Dramatic Relocation:  
The Time and Place for Shakespeare on Film  

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The Man Behind the Curtain

“Doing Shakespeare is simply harder than anything else,” Colm Feore says to his interviewer, while apparently on break from rehearsing his role as Marcus Andronicus before principal photography begins for Julie Taymor’s film, Titus (1999). “It’s harder than Chekov, it’s harder than Molière, it’s harder than Racine, it’s harder than…anything!” (“The Making of Titus,” DVD Special Features). The team involved in Michael Almereyda’s Hamlet (2000) as well as that of Richard Loncraine’s Richard III (1995) didn’t have it any easier. By all accounts of each filmmaking process, none of the films to be discussed here had the luxury of simply being one film among many; each had to face the weight of centuries of Shakespearean production and the cultural monolith that stands behind the playwright’s name. Worthen argues that a Shakespearean production “affords a powerful way to bring questions of authority and performance into view” (3), such as whether a production is “engaged in transmitting the work, or producing it” (13). Though Worthen deals mainly with stage productions, perhaps the difficulty faced by these filmmakers comes from the fact that changing Shakespeare’s medium brings assumptions of authority into focus. Feore’s anxiety toward his position in a Shakespearean production shows us “the sense that performance transmits Shakespearean authority remains very much in play” (3).

Taking a script written for the stage and using it to create a film causes many opportunities for anxiety, especially if the playwright is one of the most famous writers in
the English language. There have been some recent films that adapted the story to a modern setting for the screen (Touchstone Picture's *Ten Things I Hate About You*, 1999), but productions that use the original language in the script must combine the theatrical storytelling methods in the text with cinematic ones. There have also been productions that use the visual component of film to elaborate and expand on what is in the text, creating a cinematic universe that might result in a "realistic" Shakespeare film (Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, 1989; Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*, 1990). These films resolve the contradictions between cinematic storytelling and theatrical convention by basically ignoring them. There are, however, films that invite these contradictions to the surface through their use of physical and historical setting. The focus in this case will be how the tension between "the theatrical" and "the cinematic" exposes Shakespearean textual authority: it is confronted, dealt with ironically, or incorporated on film through the distinct relationship theater and cinema have with the movement of time.

In his discussion of authority in Shakespearean performance, Worthen notes that "despite innovative approaches..., the effort to authenticate performance through reference to the text...becomes a persistent strategy for interpreting and theorizing the work of performance" to the point where it is nearly a "critical habit" (33-34). The desire to legitimate performance does not merely stop at "the text," however, but instead gestures "to 'an authentic Shakespeare' standing behind the text, determining how the text is seen, and the terms of its authentic reproduction" (26). Bate invokes a current cliché in the first line of his introduction to *Titus: The Illustrated Screenplay*: "if Shakespeare were alive today, he would be writing and directing movies"(8). The image of "Shakespeare, the movie-maker" seems to be deployed in order to make the practice of
producing Shakespearean films somehow more legitimate. It is as if transferring the action from the stage to the screen leaves the filmmaker with something to prove, some step toward “Shakespeare” yet to be taken. According to Worthen’s analysis, “despite the ‘death of the author’ (Barthes), or the author’s functional absorption into the systems of cultural and ideological production (Foucault), ‘Shakespeare’—sometimes coded as the ‘text,’ its ‘genre,’ or the ‘theater’ itself—remains an apparently indispensable category” (3).

In the case of theater, “directors, far from liberating an authentic Shakespeare, consistently work to authorize their own efforts by locating them under the sign of ‘Shakespeare,’” at the same time that they “[negotiate] the production’s…regulatory invocation of Shakespearean authority” (Worthen 39). Though we may not be able to thrust all responsibility for a film’s production on the shoulders of its director, we can still hold on to the idea that elements of the film might still call up Shakespearean authority, if only to transfer such authority to other elements of the production. In other words, the “critical habit” of treating Shakespearean performance as mostly an illumination of what “we value” (26) in the Shakespearean text is a means of legitimizing other ideas that might be found in the film. When one critic claims that “film alone has enough space for Shakespeare’s almost boundless imagination” (Coursen 9), we see the attempt to authorize the medium of film through its proximity to “Shakespeare’s” intention; we also find that one of the elements that appears with radical difference on film and stage privileges cinema’s access to Shakespeare: movement through time and space.
Stage to Screen

On stage, any awareness of place is depicted primarily through language, while film may rely more readily on visual indicators. Because in theater the actors and the audience inhabit the same space of the theater building, the actors must create their alternate, “theatrical” space onstage and establish it as separate from that of the viewing audience. It is language more than anything that performs this task. When the actors begin to speak their lines, the audience becomes aware that the theatrical space is also a specific place, eventually realizing the play’s setting. Since the action usually remains in a single theater for the duration of a performance, any change in location onstage must be signaled through the behavior of those on stage.

Susan Sontag argues that “if an irreducible distinction between theatre and cinema does exist, it may be...[that] theatre is confined to a logical or continuous use of space” while “cinema...has access to an alogical or discontinuous use of space” (367). Because the depiction of events in a film is no longer limited to a single architectural site, the freedom of movement allowed by the camera causes the setting to contribute to, rather than contain or receive, the action of the film. André Bazin extends this idea to claim that “the drama on the screen can exist without actors” with what he calls “the décor,” or physical and aural surroundings; he paraphrases Jean-Paul Sartre as saying that “in theater the drama proceeds from the actor, [but] in the cinema it goes from the décor to [the] man” (379). Bazin refers to the repositioning of actor in relation to his surroundings as “dramatic reversal.” Setting in film becomes an agent of change and gains more control over the dramatic future of the embodied characters. Films, of course, may retain
a certain “theatrical” quality, and theatrical productions may strive for a “cinematic”
aesthetic, but the function of the setting in one cannot be fully replicated in the other.

The action that takes place on screen is defined by different parameters of space,
and by extension, time. Even if “the script or play text becomes implicated in time as
soon as it is produced” (Coursen 5), that implication is dependent on the medium. The
theatrical performance only exists in the moment that it is being performed, and this is the
only moment that it is viewed. Because the action onstage occurs in the same time as the
time experienced by the audience, any representation of an historical moment on stage is
a reenactment of that moment; history is recreated through repetition, and ultimately,
from performance to performance, a continual transformation. The main thing directing
the actors into the past is the language in the script that locates them there.

Here we may return for a moment to the rudimentary delineation between the
importance of language and imagery for each form. A stage production may employ
visual indications of the particular time period that is being enacted, but because of the
audience’s actual physical proximity to the players any evocation of time other than the
present must be achieved through language—the audience must literally take the actor’s
word for it, since, in the theater, the present is inescapable. Cinema, on the other hand, is
terminally tied to the past. The film is freed from the temporal and physical restrictions
of the stage; that is, it can be re-experienced any time, any place. Coursen points out that
“editing Shakespeare for film involves editing toward visual images that work from our
eyes to our imagination,” a process which “inevitably moves away from language” (11-
12). Images override language, and the “present” portrayed on film is irretrievable for an
audience. As Sontag says, “the historical flavor of anything on celluloid is so vivid that
practically all films older than two years or so are saturated with a kind of pathos... of mortality.” Film, the “youngest of the arts[,] is also the one most heavily burdened with memory” (370). Film is uniquely suited, even relegated, to depicting past events, not because the filmmakers have increased access to history, but because the film audience has equal access to both historical events and the “present” captured on film.

**Time on Film**

Since “our cultural response to ‘history’ dictates our response to drama based on history” (Coursen 7), film’s connection to historical representation is not the result of any particular ability to document and thereby reproduce “actual” past events. Historical representation must depend on literary techniques to create meaning out of events. For Hayden White, “historians” are concerned with events assigned to specific locations in time and space, while “imaginative,” or more literary writers are concerned with events both actual and hypothetical. The ways literary and historical discourses overlap and correspond are what he calls the “fictions of factual representation” (121). Both historians and imaginative writers strive to provide a “verbal image” of physical or experiential reality (122). The conflict arises between the “truth of correspondence,” the actual event reflected in its own description, and the “truth of coherence,” the narrative structure linking events together and attaching significance to them. To have history without literature is to have correspondence without coherence; historians represent, not just present “facts” that correspond to events by using the same relational principles of language that imaginative writers do (125).

The equation of “truth” with “fact” falsely separates literary and historical representation into two camps (White 123). Historical and literary discourses are just
different ways of ordering such facts within “fictional matrices” (127), and “every history has its myth,” or hidden shaping device that creates coherence (126). In Shakespearean drama, fidelity to actual historical events, or the “truth of correspondence,” becomes subordinate to the narrative structure, or the “truth of coherence.” Even though the source material for plays may have come from an account of fact, creating a dramatic structure was more important to the playwright. Richard’s actual life is less important in \textit{Richard III} than the villainous trajectory of the character, and historical accuracy is even less important in \textit{Hamlet} or \textit{Titus}. The historical imagery is then put in service of the dramatic structure, so that the correspondence to the world is determined by the coherence of the story. All historical representation, not just that limited to dramatic or self-consciously imaginative interpretations, puts events in order in such a way as to create recurrent “storylines” and historical conventions.

While White’s historians develop general storylines to apply to historical events, filmmakers develop aesthetic conventions to visually indicate general storylines. Film is able to tell a story through imagery that has been assigned meaning through its repeated use in similar situations. Likewise, the way in which stories are visually portrayed on film separates films into genres. Louis Giannetti claims “the system of genres…isn’t unique to movies” since “most of the other arts are classified generically” (129), but film does depend more readily on imagery that acts as a visual equivalent, or at least replacement, for verbal explanation. Like genre, the star system in film creates “cultural archetypes,” images that “[synthesize] the aspirations and anxieties of an era” (Giannetti 129). As cinema developed as an art form, filmmakers devised a “narrative formula” known as “classical cinema,” which “emphasizes unity, plausibility, and coherence”
Because the interpretation of generic convention is connected to the memory of the viewer, “archetypes are plastic energies, not immovable icons” (Coursen 11).

Relying exclusively on generic convention proves insufficient, however; works are “mere clichés unless they’re united with significant innovations in style or content,” and “the most critically admired genre films strike a balance between the form’s pre-established conventions and the artist’s unique contributions” (Giannetti 133). If a film is committed to the play’s original language, “significant innovations” must be achieved in the application of generic convention for the film to be anything beyond a visual documentation of a theatrical performance. These films strive to achieve innovation through contradiction, juxtaposing cinematic conventions from various genres in addition to creating alternative historical settings for Shakespeare’s text.

**Shakespeare on the Scene**

Productions of Shakespeare’s plays—both theatrical and cinematic—are able to create various ways of contesting Shakespearean authority. In addition, productions of historical works contest the authority of historical “fact.” Film is then in a unique position to interrogate Shakespearean authority in performance because of its connection to historical representation through generic convention, and because of its opposition to theatrical tradition. The question is then whether or not Shakespearean authority is invoked or dismantled in these cinematic productions. In each of the films to follow in this discussion, the imagery that places the action in time overtakes the language spoken by the actors. These films are situated in specific historical points in time and space, but the visual settings are in direct opposition to the textual ones. The films also have distinct methods of reflecting on the nature of presenting meaning through visual media;
alternative filmic expressions interrupt and overlap with the more classically cinematic narrative imagery and exist alongside the residual theatrical elements of performance.

Although a single stage performance is irretrievable, as Shakespeare productions pile up over time certain conventions accumulate, which then pass on through future productions. The film is separated from the weight of Shakespearean theatrical tradition, but is at the same time subject to that tradition. No work will fit neatly into another form or context without significant gaps. When a Shakespearean text is transformed into a film, the result will inevitably highlight these crevices between text and medium; that is where these films become most interesting. Due to the fact that cinema is ceaselessly receding into the past, and is able to preserve specific moments on film, its emphasis is then on innovation rather than repetition—it must continually gesture forward through time in order to approximate a present moment. This forward motion gives these films a frenetic quality. Each of these works exhibits a desire to break out of existing structures and the rules and limitations that govern them. Analysis of the films reveals a tension between medium-specific meaning and fidelity to “an authentic Shakespeare.”

The inability, or even refusal to reconcile the cinematic setting and the story being told is not unlike the (sometimes futile) drive to produce change in the social order of the characters. Hedrick and Reynolds connect such productions of Shakespeare to “transversal power...as a mechanism for experiencing alterity” (18). In their argument, “transversal territory transcends, fractures, or displaces” official ideology. Therefore, “Shakespearean characters, and characters from life, occupy transversal territory when they defy or surpass the conceptual boundaries...opening themselves...to subjective awareness outside the self” (18-19). Shakespeare on film then becomes a site for the
“critical habit” to be broken, and textual authority to be shifted away from a position as the primary key to interpretation.

A Universe of Film: Almereyda’s Multimedia *Hamlet “2000”*

Almereyda’s film seems at first to be the most open to confronting “Shakespearean authenticity” and most earnestly devoted to defending the potentials of film. Hamlet is trying to transcend his situation by mastering cinematic representation just as Almereyda’s film is using cinematic devices to challenge the notion that performance should approximate a central, authorized, “Shakespearean” meaning. The film rejects conventions of Shakespearean theater in order to reserve room for meaning that comes through cinema. Actors have been chosen who have, for the most part, little experience with Shakespearean theater and more experience with popular film and television. The production overtly includes even the commercial elements of American cinema at the turn of the century, made clear when the ghost of Hamlet’s father disappears in front of a conspicuously placed Pepsi One vending machine. The film makes the ultimate transgression when Hamlet’s most famous speech is set in the seemingly least Shakespearean of places, Blockbuster Video.

Hamlet’s alienation from those who surround him is given a postmodern character as his deepest relationship in the film is with his own digital camera and editing equipment. Hamlet’s story has been consigned to the catalog of past images, unable to achieve immortality through film, as the screen empties itself out and continuously drives imagery out of the present moment. The presence of others is at times transferred to what Bazin calls “pseudopresence” (376), rendered through electronic sound and imagery, leaving many of the characters’ interactions technologically mediated. Almereyda’s film
addresses the concept of discontinuous time and space directly by incorporating it into the action, creating a universe that communicates through fax machines, photographs, answering machines, and video recordings as much as face-to-face contact. All these elements add to the feeling of dissatisfaction, a futile search for fulfillment and general restlessness that follows Hamlet everywhere.

Lehmann calls this film “a stunning contemporary vision of Hamlet as a play poised on the verge of a new technology of expression,” and describes how the character of Hamlet “unsuccessfully strives for a means of accessing his own feelings in an increasingly virtualized, ‘hyperreal’ world” (96). This hyper-reality makes the issues surrounding the relationship of cinema to theater analogous to the issues Hamlet himself is dealing with. As Hamlet explores the emotional bankruptcy that surrounds him, he also must find footing in a cinematic universe unmoored from the conventions of “real” time and space. The shrinking of time and space through technology gives the setting the feeling of collapsing in on itself. A visual example comes early on when Hamlet walks his mother and Claudius to their car. The scene is shot from an extremely low angle until the skyscrapers literally loom over the shoulders of the characters, blocking out most of the sky and creating an intense feeling of uneasiness and claustrophobia, making the experience of space more subjective and “unreal.”

The scenes that are most connected to theatricality are those in which characters rehearse actions they hope to carry out later. Hamlet runs through the murder of Claudius, even going so far as to pull a gun on his empty office, and even replays footage of his contemplation of suicide as if to bring it into reality through repetition; Ophelia imagines her purposeful plunge into the swimming pool before her eventual drowning.
These theatrical moments come, interestingly enough, when the characters have the least control of their surroundings. Almereyda’s *Hamlet* is very preoccupied with being a film, so it becomes a point of interest that Hamlet himself is so preoccupied with being a filmmaker—that is, one whose job it is to control narrative development and surroundings. Lehmann sees “both Shakespeare’s early modern protagonist and Almereyda’s postmodern prince…in search of a medium of expression that lies somewhere beyond the affective technologies of the cultural moment in which they find themselves” (99). Whereas sympathy for a character is created in the theater through that character’s position to the audience, sympathy in the film is created through the character’s position in relationship to the camera. Almereyda places his Hamlet in the role of trying to escape and get behind the film equipment that seems to mediate his existence.

Hamlet’s “almost umbilical attachment” (Lehmann 98) to his camera shows him attempting to gain mastery in an increasingly virtual world by exerting control over the visual imagery that creates his universe. Hamlet tries to reinvent a new time and space by manipulating film images through editing; his work is to exert control over the people and relationships that move increasingly beyond his reach. The cinematic universe around him, full of electronic interactions, is a virtual one, so he tries to recreate his own digital world as a means of interfacing with what surrounds him. It is “as if, through Hamlet’s obsessive playing out and replaying out of scenarios of remembrance and revenge, Shakespeare imagines…the opportunities for perfection associated with the invention of recording technology” (Lehmann 100).
Hamlet’s struggle to gain control of his virtual surroundings comes to the foreground with his short film, “The Mousetrap.” It echoes Hamlet the film, made implicit from the beginning by the opening title sequence, which mimics the white-on-red letters. Instead of using original footage to convey his own story, Hamlet has assembled and reconfigured existing imagery in a montage, creating meaning through editing. Hamlet intends the film to interact with the characters in a way he feels incapable of doing in person, just as with his final biting comments directed at Ophelia over an answering machine. Hamlet is stuck in the cycle of trying to gain intimacy in his relationships, which is then undercut by technology. Using technology in an attempt to reconnect leaves him further alienated. Hamlet “can only create a pastiche of images from various media, he cannot, in a modernist sense, create original art” (Lehmann 98). Lehmann further argues that “if, prior to ‘The Mousetrap,’ the shots generated by Hamlet’s cameratic [sic] gaze suggest...shot construction before production, then after the failure of the play within, Hamlet’s cinematic thinking moves in the direction of...editing during post-production” (Lehmann 100). If, like its title character, Hamlet the film relies on manipulating images and editing the text, then the concept of Shakespearean authority is stripped of its central position; it is still recognized, but it becomes just another tool for the filmmaker to use.

We have seen how the film relates cinema to Hamlet’s drive for creative expression, casting him as “an abandoned son, a defiant brat, a narcissist, a poet/filmmaker/perpetual grad student—a radiantly promising young man who doesn’t quite know who he is” (Almereyda viii). His insistent identification with films and filmmaking shapes his reality. The famous line “To be, or not to be” (Ham. 3.1 58) is delivered
through footage taken from Hamlet’s own camera, and it is no longer only a contemplation of life or death, but also of the status of fully “being or not being” as an image on film. This Hamlet contemplates the kind of existence that can be achieved through purely cinematic means. Playing in the background at Blockbuster is footage from one of The Crow films, a franchise made famous by the tragic death of Brandon Lee during the shooting of the first film and the subsequent “resurrection” of his image for the film’s release. Cinema makes it possible to achieve simultaneous being and not being, or existence through all things—what the clip of Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh defines as “interbeing.” However, if Hamlet’s “only one true course of action…” lies in the choosing [of] his simulacra,” the question is “no longer ‘to be or not to be’ but, more simply, how to be in a world in which everyone is a ghost” (Lehmann 98).

The appearance of Hamlet’s father is particularly pertinent to film separating itself from theater. When the late Hamlet first appears onscreen, it is through Hamlet’s grainy camera footage shot before the character’s death; the father is already seen as a ghost. Hamlet may call upon his image at will without ever attaining access to the individual since the image is forever tied to the past moment. Hamlet replays his own home movies as a means of resurrecting his father before his actual ghost is slated to appear. When the ghost first does appear as an apparition, it is through the security cameras in the elevator, as if he is occupying a liminal space between digital spectre and disembodied spirit, moving from the filmed past to the present of the characters. The next image of the ghost is translucent, as if his image has not yet fully shifted from filmed time and space to real time and space. This movement of the ghost from a separate film universe into the same universe as the other characters mimics one of the things cinema
claims to do, which is to preserve the past in order to bring it forward into the future. However, the conflict between film time and real time can only be resolved with an impossibility—namely, a resurrected spirit, not the complete individual. Sam Shepherd’s position as a well-known playwright only underscores the film’s attitude about Shakespeare’s authority over the production since his character is merely a residual presence.

Almereyda’s film deals with the contrast between text and setting by adopting conventions from two strains of cinematic genre: the coming of age story, and the tale of an urban dystopia. The coming of age movie is bound up with the same sorts of concerns and power dynamics as the play, characterized by a conflict between the established, “adult” order and the subversive, “youthful” assertion of individuality. The generational gap is denoted by the younger characters’ visual connections to youth culture contrasting with the older adults’ identification with the upper-class mainstream. This generational conflict parallels the film’s position on Shakespearean authority, and is even mirrored in the soundtrack; Bob Dylan and Nick Cave are placed alongside Gustav Mahler and P. I. Tchaikovsky. Hamlet’s internal struggles brought out through the text are underscored by the visual indications that mark him as a disillusioned young man facing initiation into adulthood and the passage from alternative culture into a corporate mega-structure.

The other main genre the film borrows from, the tale of an urban dystopia, casts technology and urbanization in the role of destroying humanity. It is the place, the “décor,” be it anything from Times Square to the Guggenheim, that insinuates itself into a conspicuous, and anti-humanist position in almost every frame. It is this ability of the urban structures to overtake the characters (even quite literally in the case of Ophelia’s
plunge into the fountain of an office building) that would be impossible to achieve in a theater. Although the camera allows the action to travel through multiple spaces, it simply shifts the characters from one enclosed space to another, penning them in on all sides with great obelisks of glass and metal until the setting does in fact become like a prison. Even on one occasion when Hamlet tries to make a fast getaway in a cab, he is immediately penned in on both sides by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern while Eartha Kitt’s recorded voice reminds them to “buckle up.” A film can move in and out of structures with relative ease, so it is the apparent denial of the film’s potential to move out into any open space, apart from the cemetery, that makes this enclosure all the more oppressive. Even when Hamlet is “outside” on the street in the city, he is closed in by the ever-present blanket of corporate advertising and brand logos.

This Hamlet, Ethan Hawke, has already created characters in the position of post-adolescent pre-adult as well as those caught up in a society of technological nightmares. His image is already tied to such films as Reality Bites and Gattaca, so Hawke’s characterization of Hamlet is linked to his work in his other films. This brings up a question about the function of a movie star, which is directly addressed in the film. As Shakespeare’s Hamlet wonders at how a player “in a fiction, in a dream of passion/Could force his soul so to his whole conceit/That from her working all his visage wanned” (Hamlet 2.2 529-531), Almereyda’s Hamlet delivers the same lines to the flickering image of James Dean on a television screen. The following lines—“What would he do/Had he the motive and the cue for passion/That I have?” (537-539)—are delivered in the film in reference to a screen idol of the past rather than a simple player, and the effect is quite different.
The figure on Hamlet’s television screen is not engaged in anything remotely close to a moment of passion. James Dean is onscreen simply being James Dean, and Hamlet himself is not in a moment of visible turmoil—he’s lying down quietly watching television. James Dean derives his authority not from his ability to feign emotion in the moment, but instead from his film persona, which was created out of his film work and enhanced by a romanticized life story. The figure onscreen is then made powerful by its ability to connote cultural and emotional significance through memory, and Hamlet’s self-identification with James Dean furthers Hamlet’s position in the film tradition of youthful rebellion and subversion that began with Rebel Without a Cause. Hamlet is not content to merely identify with the James Dean figure, and must apprehend it by filming the television with his own camera, making the image somehow more “his.”

The time and place in the film are specific and at the same time non-specific in the way time and space in cinema simultaneously claim and defy correspondence to an outside reality. The opening title sequence declares that the action is to take place in “New York City, 2000,” but the very fact that the text contradicts this claim makes the setting more complicated. Even if the film’s action is set in a specific time, the film will be inextricably linked to the era that produced it. This Hamlet will necessarily be bound up with the anxieties and interests of its historical moment, over-mechanization and personal alienation. It is not as though the film must always seek to modernize its content, as with a play, as much as it is unable to escape or move beyond its own instant of production.

Almereyda’s film confronts textual authority and creates a dichotomy between medium and text, working to eventually displace the spoken language with various visual
media. Film eventually overtakes Shakespearean authority, and even *Hamlet* the play is reduced to the black-and-white image of an actor holding a skull, seen over Hamlet/Hawke’s shoulder on a digital screen. The film does not seem to be diminishing the significance of the play, but merely incorporating it into the visual vocabulary of our time.

**Richard III, 1936: Rewriting History, McKellen-Style**

The attitude toward “Shakespeare” in Loncraine’s film is harder to pin down. At first, the choice to set *Richard III* in a Fascist Britain seems a perfect fit, an opportunity to “reach for the script’s deeper register” (Coursen 17) by illuminating its connection with an era other than its own. If this is the case, and the historical eras are indeed a perfect match, the historical imagery should buttress the action rather than confuse it. As we look deeper, however, the setting offers more problems than solutions. The similarity between the historical narratives of the Royal Plantagenets and the European Fascists does little to draw any similarity between the distinct political climates in each. Despite the almost diabolical attention to specific “realistic” detail, the final battle scene remains little more than glorified stage combat with little hint of a conflict beyond the soundstage, causing the setting to leave the world onscreen more closed off than opened up. The main weapon in the film’s arsenal is ironic detachment, as we see the connections drawn between time periods become an in joke, exemplified by the appearance of Christopher Marlowe’s poetry as a light jazz tune. That ironic use of history ends up enclosing the action onscreen instead of creating a strong link to an outside reality.

The context of this film differs from that of Almereyda’s *Hamlet*. This film was adapted from an original *stage* production, so the task was to find ways of translating or
substituting for theatrical methods through cinematic means. We can recognize the
difficulty in untangling the cycle of influence, working with a film adapted from a stage
production informed by a culture saturated by film, one using a fascist aesthetic fostered
by the documentaries and propaganda films of the 1930s. Who better to then save us
from the quagmire than the irrepressibly flippant Ian McKellen? As the screenwriter and
actor in the title role, McKellen imbues the film with a level of irony that becomes central
to its interpretation. The film sees itself as already historical. From the moment of its
completion, the film’s claim on cultural codes of the present diminishes exponentially.

With a stage production, changing the context of the viewer will of course result
in a change in the alignment of one system of signification with another (i.e. the present
moment of performance with the imagined setting). Because of film’s position as an
object, even an artifact, the moment chosen for the setting and the moment chosen for the
production are both placed in a point in time out of reach of the moment of eventual
viewing. The opening credits of the film are framed by flickering red text reminiscent of
an old newsreel. We get the first image of the news of Richard’s approach spewing out
onto ticker tape, and information is already being brought to us in disposable flashes,
each event moving aside to make way for the next. The gritty, documentary style of the
flickering text calls attention to the medium’s inability to transcend the moment, making
the film already out of date at its onset. These credits close with the photograph of
Edward and his family atop the staircase. Clarence, the amateur photographer, sets the
timer, joins in the pose, and the frame is frozen in time. The flickering text returns, and
as the viewer’s eye reaches the line about “their lasting joy,” the vibrant colors in the
frame fade to a cool black and white, and it is assured that the moment for joy has already passed.

As the film goes on, it moves into a “realist” mode, neither “[transferring] stage performances to the screen” nor “substantially [re-imagining] the play in terms of the aesthetics and resources” of film (Loehlin 67). However, certain levels of meaning in the film are achieved by methods particular to the medium, and the film does make use of the filmic potential at certain moments relating specifically to characters’ dreams and inner thoughts. Clarence recounts his nightmare just as he moves between the in- and outdoors. A startling jump cut brings Richard from the microphone onstage into the men’s room during his opening speech, shifting the action through space in a way only possible with a camera. Lord Stanley’s horrific vision of Richard as the boar creates “dream time” by using specifically cinematic time, allowing us to enter Lord Stanley’s head, if only for a second, before the nightmare recedes. During his restless sleep before the final battle, Richard is haunted by lines lifted off the soundtrack of earlier scenes rather than by embodied ghosts, as in the text of the play. Lady Anne sees her husband crowned king through a barely lucid, drug-induced haze until finally the scene (and we assume, her consciousness) fades to Richard’s screening room, placing the image formerly on our screens onto Richard’s.

During Richard’s private screening, when he tells Buckingham to kill the young princes, Richard exclaims, “Why, Buckingham, I say I would be King.” Buckingham, already made uneasy by Richard’s demeanor, gestures feebly at the documentation of Richard’s coronation onscreen before him and replies, “Why, so you are” (McKellen 217). Buckingham makes the futile attempt to assure Richard of his established reign by
citing film footage of his rise to power. Richard is aware that the film’s only relevance is to past events; to accept film as a transmitter of authority would be to wallow in stagnant waters when his dedication to villainy must be its most vigilant. The final image of Richard in the film is itself grainy and over-evidently “on film” as it slowly descends into flames, nearly as if it is only another dream sequence. In the course of the film, the moments least rooted in the present action are those that are achieved through specifically filmic means. In this case, film becomes an inadequate medium for capturing the present in the way that fidelity to an authentic Shakespeare becomes an inadequate mode of evaluation. Perhaps this last irony is what lies behind McKellen’s final, ever-ironically detached grin.

The world in frame wears the sheen of a well-curated historical exhibit, to the point where almost every detail from the fashion to the architecture announces its presence as a determining factor in the activity onscreen. The overall look of the film is still familiar for reasons other than its historical placement, namely in its use of cinematic conventions that link it to other works. Although “the film’s primary level of meaning…is the retelling of the Richard III story in the context of modern British fascism[,]…the film operates at several other levels based on the kinds of cinematic codes it employs” (71). Loehlin sees the film as structuring itself after both what he refers to as “the British heritage film” and the American gangster films coming out of the 1930s, specifically the allusion the film makes to White Heat starring James Cagney. The film draws from works in the “heritage” genre by casting actors such as Nigel Hawthorne (Clarence), Edward Hardwicke (Lord Stanley), and Kristin Scott Thomas (Lady Anne) in roles similar to those they have played in other “heritage” productions. Since “with the
exception of Anne, none of these actors has much time to develop a characterization...the film relies on the associations they already carry with them as a kind of cinematic shorthand” (72). Loehlin outlines how this film “embraces and exploits those conventions to make a striking and imaginative Shakespeare film that remains every inch a movie” to the point where “the film exploits the historical parallel more thoroughly and tellingly than the stage production did” (67-68). Instead of creating a coherent connection to the world through historical references to other films, the intersection of the two genres ironically uses elements of the “heritage film” to eventually reject the power of heritage.

The first genre, the heritage film, “probably began with Chariots of Fire but really hit its stride with the tremendous success of A Room with a View, the first of Merchant and Ivory’s popular anglophilic adaptations of anglophobic Forster novels” (Loehlin 71). This film “is a parody of a heritage costume drama: the idea of ‘Englishness’ is always held up as ironic,” such that “the film provides the visual pleasure of heritage film while making cynical fun of it and the wholesome, hierarchical ‘English’ values it represents” (72). This ironic distancing of content from generic implication influences the position of the play text as well. The heritage film might otherwise be used as a means of resolving the theatrical and cinematic contradictions but applying a highly theatrical, yet visually pleasing style of film to the text. By parodying the heritage tradition, the film removes itself from the company of other films that subordinate visual cinematic innovation to “authorized” textual information.

Loncraine’s film also parallels a film genre coming out of the 1930s, the time period it portrays. In Loehlin’s opinion, “the relationship is more complicated, since the
The gangster movie itself is related to the rise-and-fall archetype partly defined by Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (72). He pulls extensively from *Scarface, Public Enemy,* and *White Heat* and their conventions to show how “Shakespeare’s play bears some correspondences to this pattern” and “Loncraine’s film follows it almost exactly” (74). Loncraine’s ending “recalls the ‘top of the world’ finale of one of the classic gangster pictures, *White Heat*” as McKellen’s image topples into the flames alongside the sound of Al Jolson’s “I’m sitting on top of the world” (74-75). By evoking the gangster film, *Richard III* deflates the idea of connecting the historical narrative in the play to an actual moment in history. Instead of mimicking an historical moment, the film mimics the way people in that era represented their own time. The film is representing a previous cinematic style of representation, not a comparable historical setting.

The film tries to portray an era that is closer to us than the play’s text, but not too close to the present. McKellen reasons that since “the historical events of the play had occurred just a couple of generations before the first audience saw them dramatized…the comparable period for us would be the 1930s” (13). Entirely what makes it so specifically “comparable” is not totally revealed in this introduction. Choosing a current setting for the film would have found analogous visual indications of the relationships and hierarchies that drive the action, but this would not have placed the action into a completed narrative structure. Since we are unable to determine our own historical position with any real certainty, we have a hard time recognizing the narrative significance in a contemporary setting. Choosing the 1930s creates the illusion of clarity, and evokes the narrative continuity attributed to the past era as a lens that focuses Shakespeare for our modern eyes. The action is then placed in a timeline, inferring both
the Jazz Age that led up to the moment, and anticipating the World War that came after it. This logic ultimately proves false when the contradictions between setting and “authentic Shakespeare” fail to resolve themselves on film.

This incarnation of Richard in the England of 1936 apparently began when one member of the production asked how the Prince of Wales should return to London. Someone quipped, “Don’t the royals always arrive in London by rail?” And thereafter Act 3 Scene 1 was known as ‘Victoria Station’” (McKellen 12). Our screenwriter elaborates on this point by claiming that “the crucial advantage of a modern setting is clarity of storytelling. It is impossibly confusing to try and distinguish between a multitude of characters who are all done up in floppy hats and wrinkled tights.” Here, in a nutshell, we have this production’s position on “authentically” Shakespearean productions. Never missing an opportunity to exercise his dry wit, McKellen has expressed the ridiculousness of being bound to an “authorized” textual performance of Shakespeare. The political component of the narrative “cannot clearly unfold…unless each of these characters can be readily identified by profession and social status,” which can be visually indicated by clothing, but setting events in “present-day England…would have only parodied current affairs” (12). Attaching a coherent narrative structure to a current political situation still in a state of flux comes off as parody, not poetry. On the other hand, anchoring the action to an entirely specific era in the past already begins to box the action in. When the text of the play and the modern setting combine, the discrepancies disrupt any expectation that the film merely transmits what is already in the script. Loncraine’s film is able to create new meaning with the ironic separation between style and content, and achieves it through cinema’s command of the image.
Frame Over Frame: Stratification of Time in Julie Taymor’s Titus

The previous films have set the “authorized” text and the images in the frame at odds. Our third film, Titus, incorporates new cinematic landscapes with theatrical traditions in order to create a space where they may exist simultaneously. We begin by considering whether this is an example of how a filmmaker could use the famous playwright to “authorize [her] own efforts by locating them under the sign of ‘Shakespeare’” (Worthen 39). If Taymor claimed that her production was an illumination of Shakespeare, she would ignore the idiosyncrasy and individuality of her own vision. Meaning in the text and meaning in performance are invited to exist side by side, without the dichotomy set up in the previous films. This film is less openly hostile toward the idea of “authentic Shakespeare” in general. It even begins to create a place for the viewing audience on screen, as if they can occupy the same space as the action, using Osheen Jones’s character as a kind of surrogate theatrical audience. In order for the film to bridge the audience expectations for “Shakespearean drama” (and thereby make use of its cultural capital) and the meanings that are created through the manipulation of film, the relationship of the cinematic and the theatrical appears more symbiotic than antagonistic. However, as the film continues, a hierarchy emerges whereby words become subordinate to images, and the world created on film encloses and extends beyond what can be created theatrically. Ultimately, the cinematic universe leaves no room for an entirely theatrical space.

Like the two films discussed previously, Titus must create a context for the action by creating a position for the actors in relation to both the camera and their material surroundings. According to a note in the screenplay, “time is blended” and the setting “is
simultaneously ancient Rome and the second half of the twentieth century” (Taymor 20). The action is in a specific, albeit artificial time, and resists a clear connection to any one moment in history. This choice of setting might follow along the lines of the what-Shakespeare-would-have-done-today analysis since “Elizabethans loved to mix time periods” (Buhler 187). On the other hand, this Titus goes beyond a mere mixing of time periods, overlaying historical imagery with a sort of transparency effect. It reaches the point where the production becomes an effort to transcend the connection of cinema to a specific past and re-imagine the ways theatricality may be brought to the screen.

Taymor creates the framework for her multi-layered universe during the opening sequence of the film, actually outlining the kind of movement through time the film hopes to achieve. Our first image is of a pair of eyes staring back at us through a paper mask, illuminated by the flickering light of a television set. These are the eyes of the young actor Osheen Jones, billed as Young Lucius but much more than simply an expanded minor character. Initially this young boy does not act as a member of the “cast” as listed in Shakespeare’s text, but as an intermediary between the film’s audience and the action onscreen. The appearances of the child become connected to moments of potential shifts, either political or temporal. In the opening shot, the boy stares into the camera, apparently reflecting the spectator’s gaze taken by the audience, and then the camera pans back to reveal a young boy at play at a kitchen table. The boy has shifted from being a reflection of the audience to being the instigator of action. We find that the sound effects once thought to come from a television are not attributable to any source other than the epic kitchen table warfare the boy has in front of him.
The violence created by the boy could possibly be a reenactment of Titus waging war on the Goths, but it is also a reenactment of the playwright shaping a revenge tragedy. While the author may not be fully reduced to a function, the "theater" taking place on the kitchen table is completely subject to the influence of the surroundings. The boy is both an observer and an actor once the toy violence turns to actual explosions, and this liminal quality also applies to his connection with specific eras. He is the figure that physically makes the transition from a twentieth-century kitchen into the colosseum, which is also a transition from a cinematic space to a possible theatrical space on film.

The boy’s position is again inverted from overseeing the action to being the center of it as the Clown hoists the boy over his head amid the cheers of an invisible crowd. In order to bring theatrical time to the screen, the action must be first established in a specific setting in time and space (namely the kitchen), which is then literally collapsed into a totally nonspecific space. Although the architecture recalls a building in Rome, the area beyond the stony walls is conspicuously blackened. The universe then ends with the architecture, unlike a more “cinematic” universe, which seems to extend past the edge of the frame.

As the single plastic doll gives way to an army of life-sized action figures, we see the world on film created bit by bit, but all within the walls of the arena. The action only spills over into other spaces once the "theatrical" setting is established. By connecting the boy to a specifically modern setting before turning him loose to move about among the players (and later fully enter the action as Young Lucius), Taymor potentially makes the link between theatrical and cinematic time. The incredibly bombastic cinematic opening calms as it transfers into the still silent but more theatrical dance of the soldiers, which in turn creates space for the entirely theatrical moment when the “play” begins: the
delivery of Titus’s first lines. Titus’s speech locates this non-specific theatrical space in Rome, and it seems for a moment that the action has come to rest in one place.

Though the opening sequence acknowledges the disorienting shift from the stage to the screen, once the clay is washed away and the soldier figures become individuals in the eyes of the camera, the visual language becomes more wholly cinematic. Because spaces on film can be made not only specific but also distinct from one another, Taymor uses this specificity to explore her concept of “location as metaphor,” which comes out of the juxtaposition of “stylized and naturalistic imagery” (178). After the first scene, “the film was set in over a hundred locations and only returns to the formality of the Colosseum for the finale” (179). Indeed, action shifts location even within a single scene. As Aaron leads Chiron and Demetrius through the palace, each room is so distinct from the last it is hard to believe they are all contained within the same building. Each room has a unique visual style that adds to the richness of the cinematic universe. Taymor references “the Crossroads and the Swamp...[as] two examples of how location functions as ideographs for the thematic essence of a scene” (179). Space on film can determine the action it contains by mirroring and enhancing, even changing the themes within the text.

With the link between theatrical time/space and filmic time/space, Titus becomes hyper-cinematic. The action moves from specific space to specific space, creating miniature theatrical spaces within the camera’s vast range of motion. In order to create an enclosed theatrical quality for scenes, such as the sacrifice of Alarbus and the hunt in the woods, once the camera has shifted to a location, it remains fixed, making no gesture to action outside what takes place in a single room or clearing. The images are also
highly specific to a multitude of eras, bringing together horse-drawn chariots, fifties petticoats, ancient stones and Ziploc bags. Nearly all the visual elements directly correspond to some idea of an outside reality, but they come together in a completely incongruous manner, making Titus's dismemberment all the more disturbing when his hand is casually tossed into an everyday Ziploc. The film has no connection to any single point in time, any single past, and instead refers to multiple pasts that become unified on screen, resulting in a totally filmic universe. Anthony Hopkins created characters on opposite ends of the spectrum, ranging from C.S. Lewis (Shadowlands, 1993) to Hannibal the cannibal (The Silence of the Lambs, 1991). Conflicting associations with his previous work are essential to his characterization of Titus, making him both a fallen hero and a mass-murdering people-eater.

Burt recognizes the “coding of Saturninus as fascist politician” (309), but this ruler is more Marilyn Manson than Mussolini, connecting him more to the proliferation of fascist imagery in visual media than to direct correspondence with any political ideology. Although the disparate elements become a unified setting on film, single images lose their one-to-one correspondence with the external world they are drawn from. As Lavinia stands atop her pedestal/tree stump with her flowing white skirt, after her rape and dismemberment, she is “a Marilyn Monroe figure” (Buhler 190), becoming iconic rather than individualized as Marcus speaks of but not to her. She recalls Monroe as an emblem of ultimate cinematic desire in the aftermath of truly horrific violence—this not only makes the scene all the more disturbing and disorienting, it connects Lavinia’s sexual objectification with the removal of her symbols of agency (i.e. her hands and her power of speech).
Such layering of imagery keeps the film’s purpose elusive. Richard Burt tries to categorize the bombardment of visual codes as a conflation of the low-budget slasher movie and the highbrow art-house film (319), calling Taymor’s work “a failed neoconservative response to a perceived excess of violence in contemporary mass media” (12). On the other side of the argument, Bate seems to cast his net a bit wide when he claims that this “Titus is not so much a historical work as a meditation on history” (11), and “precisely because of all its extremities, [it] is the Shakespearean play for our extreme time, our millennial moment of dark memory and fresh hope” (9-10), making the film a moral vessel for the text. In one argument, the setting displaces the text, while in the other argument, the text overrides anything in the film, and both fail to address the subtlety and complexity in the film’s relationship to the text. While the medium may push and pull on the flow of time for the action, collapsing and combining, slowing down and speeding up, the film still writhes under its own limitations, as if the medium and the text are constantly shifting in relation to one another instead of remaining in equilibrium. The most telling moments are those that break up the primary flow of the action, scenes which Taymor dubbed the “Penny Arcade Nightmares.” Incorporating textual authority with filmic innovation becomes a continual process rather than an inherent state.

Taymor claims to have “devised the concept of the ‘Penny Arcade Nightmare’ to portray the inner landscapes of the mind as affected by the external actions” (183), continuing the theme of the landscape as a determining metaphor for the activity onscreen; it gives an opportunity to overlap not only different levels of historical time, but different levels of experiential time as well. In other words, the P.A.N. will disrupt the flow of time attributed to the main action, causing it to cease, giving the P.A.N.
access to internal time, or images connected to memory and moments outside the characters’ present. The first three P.A.N.s deal with past events encroaching on the present, to the point where memory displaces action in the moments that make full use of film as a medium.

The first P.A.N. is prefaced by the decidedly theatrical moment when Tamora fully addresses the camera and swears her revenge. Taymor mimics the theatrical aside by having Tamora speak to the camera as she would the audience in a theater. On stage, this is meant to key the viewer into the internal life of a character, expressing what is going on inside of them that cannot be represented on the stage. Taymor follows this moment up with a filmic “equivalent,” the P.A.N., which actually turns out to totally preempt the previous theatrical moment. The P.A.N. seems to occur entirely within the instant Tamora and Titus lock eyes, perhaps lasting a split second on the timeline for the characters, but extending that instant into a full sequence. Tamora and Titus are seen in profile, but their images are superimposed over the background instead of standing within it, already creating two planes of existence in the frame, one over the other. The background turns to flames as their profiles become silhouettes, and the stone remains of statues fly into the foreground, as they become models of the limbs lopped from Alarbus in the earlier scene. The dismembered torso that comes to the center of the frame is marked for sacrifice just as Tamora’s son was, and the shared memory of the two characters dissolves into flames. Instead of creating one internal landscape for one character, the P.A.N. not only created one for two, but represented the connection between the two characters completely through imagery. The flow of time does not
immediately return to normal, as Tamora ascends the palace stairs in slow motion and the film shifts from one level of time to the other.

The second P.A.N comes as Titus prostrates himself at the crossroads after begging for the lives of his two sons. The movement of real time comes to a halt as an angel approaches Titus and he envisions Mutius, the son he himself killed, as a sacrificial lamb. As the angel comes closer, her own movements slowed by the camera, the clouds in the sky behind her speed up, again creating two separate planes of time in a single frame. The camera zooms in on Titus’s eye, and the images become what are indeed in his mind’s eye until his vision disappears again in an explosion of angels. In the first P.A.N., a single instant was expanded. Here, when the camera returns to Titus, we get the impression he has been weeping at the crossroads for quite a while, so his nightmare has caused time to contract.

A very different style of nightmare occurs when Titus’s hand and the heads of his sons are sent back to him in scorn. Because it disrupts the action and creates an alternative atmosphere to the rest of the action, the re-entrance of the Clown and the little girl is set up to be a theatrical equivalent to the other P.A.N.s. It is around this time that Osheen Jones’s character begins to become more explicitly a member of the Andronici household. He is the first to come out to see and watch, with mild amusement, as the Clown and the little girl arrive and set up their presentation. The comical polka accompanying the pair jolts the viewer out of the somber mood established by the previous scene between Titus and Lavinia. The boy and girl acknowledge one another, the girl reflecting Jones’s character’s ability to exist through multiple narrative planes. The Clown and the girl set up a miniature stage for themselves in from of the Andronici
home, setting out chairs for Titus and his family as if what is to follow is meant to be a break from the action.

It culminates, however, in the gruesome moment when Aaron’s treachery has been revealed to the Andronici, along with the various body parts. The music ends abruptly, and Marcus and the others try with some discomfort to shift from the position as audience member to that of outraged kinsman. Titus, however, accepts the comic framework offered by the Clown and responds in kind with laughter. No longer disoriented by the juxtaposition of light-hearted form with dark content, Titus is able to more easily negotiate his way through this world of contradiction and deceit. Coursen attributes the success of this to “Anthony Hopkins’s uncanny ability to suggest that Titus is figuring out the pattern in which he is implicated as he goes along” (134). It may also be because the theatrical presentation was unable to live up to the filmic representation of his imagination.

At the final climactic banquet, after most of the carnage has been carried out, Taymor “uses the Mad Cow Time Slice System...when Lucius shoots Saturninus” (Burt 304) and brings an end to the major storyline, causing the time onscreen to come to a full halt. After Saturninus is choked to death on a spoon, a flash of white clears the frame, giving way to the shot of all figures suspended in time as the camera moves around the table, coming to rest with Young Lucius in the center of the frame, looking at his father. All remain frozen except Lucius and his father, who move to opposite edges of the frame. The boy watches the man administer the final gunshot and the camera rushes back to reveal that the final scene is enclosed by the original colosseum. An audience gradually appears. In these few seconds, history, time, and film interact. The moment is captured,
made static, and then disintegrates. It seems as though we have been brought back to where we started, but the story created from here on in is almost completely visual.

By returning to the free-floating colosseum, basically an archetypal theater space, the action seems to have shifted from the cinematic back to the theatrical. In contrast with the opening scene, however, the viewer is alienated from an experience of “the theatrical” by virtue of the fact that an audience is actually there on film to displace her. The life-sized action figures of Titus, Saturninus, and Lavinia are wrapped in plastic, preserved but no longer viable participants. Osheen Jones’s character carries Aaron’s child away from the action as time again begins to slow, and a universe begins to appear onscreen beyond the theater walls, and eventually time grinds to a gentle stop before the screen fades to black. Although “Titus [the play]...shows little if any moral universe evolving out of or reinforcing the revenge pattern” (Coursen 133), the final image in Titus the film illustrates the moral universe created by the placement of a catalog of images from an external reality onto the action in the script.

Eventually, by incorporating Shakespearean authority into the film, Taymor’s film portrays a consistent give and take between the authorized text and cinematic innovation. Instead of totally reconciling the differences, Titus expands the distance between the text and the setting only to force an eventual compromise. The theatrical moments in the script remain, but theatricality is re-envisioned in cinematic terms.

**Shakespeare on Film**

These three works engage critically with Shakespeare’s texts, but the resulting performances are not merely transmissions of textual “truths”; the films are also not simply interpretations moving toward “authentic Shakespeare.” The medium of cinema
is used to subvert rather than support textual authority. These films are re-imagining the physical and temporal universes that house the action on screen. Far from rejecting Shakespeare’s text altogether, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Titus* create an environment where Shakespearean drama is invited onto the screen as a participant in meaning rather than the sole location of meaning.

It is not enough for these films to create alternative cinematic settings for imagining Shakespeare if the critical engagement remains based in the text rather than in performance. Coursen claims that “the [Shakespearean] script is moving forward in time—it is not timeless, but seeks production *in* time. Production, invariably, will show us our own zeitgeist or episteme, linking what is construed as meaning in the script to meanings we perceive in our culture” (1). However, his analysis betrays a less open-minded stance when faced with the rejection of Shakespearean authenticity found in Almereyda’s film. In comparing two recent film productions of *Hamlet*, after engaging in some brief Branagh-worship, Coursen shifts to Almereyda-bashing right away by asserting that “this is a low-budget film, and it shows. Almost everything potentially interesting in the inherited script suffers a grim reduction in this version” (151).

As his discussion goes on, it becomes clear that the film’s failure is not entirely due to a faulty production as much as it is as a result of the film’s rampant insubordination. Rather than examining the particulars of the action on screen or the specific uses of film’s potential, Coursen dismisses many of the production choices, all the way down to the wool cap Hamlet wears—“which I am told is very trendy these days” (151)—as one might dismiss adolescent insolence. Apparently, Claudius runs from the screening of Hamlet’s film “because he has better things to do,” while Gertrude
follows due to “her awareness that she has spawned a talentless blockhead” (154). His analysis of Loncraine’s *Richard III* is only slightly less insulting, coming out of the claim that setting the action in the 1930s “attempts to explain rather than explore” (17).

It then becomes clear the claim that “if Shakespeare were alive today, he would be writing and directing movies” (Bate 8) is by and large irrelevant and ultimately detrimental to any full discussion of a film. Despite any protests by their filmmakers, these films stand in opposition to the idea that performance is merely a vessel for Shakespearean authority. Each film uses cinema’s connection to the past to disrupt the authority of the text, relying more on anachronism than continuity. They therefore do not reach for authorial validation. These kinds of Shakespearean films challenge critical practice to recognize cinematic performance as part of the creation of meaning instead of only the transmission of it, and to explore the elements of a medium that shift and control content. These films, whether through confrontation, irony, or incorporation, construct a new space and time for Shakespeare’s text to inhabit on screen, and imagine new ways of exploring Shakespearean performance in a cinematic universe where language becomes image.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


