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Shakespeare and Artistic Compromise

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Since drama is listed as a clearly demarcated generic component of the literature syllabus at secondary and tertiary levels, the implied assumption is that we know what it 'is' when we teach it. Yet drama is seldom taught with any clearly established distinction in method or emphasis from the broad strategies employed in the teaching of fiction or poetry. Because a play reveals its action through characters and dialogue, there is the tendency to deal with the characters as though they were characters of fiction. And because Shakespearian drama is largely poetic drama, there is the tendency to deal with the dialogue as though it were poetry to be critically analysed on the printed page. In short, drama is studied as a text rather than as a play and the gap between the printed dialogue and the performed work is at best but slenderly bridged.

Many teachers feel understandably uneasy about the weighted importance given to the textual study of Shakespearian plays, but they feel they are being unfair to their students if they try to redress the balance in any way which takes up time, for examinations inevitably cast a looming shadow. They are left what appears to be an exciting if desperate resort — the showing of a film.

Now while it is undoubtedly true that the impact of the visual realism which the film medium affords might well engage the minds of students with certain aspects of Shakespeare's dramatic stature, it is by no means clear, or even likely, that any significant and lasting fusion of response to the film with response to the text will result.

Indeed the gap between the text and the film will — in the case of effective cinematography — be considerably wider than that between the text and the staged presentation, and unless the text is approached along particular preparatory lines, the relationship between Shakespeare's play and the film presentation of Shakespeare's dramatic material will remain obscure. Neither the artistic intention nor the artistic integrity of the film director will be open to critical scrutiny.

This is not to say that films must not be used in the teaching of Shakespearian drama, but it is to say that the film is not a satisfactory substitute for the staged production of a Shakespeare play. There are subtle and very significant differences between the cinema and the theatre: differences which do not merely concern the nature of the work's presentation but which crucially modify the relationship between the audience and the presented work. These differences essentially concern spatial relationships. When we watch dramatic action on the theatre stage, we watch that action within a complete spatial microcosm; a three-dimensional construction representing a space concept which is placed in but separate from the world of space-reality around it. Even where the decor and the set aim to bring spatial illusions closer to reality, the stage can never aim at verisimilitude on its own because we, the theatre audience, know too much about it. We know that around the illuminated space of the staged dramatic action there are actors waiting in the wings, there are battens of blazing lights suspended from catwalks and there are dusty men in paint-stained dungarees waiting to move the scenery. We are in complicity with the stage director and the actors in that we are prepared "willingly to suspend our disbelief" about the totality of significance which the action on the stage represents.

The cinema is different. When we watch the action within the cinema frame, we are not looking at a spatial microcosm. It is rather as André Bazin has put it in his essay *Theatre and Cinema*, as though we are looking through the eye-hole of a mask which allows us to see only a selected part of the action at any given moment. The spatial and social contexts of the action must seem to extend beyond the boundaries of the frame. The selected action we are watching must be 'central' for our purposes, but it must in no sense seem 'staged'. The cinema aims at spatial realism and at no point are we in collusion with the film director. His work, like that of the projection machinery, is done behind our backs as it were.

We will tolerate — indeed we will expect — photographic 'tricks' so long as they are sufficiently convincing; so long as we are given at the visual perceptual level what appears to be spatially 'real', and so long as we can believe in a spatial reality beyond the boundaries of the frame.

There is a profound difference, too, implicit in the architectural differences between the theatre and the cinema. The architecturally established spatial relationships within the theatre form a relatively inflexible framework within which the three-fold aesthetic relationship between actors, audience and dramatic work operates. The audience is sedentary and the seating is designed (ideally) to afford maximum visual concentration upon a demarcated 'space' within which the actors manipulate the pace, progress and impact of the dramatic work. The cinema audience on the other hand faces a flat screen which reflects a two-dimensional image, and although like the theatre audience the cinema audience is sedentary in the physical sense, the distance between the viewer and the detail in the framed picture appears constantly to be changing because it is the camera's property to explore and to make the viewer conscious of the reality of space — 'deep' space as well as 'wide' space. By "zooming" and by "tracking" the camera gives the viewer the illusion of travelling, while the change in the camera's angle gives the viewer the illusion of vertical mobility.

By manipulating its audience in this way, the cinema camera can — and to some extent always does — induce a passivity in the spectator. This is part of what we expect of cinema. We are no longer, in Bazin's words, "playing the game of theatre". We are now being moved about without effort in relation to the images projected on the reflecting screen before us. The effortlessness of this apparent physical movement constitutes a kind of 'magic', and it induces an euphoric enjoyment which to some extent permeates all levels of the spectator's response. His awareness of the

dramatic action in the film, his awareness of the rest of the audience and his awareness of himself are all affected in a way which dramatic action on the theatre stage does not affect them. Bazin has put it thus,

> "Incontestably there is the pleasure derived from cinema . . . a self-satisfaction, a concession to solitude a sort of betrayal of action by a refusal of social responsibility."

Bazin is really suggesting here that the cinema imposes an authority on its audience. It is almost because of its apparent physical power over us that we find it less easy to question. Like Macbeth, we find ourselves the victims of a paradoxical situation. We are powerless in that we are manipulated, and at the same time, more powerful in the sense that we can see the spatial vastness and the microscopic detail of an image in a second. The theatre audience become the active "players of a game" in a spatial as well as in a credibility sense, for the demarcated area of the acting stage implies a territorial set of rules. When the actors violate the territory of the auditorium (as they are sometimes directed to do), it is effective partly because it *is* a violation of an expected code deliberately made by the director. Up to a point the theatre director is doing what the film director does, in making 'fluid' the relationship of the audience to the dramatic work. But when the cinema director does this there is no "game" because there is, on the part of the cinema audience, a spatial surrender. Cinema is permissive in that whatever invasion by the visual and aural is possible (short of sheer discomfort), is quite legitimate. There are no conventional boundaries to the action.

Finally, there is a distinction — of which it is more difficult to be conscious — in the spatial relationship between the actor and the spatial context in which he is seen to act. In the theatre, as a play proceeds, the focus of interest becomes increasingly vested in the actor. The play in fact, becomes a process during which the stage decor becomes less important and the actor takes over total dramatic responsibility. This has been shown nowhere more effectively than in Shakespearian drama where dramatic development can be projected with complete success to an audience, with only the merest suggestion of spatial feature.

These dynamics do not operate in cinema. The unsatisfactoriness (in cinematic terms) of Laurence Olivier's film of *Othello* and — to a lesser extent — of Peter Brook's film of *King Lear* lies in the fact that the progressive relationship between the actor and the decor is theatrically rather than cinematically developed. This makes for frustrating cinema. On the cinema screen, the relationship of the actor to his spatial context essentially excludes the consciousness of an audience, and this means that the decor and the actor are related in a 'closed' sense. Dramatic development tends to derive its strength from a sustained flow between the decor and the actor. It is in fact a flow *from* the decor to the actor. The spatial context — both that within the frame and that which is accepted as existing beyond the frame — is of primary importance and remains so as the aesthetic development of the screened work proceeds.

Because of this very special relationship of the decor to the actor, the 'film actor' is not in the theatrical sense an 'actor' at all, for his relationship with the audience is not within his control. It is manipulated by the camera. And Laurence Olivier is not right of film in general when he says (as he did to Roger Manvill in 1955), "There is much less difference between film acting and stage acting than people think". He is asking cinema to make a very risky compromise.

And yet if Shakespeare is to be got effectively on the screen at all, then compromise is essential, for the language of the cinema and the language of Shakespearian drama are fundamentally at odds. Peter Hall, in an article in the Sunday Times (London) in 1969 put it thus:

> "It's true that Shakespeare's structural rhythms, the counterpoint between scenes, often work in the same way as good film editing. But in a more important respect, Shakespeare is no screen writer. He is a verbal dramatist, relying on the associative and metaphorical power of words. Action is secondary."

From this recognition there has emerged a more interesting and more profoundly engaging compromise than the one upon which Olivier's Shakespearian films depend. Where Olivier would make the camera the servant of the theatrical actor, Peter Hall's film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Peter Brook's film of *King Lear* make the camera the servant of Shakespeare's dialogue. Peter Hall continues:

> "The verbal essence of Shakespeare is inescapably non-cinematic. In spite of this — indeed in contradiction to it — I have tended to use the advantages of cinema not to make a film in the accepted sense, but to communicate his words . . ."

We do not encounter entirely happy cinema in these films. They make prolonged use of close-up shooting so that after a time one yearns desperately to see a whole person move on the screen, and one becomes increasingly aware that the sustained under-playing is the result of constraints which the medium imposes upon what is basically stage playing. In discussing his film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Peter Hall has spoken of the closeness which the stage technique of the players bore to their work before the cameras:

> "All we had to do," he said, "was to make sure that the faces did nothing excessive in expression during the close shots."

There is a third alternative which has been embarked upon — very significantly — by the Russians and the Japanese. Ironically this depends upon liberating Shakespearian drama from the 'tyranny' of the might of Shakespeare's poetry. Perhaps this could only be tackled by a film-director from a non-English-speaking heritage, for what it attempts is to make Shakespeare's dramatic material the basis for cinematic art and cinematic language. (In this connection it is interesting to note that before the advent of the 'talkies', some four hundred silent films were made from Shakespearian material. So the more

recent work of the Russians and the Japanese was not without its precedent experiments in English-speaking countries.)

Probably the most successful Shakespearian film — in pure cinematic terms — is Kurasawa's *Throne of Blood,* made in Japan in 1957. The film transposes the dramatic material of *Macbeth* to a sixteenth century Japanese setting. The interior scenes derive their theatrical suggestions from the Japanese Noh theatre. Dialogue is only very sparingly used in the film, yet the visuals succeed with most powerful effect in expressing visually the nature of the characters' relationships with thoughts, and in projecting spatially the psychological universe and tensions within Shakespeare's dramatic work. The forest, for example, with its deceptive paths and its shrouds of mist is a spatial projection of Macbeth's mind. The interior of the castle with its delicate walls and its aesthetic harmonies of vertical and horizontal lines suggests the finely poised concept of order which Macbeth's action is to disrupt.

More immediately accessible to Western Shakespearian sensibilities are three Russian films: Sergei Yutkevitch's *Othello* (1955) and Grigori Kozintsev's films of *Hamlet* (1964) and *King Lear* (1970). These three films accede to the imperative demand of the cinematic medium, that of relating the characters and the dramatic action to the spatial context in terms of cinematic priorities. Indeed, Kozintsev entitles his record of the making of his film of *King Lear,* THE SPACE OF TRAGEDY.

From this absorbing account one comes to understand the extent to which Kozintsev's cinematic conception was dominated by a visual creative impulse. Where Brook chose an actor with well known stage experience to play the part of Lear in his film, Kozintsev's casting priorities were different. After many unsuccessful auditions with experienced actors, Kozintsev was one day viewing camera tests of extras for crowd scenes. His diary records the following entry:

> "Today, after many difficult months, after so many unsuccessful tests, I have at last seen the eyes on the screen; the very eyes.
> "In outward appearance he did not look the part at all: he was short, with a small head, and very nervous. To crown it all he not only spoke Russian poorly but also only partly understood it."

This was Yuri Yarvet who played the part of Lear in the film. The diary entry ends, " . . . I looked at Yarvet and recognised Lear. Yarvet looked like him."

The power of the visuals in Kozintsev's *King Lear* makes it, from many points of view, the most aesthetically satisfying 'adaptation' of Shakespeare for the screen (leaving aside Kurusawa's *Throne of Blood* which is a 'transposition'). The translation of the text by Boris Pasternak is also a deliberate rewriting for the screen. It is deliberately less poetically complex than Shakespeare's, and as such allows a refreshing freedom of spatial exploration for the cameras. One is tempted to speculate on the possible cinematic nature of Peter Brook's film if the original intention to use a rewritten text by Ted Hughes had been carried through. When Brook and Birkett finally decided to retain Shakespeare's dialogue they committed themselves to the necessity for camera restraint.

Because cinema imposes an authority on its presentation of dramatic material, it is important for the viewer to bear in mind that the iterpretive factor works over a wider gap between the text and the presented dramatic work than is the case in the theatre. In putting Shakespeare on the screen, certain selected priorities will govern the nature of the compromise made between the language of the cinema and the language of Shakespeare. This compromise will in turn govern the stature of the cinematic experience we encounter.

The particular properties of the film medium, too, will modify our responses to the dramatic work we watch. We shall certainly not experience Shakespeare on the screen as we might do in the theatre, for as this article has tried to show, the cinematic experience is different from the theatrical experience and it is shaped by different aesthetic impulses.

To appreciate the play, it is helpful to know the text. But to appreciate the film and to accept that the authority of the film medium is not absolute, it would seem necessary to know the text in a particular way; to have experienced its dramatic potential for ourselves in some way before encountering the film. The best way to experience this dramatic potential in preparation for the viewing of a film, is to use a camera on some selected part of it.

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