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review scientific paper

Shakespeare on screen

As a way of analyzing cultural, theoretical, and performance trends this paper draws on the historic cinematic approaches to Shakespearean adaptation and the way in which they reflect the cultural milieu of contemporary Shakespeare performance. This overview ranges from the adaptations from the golden age of Hollywood to film entries in our contemporary pop culture. By constructing a new historicist approach to the Shakespearian adaptations on the silver screen the paper undertakes a contextual analysis of the historic adaptations in order to understand how contemporary directors and actors converse with Shakespeare as well as how they invite audiences to engage with modern retellings of his plays.

KEY WORDS: adaptation, film, William Shakespeare, New Historicism, popular culture

The number of films made from Shakespeare's plays has increased over the course of the past few years ranging from faithful adaptations of his plays to adapting material loosely based on his plays. Although seemingly not as popular as some other adaptations hailed by the popular culture as worth undertaking, Shakespeare still manages to bear considerable significance in the twenty first century. Some recent films such as Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004), Kenneth Branagh's *As You Like It* (2006), Julie Taymor's *The Tempest* (2010) Ralph Fiennes' *Coriolanus* (2011) and Roland Emmerich's *Anonymous* (2011) have testified to this notion while resonating with the modern audiences worldwide. Screening Shakespeare in the twenty first century seems to be both a task that the film directors take seriously and a torch that continues to be passed on from one generation of filmmakers to

another, from Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles over Grigori Kozintzev, Akira Kurosawa and Franco Zeffrelli to Kenneth Branagh, Baz Luhrmann, John Madden and Julie Taymor. These filmmakers have transferred Shakespeare's plays from stage to screen with unforgettable results: from Oscar®-winning British classics to Hollywood musicals and Westerns, from Soviet epics to BBC's modern adaptations, Shakespeare has inspired an almost infinite variety of films.

This paper aims to explore the the adaptations of Shakespeare's plays for the big screen as seen from the point of view of the New Historicist practice, that is, by paying attention to the manner in which their contemporary frame of reference reconstructs the main characters, plots and themes in modern Shakespeare retellings. The theoretical framework of New historicism will be used to focus on the emergence of the first adaptations of Shakespeare and spanning from the 1940s to the 1980s golden age of Hollywood. Here the focus will be made on the key directors and adaptations of Shakespeare of this age and time. The second part will focus on Shakespeare entering the cinematic stage of popular culture at the end of the 1980s onwards. The main cultural and performance trends in adapting Shakespeare in our contemporary age and time shall also be reflected upon. The two historical parts of this analysis of Shakespeare on screen will hopefully bring closer the premise that Shakespeare constitutes a large part of our contemporary culture because of the fact that our culture is enshrouded with the universal plots, themes and characters he had envisioned. Retelling and re-contextualizing them from the viewpoint of a modern observer will grant insight into Shakespeare as a *stereotypical character*, a *standardized plot* and a *universal theme* that is always the same and yet always containing some variations that speak to us all.

With the birth of the film as a mass medium it was not long before Shakespeare's plays were incorporated into the realm of the film and television: movies, feature films, musicals, westerns, science fictions films, epics, thrillers, comedies and other genres were adapted from Shakespeare's plays. Over the course of the years it became quite interesting how many adaptations of Shakespeare were made and one wonders just how come it is possible that there were and *still* are so many of them. The truth is simple – Shakespeare wrote for a wide range of audience very much like television writers today. In

the early days of TV, Shakespeare plays were seen on many drama series and this is the same in the twenty first century. Perhaps due to his reputation as "intellectual" or "high culture", today Shakespeare's plays are frequently adapted for both TV and cinema.

They have also ushered their way into our collective consciousness; they are a constant part of popular culture with numerous references in TV shows, sitcoms, cartoons, and science fiction. Hollywood seems to have found Shakespeare anew – his plays seem to be the perfect screenplays for Hollywood films. This is quite interesting to note since Shakespeare's plays could be observed not just as plays but as screenplays that pre-date the age of film. This ironic notion would mean that Shakespeare wrote screenplays some three hundred years before the birth of the cinema.

From a theoretical perspective, the question of adapting Shakespearean plays is an intriguing one: given that Shakespeare himself adapted a large portion of his plots from previous material, one should wonder *what* exactly is being adapted in the new adaptations. This is where New Historicism comes useful with as it views literary creations as cultural formations shaped by 'the circulation of social energy' (Miller, 2005). Such a framework provides a critical relation between literature and history in as much as it allow us to follow the process through which Shakespeare's works of art are at once embedded into popular culture and rendered as a part of our everyday life. The most important power of the adaptation is to move Shakespeare's play and re-contextualize it to a different time while still retaining its original characters, plots and themes. Such a reading would transcend the historical timeframe while at the same time resonate very strongly with the audiences. This is the reason why the timeless characters and themes from the plays manage to stay fresh today.

1. SHAKESPEARE IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF HOLLYWOOD

Directors and actors have adapted Shakespeare for as long as his plays since the beginning of the silver screen era. Some feel that the adaptations without Shakespeare's original poetry, audiences are robbed of the opportunity to experience the cleverness, poetry, and majesty of the language, all of which are considered to be trademarks of Shakespeare's genius. Others feel that modern adaptations do not challenge viewers as the original plays would and that they offer weaker plots and less complex characters. Tragedy or comedy, Shakespeare's plays seem to catch on to the popular trends of our modern society by reinventing themselves so as to be relevant in the context of the twenty first century. Harold Bloom in his book *The Western Canon* claims that "of all the writers in the history of the world Shakespeare is the most relevant" (Bloom 1994:71) and that his plays have had the most impact and that "he [Shakespeare] is the Western Canon" (ibid.)

The universality of Shakespeare's characters and themes is so vast that it leaves place for all the *underlying* ideologies to interpolate the canon of Shakespeare (ibid.) and to make them constantly new while keeping intact the fundamental themes and motifs that are embedded in the plays. Contemporary film directors such as Ralph Fiennes, Julie Taymor, Baz Luhrman and John Madden seem to have found the same recipe as Olivier, Wells, Kozintsev, Zeffirelli and Kurosawa before them: to make completely new piece of art while preserving the original play:

The romantic comedy Shakespeare in Love (1998) wittily puts the dramatist into the world of show business. Shakespeare's relationship with the theatre manager, Henslowe – and through him with 'the money' – is the occasion for a multitude of jokes referring to the entertainment industry of late sixteenth-century London in terms of its equivalent four hundred years later. In one moment of crisis Henslowe is even on the point of giving birth to a great cliché. 'The show must . . .' he starts, and Shakespeare completes the phrase by urging him impatiently to 'Go on.' The moment passes, unnoticed by either of them. The tension between the artist and the marketplace has always been a good source of humor in drama and ction and

on film, and the story is usually told in terms of the crassness of the producers and the crushed idealism of the ‘creative’ department. This is true to the experience of many artists, not least those writers and directors who worked in Hollywood at the height of the studios’ powers. (Jackson 2000:1)

The entertainment industry, as Jackson notes, is a site of a struggle between the artist and the marketplace. The marketplace is the audience and the product is the play or the adaptation thereof. They coexist both on and off the stage or the silver screen. With the emergence of the film there was a clear intent to make this bond between the artist and the marketplace stronger:

Signaling a break not only with photography but also with the artificial reality of the stage, the moving pictures, as Charles Frohman observed as early as 1896, “make us believe that we see actual living nature”, declaring henceforth that “the dead things of the stage must go”. At its inception, then, cinema produced the equivalent of “a cult of life”. Indeed its novel ability to store time in moving images led to the preoccupation with early innovators with filming the activities of everyday life. But as films entered mass culture, they produced not only fascination, but apprehension. Rather than replacing “dead things of the stage” with “actual living nature”, cinema replaced living actors with ghostly, flickering shadows on the screen, eliciting a sense of emptiness and death more than the experience of a “real” life it promised to contain. The proliferation of these barren images [...] contributed to the feeling of trauma that would characterize modernity as a barrage of disconnected and frequently disturbing images. Partly in response to this threat, the cinema developed the narrative – its dominant form: the use of selective images in succession to create an illusion of consistent dramatic action. (Starks and Lehmann 2002:9–10)

This is Shakespeare entering the cinematic stage. His plays had already been intricately woven into every fabric of Anglo-American culture (Starks and Lehmann 2002:10). Indeed it would be difficult to speak about the history

of cinema without mentioning Shakespeare for he has been linked with the cinema and the film since its inception (ibid). Shakespeare, in a way, wrote for films, claimed Laurence Olivier (Cartmell 2000: 21). The film, being a social medium addresses the group, rather than individual participation (Holderness 2002: 6), served as a perfect vehicle for Shakespeare to enter the realm of cinema.

Shakespeare officially entered the motion pictures in September 1899 when segments of Shakespeare's *King John* were filmed by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree (Henderson 2006:32). This was a milestone in the adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. The social role of both film and television will prove to be of great importance when screening Shakespeare in the future as it will become apparent that Shakespeare will manage very early to incorporate himself into the rhythms of social life with the help of the unique availability that television offers to everyone

Television operates as a medium of collective participation within the fundamental social institution (family) and within the basic space of social living (home). Secondly, television is a universal medium to a far greater extent than the theatre or even literacy; as an oral and a visual form it is accessible even to the unlettered, its complex visual dialect easier to learn than spoken or written language. It can therefore claim, more than any other cultural form, to be a national communication medium. (Holderness 2002: 7)

As the century progressed and talking pictures replaced the silent film, new techniques revolutionized the film, television and the cinema which split into modernist art distinctions of 'high' art cinema and 'popular' movie entertainment although this distinction did not always hold (Starks and Lehmann 2002: 12). In the fashion of new historicism, culture does not limit itself to 'high culture' but includes all forms of culture, even the ones that came subsequently like television, popular music and film. Directors like Orson Welles and Laurence Olivier appropriated and adapted Shakespeare for the avant-garde 'high' art cinema although Shakespeare proved to be quite profitable in 'popular' adaptations as well from Samuel Taylor's *The Taming*

of *the Shrew*¹(1929) to Franco Zeffirelli's box office hit *Romeo and Juliet* (1968). This distinction between 'high' and 'low' entertainment became institutionalized in the 1950s through the 1970s (ibid).

Deborah Cartmell in her book *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen* addresses the history of the Shakespeare's plays adapted to the silver screen by claiming that it was Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* (1944) that succeeded to blend 'high' and 'low' culture, converting academics to cinema and the 'uneducated' to Shakespeare (Cartmell 2000: 21). This movie invented the modern Shakespeare film (Rothwell 2004: 50)

Laurence Olivier's early version was not just his first Shakespeare adaptation as a director and producer; it also set new standards by making conscious use of the particular advantages of the film, thereby bringing the Bard's work to a mass audience – in Technicolor! (Mueller 2005: 228)

The importance of Olivier's work is that his three Shakespearian adaptations – *Henry V* (1944), *Hamlet*² (1948) and *Richard III* (1955) were hailed as being "simultaneously Shakespearian and totally cinematic" (Schneider 2003: 202). In *Richard III* Olivier made the villainous king not merely meditate upon his vicious scheming but, notably "in terms of the relation of the theater to the cinema, Richard talks to the audience all the time, which is the absolute audience approach, not meditation" (Jackson 2000: 59).

In a similar manner, Orson Welles, after establishing his name in Hollywood with his masterpiece *Citizen Kane* (1941), also followed Olivier's cinematic excursions with his adaptations of *Macbeth* (1948) and *Othello* (1952). It is no surprise that Welles' films were and still are compared to Olivier's and Welles, along with several other directors will eventually become an integral part of the canon of Shakespeare on screen:

Olivier's films must be central among those Lawrence Guntner identified as having become a kind of 'Great Tradition of Shakespeare on Film', privileging the film directed by Olivier, Welles, Kurosawa, Kozintzev, Polanski and Zeffirelli. One reason for the status accorded to these films is that their source plays are the best tragedies with their strong story lines, large-scale characters and symbolic dimension which generate a powerful cinematic imagery on the big screen. (Jackson 2000: 171)

1 This was Hollywood's first full length Shakespearian film (Stark and Lehmann 2002: 12)

2 Olivier's *Hamlet* earned critical acclaim with the film both movie goers as well as with the critics. Olivier received an Academy Award for best leading actor in *Hamlet*. The movie was also awarded with Oscars® for best art direction (black and white) and best costumes (black and white) (Mueller 2005: 557)

Welles's *Macbeth* (1948) was significant as a turning point in Shakespeare cinematic adaptation: "Its major effect on the critical response was to confront critics with a new territory of adaptive endeavor which had to be accommodated" (Davies 1988: 5). The common characteristic of Welles' adaptations – *Macbeth* (1948) as well as his later adaptation of *Othello* (1952) – a very common trait running between these two adaptations is that in both of his films Welles carefully engages with Shakespeare's emphasis "upon the need to tell and retell the story" (Mason, qtd. in Jackson 2000: 193) His films acknowledge the narrative imperative is the plays' performance and their method (ibid). Welles' *Macbeth* will be compared by the critics with the much acclaimed Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of *Macbeth* titled *Throne of Blood* (1957) wherein the above mentioned method of guiding the narrative is chiseled by Kurosawa to near perfection:

Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of Macbeth titled Throne of Blood (1957) is the most complete translation of Shakespeare on film. The text is abandoned altogether, the action is shifted from medieval Scotland to feudal Japan; a western Renaissance tragedy becomes an Oriental samurai epic. The film displays a militaristic society with an elaborate code of loyalty expressed in conventionalized social rituals (Holderness 2002: 64).

Certainly the most popular nowadays of Welles' Shakespearian films is his 1966 adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* titled *Chimes at Midnight* wherein Welles very 'comfortably' plays the role of the legendary rogue Falstaff. The entire film is told from the point of view of this character which allows an incredible insight into one of the Bard's most complex and witty characters: "Shakespeare's comedy was never as gloriously performed as it was in this Welles' adaptation" (Schneider 2003: 449). A more subtle adaptation of the same play will ensue in the 1991 Gus Van Sant adaptation of *Henry IV* titled *My Own Private Idaho*.

Shakespeare visited the musical genre in George Sidney's 1953 *Kiss Me Kate*, an adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and in Jerome Robbins' *West Side Story* (1961) inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*. This appealing setting of Shakespeare into the youthful beginning of pop-culture in the 1960s will spawn numerous teenage Shakespeare adaptations in the 1990s that will appeal to the younger

audiences hence making Shakespeare incredibly popular with the teenage demographics (Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet*, Gil Junger *10 Things I Hate About You*, Tim Blake Nelson's *O*, etc.)

One of the most popular genres in the 1960s was the epic film and in 1963 Joseph L. Mankewicz's, who had also adapted *Julius Caesar* (1953) starring Marlon Brando, returned to this genre with his grandiose epic *Cleopatra* (1963) starring Elizabeth Taylor and the film received high acclaim for "its visual splendor and mesmerizing opulence" (Mueller 2003: 171). Mankewicz's epic *Julius Caesar* (1953) had also garnered him some critical acclaim but with *Cleopatra* (1963) he had made a grandiose production with his take on one of Shakespeare's greatest heroines. Along with a compelling modernistic interpretation in Roman Polanski's gloomy version of *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (1971) other highly cinematic epic versions of Shakespeare's plays followed such as Charlton Heston's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1972) which was much measured against Mankewicz's grand epic.

Franco Zeffirelli's contribution to Shakespeare on screen cannon continued to receive accolade by critics and audiences alike even though his last Shakespeare adaptation, *Hamlet* starring Mel Gibson was made as long ago as 1990. Zeffirelli has made three films based on the works of Shakespeare: *The Taming of the Shrew* (1966), *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and *Hamlet* (1990) (Cartmell, qtd. in Jackson 2000: 212). Zeffirelli exploits the visual aspects of his films as much as he does the Bard's lines (ibid). The visual aspect of the film becomes something that will carry even more significance in the period between 1960s and 1980s where there were some of the most vividly screened Shakespearian adaptations: Zeffirelli's, Kozintsev's and Kurosawa's.

The Russian dramaturge Grigori Kozintsev directed a magnificent *King Lear* (1971) derived from the Russian translation of Boris Pasternak (Welsh, and Lev 2007: 110). Kozintsev made two adaptations of Shakespeare - *Hamlet* (1964) and *King Lear* (1971), both of which were and still are outstanding films as they are considered to be among the most praised films in and outside of former Soviet Union. "The worlds of Kozintsev's Shakespeare are concentrated in a reserved, very compact space" (Sokolyansky, qtd. in Jackson 2000: 202) and this is what allows for the raw, sometimes very harsh and surreal atmosphere that inhabits Kozintsev's films. The gothic depiction of

Kozintsev's *King Lear* (1971) will echo in later Hollywood productions – most notably in the gothic adaptation of *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (1971) by Roman Polanski, where Polanski similarly employs ominously unnatural silences and amplified sounds to create a sense of heavy discomfort and sheer dread.

After winning critical acclaim with his 1957 *Throne of Blood* (or *Spider Web Castle*), Akira Kurosawa returned with the adaptation of *King Lear* titled *Ran*³ (1985), a sublime work of art, wise and flawlessly directed (Mueller 2003: 396). Film critic Steven J. Schneider in his book *1001 Movies You Must See before You Die* (2003: 718) comments:

Of the 1001 movies you must see before you die, Ran is definitely among the top ten. [...] The acting and directing in Kurosawa's adaptation ranges from brilliance to something resembling perfection; Ran displays the wisdom of an entire life in 'only' two hours and forty minutes during which time is simply suspended.

No Shakespearian adaptation before Kurosawa's *Ran* insisted so on the visuals in its representation as well as on pure performance: "Some scenes in *Ran* have the qualities of paintings [...] Kurosawa loves these luscious tones, which shine so intensely that they seem almost unreal" (Mueller 2003: 396). It would be no long before Kenneth Branagh in his 1989 adaptation of *Henry V* exploits precisely the same aspects of representation and performance.

One can observe that Shakespeare has been present in the cinema from its very inception. The golden age of Hollywood has propelled Shakespeare to the top by firmly cementing his status as one of the most desirable writers. The numerous adaptations of his works ranging from historic epics, dramas and musicals can testify to this notion. This trend will continue throughout the 1980s onwards.

3 *Ran* means 'chaos', see Schneider (2003: 718) and Mueller (2003: 399)

2. SHAKESPEARE IN MODERN POP CULTURE

Jan Kott in his book *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* claimed that Shakespeare's reach on our lives has not diminished regardless of the centuries that divide our modern reality and his Renaissance world (Sawicka 2009). This was never truer than in the case of the adaptations of the 1980s and onwards because these adaptations offer Shakespearian characters so realistically depicted that the quality of their performance has left the world wanting for more adapted works of the Shakespeare. From Olivier, Welles, Kozintzev, Kurosawa and Zeffirell retelling Shakespeare to a modern audience in our contemporary pop culture has been a task to young and aspiring directors such as Kenneth Branagh, Baz Luhrmann, John Madden and Julie Taymor. These filmmaker have carried on making modern culture by adapting Shakespeare for new generations.

The late 1980s saw a first Shakespeare adapted blockbuster with the adaptation Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989). Branagh looks back to the golden age of Shakespeare on film of the 1940s and 1950s. The aspect of Branagh's directorial debut that is most praised by numerous Shakespeare on film scholars (Mark Thornton Burnett, Deborah Cartmell, Samuel Crowl, Sarah Hatchuel and Kenneth Rothwell⁴) is "seeking to distance itself from the mannered, decidedly anti-cinematic BBC style of televised Shakespeare" (Cartelli, Rowe 2007: 12). Branagh, in fact, initialized a Shakespeare on screen revival by initiating more focus on more florid acting and direction, which he continued in his subsequent film versions of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Hamlet* (1996), *Love's Labor Lost* (2000) and *As You Like It* (2006) (ibid):

Crowl, for one, contended that Branagh's Henry V jump started a revival in Shakespeare on film production, [...] in part to his demonstration of Shakespeare's marketability and successful integration of Hollywood styling with convincing reading of Shakespearian verse, but also owing to the naturalness, conviction [...] he brought to the role. On both accounts, Branagh was clearly modeling himself on two precedents: Laurence Olivier, whose own wartime production of Henry V

4 see Cartelli and Rowe (2007: 12)

(1944) was followed by *Hamlet* (1948) and then in 1955 his Technicolor version of *Richard III*; and to a less extent, to an actor-impresario, Orson Welles, who directed and starred in more idiosyncratic versions of *Macbeth* (1948) and *Othello* (1952) and in his pastiche of Shakespeare's first and second parts of *Henry IV* titled *Chimes at Midnight* (1966). (Cartelli and Rowe 2007: 12)

In the early 1990s there was an imminent spectrum of possibilities best illustrated by the enormously different aesthetics, languages and narratives of adaptations. The allusions to Shakespeare in the popular culture of the 1990s were immense:

Developments in cultural studies have made us relatively more attentive to patterns of Shakespeare allusion in popular culture. Mainstream films such as Renaissance Man (1994), L.A. Story (1991), Last Action Hero (1991), and spin-offs designed to appeal to younger audiences, such as 10 Things I Hate About You (1999), Shakespeare in Love (1999) and Tim Blake Nelson's O (2001). Such back and forth traffic between high and popular culture has made us especially alert to "ghosting" effects of global celebrity. Those effects allow Mel Gibson's fiery star turns in Lethal Weapon (1987) and Lethal Weapon II (1989), for example, to migrate into the promotional field of the Shakespeare in film, in this case, Zeffirelli's 1990 Hamlet, thus generating an aggressive impression of the usually more cerebral and indecisive Danish Prince (Cartelli and Rowe 2007: 23)

So as to keep the overview of the adaptations as clear as possible it is easiest to divide them in three categories in accordance to the way they have been adapted throughout the 1990s. Some were merely straightforward adaptations of Shakespeare that have the same intimate plot, characters and themes familiar to the audience from the plays. These straightforward adaptations of Shakespeare include films such as: Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990), Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Hamlet* (1996), Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* (1996), Michael Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream (1999), among others. The second category includes the adaptations that have been re-contextualized so as to fit a specific time period with the themes, characters and the plot (mostly) intact. In a very postmodern manner the directors of these films have transposed the Bard's plots, characters and even lines with a twist on the historical context. These adaptations include films such as: Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999), Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995), Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), Gil Junger's *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999).

The third category of Shakespearean adaptations in the 1990s includes marginal and radical experimentations with Shakespeare's works that takes a step beyond mere re-contextualization. These adaptations mainly borrow themes, characters and the plot from Shakespeare and they use them to comment on contemporary society. In particular these adaptations include Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* (1987), Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991) and John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

The straightforward adaptations have garnered much acclaim. They have established the Shakespearian romantic comedy film (Pittman 2011: 146) with Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), as well as the tragedy with the well received Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990) starring Mel Gibson as well as Kenneth Branagh's "lavish, anachronistic, spectacular, often majestic and magnificent and, at times, unbearably long adaptation" (Pittman 2011: 146) wherein Branagh both starred and directed *Hamlet* very much in the same fashion as Laurence Olivier did some years before him. Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990) secured many accolades for Mel Gibson's performance as well:

Most of the credit for this must go to the film's star. Gibson's Hamlet is deeply felt, electric and made very much for the camera. There's nothing held back in his performance, yet at the same time it's subtly calibrated. [...]From the film's first scene, which takes place not on the battlements with the ghost of Hamlet's father but at the murdered king's funeral, we are locked into Hamlet's fury and disappointment. As Gibson plays him, there's nothing bookish or neurasthenic about this angry young man; he's not a neurotic. Instead, he seems

rather foursquare and plain and all too justified in his outrage. Gibson's performance is robust and exuberant; he's fun to watch, and there's never a moment when he seems less than adequate to the task he's undertaken. (Hinson 1991)

Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) and Michael Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999), apart from being two comedies directly being adapted from Shakespeare also had pantheons of popular Hollywood actors and actresses that starred in them. The sheer star power of these adaptations helped garner them popularity with audiences. Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (starring Denzel Washington, Keanu Reeves, Michael Keaton, Emma Thompson, Kate Beckinsale, Brian Blessed) and Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (starring Michelle Pfeiffer, Kevin Kline, Christian Bale, Rupert Everett, Stanley Tucci, Sophie Marceau, Sam Rockwell) prove that Shakespeare gathers popular actors around his not just around tragedies but also around adaptations of lighthearted comedies.

Popular adaptations that re-contextualized Shakespearean plays resonated well with the younger audiences. A prototypical example of this was Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* which was criticized for being a production of "MTV Shakespeare" but later on defended as an "alternative, a popular way to satisfy existing markets but appealing to teenagers, who must, apparently against their will, read Shakespeare in school" (Walker 2003: 126). *Romeo + Juliet* was later claimed as "an aggressive attempt to claim Shakespeare for the MTV generation" (ibid). In a similar manner Gil Junger's romantic comedy *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), which is an adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, was set to appeal to teenagers with the premise that Katherine, or 'Kat', 'the shrew' (Julia Stiles) is a high school teenager with the same problems as millions of teenager worldwide until she is wooed and eventually won over by the Petruchio-character aptly named 'Patrick' (Heath Ledger):

Among the crop of recent teen-age movies whose plots parody stories from classic literature, "10 Things I Hate About You," a high-school "Taming of the Shrew," tries the hardest of any to season its screenplay with authentic Shakespearean touches. Students in a writing class at Padua High School (somewhere

around Seattle) are asked to create sonnets. There is an Elizabethan-theme prom that inspires some fancy hairdos and fetching costumes. And every now and then the banter among the characters incorporates actual Shakespearean quotations. (Holden 1999)

Most notable mention here should also be Richard Locraïne's *Richard III* (1995) which was set against a backdrop of a 1930s fascism and with a brilliant performance by Ian McKellen (Boose and Burt 1997: 3) and a different take on the same play with Al Pacino's directorial debut *Looking for Richard* (1996). Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999) starring Anthony Hopkins was also well received by the critics as it is deconstructed so as to address the issues of war and violence:

From its opening images, "Titus" portrays violence as an escalating fever, an addictive mass hysteria that consumes the characters and turns them into bloodthirsty fiends. That notion seems to be borne out by what we know of the killing field in Rwanda and Cambodia, to name two countries where mass slaughter became commonplace in recent times. Near the end of the film, in one of its most indelible and grotesque images, the title character (Anthony Hopkins), who has gone mad, throws a cannibalistic banquet of revenge in which he dons a contemporary chef's uniform to serve meat pies to the empress Tamora and her husband made from the bodies of her two sons. (Holden, 1999)

The 1990s displayed an urgency need to take a step further in depicting the state of mind of that period by Shakespearian adaptations. Gus Van Sant did precisely this with *My Own Private Idaho* (1992) starring River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves where the issues of alienated youth is addressed by subtly deconstructing *Henry IV*:

"My Own Private Idaho" is essentially a road movie that, in its subversive way, almost qualifies as a romantic comedy except that its characters are so forlorn. The film itself is invigorating -- written, directed and acted with enormous insight and comic

elan. [...] Like Sam Shepard's plays, "My Own Private Idaho" is set in a contemporary American West inhabited by people who have lost touch with a past perhaps best left unexplored. Their attempts to connect with the present are tentative, desperate and usually doomed. For most, the cost of the connection is too high, being beyond their mental and emotional means. (Canby 1991)

Also a notable example of a surreal approach to Shakespeare was Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991) based on *The Tempest* and starring John Gielgud and offering an incredible visual splendor as well as uncanny exploration of Shakespeare's final play. Greenaway's adaptation was not particularly popular with the audiences but it was a visual delight delving deep into Shakespeare and connecting it to contemporary pop culture that was on the rise in the early 1990s. The rise of pop culture in the 1990s culminated with the 1998 John Madden adaptation of *Shakespeare in Love* which was showered with Academy Awards⁵ because of its incredibly stylistic and performance-driven quality:

Against a well-researched backdrop of Elizabethan theatrical life, the plot speculates about Shakespeare's private life, which in fact, remains a mystery to critics even today. The screenplay skillfully combines elements from his plays with historical fact and pure fantasy. But there is nothing dry or dusty about it, it's not only about the English theatre in the 16th century but it is also a radical modernization of Shakespeare. (Mueller 2001: 582)

The original idea behind Madden's Oscar® winning film is that it actually does not draw on any of the particular plays but it reaches to Shakespeare's material. In the manner of true New Historicist approach, the adaptation draws on the sociopolitical context around the plays centering on the character of Shakespeare struggling on the playwright marketplace. This is where we come back to what we claimed at the beginning: the adaptation,

⁵ *Shakespeare in Love* won seven Oscars® , including best picture, best leading actress and best supporting actress.

just like the film, is the struggle between the marketplace and the writer; perhaps nowhere is this better to be seen than in *Shakespeare in Love*. If Shakespeare would be alive today, he would have been a screenplay writer and a bona fide Hollywood star (ibid). This trend of drawing on Shakespeare's life and using it as a basis for adaptation will also be revisited in Roland Emmerich's *Anonymous* (2011).

Finally, the 2000s have too seen their portion of Shakespeare on screen. The popular BBC adaptations that reigned in the 1980s and 1990s could not longer hold against the marching army of films on Shakespeare and therefore felt the need to reinvent themselves anew. This they certainly succeeded in with the BBC's 2005 *Shakespeare Retold* series where the Bard's plays were contextualized so as to fit the frames of contemporary popular culture. Notable movies in the 2000s include Kenneth Branagh's adaptations of *Love's Labor Lost* (2000) where the play was transported to the musical with its golden-age-Hollywood setting evocating the genres of the 1930s and *As You Like It* (2006), which Branagh adapted to a Japanese kabuki⁶ drama that resonates with the Elizabethan drama: namely, kabuki has men playing the roles of women; there is wrestling in the play which Branagh exploits by having sumo wrestlers, the element of dancing – all well incorporated by Branagh, whose Japanese contextualized work could be observed as homage to the brilliant works of Kurosawa.

In Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004), Al Pacino, who directed the 1996 *Looking for Richard*, now returned to the Shakespeare adaptation and, indeed, excelled as Shylock:

Pacino displays a remarkable technical mastery of the crisp, taut, repetitive invective (and sly irony) of Shylock's language and conspicuously avoids bending his portrayal to catch at modern sensibilities. (Crow, quoted in Burnett and Wray 2006: 113-114)

Screening Shakespeare became incredibly popular within the mainstream culture and it was only a matter of time before the BBC adaptations would

6 Classical Japanese dance drama

emerge under the title *Shakespeare Retold* in 2005, offering adaptations such as *Macbeth*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The fascinating aspect that these adaptations incorporated within their 're-telling' of the Bard's plays is a rather simple one, and one already recognized before them by the acclaimed representatives of the Shakespeare on screen canon like Olivier, Welles, Kurosawa and Branagh. It was relocating Shakespeare into a different context while preserving the essence of his plays. The most striking aspect of the BBC serial on Shakespeare is the contemporariness of the new adaptations – Mark Brozel's *Macbeth*, Brian Percival's *Much Ado About Nothing* and David Richard's *The Taming of the Shrew* – all offer the contemporary view on Shakespeare's work that is embedded deeply within the popular culture and history that shapes and reshapes all of us. In these adaptations, the grand Shakespearian heroes are portrayed as our contemporaries with problems that are easily identifiable and intimately close to our own.

The audiences' yearning for new edgy adaptations of Shakespeare will become so relentless that even less popular plays will become very popular adaptations. In 2012 the BBC series *The Hollow Crown* follows the screen adaptation of Shakespeare's history plays comprising *King Richard II*; *King Henry IV, Part 1 and 2* and *King Henry V* in the form of a revived BBC TV miniseries titled starring Jeremy Irons and Tom Hiddleston. This is just one of the latest projects that join the exuberance of the BBC adaptations. A sequel to the *Hollow Crown* titled *The Wars of the Roses* was also released by the BBC in 2016 and it was based on Shakespeare's first trilogy: *Henry VI, Part I* with *Henry VI, Part II*, and *Henry VI, Part III* and *Richard III* starring Benedict Cumberbatch (Greenwood 2014). The history plays adaptations seem to be a very desirable vehicles for Shakespeare in the 2010s Britain mainly because the reemerging popularity of the costume drama .

Julie Taymor decided to relocate Shakespeare in her 2010 adaptation of *The Tempest* wherein she cast Helen Mirren to play Prospera, the female version of Prospero which also contextualized the role of Shakespearian characters gender wise:

Presiding over a motley, talented assembly is Helen Mirren as Prospera, the former duchess of Milan and Ms. Taymor's

most provocative and persuasive act of revision. Switching the gender of Prospero — an aging wizard who is also his author's last and fondest alter ego — is more than a gimmick. When the character is a woman, a central relationship in the play, between the magician and her doted-on child, Miranda, sheds some of its traditional, patriarchal dynamic. Instead, a mother-daughter bond fraught with envy, protectiveness and identification blossoms into something newly rich and strange. (Scott 2010)

Taymor's adaptation was followed by Roland Emmerich's *Anonymous* (2011) wherein the popular Shakespearian controversy regarding the Bard's authorship was tackled upon. Emmerich's adaptation focuses on the count of Oxford, who in this film is attributed with writing the Shakespeare's plays, and the socio political circumstances that surrounded his life:

More importantly, he [Emmerich] draws on the Queen's own fascination with dramaturgy and poetry, which allows the film to dwell rather interestingly on the connection between art and politics ("All art is political, otherwise it would just be decoration," snaps Oxford). And most fittingly for a play about such great works, there are some wonderful performances too (...) and Emmerich vividly portrays Elizabethan audiences and their visceral appreciation of the plays put before them (Wise 2011).

Another 2011 adaptation resonated widely with the audiences and this was Ralph Fiennes' directorial debut *Coriolanus*. The modern *Coriolanus*, in Fiennes' hands, quite turns to the issues of our world today by addressing issues of power and politics on a grand scale. By viewing *Coriolanus* through an 'end of the first decade of the 21st century' lens, Fiennes gives us a fresh perspective that is apt for the context of our time. Fiennes' film unfolds in a modern city called Rome, but shot in Belgrade (Pulver 2011) and drawing on the visual iconography of recent Balkan conflicts (Johnston 2012) –grey combat fatigues, guerilla fighting, suffering civilians and rolling satellite news. (ibid.) This is what makes the theme of *Coriolanus* very relevant while reminiscing on the wars that are raging in Iraq, Afghanistan or Gaza.

Taymor, Branagh, Emmerich, and Fiennes are among the last wave of Shakespearian resurrection on the silver screen and along with the BBC's *Shakespeare Retold* and *The Hollow Crown* series that inhabit the realm of television, one could claim that the contemporary screening of Shakespeare has come a long way from Olivier, Welles, Kozintsev, Kurosawa to Branagh and this is the latest set of directors and actors who exploit the visual aspects of the film medium as much as they did the Shakespeare line. This theoretical overview of the landmark adaptations of Shakespeare throughout the history of film and television is important in setting the New Historicists context in which Shakespeare on screen operated so far and up to date and it will perhaps aid in foreshadowing where it will go from this point on. Our contemporary culture has expressed a craving for the adaptation and has helped propel it as a cultural phenomenon. Shakespeare is not the only writer whose works are popular being adapted but he is the only writer whose plays are being *constantly* adapted into popular culture.

Harold Bloom claims that Shakespeare is his own canon (Bloom 1994: 71) and the practice of popular culture being has been to put Shakespeare in the very center of it – in literature and, ever more constantly nowadays, in the adaptation. The practice of new historicism in contextualizing the plays of this great playwright shows that the universal themes, plots and characters are successfully relocated to modern renditions of his plays. The Shakespeare character is recognizable in the canon of modern filmmaking Shakespeare's universality is such a fertile playground for modern directors that new adaptations of his plays do not cease to be produced. This would not be possible without the media of film and television which prove to be very successful vehicles for bringing Shakespeare closer to contemporary audiences. The inception of cinema has seen Shakespeare on the big screen and adaptations of his plays have stretched throughout film and television alike in such fashion that they have become inextricably interwoven with the cultural fabric of our society. Within the medium of the film Shakespeare has found the vehicle capable of transporting his plays into our contemporary world.

Shakespearean adaptations have found their place in the annals of the golden age of Hollywood as well as in our contemporary pop culture alike. New

historicist approach in re-contextualizing his plays across a wide spectrum of time ranging from the first adaptation in 1899 to the 2010s signifies that they are "as constant as the Northern star" without losing their cultural value or sociopolitical urgency. This speaks volumes of the universality of the Bard's characters, plots and themes that are inhabited in every single adaptation of his works.

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Shakespeare na velikom ekranu

Analizirajući kulturalne, teoretske i performanske trendove ovaj rad se fokusira na historijske adaptacije Shakespearea kao i način na koji one odražavaju kulturalni milje Shakespereichkih izvedbi. Rad se fokusira na kontekstualnu analizu adaptacija kao i historijski pregled adaptacija od zlatnog doba Hollywooda preko filmova savremene popularne kulture. Analizom na bazi teorije novog historizma pokušava se ukazati na način na koji savremeni režiseri i glumci prilaze Shakespeareu kao i način na koji se publici prenose moderne adaptacije njegovih drama.

Ključne riječi: adaptacija, film, William Shakespeare, Novi historizam, popularna kultura



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