

Theatrum Mundi as a Conceptual Pattern in cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare

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Since Jan Kott's monograph entitled *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* had been published, the question whether Shakespeare *is* our contemporary, received a distinct edge. In answering this question, I wish to examine the concept of the world as theatrical, being permeated with media – or in other words, being a universal stage, a *Theatrum Mundi*. I wish to examine the role this concept plays in making Shakespeare's dramas our contemporaries in the sense that they relate directly to the present, the actual "here and now" of the audience, their lives and their personal responsibility in their life choices. I am interested in the way two contemporary cinematic adaptations may become, or strive to become our contemporaries by applying versions of the *Theatrum Mundi* concept. What is it, that may address a 21st century global audience of Shakespeare that will make his dramas our contemporaries? Both movies to be examined thematize the grim social reality of the Second World War, and make the context of the war the context of the Shakespearean plot. Clearly, at the turn of the 21st century not only Shakespeare, but the world war is history, however, it seems that according to the cinematic adaptations under scrutiny, both adapted *dramas* are indeed our contemporaries, and they potentially become our contemporaries specifically through the mentioned context of the war. By examining these two examples I wish to argue that the thematization of the world war, and the consequent creation of a non-Shakespearean, and for a contemporary viewer, a more actual, more immediate context, which is parallel in the two films examined, serves different functions in the respective films, despite their seemingly similar formal features. Also, the two works employ different strategies in addressing the audience by referring to the universality of the stage, or the mediated world represented in the films themselves.

Shakespeare's Richard III, still as Gloucester, at the beginning of the drama addresses the audience following a strategy that may have been familiar to the Elizabethan audience from late Tudor morality play, and specifically its morally dubious game-makers, the Vices. Gloucester is the first actor to enter the stage, and recites a long monologue witnessed only by the audience, and with his soliloquy creates the frames of the game, or rather, sets the stage. He decides to become a villain, and thus sets the mechanism of the plot in motion. Depending on directorial choices, we may see the roots of Gloucester in the medieval Vice player to a smaller or larger extent: he is one of the characters of the play, but at the same time he is the potential director of the events, which evolve as his play, and up until the very end, he remains an external manipulator of the plot. There are textual references to Gloucester as the Vice in the play as well, reminding the audience of the connection between the would-be king and the chief game maker. The protagonist, in a self-reference, paraphrases his own role as the role of the Vice in Act III Scene 1 – again, in an *aside* remark that is heard merely by the audience. "Like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralise two meanings in on word".¹ Implying two meanings with one word – this refers not exclusively to Gloucester, who may be playful, but is surely morally corrupt. Apart from his sinful machinations, the same method applies to the activities of directors, as well as poets, who also build on the inherent playfulness of language.

What is perhaps easy to create on stage, namely to appeal to the personal moral choices of the audience by addressing them – and Gloucester indeed addresses them directly as the chief

¹ There are two moralities that survived from the 1560s that feature a Vice with the name Iniquity, one being *King Darius* (published in 1565), and the other *Nice Wanton* (from 1560). In references to Shakespeare's plays I use the Arden edition. *King Richard III*. Ed. Anthony Hammond. London, Methuen, 1981.

game-maker of the event that everybody is participating in during the play and thus blurs the boundary between the audience's reality and the *locus* of the play – is considered as taboo in cinematic language. Addressing the cinematic audience, by looking directly into the camera, and thus acknowledging the necessary presence of the agent who has to validate the performance, is an acknowledgement of the lack of transparency of the cinematic medium, and thus its use is extremely rare. Interestingly, however, in the tradition of *Richard III* movies, there is a custom to transgress this taboo, indeed its disrespect has almost become convention. Loncraine's *Richard* follows, among others, Laurence Olivier's 1955 adaptation, when it depicts Gloucester staring at, or rather beyond the camera, while initiating us into his sinister plans. Still, the fact that the protagonist stares at us by looking into the camera, does not mean that we, his audience would be personally involved in any way in the bloodshed of the War of the Roses. Loncraine's film wishes to involve us into its theatrical world by placing the plot into a fictive Britain, where the atmosphere of the war settling in permeates the scene, and Gloucester gradually emerges as a fascist dictator. In order to examine the tools with which Loncraine's adaptation wishes to make us aware of our own involvement in the reality presented by the medium, it is useful first to think of the way Shakespeare's play situates itself *vis-à-vis* its own audience, and their actual social reality.

The question of theatricality, of theatrical play as a *Theatrum Mundi*, something that potentially permeates the reality of the audience, is central not only to Shakespearean drama, but to the plays of his contemporaries as well. The interesting thing in *Richard III*, however, is that Gloucester, the chief game-maker, embodies the negative aspect of theatricality: he is the mastermind of pretense and deceit, of wicked manipulation. He is a player indeed, but far from being innocent. Compared to the other characters in the drama, his powers of creativity and invention are outstanding, and he becomes immensely successful by creating himself, re-imagining and making himself a king from a cripple. Although in the Elizabethan era one of the play's aims was to strengthen the Tudor myth, and implicitly it contributed to the solidification of the Queen's reign as a legitimate monarch, this fact does not provide explanation to the unsettling image that the play depicts about the logic of power, political manipulation and the propaganda that is required for maintaining sovereign rule. Although we do see that the world projected by Gloucester is a mere show that he uses to deceive his subordinates, the play itself does not offer any less unsettling alternative. In other words, despite the fact that the play ends with the appearance of the new ruler presented as legitimate, the audience has learned a lot from the plot about the diverse perspectives regarding the question of legitimacy, about propaganda, the possibility of theatrical manipulation of reality as a misuse of the *Theatrum Mundi*, which is based on the inherent similarity between theatrical and political scenes.²

It is precisely this threat that Loncraine picks up in his movie. And since for the audience of the turn of the century politics and propaganda are organically intertwined with modern warfare and the global broadcasting of war through diverse media, the choice of presenting Gloucester as a fascist dictator is perfectly plausible. We see a dictator who builds up his empire through the conscious use of modern media, and maintains it through the same. Allusions to the world war thus actually play a secondary role, their main function being to provide the scenery. Actualization, the extension of the theatrical/cinematic world of the play to the world of the audience, involving our own reality into what emerges as the *Theatrum Mundi* from the play is

² David Scott Kastan deals with this question in relation to histories in general and *Richard II* in particular in his book chapter entitled "Proud Majesty Made a subject", in which he shows how the stage representation of rulers points to the inherent theatricality of sovereign power in general, thus accusing them of potential fakeness and creating the necessity that an audience (be it a theatrical audience or subjects) regard them as rulers. Kastan, David Scott (1999): *Shakespeare after Theory*. Routledge, New York.

realized primarily through presenting the inherent connections between war, politics and media. As for Richard's opening monologue: he recites its first half into a microphone, addressing the courtly audience as part of their light entertainment, and just before he would continue his soliloquy to his own mirror image, while urinating, the camera zooms on his mouth and the microphone, making the outside reality all but disappear, and retaining the sole version of it that is connected to, or rather emerges from the disgusting mouth in front of the microphone, belonging to the player-director villain. We know that his tale will have to be ugly, Richard, however, not surprisingly, recognizes with great content the version of reality that he depicts and represents. The depiction of the coronation ritual starts with color images in the movie, the picture then turns black and white, and we see the newly crowned king in his private screening studio, watching the recorded version of the ceremony. He appears in front of magnificently designed *mise-en-scene* when he is elected, too: he is waving behind his microphone – and this is where the parallel with fascist propaganda is most obvious. Medial representation as the tool of reality's manipulation is depicted beyond these public ceremonies as well: Richard puts on a record to his player, a light little song, and runs his fingers through photographs taken to document the event that his order was carried out, and Hastings was killed. Earlier in the movie he receives photographs nicely packed, together with Clarence's glasses – proofs for the fact that his brother has been killed, since earlier we could see Clarence as an amateur photographer, who, contrary to Richard, is too naïve to recognize the power of creating reality through photographs, or more generally, the potential of generating a *Theatrum Mundi* through medial representations. Taking into consideration the multitude of media thematized in the film, such as photography, voice mediated by microphone and gramophone, telegraph, black and white movie, we cannot leave unnoticed the curious fact that we are watching a cinematic production that consciously plays with its medial possibilities.³ Also, it is a work of a director who, prior to making the film, produced hundreds of media advertisements, who is a true master of propaganda, especially in its visually coded form, and knows how to flaunt the tools of his profession in support of manipulating an audience through moving images. Loncrain's film chooses a remarkable strategy to create a relationship with its own audience: already at the beginning of the movie, prior to the famous opening soliloquy of Gloucester, we see a series of citations from diverse popular cinematic genres. We are presented the characteristically idyllic family ambient with diffused lights (Edward, prince of Wales sits by his desk, Lady Anne's picture in a frame, his dog at his feet, and cosy fire in the fireplace), which turns suddenly into an action movie (Gloucester breathing behind a mask like Dart Vader, appears with a huge machine gun, and a series of cruel shots counterpoints the idyllic moment we have just witnessed), then the setting switches into a musical (members of the court elegantly dressed, dancing and laughing under the brilliant chandeliers, and Stacey Kent singing a jazz version of Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love"), and even comedy is conjured for a short time (Lord Rivers, whom the audience may know as played by the impersonator of Chaplin, gets off the plane in a scene recalling vaudeville humor).⁴ In other words, Loncraine reflects continuously to his own medium, conjures a magical series of cinematic genres and possibilities in just a few minutes, and with this same gesture creates the grounds for drawing a parallel between Richard, the media-addicted dictator and himself as director of popular cinema. Additionally, he points to two further crucial parallels. First, he reminds us of the fact that in Shakespeare's drama Gloucester's theatrical behavior is not necessarily identical with the critique of the institution or the medium of theatre. It may suggest the opposite as well, namely the powerful energies of theatre to

³ Donaldson traces back the media allegories present in Shakespeare adaptations to the metatheatricality of Shakespearean drama. In his opinion directors regard Shakespeare as their predecessor, and read the Shakespearean text as a critique of intermediality. Donaldson, Peter Samuel (2002): "Cinema and the Kingdom of Death: Loncraine's *Richard III*." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 2, Summer. 241—259, 245.

influence reality, and certainly it points to the inherent theatricality of society, in the spirit of the Globe's supposed motto, according to which the whole world is a stage.⁵ Second, the way Loncraine tries to win his audience with the opening sequence employing the mix of genres, is indeed comparable to the method medieval Vices applied in morality plays, in which they made participation in the play appealing, but did not conceal the moral responsibility in such participation either. Both Loncraine and the medieval, potentially corrupt game-maker Vices would speak against themselves if they urged the audience to reject the play, the world of mediated representation. Also, such a rejection would not guarantee that the audience has a radically different alternative to the mediated worlds presented. The alternative is actually provided by the implied role the audience plays, a role needed for any theatrical world, be it created by a Vice, by Gloucester or Loncraine: the audience may enter the game conscious of its role as validating or rejecting the world represented. Luckily, we are reminded of its role from time to time by the game makers themselves.⁶

In Loncraine's movie *Richard*, the media mogul-dictator cannot fall entirely, he cannot be defeated to the extent he is in Shakespeare's drama, where his admirably composed identity falls apart during his nightmare. At the end of moralities we frequently see Vices riding on the devil's back to hell, just to reappear next time in another drama. Loncraine's film ends with a digital montage (another medium), following a similar logic. After being shot by Richmond, Richard falls back laughingly into a fire that seems to be the fire of hell, with the background music recalling the cabaret scene of the 1920s: "Im sitting on 'Top of the World'" performed by Al Jolson. The film also suggests that Richmond is more than ready to take over power, he knows the relationship between power and media: now he is the one to stare self-assuredly into the camera the way Richard used to, at the beginning of the movie.

Managing its own relationship to its audience via the elements of the plot is similarly central to the other adaptation of a Shakespearean play to be examined – and here, too, this device serves to scrutinize the problem of its own relevance or actuality, the possibility of making itself a stage extended to the audience's world, a *Theatrum Mundi*.

A central motif in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* is the relationship between artistic fiction and reality. In Carroll's words: "this play can profitably be read as a debate on the right uses of

4 Barbara Freedman detects similar genres in the opening scene of the film. See Freedman, Barbara (2007): "Critical junctures in Shakespeare screen history: the case of *Richard III*." In *Shakespeare on Film*. Ed. Russel Jackson. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 15–34. Jared Johnson also deals with the way in which Loncraine consciously admits the relationship of his adaptation with mainstream cinema, as opposed to Olivier's *Richard III*, which claims the superiority of both the cinematic medium as well as of Shakespearean drama. Cf. Johnson Jared (2004). "The Propaganda Imperative: Challenging Mass Media Representations in McKellen's *Richard III*." *College Literature*, 4, Fall. 44–59.

5 Although the motto has by now become a recurring element in interpretations of Shakespeare, we cannot be sure whether it really existed or not. Stern, Tiffany (1997): "Was *Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem* ever the motto of the Globe Theatre?" *Theatre Notebook*, 3. 122–127.

6 On a comprehensive, and not necessarily negative understanding of propaganda, see the Introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies* by the editors Auerbach, Jonathan—Castronovo, Russ (2014): Oxford University Press, 2013.

rhetoric, poetry, and the imagination...”⁷ The play revolves around the central theme of creating illusory worlds through words. The illusion of play in this drama is created not merely in the conventional way, namely making comic worlds emerge on stage, but quite importantly also as an occasion to gauge the playfully constructed worlds of poetic fiction against reality. This is served by the three playlets that are traditionally regarded as plays-within-the-play. Here I see a pattern in the drama in the way it deals with plays within, elements that are explicitly dramatic, included in an imaginary or a play-world. None of the playlets are completed, they all miscarry. If we read these devices as the allegories of poetic vision, of imaginary theatrical worlds, we have to see that the reason for their abrupt endings are also versions of poetic fiction. In the wooing scene of the Muskovites the lords take on the masks assuming that the ladies will be the enchanted spectators of their play, but their plan miscarries once the ladies turn to be actors too. In the other playlet, the overhearing scene where the lords unintentionally disclose in front of each other that they have forsworn, reality behind the play will be revealed by members of the on-stage audience again, this time in a hierarchical cascade, but the last veil will be revealed by two figures who are stock dramatic characters of comedies,⁸ not the “real life” counterparts of the ridiculed imaginary world of the lords to create the isolated Academe. The third, and most proper play-within-the-play scene in the drama, the pageant of the Nine Worthies, is also stripped of the intended effect through being ridiculed. This time the disruptive audience is constituted of the lords. The pageant will miscarry neither for the lack of its actors’ self-knowledge and their confusion of role and identity, nor due to the unsupportive members of the audience, but because of the news brought by Marcade the messenger, who in one moment disrupts, together with the illusion of the pageant, its whole context, which is rooted in multiple play and merry mockery. In the first two instances the lack of reality, the futility of a play was paradoxically revealed by the introduction of new elements of play, through “mock for mock”: the lords being revealed first by the comic multiple overhearings and the miscarried letter, their oaths ridiculed by comic characters, and their mask stripped of its power by the ladies disguising themselves as a reply to the mask. The success of the Pageant of the Nine Worthies is obviously endangered by the lords as a hostile audience to the show, ridiculing the unsophisticated and outmoded theatrical style of the pageant – although the lords may see now their own folly of play reflected by the Worthies. Still, this is not how this last inset show ends. What is offered at this point in the drama as an opposite to play is the reality of death, which destroys illusion in a more drastic way than the previous examples. The miraculous fictive world of the comedy and play is gone for good. Berowne’s melancholy remark refers explicitly to the deviance from the genre, his being *out* of a fictional comedy, and he shows his awareness of their dramatic status, as characters, who nevertheless find themselves in an abortive version of their genre:

Our wooing doth not end like an old play.
 Jack hath not Jill. These ladies’ courtesies
 Might well have made our sport a comedy.⁹

⁷ Carroll, William C. (1976): *The Great Feast of Language in Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 8.

⁸ They are actually referred to as stock characters of the Commedia Dell Arte in the Quarto edition of the play . See Carroll 1976; 28.

⁹ For the quotations of the play I use the Arden Shakespeare edition: *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Ed. H.R. Woudhuysen, Methuen 1998.

(5.2.47-9)

Whether the happy ending will be realized or not after the year of penitence, we cannot know. It surely is not realized within this play. The audience may try to decide what to make of this play, and in general, what to think of the reality or the relevance of comic play after having seen that the latter always loses to the former. Still, we are given one key to interpretation. Berowne, who has proved to be a talented comedian, as his year-long penance, gets from Rosaline the task of devising jokes to an audience that is possibly the most unkind.

You shall this twelvemonth term from day to day
Visit the speechless sick, and still converse
With groaning wretches; and your task shall be
With all the fierce endeavor of your wit
To enforce the pained impotent to smile.
(5.2.838-842)

Berowne, known for his wit, for his readiness to play and make merry, as well as his quickness to devise jokes and answer a mocking partner, will be tried. The potency of his comic power will be measured against an audience possibly more hostile than any ungracious group of audience presented in the play so far. Rosaline explains the aim of this task herself:

Why, that's the way to choke a gibing spirit,
Whose influence is begot of that loose grace
Which shallow laughing hearers give to fools.
A jest's prosperity lies in the ear
Of him that hears it, never in the tongue
Of him that makes it. Then, if sickly ears,
Deafed with the clamours of their own dear groans,
Will hear your idle scorns, continue then,
And I will have you and that fault withal;
But, if they will not, throw away that spirit,
And I shall find you empty of that fault,
Right joyful of your reformation.
(5.2.845-857)

If there is chance at all for the success of “moving wild laughter in the throat of death,” as Berowne himself puts it, there are few candidates with more potential of success than him, although he does not seem to believe in a fortunate outcome of the trial (“Mirth cannot move a soul in agony”, 5.2.930). Proving the magical transformative power of comedy is at stake, weighing its potential not against reality, but rather its potential of *being accepted as* or even *becoming* reality, a self-realizing *Theatrum Mundi*, through comic and magical transformation. After having seen plays-within-the-play inevitably fail, we cannot know if Berowne does or does not stand real chances of using his wit and poetic imagination for moving souls in agony, but we see what his *task* is: it is precisely the same as the task of comedy if it wants to be more than mere illusion. If it turns out differently, we should just leave comedy as it is. Shakespeare's play does not end with celebrating the creative power of play, but it does offer its creative potential, as well as the fact that the real decision lies with the audience: comic play cannot be successful without the audience's acceptance and faith in it.

The play, thus, does not solve the question of actuality, but it does propose a question regarding its relevance. It does not try to persuade its contemporary audience that the play is their

real contemporary, it rather makes them uncertain about it. Brannagh's adaptation of the play, on the other hand, acknowledges its own anachronistic nature, but wishes to make its message contemporary by following the still popular conventions of the musicals of the 1930s and their cinematic versions from a few decades later, and it also follows the metadramatic multiplication of the layers of plays within, by adding an extra frame. This frame is a newsreel, summarizing and explaining the events, evoking the atmosphere, again, of the 1930s with the black-and-white images, a characteristic tone and style, and the typical, abrupt cuts. Interestingly, as we learn from Jackson, this frame was added to the movie at a late stage of production – "after a lukewarm reception at a preview had made it clear that the audience did not know quite how seriously they should take the film's characters or their situation".¹⁰ The framing device, thus, is supposed to function as the counterpoint of the imaginary world of the Lords which is lacking reality. The increases the sense of the newsreel's "realness" at the end through documentary cuts of real world war footage, inserting these into the news informing the audience about the life outside the one of the fictive one in the court, during the year of penance – thus after the plot of the original play ended. We see the lords forced to participate in this reality as part of their punishment, leaving their previous, unreal lives behind. It is ironic, however, that the audience of Brannagh's movie complained (after having seen the version without this device at previews) that they did not know "how seriously they should take the film's characters or their situation," since the main question of the Shakespearean drama itself, as I argued, is precisely the one of the relevance of comic fiction, its potential to influence or become reality. We cannot know if the added frame helped the audience resolve their doubts in any way (we do know, however, that it was not a great success either for the wide masses, or for the narrow group of critics). We do see, however, that in Brannagh's adaptation, similarly to Loncraine's film, it is not so much the references to the world war that make these films contemporary to the audience. It is much more the thematization of the media that convey the image, or the idea of reality (and at the same time the self-reference of the movies) that may make the plots and the message of the plays actual. The film's appeal to its own audience, us, makes us conscious of our own involvement in the *Theatrum Mundi*. In Brannagh's example, however, this appeal backfires, the added frame reaches the opposite result: instead of giving its audience the opportunity to decide the extent to which they wish to legitimize the fiction presented by the movie, Brannagh's adaptation makes this step instead of us, when it changes from the mock-documentary black-and-white pictures showing its characters at the end of the war. The atmosphere of the musical returns, and we see that the documentary images of the world war are contained by a Hollywood dream fiction, and Shakespeare's puzzling lack of real comic ending is overwritten by a happy ending, a necessary element of the containing genre. While Loncraine's use of the pervading theatricality in Shakespearean drama allows him to use the idea of the *Theatrum Mundi* as constructive media criticism, Brannagh's film, despite its conscious references to the multiplicity of representative planes, ultimately conceals the same pervading theatricality of our social way of being.

As coda to my paper I would like to refer to an anecdote that teaches us that the function and beauty of dramatic play lies actually in the impossibility of governing its actualization, the way it will encroach upon the audience's reality (in case the audience allows this). Veronika Schandl tells the story of a 1947 production of *Richard III* by the National Theatre in Budapest, which was renewed in 1955, just a few years after its original premiere.¹¹

¹⁰ Jackson, Russell (2007): From play-script to screenplay In *Shakespeare on Film*. Ed: Russel Jackson. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 47—71, 30.

¹¹ Schandl, Veronika (2009): *Socialist Shakespeare Productions in Kádár-Regime Hungary*. Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, 16-19.

Nobody could expect that in the few years that had passed, the drastic changes in politics would make the audience identify the tyrant and the dictatorial, manipulative regime of Gloucester with the people and setting of their own reality, identifying the propaganda machine presented on stage with the one they knew from their daily life. After realizing the enormous and actually dangerous blunder, official critics of the regime were busy to stress how remote in time Shakespeare's play was: written several hundred years before, depicting an even older world, having nothing to do with post-World War Hungary. These critics were right in almost everything, except the fact that actualization, making Shakespeare's dramas our contemporaries, did not depend on their opinion or wish, but rather on the audience, who may decide to join the play and participate in the *Theatrum Mundi* it offers, as they sometimes actually do. Fictive worlds created by the Shakespeare industry are surely noteworthy regarding the fact that what we can learn from them is not only that we learn something about our own reality, but also the ways it is created, shaped and maintained. And if the audience feels involved, they can actually take over the lead, and make use of these potentials of creation, as the Hungarian audience of the 1955 production indeed did, just a year later.

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