Dissertation Summary

'Art Thou Base, Common, and Popular?'

Millennial Shakespeare Films Straddling the High/Low Divide

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Subject and Aims of the Dissertation

The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented deluge of Anglo-American screen versions of Shakespeare. This incredible flood of Shakespeare films made me wonder what the reasons could be for this millennial resurgence, in what way this phase of Shakespearean filmmaking differs from the previous ones. In my dissertation I offer a comprehensive attempt to answer these questions by examining exciting 'Shakespop' hybrids, which, as the term Shakespop would suggest, involve a kind of strained but really productive interplay between two cultural systems, high and popular culture. [1]

The sheer volume of the Shakespeare films made in the 1990s makes the total coverage of them impossible; furthermore, I did not set out to write a collection of film reviews. Due to my interest in Shakespeare films in socio-cultural terms, in the dissertation I discuss major films which, besides evoking intense critical response and/or being big box-office-hits, address the seemingly ubiquitous conflation of high culture and popular culture, and capture the significant changes in Shakespeare's status in our postmodern millennial culture. To explore the issue I have taken up the following wide ranging questions: Does Shakespeare appear as a cultural force in these adaptations or is his status as a cultural icon emptied out, and he functions only as an empty signifier? How do these screen versions of Shakespeare relate to bardic authority; do they quote Shakespeare with the aim of homage, parody, or simple imitation? And finally, are they marked by the total dismissal of the distinction between the two cultural systems or rather they suggest that the distinction is still alive?

I have chosen Kenneth Branagh's three 'faithful' screen versions of Shakespeare – *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), and *Hamlet* (1996) – and set them against Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991), Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995), Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+ Juliet* (1996), John Madden's *Shakespeare in*

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[1] The term is coined by Douglas Lanier. See Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.19.

Love (1998), Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999), and Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000). These adaptations were especially suitable for my investigation because they occupy a fairly peculiar cultural position, oscillating between high culture and popular culture in a paradoxical way. While the lavish, romantic adaptations of Kenneth Branagh – however 'popular' they are intended to be – show the traces of bardolatry and are often enlisted in the category of quality cinema, the postmodern screen versions of Shakespeare listed above are also marked by the 'taint of elitism' by expecting their audiences to understand the witty intertextual allusions not only to popular cinema but to other cultural systems like theatre, architecture, painting and last but not least Shakespearean cultural history.

Although my dissertation is grounded on a socio-cultural approach and I opted for not going into the depths of film aesthetics, by virtue of the topic I cannot avoid discussing the struggle inherent in translating the Shakespearean text into the language of a visual medium, and examining the impact of postmodern aesthetics on these adaptations. I am mainly concerned about what kind of filmic language these popular appropriations of Shakespeare employ to actualize his works: whether they attempt at easing the translation of the Shakespearean text into the language of the cinema choosing a basically realist approach – these screen versions are based on the aesthetics of the mainstream film – or rather, they draw the spectator's attention to the incongruities, to the differences between the Shakespearean text and the visual image, and employ a kind of non-illusionistic filmic language.

It follows from the above that I do not provide an all-embracing summary of Shakespearean filmmaking of the 1990s; instead, I highlight the most challenging and tell-tale trends of millennial Shakespeare cinema citing appropriate examples. Thus the chapters are not dedicated to particular films but to particular issues, the discussion of which require the analysis of certain films from different aspects each time. As a result, some adaptations are examined in the context of several chapters.

I am in the fortunate situation to be able to perform research into Shakespearean filmmaking in an age when there is an exceptional abundance and multiplicity of critical

studies on Shakespeare film, and when Shakespeare film criticism has already become inextricably intertwined with contemporary cinema studies and Shakespeare studies. Consequently, I could consult such remarkable collections of critical studies as for example, *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siècle* edited by Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray (2000), *Spectacular Shakespeare: critical theory and popular cinema* edited by Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Stark (2002), or *Shakespeare, The Movie, II* edited by Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose (2003) – all of which examine Shakespeare film adaptations in the context of a postmodern millennial culture. They consider the ways in which Shakespeare's popularization has been transformed by digitalization and globalization, and discuss the 'uses and abuses' of Shakespeare's cultural authority, which, as the deluge of Shakespeare screen products in the first decade of the twenty-first century attests, will continue in the future, as well.

Conclusions

1. Postmodern *auteurism* and/or 'life-enhancing populism'[2]

In the first chapter on Kenneth Branagh my argument is that he is not so much a 'postmodern *auteur*', as Courtney Lehmann dubs him, but rather a 'life-enhancing popularizer of Shakespeare', who mobilizes postmodern aesthetic to make Shakespeare accessible for mass audiences. Branagh's directorial approach to Shakespeare is undoubtedly postmodern in its offering an impressive array of filmic borrowings: in his films he effectively interweaves materials drawn from popular genres of Hollywood filmmaking, which range from scenes from classical western movies to popular songs of musicals in the 1930s. No doubt by combining unlikely locations of culture – the Shakespearean drama with multiculturalism, classically trained British actors with Hollywood stars – Branagh has succeeded in creating his own unique style, and he can be considered the 'author' of his Shakespearean screen products with a personal signature visible from film to film. But in spite of all his postmodern

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[2] Branagh himself wrote in his autobiography that his aim had always been to mount stage and screen productions of 'life-enhancing populism'. See Kenneth Branagh, *Beginning,* (London:Chatto & Windus Ltd, 1989), p. 197

intextual operation, I believe that Branagh's screen versions of Shakespeare stand apart from the postmodern Shakespeare-film adaptations made in the 1990, which are marked by a self-conscious, self-reflective way of intertextual presentation and detached, playful parody. On the one hand Branagh is a 'bardolater', who acknowledges and exploits the cultural authority and prestige of the Shakespearean source text and leaves Shakespeare as cultural icon untouched. His lavish and prestigious films are devoid of irreverent parodistic approach to the Bard and are marked by his emphasis on the importance of a clearly-spoken Shakespearean language. On the other hand he is motivated by a kind of 'life-enhancing populism', and employs postmodern aesthetic in the service of his mission of making Shakespeare a site of universal consumption; the allusions to popular film genres, which are to help the viewer follow the plot easily and identify with the characters, his taste for romantic lyricism, and his emphasis on clarity and naturalness of acting, all testify to his commitment to popular aesthetic, which is served successfully by the apparatus of mass-market cinema, and its modes of production and marketing techniques.

2. Bardolatry wrapped in Hollywood-inflected realism

In the second chapter on Branagh my argument is that his screen versions of Shakespeare are made in the tradition of classical Hollywood cinema. Branagh's cinematic efforts to reconcile his brand of bardolatry with classical Hollywood cinema are not so strange. Shakespeare, viewed by Branagh as a conservative cultural force, and Hollywood ideology, which is also basically conservative, are not antagonistic concepts. Branagh structures his adaptations around traditional moral values like faith, sacrifice, friendship, loyalty, responsibility, patriotism, romantic love, which, besides being offered by the Shakespearean text, constitute the basic topics of Hollywood cinema. Furthermore, Branagh employs the classical Hollywood-style narrative, which is based on clear, unambiguous patterns of cause-and-effect: it is organized around actions of goal-driven characters seeking to overcome a variety of obstacles, and comprises events which are justified and motivated, rather than arbitrary or

coincidental – a kind of narrative introduced by the *auteur* films of the European New Wave in the 1960s. Keeping to the narrative demands of classical realism, Branagh's adaptations relate the narrative straightforwardly, without calling attention to the medium, and the visual spectacle (style, special effects, images) of his films, although heavily accentuated, is never emphasized at the expense of language, plot and character – in contrast with the postmodern appropriations of Shakespeare made in the 1990s.

3. The 'pure gaze'[3] of the 'double-access audience'[4] – Intertextuality and eclecticism in postmodern film adaptations of Shakespeare

In the first chapter on postmodern filmic reconceptualizations of Shakespeare I claim that these movies are high-cultural products appropriating popular culture, and they can be fully explored only by the so-called 'double- access' audience, who has cultural fluency with both high culture and popular culture. These adaptations are specifically inscribed with a series of intertextual references, and define themselves not only in relation to other film texts but also in relation to other textual systems, such as theatre, architecture, painting, music videos, television, and so on. To decode the intertextual allusions of these films, and to appreciate the exciting interplay between the two cultural systems one needs to possess the 'pure gaze' – a term used by Pierre Bourdieu – which is a mode of artistic perception. According to Bourdieu this kind of disinterested, analytic approach, which presupposes mastery of different codes, is the only effective way of 'reading' a work of art. My conclusion is that this kind of attitude the spectator is assumed to take up towards these postmodern screen versions of Shakespeare designate these movies as high -cultural products as opposed to popular ones, which depend on approval and identification and do not demand specialist knowledge.

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[3] The term 'pure gaze/taste' is used by Pierre Bourdieu as opposed to popular taste. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 3.

[4] The term 'double-access audience' is used by Jostein Gripsrud as opposed to the term 'single-access audience'. See Jostein Gripsrud, '"High Culture" Revisited', *Cultural Studies*, 3.2 (1989), pp. 199.

4. The ambivalent doubleness of Shakespearean film parody

Although parody is not the prevailing mode in recent Shakespearean filmmaking, it has proved to be fertile material for pop cinematizing of Shakespeare. In the second chapter on postmodern film adaptations of Shakespeare, after examining some pivotal products with a strong parodic strain, I have come to the conclusion that Shakespearean film parody[5] is profoundly ambivalent in its transgression. First, although these films interrogate Shakespeare's 'highness' and destabilize our preconceptions concerning his plays, they simultaneously display their conviction that Shakespeare is a valuable ethical touchstone, and – by appropriating the Shakespearean drama – they recognize its capacities to capture the imagination. Secondly, the object of the parody is not solely Shakespeare – or rather the traditions the plays have become aligned with; parody is also aimed at late twentieth-century culture, which is criticised by these postmodern screen products – occupying an insider-outsider doubled position – from within the system itself. Although these films engage in contemporary popular culture, they problematize pop cinematization of Shakespeare by poking fun of the terms by which Shakespeare has so often been modernized and popularized.

5**. Only simulacrum?**

My next argument concerning postmodern screen versions of Shakespeare has been that by confronting the social realities and the media modes of contemporary society, postmodern Shakespeare film goes beyond being merely a spectacular postmodern bricolage. Postmodern filmic appropriations of Shakespeare are marked by a hightened degree of the spectacular, and seem to recreate only the *look* and *feel* of different representational modes suggesting that there is no direct and natural access to reality. They are riddled with empty signifiers which

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[5] In my dissertation I usually use the concept of parody as an umbrella term on the basis of its capability to embrace those essential qualities of *pastiche, camp* and *grotesque* which unite them into one group: they are all concerned with incongruities of stylistic register, and celebrate a kind of self-consciously transgressive relationship to their targets. But while *camp* and *grotesque* share with parody the element of exaggerarion and humor, *pastiche* offers the juxtaposition of incompatible formal components without the element of mockery – it is 'dark parody' without laughter.

have nothing to do with the signified, the 'original'; they seem to be mere simulacra, pure simulations which imitate rather than reflect social reality. My argument is that the profusion of these empty signs do not obliterate meaning, they do not serve only a formal purpose. Paradoxically, I believe, it is exactly their simulacrum-nature, that is the abundance of the depleted high and popular cultural elements, which draw our attention to the disturbing problems of postmodern millennial culture and prevent these movies from becoming mere postmodern spectacles. Furthermore, by employing the playfully subversive artistic devices of pastiche, camp and grotesque – dominant techniques of postmodern filmmaking – they not only distance the audience from the Shakespearean source but engage with the most pressing concerns western culture had to face at the end of the millennium: familial crisis, drug consumption, urban decay, media saturation, or violence. They illustrate that postmodern parodic representation allows exercising criticism, and is capable of signalling difference from a moral perspective.

6. Text versus image: The survival of the poetic mode[6] in postmodern filmic language

The last chapter on millennial postmodern film versions of Shakespeare is centered on the filmic language these screen products employ. Unlike Kenneth Branagh's basically realist screen versions of Shakespeare, which are aimed at easing the translation of the Shakespearean text into the language of the cinema, postmodern filmic reinterpretations of Shakespeare foreground the clash between the early modern text and postmodern *mise-en-scène*.[7] In this respect they also differ from the modernist Shakespeare film adaptations made in the poetic mode of the 1950s and 1960s, with which they otherwise share a lot in common: for example the extensive use of anti-realist techniques and their penchant for formal

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[6] In 1977 Jack Jorgens divided the major sound-era Shakespeare films into three categories/modes: the theatrical, the realist, and the filmic/poetic. He argued that it was the poetic mode, the 'authentically cinematic' one, which was paradoxically 'truest to the effect of Shakespeare's dramatic verse'. See Jack Jorgens, 'Realizing Shakespeare on Film', in *New Casebooks: Shakespeare on Film*, ed. by Robert Shaughnessy (London: Macmillan Ltd, 1998), pp. 18-43, (p.21).

[7] Everything that we can see in the frame: setting, props, costume, facial expressions and body language of the characters, their setting within the frame, as well as lighting and colour.

experimentation. While the scenography in Kurosawa, Kozintsev, Welles, or Brook's film adaptations reflect an underlying metaphorical meaning – where the visual and the verbal are inextricably interwoven – in postmodern Shakespeare films the visual, which is eclectic and fragmented, is often markedly detached from the verbal, and in most cases it carries the burden of the event. Consequently, here I argue that in spite of all the significant similarities with the Shakespeare films made in the traditional poetic mode, by virtue of their predilection for fragmentation, visual eclecticism and clash between the visual and the verbal, these postmodern products demand a new category, that of the *postmodern* poetic mode.

7. Shakespeare's cultural authority has remained

In the last chapter my argument is that Shakespeare as a sign continues to be appropriated, and the romantic devotion to the 'timeless, universal Author' is also a constitutive feature of Shakespearean filmmaking at the end of the millennium. Although Shakespeare has undoubtedly been appropriated by all kinds of 'unspeakable ShaXXXspeares'[8], and his cultural authority seems to have been emptied out, I assert that the Bard has not lost his cultural force, and 'Shakespeare' is still a brand-name which legitimizes all kinds of filmed stories. The stability of 'Shakespeare' as a sign is further emphasized by the fact that the false genre called 'Shakespeare film' still exists: any screen product that bears the label 'Shakespeare' has been categorized as a Shakespeare movie, making the viewer forget all the differences in genre and style, which would mark them as importantly distinct. Secondly – as the extracts from interviews I bring as examples testify – Shakespearean filmmakers of the 90s tend to communicate their love of Shakespeare by emphasizing their commitment to the 'real' Shakespeare. It is not only Branagh who advertizes his romantic devotion to the Bard by his faithful adaptations, but – in spite of all their subversive gestures – many of the most self-consciously postmodern Shakespearean filmmakers praise the Bard's timelessness and

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[8] The term is coined by Richard Burt, and it refers to recreations of Shakespeare which are wholly 'decontextualized, disembodied, unmoored, even hallucinatory'. See Richard Burt, *Unspeakable ShaXXXspeares* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. xiv.

the all-embracing vigour of the Shakespearean text, featuring the Romantic theory of literary authorship in their adaptations. Screen productions made about Shakespeare's life are also marked by this conspicuous paradox: Although the Bard's life serves for them as an occasion to demystify his cultural authority, the figure who appears on the screen is the icon of the Author, the genius whose works are for all ages.

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