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LITERATURE, FILM AND SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract: *SHAKESPEARE IS WITHOUT DOUBT THE AUTHOR OF THEATER THE MOST ADAPTED TO THE CINEMA, EITHER IN FAITHFUL TRANSPPOSITIONS OF ITS PLAYS OR IN ADAPTATIONS TO OTHER SETTINGS IN TIME AND SPACE. THE FIRST QUESTION THAT OPENS THIS CHAPTER IS: WHY DOES THE SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA TRANSFER SO EASY TO THE SCREEN? A POSSIBLE ANSWER TO THIS MYSTERY COULD BE RELATED TO THE SIMILARITIES, BUT MOREOVER TO THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE STRUCTURE OF THE ELIZABETHAN THEATRE AND THE CINEMATIC PRODUCTIONS. BOTH OF THESE FORMS OF ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION ARE BASED ON A RAPID AND AS NATURAL AS POSSIBLE CHANGE OF SCENES, WHICH GIVES THE POSSIBILITY TO THE THEATRE OR TO THE CINEMA PRODUCER TO CHANGE THE FOCUS OF THE SPECTATOR WHEN LEAST EXPECTED.*

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INTRODUCTION

Going back to the differences between literature and film, we discover the real basis on which a Shakespearean play can be translated so naturally to the screen. At the age of the Bard, theatre was directly connected to the spectators who were implicated in the development of the plot, participating with their reactions to the actions of the actors. This way, there was a lack of control of the play producer, who could not always send a clear, unique message beyond the stage, as those in front of it had the possibility to view the dramatic act from different angles, whereas in the case of a cinema performance, the person standing in front of the screen has only the possibility of watching the action from a single angle. This apparent disturbing detail, gives the screen producer a unique possibility to transfer his personal perception to the audience, without having to face the danger of being misunderstood. Sarah Hatchuel expressed her opinion regarding this validity of the Shakespearean drama on the screen in her work *Shakespeare, from stage to screen*:

“Elizabethan drama, therefore, played with the spectators and their permanent awareness of theatrical illusion. *Mises-en-abyme* (i.e. embedded structures) – which could take the form of masques



or plays within plays –added a second level of dramatic action, while a Chorus, a Prologue or an Epilogue could directly call out the spectators and alienate them from the action. The actors' soliloquies and asides were conventions that established intimacy with the public while signalling the devices of theatre. The spectators intervened regularly during the performance, participating in the action with their own reactions. Fiction was thus designated as such. The deceit and trickery that are part of acting were pointed out by the *mise-en-scène* itself. A comparison between cinema and the Elizabethan stage reveals minor common points and major differences. In the cinema, as in the Renaissance theatre, scenes move on with great rapidity and fluidity. A film, like a theatre production in Shakespeare's time, can go quickly from a battle scene to a discussion behind closed doors inside a palace.” (Sarah Hatchuel, 2004, p. 4)

THE SHAKESPEAREAN PLAY AND CINEMA ADAPTATIONS

Comparing the two sections of dramatic performance, Sarah Hatchuel detects an inevitable intersection between these: “While the first film productions imported techniques from the stage, theatre productions are now sometimes influenced by realistic cinema.” (Sarah Hatchuel, 2004, p. 14) Therefore we can state before giving the examples chosen for this chapter that film and theatre are in a permanent process of influence, and in the particular case of Shakespeare, this juncture underlines the adaptability of his works in all medium of development. By 1944, the Shakespearean cinema is dominated by the strong personality of two actors-directors radically opposed: Laurence Olivier (*Henry V*, 1944, *Hamlet*, 1948, *Richard III*, 1955) and Orson Welles (*Macbeth*, 1948, *Othello*, 1952, *Falstaff*, 1965). Joseph Mankiewicz succeeds with a spectacular adaptation of *Julius Caesar* (1953) with Marlon Brando as Marc Antoine.

The 'renaissance' of the Shakespearean film in the years 90' owes without doubt much to Kenneth Branagh, who created, in 1984, the youngest Henry V of the Royal Shakespeare Company. The success of his film version of *Henry V* (1989) and in 1993 of *Much Ado about* has brought to Hollywood producers the evidence that the work of Shakespeare deserves exploitation. Later, Branagh has bravely risked bringing to the screen for the first time the story of *Hamlet* (1996). Branagh's version in four hours of projection was installed in a royal court 'Mittel Europa' of 1860, covered in snow. The most unexpected transpositions bring the genius of Shakespeare in the most various settings: the Italy of the aftermath of war (*The lovers of Verona*, 1948), the medieval Japan (*The chateau of the spider*, 1957), the fascist nightmare of the years thirty (*Richard III*, 1996), the Baroque castles of the nineteenth century (*Hamlet*, 1996), the modern cities (*Looking for Richard*, 1996, *Romeo+Juliet*, 1996).

Shakespeare has also inspired the filmmakers who have used the plot of its plays to build personal stories as well the musical drama: *West side story* (1961) the anti-racist metaphor (*Rami and Juliette*, 1967), the puppet film (*A midsummer Night's Dream*, 1959) the cartoon (*Trip to Melonia*, 1989), the tragic-comedy (*Hamlet goes business* of Aki Kaurismaki 1987) where Helsinki replaces the former kingdom rotten in Denmark. The king is the general chairman of an important corporation, and Hamlet the main heir, the parable (*The ark of the desert*, 1997) or the documentary (*Looking for Richard*, 1996).

The British Arts & Humanities Research Council created an impressive database containing all the adaptations and representations of Shakespeare's drama on television, film and radio created from 1890 to the contemporary time. The result was a list of more than 410 films and television variants of the Bard's plays, some of which respect the original text and others rebuild it for a new audience, for a new age. However, the most important aspect of this study is that it proves one more time that Shakespeare is the author that raised the most the interest of producers, film directors and simple writers all over the world. Taking into account the fact that in this chapter, our analysis focuses on



cinematic adaptations mainly of the Shakespearean tragedies we are going to list some of the most eloquent examples found by the Research Council:

Hamlet

The most significant screen performances are:

Hamlet (Germany, 1920) Svend Gade & Heinz Schall directors

Hamlet (UK, 1948) Laurence Olivier director

Hamlet, Prinz von Dänemark (West Germany, 1961) Franz Peter Wirth director

Hamlet (aka *Gamlet*) (Russia, 1964) Grigori Kozintsev director

Hamlet (aka Richard Burton's *Hamlet*) (1964), Bill Colleran and John Gielgud directors

Hamlet at Elsinore (TV, UK, 1964) Philip Saville director

Hamlet (UK, 1969) Tony Richardson director

BBC Television Shakespeare *Hamlet* (TV, UK, 1980) Rodney Bennett director (a videotaped production)

Hamlet (USA, 1990) Franco Zeffirelli director

The Animated Shakespeare Hamlet (TV, Russia and UK, 1992) Natalia Orlova director

Hamlet (UK, 1996) Kenneth Branagh director

Hamlet (USA, 2000) Michael Almereyda director (Modern Retelling)

The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark (2007) (AUS, 2007) Oscar Redding director

The Bad Sleep Well (aka *Warui yatsu hodo yoku nemuru*) (Japan, 1960) Akira Kurosawa director

Strange Brew (Canada, 1983) Dave Thomas & Rick Moranis directors.

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead (USA, 1990) Tom Stoppard director

Renaissance Man (USA, 1994) Penny Marshall director

The Lion King (USA, 1994) Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff directors.

In The Bleak Midwinter (aka "A Midwinter's Tale") (UK, 1996) Kenneth Branagh director

The Truman Show (USA, 1998) Peter Weir director

Let the Devil Wear Black (USA, 1999) Stacy Title director

The Banquet, (China, 2006) Feng Xiaogang, director

Sons of Anarchy (television show, USA 2008) Created by Kurt Sutters

Karmayogi (2011 film), (India, 2011) V K Prakash, director

King Lear

King Lear (TV, USA, 1953) (originally presented live, now survives on kinescope) Peter Brook/Andrew McCullough director and Orson Welles as Lear

King Lear (UK, 1971) with Peter Brook director and Paul Scofield as Lear

King Lear (aka *Korol Lir*) (Russia, 1971)

New York Shakespeare Festival King Lear (USA, 1974) (videotaped)

King Lear (TV, UK, 1976) (videotaped), directed by Tony Davenall director

BBC Television Shakespeare *King Lear* (TV, UK, 1982) with Jonathan Miller as director and released in the USA as part of the "Complete Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare" series.

King Lear (TV, UK, 1983), directed by Michael Elliot

King Lear (TV, UK, 1997). BBC film of the Royal National Theatre's stage version. It was televised with an accompanying documentary, including interviews with the director and cast.

King Lear (UK, 1999) with Brian Blessed as a director

King Lear (Bahamas/USA, 1987) is post-Chernobyl disaster science fiction.

Ran (Japan, 1985) is an adaptation of the Lear story to a Japanese setting, directed by Akira Kurosawa



A Thousand Acres (USA, 1997) is a modern retelling of the Lear story, from the perspective of the Goneril character (Ginny).

King of Texas (TV, USA, 2002) is a Western adaptation of King Lear with Uli Edel as director and Patrick Stewart as John Lear

Macbeth

Macbeth (USA, 1948), Orson Welles director

Macbeth (1954 TV special), (USA, 1954), George Schaefer, director, a live television production now preserved on kinescope

Macbeth (1960 film), (UK, 1960), George Schaefer director, a filmed-on-location adaptation with the same two stars and director as the 1954 production. Shown on TV in the U.S. and in theatres in Europe

'Play of the Month' Macbeth (1965 TV, UK), John Gorrie director

Macbeth (USA and UK, 1971), Roman Polanski director

Macbeth (UK, 1978, Royal Shakespeare Company), Philip Casson director

Macbeth (UK, 1981), Arthur Allan Seidelman director

BBC Television Shakespeare Macbeth (TV, UK, 1983)

Macbeth (UK, 1997), Jeremy Freeston and Brian Blessed directors

Macbeth (TV, UK, 1998), Michael Bogdanov director

The Animated Shakespeare Macbeth (TV, Russia and UK, 1992), Nicolai Serebryakov director

Macbeth (Video, UK, 2001, Royal Shakespeare Company), Greg Doran director

Macbeth (2006 film) (Australia, 2006), Geoffrey Wright director

Macbeth (2010 film) (UK, 2010), Rupert Goold director

Joe MacBeth (UK, 1955), Ken Hughes director

Throne of Blood (aka Cobweb Castle or Kumonosu-jo) (Japan, 1957), Akira Kurosawa director

Men of Respect (USA 1991), William Reilly director

Rave Macbeth (Germany, 2001)

Scotland, PA (USA, 2001), Billy Morrissette director

Maqbool (India, 2004), Vishal Bharadwaj director

ShakespeaRe-Told Macbeth (UK, TV, 2005)

Othello

Othello (Silent, Germany, 1922) with Dimitri Buchowetzki director and Emil Jannings as Othello

Othello (UK, 1946) with David MacKane director

Othello (USA, 1952): Orson Welles director and as Othello

Othello (Russia, 1955):Sergei Yutkevich director and screenplay

Othello (UK, 1965) film of the Royal National Theatre's stage production with Stuart Burge director and Laurence Olivier as Othello

BBC Television Shakespeare Othello (TV, UK, 1980) (videotaped) Released in the USA as part of the "Complete Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare" series, with Anthony Hopkins as Othello

Othello (TV, UK, 1990) videotape of the Royal Shakespeare Company's stage production.

The Animated Shakespeare Othello (TV, Russia and UK, 1994)

Othello (USA, 1995) Oliver Parker director

A Double Life (USA, 1947) is a film noir adaptation of the Othello story, in which an actor playing the moor takes on frightening aspects of his character's personality, directed by George Cukor



All Night Long (UK, 1962) is an adaptation set in the contemporary London jazz scene.

Catch My Soul (USA, 1974) is adapted from the rock musical based on the play.

Kaliyattam (India, Malayalam, 1997), directed by Jayaraaj

O (USA, made in 1999, but not released until 2001) is a modern adaptation of *Shakespeare's Othello*, directed by Tim Blake Nelson

Othello (TV, UK, 2001) is an adaptation by Andrew Davies of Shakespeare's *Othello*, set in the police force in modern London.

Omkara (India, 2006)

Iago (Italy, 2009) is an adaptation directed by Volfango De Biasi. Iago (Nicolas Vaporidis) is an architecture school student about to graduate who falls in love with his fellow student Desdemona (Laura Chiatti), the noble and beautiful daughter of the academic dean, professor Brabanzio (Gabriele Lavia). Both his career and love hopes are ruined when Otello (Aurelien Gaya), a young and handsome french nobleman, comes on the scene. With the help of his friends Emilia (Giulia Steigerwalt) and Roderigo (Lorenzo Gleijeses), Iago will achieve his revenge by playing everyone against each other through a complex scheme of lies.

Romeo and Juliet

The most significant screen performances are:

Romeo and Juliet (USA, 1908), J. Stuart Blackton director

Romeo and Juliet (USA, 1936), George Cukor director

Romeo and Juliet (UK, 1954), Renato Castellani director

Romeo and Juliet (Italy, 1968), Franco Zeffirelli director

BBC Television Shakespeare Romeo and Juliet (TV, UK, 1978) (videotaped)

The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet (USA, 1982), William Woodman director

The Animated Shakespeare Romeo and Juliet (TV, Russia and UK, 1992) Efim Gamburg director

Romeo+Juliet (USA, 1996) Baz Luhrmann director

West Side Story (USA, 1961), Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins directors

Romie-0 and Julie-8 (Canada, 1979), Clive A. Smith, director

Tromeo and Juliet (USA, 1996), Lloyd Kaufman director

The Lion King II: Simba's Pride (USA, 1998), Darrell Rooney director

Romeo Must Die (2000), Andrzej Bartkowiak director

Gnomeo and Juliet (2011), Kelly Asbury director

Private Romeo (2011), Alan Brown director

Warm Bodies (2013), Jonathan Levine director

Issaq (2013), Hindi Movie”(bufvc.ac.uk/shakespeare)

The reason for which we have chosen to list the adaptations of some of the most popular Shakespearean plays, is to prove that the integral literary work of the Bard became a source for the screen productions, not only a part of it. The endlessness of his creations is again indisputable, as it has been adapted in multicultural environments, suggesting that the message he transmits to his reader or spectator is accepted in all the parts of the world, from India and Japan to the American continent. Shakespeare goes beyond any border and more than this he adapts to any cultural environment, because he represents the essence of human nature. His works present reality and at the same time break the limit towards fantastic, defined by Curelar (2016, p.148) as creating “a specific feeling of high acuity”.

CONCLUSIONS

The adaptation of a play for the cinema requires the director to accept from the beginning the characters, the dialogue and the succession of scenes. Another interesting aspect is the parallel between



the theatre and the cinema; the main elements that the director of theatre needs to give shape to its interpretation of the play, namely the scenery, the costumes, the lighting, or the music, whereas the film director has purely cinematographic elements provided by the handling of the camera. The film director also has more liberties since he is limited neither in time nor in space. We thus explain the differences between the films obtained through all these criteria. A play is composed only of dialogues. It must therefore convey emotions only in this way, this is why the texts are often bombastic. Why a play can, regardless of its content, always escape this constraint of realism? The reason is the following: do not forget that before anything else, a play is written to be performed. Or representation always gives the play a deeply practical, human, realistic character. The movie screen doesn't have such an impact on the viewer: actually seeing actors on stage has a more profound impact than any image displayed on a white screen. Therefore we understand why realism is not a concern for a theatrical author.



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Online resources

<http://bufvc.ac.uk/shakespeare/>