered his scenes with a continual bustle of retainers and servants, carts, horses, squealing pigs, chickens, what have you. Since none of this bustling activity actually enhances a single dramatic moment in the play, it comes across as pointless and distracting "shtick"—or perhaps a respectful bow to the genius of C. B. de Mille.

One real advantage of film over stage production is the swift economy of cutting from scene to scene that can save a lot of wasted time and motion. Actors do not have to exit from a stage; they can simply leave the frame, or a scene can fade out or dissolve into the next one. If one employs elaborate settings, however, the economy of film is lost, and the dramatic action may be slower than in a stage production—and much less effective. On stage, when Duncan and his party approach Elsinore, they remark on its peaceful beauty. Lady Macbeth walks on to greet them, and there is an immediate vivid contrast between Duncan's innocent pleasure in being her guest and her hypocritical welcoming of him.

As Polanski's film demonstrates, if one is going to photograph Duncan's approach to the castle, and his conversation with his retainers, quite a bit of time must elapse before they enter the castle and Lady Macbeth can greet them. Polanski must, therefore, invent a brief scene showing Lady Macbeth peering out at the king's party from a castle window, because otherwise he loses the vivid contrast between the apparent beauty of the castle that Duncan sees and the murderous reality that lurks within. A meeting that should be brief and drenched in irony becomes stretched out and pointlessly so.

My point is that with every gain that a camera provides, there is the possibility of a corollary loss or pitfall. A camera gives one the ability to see action from almost any perspective, but some of the perspectives one chooses (as in the Welles *Macbeth*) may strike an audience as utterly contrived if not pretentious. Film gives one control of the framing of every moment, and the possibility of closeups. It also imposes its own necessities because one cannot escape the psychological effects of framing and the conventional expectations which an audience has about film. They expect to see closeups, and you have to use them. On the other hand, if you get too enamored of closeups (as Tony Richardson did in his *Hamlet*) the effect is painfully claustrophobic, and finally inartistic, because before long the closeup loses its dramatic effect. One wonders why the camera always insists upon seeing the action from this artificially "telephoto way." Why can't we see more of the drama in a more normal "wide angle"?

A filmmaker has absolute control of an audience's perceptions. They can see only what he wants them to see. The other side of that coin is that an audience has to feel that the choices a director makes are inevitable and right. When I made a film about the staging of Shakespeare, I never used a camera angle which did not approximate what an audience in a theater could see of the stage. In that way, despite the use of a camera, the scenes never lose contact with the sense of theatrical staging. As a matter of fact, successful cutting of a scene will correspond to the natural shifts of audience attention during a stage production.

Sometimes a scene demands to be viewed in its entirety—when there are many actors on stage and the dramatic moment involves all of them. We see it, so to speak, in "wide angle." But at any moment one actor may draw all of our attention to him, and we "move in" to focus on his voice and gestures. At other times, our attention frames two characters, or three, and tightens or widens according to the flow of the dialogue and dramatic tension. Although cinema accustoms us to closeups of a kind we will never experience in a theater, those closeups must still have the psychological persuasiveness of a normal attention-shift in a theater. When a camera shift seems merely arbitrary, or a closeup is unprepared for, the effect is worse than bad blocking in a stage production.

I get the impression that teachers of film courses put a loss of stress on arty framing and cutting. My impression, however, is that artificial camera angles, groovy cutting, and mannered framing of scenes are not the stuff that great films are made of, and that beautiful photography has the simplicity and inevitability of all first-class art. My taste for directness and simplicity (of a very sophisticated kind perhaps) may reflect my own timidity as a filmmaker, but I am not a snob in my tastes. I never miss the old John Wayne movies on TV because, now that I know what goes into planning and cutting scenes, I can appreciate the effortless skill and mastery of those westerns. I have a special fondness for one of the all-time lousy movies, *Operation Burma*, a World War II lemon which shows Errol Flynn and a handful of American paratroopers driving the Japanese from Burma, when in fact the British defeated the Japanese in a long, costly series of battles. But that's beside the point. Unless my memories lie, that film has some of the greatest action photography ever contrived by Hollywood craftsmen. And everything is shot so simply, in such a straightforward manner, that the sleight of hand escapes a viewer's attention. The advance of a skirmish line up a hill seems absolutely authentic and immensely exciting even though one has seen the same moment in a hundred war flicks. The difference here is that the advance of the skirmish line is a mosaic of eight or ten different shots from different angles, perspectives, and framings, put together so seamlessly that one is not even aware the first time that the action is a composite. I think the greatest photography does not call attention to itself in the way that Welles' or Eisenstein's do, and it is particularly painful to me when a Shakespearean scene is shot in a mannered way.

Another way that a filmmaker can be seduced by the technical resources of the camera is in the use of color film. I doubt that we will see many more Hollywood or commercial films of Shakespearean plays, because color photography and its technical demands have made such films hopelessly expensive. If there are more film versions, I have the sinking feeling that they will be more like Polanski's *Macbeth* in elaborateness of production than like Olivier's *Hamlet*, which aimed at what now seems an old-fashioned scenic effect but through the relatively bare and simple lighting effects that work with black and white. Nothing stopped the old directors from creating elaborate and costly scenes in black and white if they were after spectacle, but black and white film does not invite elaborate and detailed set dressing in the way that color film does even in



movies which are intimate in scale. An apartment in a black and white film will strike an audience as having a certain character created by various objects in it. An apartment in a color film will be filled with colors as well as objects, and the colors will stand out more than they do in an actual room so that the camera and the audience will note the bookjackets on a shelf and be struck by the vividness of a wallposter or painting. What catches an audience's attention must be paid attention to; therefore, set dressing has to be more elaborate, more planned, and more expensive. Every fabric, every detail of clothing, must be calculated even if the desired effect, as in films like *The Goodbye Girl*, is casualness. I suspect that Polanski was drawn into the gratuitous background shtick of his *Macbeth* partly because he had all the glorious resources of modern color photography at his disposal and therefore had to figure out how to use them.

Since he can take his camera crew out on the heaths and mountains of Scotland, he is going to have gorgeous, atmospheric outdoor scenes, breathtaking panoramas. To match this breathtaking scenery, he has to have a terrific-looking medieval castle so that the interior scenes are realistic in the same way the exterior scenes are. But then the interior scenes seem very bare with just Macbeth and his wife and an occasional servant walking about; so let's have a colorful medieval panoply of "castle activity" even though it is needless and distracting. Even more modest ventures with color film can prove defeating when a director is tempted to use a real exterior setting for what is in a play an imaginary landscape. Photograph a real forest, and the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* almost inevitably lose their magical quality. When the forest of Arden becomes a real forest in a production of *As You Like It*, the characters start to look a bit absurd wandering about with very little to do, and the action slows down sadly as the actors have to pick their way among vines and shrubs.

The only time I ever felt that an Elizabethan play profited from being set realistically in film was the BBC production of *The Duchess of Malfi*. By using a great English manor house, with its gardens and splendid interior rooms, as a setting, it gave the Webster play, which seems on the printed page a surrealist nightmare from the beginning, a real connection with more ordinary experience. Reading the play, one is overwhelmed from the start by the macabre poetry, by Bosola's terrible cynicism and Ferdinand's incipient madness. Watching the film, one saw characters, even (or especially) Bosola, who belong to a world that has its aristocratic normalities, threatened by sinister and lunatic forces. With this initial setting, the later movement into utter nightmare with the tormenting of the Duchess was all the more powerful and effective. I have only praise for the nerve, imagination, and sensitivity of the filmmakers who made *The Duchess* accessible to a modern audience in a way that may not even be possible any longer on stage.

The greatest Shakespearean film for me is still the Olivier *Henry Fifth*. Here is a color film made before color itself was perfected and the conventions of color were crystallized. If color photography is good, but hardly dazzling, one is not tempted to linger over details; and one is not tempted to create elaborate and detailed settings to have the camera linger over. Up to fairly recent times, it was not easy to get convincing color photography in films, and even now, one

has problems with the inherent lushness of film color. It's hard, for example, to capture the reality of shabby places in color. You'd be amazed at how attractive a ghetto street might look in a cinematic color that is unnaturally vivid and bright.

Of course, a genius like Olivier is not going to be led astray by the charm of color photography. There is in *Henry Fifth* a design concept of breathtaking simplicity that precludes elaborate and needless cinematic detail. For example, when the French princess Katherine has her little English lesson, she and her companion are walking through what seems to be a French garden. But it is a garden so simple that it could easily have been created in a theater for stage performance, and if one looks attentively at the vista of rolling French countryside in the background, one sees that the vista is a painted drop. More important, one notices that the artifice of the backdrop is deliberate. It does not pretend to be real but rather a form of theatrical illusion.

Except for the battle of Agincourt, which is realistically portrayed, every scene of *Henry Fifth* retains its connection to the stage of the Globe, on which the film opens and closes. In fact, Olivier makes the back wall of the Globe stage a curtained, arcaded facade, and then recreates that architectural motif again and again with ingenious variations in later scenes—in French palaces, or English taverns, or military tents. With the exception of the battle scenes, every scene in the film is a blend of cinematic realism and stage illusion—always there is the reminder of painted backdrop or stage architecture, and only gradually does the film move towards the completely cinematic naturalism of the battle scenes at Agincourt, which demands the thousands of men and horses no theater (as the Chorus reminds us) can hold. The continuing principle of the film seems to be "nothing too much," and setting is never allowed to interfere with the essential drama of the play, as in the haunting campfire scene before the battle, which is staged as if the actors were on the boards of the Globe.

The battle of Agincourt in the film is a marvel of cinematography. If Shakespeare had seen it, I'm sure he would have approved. It's worth remembering, however, that when Olivier creates that battle scene, he does something perfectly appropriate to the spirit of Shakespeare's play, but he is not then interpreting Shakespeare's play or realizing its intention more fully than any stage production could. Shakespeare deliberately declines to stage a single scene of combat at Agincourt. Or, more correctly, the single scene he writes is a parody of chivalric combat in which the cowardly Pistol captures a more cowardly Frenchman. It is Olivier who makes King Henry a titanic warrior; Shakespeare glorifies the common soldiers who fought valiantly at odds for their king.

One could hardly have made *Henry Fifth* during wartime without showing the great victory at Agincourt. Sometimes, however, it is a mistake to create on film a battle which a Shakespearean play does not actually dramatize. Consider the end of *Macbeth*, in which the wretched tyrant, deserted by his followers, faces his attackers with a final senseless fury. It is hard to have a very exciting battle, even in color, when there is no opposition to the attackers. That did not stop Welles from mounting an epic movement of Malcolm's army that rushes into Macbeth's castle and then has nothing to do while Macduff kills Macbeth. In



the Polanski film, the artificiality of the final battle is more pronounced, because there is all this rushing about, when in fact, only a single combat decides the battle. But there is enough gore and gratuitous savagery in minor bits of action to remind us to the end of the Sharon Tate murders.

It can be argued that Welles, Polanski, and a host of other filmmakers have the right to recreate Shakespeare on film according to their own personal artistic visions, because their films are works of art independent of Shakespeare's dramatic texts. I do not agree. If one uses Shakespeare's title, his characters, most of his plot, his lines and his dramatic situations, one cannot escape being judged as an interpreter of Shakespeare. Inevitably the filmmaker will have to make changes in the text to convert a play to film, but he has to take responsibility for every change he makes. Otherwise he demands a special dispensation allowed no other artistic interpreter. We have lived through several decades of jazzy "innovative" stage-productions of Shakespeare, whose directors also claimed the right to be original in their recreation of the texts. The dazzling innovations have proven tiresome and sterile, in the long run, and some now seem monuments of bad taste. Until the stage director or filmmaker comes along whose creative genius is comparable to Shakespeare's, we can assume that the finest Shakespearean productions will continue to be those that most closely adhere to Shakespeare's text and most thoughtfully and sensitively seek to realize Shakespeare's artistic intention.

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