

Shakespeare's language and the contemporary cinema audience

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Abstract

Among the many difficulties which are encountered in realising the plays of Shakespeare for the screen, perhaps the greatest is the translation from a primarily verbal medium to a primarily visual one. The decisions made by filmmakers with regard to how much of Shakespeare's language they chose to include or exclude, and the ways in which they use a visual language either as surrogate or enhancement, throw open areas of discussion which go to the very core of Shakespeare's currency in contemporary culture. This article examines the differing approaches of a selection of filmmakers to the vexed question of making Shakespeare's words work in the cinema. Furthermore, by drawing upon a range of examples from the early silent cinema to the modern multiplex the author asks how Shakespearean a film is when the words are not Shakespeare's own.

The relationship between cinema and spoken language has never been easy. Cinema's history as a silent medium for the first decades of its existence has left a perceptual legacy which is now rarely questioned by audiences or critics. This perception is that cinema is about movement, that it is visual and that a film should not be dependent upon the spoken word. Ejzenštejn, who has as much claim to having invented the techniques of film as anyone «positively rejected dialogue as being incompatible with the proper use of montages»¹. Later theorists, and practitioners such as Elia Kazan would say «movies are not literature, they're sequences of photographed action arranged to tell a story; they are images and movement, not sentences and words»². Kazan described his approach as «mak[ing] a film that a deaf man could follow»³. Syd Field, the Guru of aspiring screenwriters, tells his disciples all over the world that using language rather than pictures is «not screenwriting, that's stage writing»⁴. Where does this leave William Shakespeare in the cinema? In the theatre his plays depend upon language. Plot, content and characterisation depend upon the things which are said, and there is a further dimension. Shakespeare wrote for an essentially non-scenic theatre, and filled his plays with descriptions of things the audience could not actually see, either through the lack of appro-

appropriate scenographic resources, as in «Well, this is the Forest of Arden»⁵ or because they exist in an internal or spiritual dimension, which is difficult to portray physically, but can be delineated verbally. The union of a playwright whose work exists primarily in language and a dramatic medium which puts a premium on action, frequently marginalising the spoken word, has never been easy, but it is an idea which has had considerable currency for over a century.

When the plays of Shakespeare first entered the new world of the moving pictures they did so at a distinct disadvantage. The words spoken by the characters are the only part of that which we publish as his plays which can be attributed even vaguely accurately to him, almost all stage directions, and the division of the plays into acts and scenes being added by later editors to aid readers. In the early cinema, however, those words could not be heard. Film makers presented a series of visual images based upon the impressions which audiences had previously absorbed from Shakespeare's plays, in short, ten minute, single reel films. These films skimmed over the surface of the best remembered moments from those plays which were well enough known to be recognisable to the audiences crowding into the new *Nickelodeons*. There the flickering images showed the murder of Julius Caesar in the Senate or Romeo and Juliet on the balcony to a popular audience, who might identify that which they were looking at as being a representation of the plays of Shakespeare.

But the silent cinema was never really silent. There was musical accompaniment, often there were live sound effects and in many cases a performer would interpret or narrate the film which the audience was watching. Beyond this, at the beginning of the Twentieth Century one of the very earliest attempts to film part of a Shakespeare play included a sound recording. Sarah Bernhardt, the legendary French actress, had played Hamlet successfully on stage for many years, and was filmed in *Le duel d'Hamlet*⁶. The dialogue and the clashing of swords were recorded onto wax cylinders to be played alongside the showing of the film. These cylinders have long been lost, and no-one today has heard them, but the project demonstrates the frustration felt by some early film makers, and reflects an aspiration to enhance the filming of Shakespeare's plays not only with words but also with sounds.

The viability of Shakespeare in the movies was debated right from the very beginnings of cinema, even by the stars employed on the films, some of whom were unsure as to whether without the words of Shakespeare a film really was a performance of Shakespeare. Dorothy Phillips played Rosalind, a role she had always wanted to play on the stage, in scenes from *As You Like It* as part of the Bluebird Photoplays film *Triumph*⁷. She expressed doubts.

One of the most disappointing things in the whole business, to me, [...] is the impracticability [of filming] the plays of Shakespeare [...] imagine most of them, divested of their poetry on the screen [...] What audience of today would tolerate a story in which a lion attacks the villain in a French forest [...] or a [shipwreck] on the coast of Bohe-

mia? [...] I doubt if you could get the “pound of flesh” incident past the censors [...] Even *Romeo and Juliet* would hardly find a hearing on the strength of the story alone⁸.

For some critics, in whose opinions Shakespeare wrote dramatic poetry to be read and studied rather than to be subjected to the compromises of production, the films were a travesty. Fiske detested the appropriation:

Nothing escapes [t]his vandalism. We have seen Shakespeare [...] and other great dramatists ruthlessly subjected to the perverted horrors of the screen [...] seized by the greasy hands of ignorance and [illegible] in mutilated form [...] the result is revolting to persons familiar with the original work and misleading to others⁹.

Others applauded the attempt to visualise Shakespeare for the screen. To critics who regarded Shakespeare as a still-present playwright, a writer of timeless drama for an ever-changing world, the assimilation of the greatest dramatist into the newest dramatic medium was right and proper. Felheim has said that for these «the union of film and Shakespeare was as natural and ordained a combination as bread and butter or life and breath»¹⁰. Those who favoured filming Shakespeare won the argument by default. Between 1899 and 1929 several hundred silent films based on Shakespeare's plays were made and released. Both Robert Hamilton Ball¹¹ and Judith Buchanan¹² have done excellent work in championing these early silent films, but it was really only with the advent of sound that the relationship between language and film could be properly discussed. It was at this point that film makers began to have choices in the ways in which they approached Shakespeare's language on screen.

In contrast to the large number of silent films based on Shakespeare's plays, sound films of Shakespeare's plays came about gradually. The earliest existing versions, the “balcony” scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, performed as part of a sketch in *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*³, and a scene from *Henry VI* pt III, which was included as part of *The Show of Shows*¹⁴, were short extracts sandwiched between more mainstream cinematic entertainments, being introduced as a touch of culture in between the popular entertainment. In the sketch in *The Hollywood Revue* the scene is immediately replayed in contemporary dialogue, in response to a telegram from Head Office telling them the dialogue as written is too old fashioned. The sketch in fun in itself, but hardly augured well for Shakespeare's language on screen.

This equivocal attitude to Shakespeare's language continued in the first feature length sound film based on a Shakespeare play, the Mary Pickford/Douglas Fairbanks *Taming of the Shrew*¹⁵. A large part of the play, including the episodes with Sly, the tinker, and the sub plot involving Lucentio and Bianca were jettisoned, and as well as some silent film style slapstick comedy a certain amount of anachronistic dialogue was added¹⁶. This reduced the proportion of Shakespeare's play still further. The film makers, Pickford's production com-

pany, were clearly not ready to risk undiluted Shakespearean language on the cinema-going public. The film performed in a lukewarm fashion at the box office, although critics were guardedly favourable. When “Film Daily” described it as «Shakespeare done Slapstick!» and said «much of the film looks as if Mack Sennet has revived his pie – tossing days»¹⁷ they intended it as a compliment. Pickford, whose own production company had made the film, considered it a disaster, and she described it as «My finish»¹⁸, withdrew the film and gave up acting after the experience. This meant that there was little serious appraisal of the film. It was not until the release of Warner Brother’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*¹⁹, MGM’s *Romeo and Juliet*²⁰ and Paul Czinner’s *As You Like It*²¹ that critics really began to examine the relationship between Shakespeare and the cinema.

Allardyce Nicholl’s was one of the first important studies. He examined some of the issues surrounding Shakespeare’s language in the cinema, specifically in relation to Max Reinhardt’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Here he found two main advantages which the cinema potentially holds over stage presentations, the first

that certain passages which, spoken in our vast modern theatres with their sharp separation of audience and actors, become mere pieces of rhetoric devoid of true meaning and significance were invested in the film with an intimacy and directness they lacked on the stage [...] the second [...] lay in the ease with which the cinema can present visual symbols to accompany language²².

The idea of accompanying language with visual symbols was controversial. Nicholl anticipated the counter arguments of banality and reduction of the spectator’s imaginative connection with the language, and suggested that modern audiences no longer have abilities which audiences in Shakespeare’s own time enjoyed:

Owing to the universal development of reading, certain faculties possessed by men of earlier ages have vanished from us. In the sixteenth century, men’s minds were more acutely perceptive of values in words heard, partly because their language was a growing thing with constantly occurring new forms and strange applications of familiar words, but largely because they had to maintain a constant alertness to spoken speech²³.

He goes on to suggest that in the Twentieth Century this no longer holds true and that these vanished faculties mean that «a modern audience [...] listening to earlier verse drama, will normally require a direct stimulus to its visual imagination»²⁴. Nicholl was writing after only two sound feature films of Shakespeare’s plays had been seen by audiences. The ways in which subsequent film makers have interpreted this direct stimulus, however, have varied enormously. With regard to the language it becomes apparent that there is a question which arises immediately: «[T]he first and chief and most

traditional problem of film criticism vis-à-vis Shakespeare in the cinema is one of the oldest issues: what to do about the poetry in production»²⁵. Although many more films using Shakespeare's language have been made since 1929, the controversy still, from time to time, raises its head. Blumenthal, for one, says that «there is no place in the film (in any film for that matter) for Shakespeare's poetry»²⁶. On the other hand, in an adjacent article in the same anthology Agee praises Olivier's film of *Henry V*, largely for the way in which it has used the poetry. «The one great glory of this film is this language. The greatest credit I can assign to those who made the film is that they have loved and served the language so well»²⁷.

If the language and the dependence on speech that Shakespeare's plays entail can be seen as challenges for the film maker, the medium also offers the potential to visualise many things which Shakespeare refers to but does not show. The scope for spectacle is considerable, and cinema audiences indeed expect it. In some cases the spectacle in film versions has completely changed from the portrayal of events given in Shakespeare's plays, and now forms the expectation of contemporary audiences. One example is the Battle of Agincourt. In the text of the play *Henry V* the battle is not seen, yet in the two film versions it is a climactic episode, taking a considerable amount of screen time. It is possible to argue that a battle won in large part by archers is harder to show onstage than for instance the battle of Phillipi in *Julius Caesar*, of which a certain amount does take place within the play, but for many today their vision of Agincourt has been formed by Olivier's charging French knights²⁸ and the hiss of the arrows, both absent from the stage play. When Branagh made his film of the same play²⁹ he placed a similar emphasis on the battle, although his version of it was less romantic, influenced more by the Battle of Shrewsbury in Orson Welles' *Chimes at Midnight*³⁰.

Twentieth Century film makers assume that Shakespeare would have liked to have shown the Battle of Agincourt in detail. Whether this is the seizing an opportunity to fill in background and provide new perspectives or simply because, as Russell Jackson says «a large scale event can hardly be expected to take place "off screen"»³¹, for many, obviously including Olivier and Branagh, it would be unthinkable not to show the battle of Agincourt. On stage it can be different. Rather than depict the ebb and flow of the battle, with lots of *Alarums and Excursions* or *They fight*, Shakespeare himself chose to depict the battle by showing a comic episode of Pistol and a French knight instead³². He could have shown this legendary triumph from English history in many ways, but instead depicts the battle through an episode which is the opposite of our modern assumptions. He actually depicts a comic episode between two uncomprehending speakers of different languages.

Of course film makers respond to visual opportunities offered by the script. As Hitchcock said: «the cinema has seen stage directions in Shakespeare's poetry where decades of theatrical craftsmen have seen only words»³³. In some

cases the argument against spectacle is that reality falls short of Shakespeare's description. How could any real barge be as marvellous as that which Enobarbus describes in his magnificent speech?³⁴ To show such a thing would be to render it banal. In Las Vegas a barge based upon the description has been built as an entertainment venue. It is a sight which leaves the viewer speechless with its vulgarity, and in many ways epitomises the kind of concern that has been voiced by opponents.

This is not merely a matter of descriptions of objects, it covers actions as well. In *Hamlet* the death of Ophelia is described movingly by Gertrude, who enters into a scene where Laertes is talking to Claudius³⁵. In Olivier's film³⁶ the death is shown as well as being described. Jean Simmons as Ophelia is seen floating down the river, festooned with flowers, singing to herself, in an image which echoes the Millais painting³⁷, while Eileen Herlie as Gertrude describes in voiceover what the spectator is watching. It is a moment which has been frequently discussed by never imitated. Leonard calls it «a singular moment of grotesquerie»³⁸. Whether or not the reinforcement of the verbal imagery with the visual has given ammunition to those who find such pictorialisation distasteful, subsequent films of *Hamlet* have taken different approaches. While Zeffirelli³⁹ shows rather less of the picture and gives rather more of the description, Branagh⁴⁰ gives the verbal description and ends on a single close-up shot of Ophelia's drowned face, eyes open, under the water. Mundell⁴¹ only has the speech containing the description, with no visualisation, whereas Kozintsev⁴² gives only a shot of dead Ophelia floating below the surface of the water, with no speech. In the case of Ophelia's death, the literal presentation of the image together with it being described in the speech, as used by Olivier, is rather cloying, while there is a simplicity both in Mundell's and in Kozintsev's opposite representations which is powerful and eloquent. All four of the directors have responded differently to the same problem – that of whether to show the picture, which the cinema can do but the theatre cannot, or to use the speech which is very evocative, has stood alone in the theatre for four hundred years, and is after all what Shakespeare wrote.

Another example is the appearance or otherwise of the dagger in *Macbeth* (II, i). In Shakespeare's theatre this was not a dilemma. There was no way of showing this dagger on the stage of the Globe. It might be possible for some stage hand to hang a dagger on a fishing line over the balcony, somewhere behind the actor standing on the front of the thrust stage, but the likelihood of this is non-existent. In Shakespeare's theatre this was indeed «a dagger of the mind»⁴³. In the cinema it has had a varied existence. Polanski shows a special effects dagger floating in front of Macbeth⁴⁴. This looks ridiculous nowadays, not merely because audience expectations of computer-generated imagery are now much more sophisticated. The author can remember watching the film at the time of its initial run in cinemas, and the hoots of derision which greeted the appearance of the dagger. Other film makers have approached the same

image differently. In Freeston's⁴⁵ film, Macbeth is in a chapel. A window blows open, light comes in, the dagger he sees and attempts to touch is the shadow of a crucifix on the floor in front of him, and he gives the speech in a somewhat echoing voice over. The dagger is his interpretation of a real phenomenon, and the image and the speech work tolerably well in context. Welles⁴⁶ does not show a literal dagger. For him the speech, in voiceover, is accompanied by close-ups of his face, and a series of shots of out-of-focus flashes of light or shadows. It is very much a psychological interpretation. Of the three, Polanski's version, where he both gives the audience the speech and shows a visual effect of a dagger, is the least satisfactory. Although it is possible, unlike the case of the death of Ophelia no film maker as yet has shown the dagger and Macbeth's reaction to it without the speech.

There are some things which cinema can certainly achieve which the stage can only do in a limited way. The representation of twins, for example, so central to a number of the plays, can be made far more convincing on screen, where the two can be played by the same actor. Disguise, which for Shakespeare is usually a matter of convention, may conversely be more convincing in the theatre than in the context of a medium which is predicated upon a semblance of realism. But it is this semblance of realism which throws down the greatest challenge to film makers working with Shakespeare. Poetic language is difficult to carry off in a realistic setting. The more realistic the detail which surrounds the actors, the more artificial the language can sound. It is easier to find an equivalent convention for soliloquies, another feature of Shakespeare's plays which stand out in a realistic context, in that the cinema has its own conventions for revealing a character's thought to the audience, for instance in voiceovers. Although some directors, such as Olivier in *Hamlet*, have combined voice over with one or two lines spoken aloud as if overflowing from the character in the course of his or her thoughts, the stage convention of talking aloud with no-one there has proved more problematic. Throughout most of the Twentieth Century there was no naturalistic setting in which a character could talk out loud apparently to him- or herself, being ignored by any passers-by, although in a Twenty-first Century setting someone talking to him or herself in public might nowadays be assumed to be using a mobile phone in hands-free mode, and excite little curiosity.

One of the difficulties is that someone talking in blank verse does not fit into any realistic or naturalistic context. Thus many films, as well as cutting the script, attempt to downplay the poetic qualities of the language. For example, almost all of *Romeo and Juliet* rhymes, but the film versions, and most contemporary stage versions, seek to downplay rather than acknowledge this. There are film makers who see dialogue itself as the last layer in the texture of a film. «Dialogue should simply be a sound among other sounds, just something that comes out of the mouths of people whose eyes tell the story in visual terms»⁴⁷. If ordinary dialogue is in such a position in relation to pictures, then poetry

is indeed in a parlous state. Yet if one removes the language, the whole reason for filming Shakespeare becomes questionable. «The whole point about Shakespeare is his wonderful language. Making a “Shakespeare film” without Shakespeare’s language is like a silent version of *La Traviata*»⁴⁸. If one begins to cut the language, the next question to be raised is how much can be cut, yet the result still be valid as Shakespeare.

With the exception of Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet* which uses virtually the full Folio text from 1623 and adds some lines from the second Quarto, every film version of a Shakespeare play cuts some of the lines. This is by no means unusual. Most theatrical productions of Shakespeare’s plays also cut the text. The «two hours traffic of our stage»⁴⁹ to which the Chorus in *Romeo and Juliet* refers is only achievable by cutting the plays. In the cinema the text is almost invariably cut even further. In the preface to his screenplay for *Richard III* (1996) Ian McKellen discusses his approach to cutting the text.

mixing words and pictures the screen has its own language. So, in adapting *Richard III* I was translating. Translation is an inexact art, carrying responsibilities to respect the author’s ends, even as you wilfully tamper with the means⁵⁰.

Cut, reduced, transposed or not, McKellen, Luhrmann, Hoffman, Almereyda and others use Shakespeare’s language, as Olivier, Welles, Branagh and others have before them, but some of the most acclaimed Shakespearean films have not used Shakespeare’s language at all. Grigori Kozintsev made, in his *Hamlet* and his *King Lear*⁵¹ two of the most acclaimed film versions of Shakespeare’s plays. He used translations by Pasternak, which were at the time new, quite spare versions, far removed from the more ornate traditional translations used in the Russian theatre before him. Akira Kurosawa, with *Throne of Blood*⁵² and *Ran*⁵³ also made critically acclaimed films which used scripts which acknowledge a debt to Shakespeare but do not use a word of the original. The most recent film of this type is Sherwood Hu’s *Prince of the Himalayas*⁵⁴, which is actually far closer to *Hamlet* than any of Kurosawa’s versions of Shakespeare.

When *Prince of the Himalayas* was screened at the Rubin Institute in New York, an academic giving a talk to accompany the screening said that this was «a new and significant entry to the cannon of Shakespeare films»⁵⁵. This immediately begs several questions. 1) What is contained in the “cannon” of Shakespeare films? 2) Who decides on inclusions? 3) What makes one addition more “significant” than another? 4) What is a Shakespeare film? This is not a place to debate whether there is indeed a “cannon” of Shakespeare films, nor to discuss the criteria for inclusion or significance, but it is apposite to discuss the idea that there are “Shakespeare films”. If this is to be discussed, then some sort of definition must be approached. Not everyone accepts *Throne of Blood* as a “Shakespeare film”. Peter Brook, for one, does not.

[*Throne of Blood*] [...] is a great masterpiece, perhaps the only true masterpiece inspired by Shakespeare, but it cannot be properly considered Shakespeare because it doesn't use the text. Kurosawa follows the plot very closely, but by transposing it to the Japan of the Middle Ages and making Macbeth a Samurai he is doing another *Seven Samurai*. Where the story comes from doesn't matter; he is doing what every film-maker has always done – constructing a film from an idea and using appropriate dialogue⁶⁶.

Brook rejects Kurosawa as Shakespeare, but as well as the phrase shown above, «inspired by Shakespeare» he also says «So what may be the best Shakespearean film doesn't help us with the problems of filming Shakespeare»⁶⁷.

A *Shakespeare film* is different therefore from a *Shakespearean film*, and the difference is the use of Shakespeare's text. If this definition is used Sherwood Hu is not included as a Shakespeare film, neither is Kurosawa, and there are a number of other films which need to argue for inclusion, depending upon how much of Shakespeare's text they use. Kozintsev follows Shakespeare's story, or at least a large part of it, given that he cuts the play to half its length, and his script is a translation of Shakespeare's script, albeit into a different idiom. Given that the script would be translated into Russian anyway, it is less vital that it be translated into one Russian version rather than another. As the script is a translation of Shakespeare's text, by this definition it is a Shakespeare film. It becomes a moot point to decide upon the inclusion of *Taming of the Shrew* which cuts so much of the text and adds some extraneous material. It keeps the title, some of the lines and some of the characters, and follows one of the three plots reasonably well. This film sits right on the cusp of definition. In the end, taking into account its position as the first attempt to create a feature film based on a Shakespeare play using sound it can perhaps be afforded the benefit of the doubt, and classed, although not without reservation, as a Shakespeare film. *Chimes at Midnight* on the other hand does not use the title of a Shakespeare play, cuts and combines elements of four different plays, takes enormous liberties with Shakespeare's story lines, yet every word of it is Shakespeare. Orson Welles, its director, who does in fact use Shakespeare's language in all three of his film versions of Shakespeare, says something revealing: «I use Shakespeare's words and characters to make motion pictures. They are variations on his themes [...] It certainly could not have been written without Shakespeare, but [...] *Othello* the movie, I hope, is first and foremost a motion picture»⁶⁸. It is a Shakespeare motion picture rather than a Shakespearean motion picture.

Kenneth Branagh is the only person to have attempted to film *Love's Labour's Lost*⁶⁹, and he should be commended for that, but he cuts Shakespeare's play down to approximately a quarter of the lines, and adds songs from Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin and others. The attempt at definition becomes more problematic. It is by Branagh, usually an indication that it is genu-

ine Shakespeare, but in the case of this film it is not just Shakespeare, it is some other things too. «*Love's Labour's Lost* is about 1/3 Shakespeare, 1/3 song-and-dance, and 1/3 ribald slapstick»⁶⁰.

This film was not successful, and led to the cancellation of his three picture deal, but the cast obviously had great fun making it. Branagh had moved too far from Shakespeare for Shakespeare enthusiasts, but it was still too full of Shakespeare to find a different audience. This film has few champions, although for some, including the author of this article, it has its own charm, but it works better as a pastiche of Hollywood musicals than it does as Shakespeare, and would therefore become Shakespearean rather than Shakespeare.

If a film does not use Shakespeare's text, it may still acknowledge Shakespeare's influence. Kurosawa does this. On the other hand there are many other films which make the same claim on a more tenuous basis. A film like *She's the Man*⁶¹ is filled with Shakespearean references. Although for fear of alienating the teenagers in the multiplexes which are its target audience it does not advertise itself as a Shakespearean film, in the additional materials on the DVD the director Andy Fickman heavily emphasises the connections. The most commercially successful film ever to avow Shakespeare as its source is Kelly Asbury's *Gnomeo and Juliet*⁶², which deliberately courts comparison, which begins with a small gnome attempting to deliver Shakespeare's opening Chorus, and which entertainingly plunders Shakespeare's play, indeed several other plays by Shakespeare, as a source of puns, sight gags and parody.

Entertaining as these films may be, they are not Shakespeare. They use Shakespeare as a cultural reference point, and operate in a penumbra of Shakespearean allusion, but they do not really attempt to find a way of making Shakespeare films, within Brook's definition of films using the text. It is possible to take the recognition of reference to extremes, and to see Shakespearean allusion well beyond the point where it is intended, however. There are many internet sites⁶³, which regard *The Lion King*⁶⁴ as a version of *Hamlet*, but it is not. It shares an archetypal plot device with *Hamlet*, which Shakespeare took from a far earlier tradition, at least from Seneca. Ghosts demanding vengeance go back much further than *Hamlet*, just as divided lovers go back much further than *Romeo and Juliet*, but from a modern perspective we often use a reference to Shakespeare as shorthand for describing such archetypal situations. *Twilight: New Moon*⁶⁵ alludes to, and even directly quotes from *Romeo and Juliet*, but it neither a Shakespeare film nor a Shakespearean film.

Every director who uses a text by Shakespeare interprets it. There is no ideal production or definitive interpretation. This infinite variety of interpretative possibilities is one of the reasons that Shakespeare's plays are valued by artists and audiences four hundred years after they were written. Such interpretation can radically alter the representation, and even the meaning, of the text, without altering a single word. Every theatre production seeks to find some points of differentiation from every other production of the play,

some stamp of individuality. This is understandable. Any actor playing a major Shakespearean role knows that it has been played a thousand times before, and it is quite likely that some of the most discerning members of the audience, and all of the critics, will have seen a number of actors in the same role, so the actor will seek out interpretative nuance to highlight his or her personal interpretation. Directors will also seek to differentiate their vision from preceding productions and films. While some of this is a matter of context and setting, much of this happens through the ways in which the lines are interpreted. When the play is then translated into a different medium, the options for interpreting the text alter.

To give an instance of an interpretation of a simple line which goes on to have more profound implications, Polanski furnishes an example. Macbeth has a line, not usually considered vital, «Here's our chief guest»⁶⁶ as he and his wife enter a busy scene. This line is usually taken as referring to Banquo. In Polanski's film the scene takes place as preparations are underway for a banquet, to which Banquo has been invited. As part of the preparation, a bear in a cage has been brought in, to be baited by dogs later as part of the entertainment. Macbeth delivers the line as a reference to the bear, as does Lady Macbeth her following lines «If he had been forgotten, It had been a gap in our great feast»⁶⁷. The utterance, which in its more conventional setting can carry a degree of irony, in that the audience knows at this point that Macbeth is planning the death of Banquo, appears to have been turned into a light throwaway line, but while this appears to be merely a piece of banter when it takes place, the image persists. At the end of the banquet the torn corpse of the bear is dragged out, leaving a bloody trail on the floor. The image reverberates later, when Macbeth says «They have tied me to a stake: I cannot fly, But, bear-like, I must fight the course»⁶⁸. The original line about the chief guest, usually take to refer to Banquo, has instead become entwined with Macbeth, and the fate of the bear the audience has already seen presages the fate which awaits him.

While this example shows a way in which the visual image can give new and recurring resonances to a line, it is something which of necessity has to be used sparingly. The most important scenes in Shakespeare are usually resolved by language. A particularly telling instance is the scene in *Coriolanus*⁶⁹, where the eponymous figure is leading the Volscians to the gates of Rome, and is deaf to all pleas for mercy. His wife, his mother, his son, and another lady come to him in the Volscian camp to beg him to turn away from destroying the city which has spurned and banished him, yet which gave him his birth. This is perhaps an archetypal Shakespeare scene, where people begin in a seemingly irreconcilable situation, and by using language the scene is resolved. It is also the sort of scene which conventional wisdom would suggest does least to recommend itself to a film maker. In Ralph Fiennes' film⁷⁰ the context has been firmly set in the Balkans in the present time. The film was so strongly marketed as an action film that a group of the author's students who went to

see the film were asked if they were aware that the film was actually a version of a Shakespeare play. Apparently groups of young men, who had been drawn in by the trailer showing modern day combat, were demanding their money back when the cast began talking in blank verse. Yet Fiennes' film is definitely a Shakespeare film. The tanks, the AK-47s, the RPGs and the television news broadcasts notwithstanding, Fiennes has made a film which uses, respects and values Shakespeare's language.

The setting for this scene in the film is a warehouse. There is a crowd of men in combat fatigues on all sides. His family come in and Fiennes, as Coriolanus, sits in a chair to listen to them. There is no mystery about this scene. There is no clever exploitation of the language of film. The scene is played absolutely straight, and relies solely upon the delivery of the language. Vanessa Redgrave's performance as Volumnia is modulated perfectly for the camera, and the ability of the camera to move into close-up gives all of the opportunities for intimacy and directness which Nicholl talked about⁷¹. In many stage productions in large theatres this scene takes on an operatic quality, which could be catastrophic in film, but Redgrave and Fiennes play the scene with great subtlety where it is needed, and the huge emotions running throughout are pitched at the right level for the size of the frame, which is the essence of film acting.

Fiennes' film as a whole is not entirely successful, but this scene is played magnificently, as an example of just how effective Shakespeare's language can be in the cinema. The setting disappears, the incongruities of characters in modern dress speaking in blank verse become irrelevant. The delivery of a magnificent scene, which depends first and foremost on the delivery of Shakespeare's words, works as well in the cinema as it ever has in the theatre. There is no visual distraction from the words, the only camera movements are to follow the dialogue and to look into the faces of the characters for their reactions. This is a scene which could not be replicated in some other more "cinematic" way. There is no non-verbal visual equivalent which could achieve the same effect. This scene, which consists almost solely of people talking, is an immensely powerful piece of cinema.

When cinema began, spoken language was excluded. The movies have tended to apologise for language ever since. Yet there are many films where the climax or the resolution of the film depends upon a speech, or upon a scene of extended dialogue. Whether Charlie Chaplin's speech at the end of *The Great Dictator*⁷², Spencer Tracy in *Guess who's Coming to Dinner?*⁷³, Al Pacino in *Any Given Sunday*⁷⁴ or Laurence Olivier before Agincourt in *Henry V*⁷⁵, some of the most powerful moments in cinema have come from the unadorned use of language. These, and many more, demonstrate that there is nothing intrinsically un-cinematic about using language. If directors and actors were prepared to trust Shakespeare's language more, and to use the camera to explore the performance rather than the setting, perhaps Shakespeare's language could be seen as an asset, rather than an obstacle for film makers to overcome.

Notes

1. G. Mast, M. Cohen (eds.), *Film Image and Film Language*, in Idd., *Film Theory and Criticism*, 3rd edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985, p. 79.
2. E. Kazan, *A Life*, Pan Books, London 1988, p. 403.
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