Shakespearean cultural history, a kind of interpretative process of reconceptualization or reinvention, has always been shaped by the cultural interests, values and developments of particular historical moments. At the end of the Millennium it was obviously the cinema, a medium of mass entertainment, which became one of the dominant factors in redefining Shakespeare’s late twentieth-century cultural image. The 1990s witnessed the greatest boom in the number of Anglo-American films based on Shakespeare’s plays in the hundred-year history of the medium, and this revitalization of the Shakespeare-film had several significant consequences. First, Shakespeare gained a new prominence in the cultural imagination of the mass audience; second, Shakespearean filmmaking became a crucial element of modern cinema culture, and established itself as big business. Hollywood mainstream film laid claim to the Bard, the emblematic figure of high culture, and produced 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. This paper intends to highlight what kind of filmic language these popular appropriations of Shakespeare employ to actualize his works, and how they relate to bardic authority: whether they quote Shakespeare with the aim of parody, homage or simple imitation.

Spectacle of Multiplicity – Shakespeare in Hollywood

The 1990s proved to be an exciting period in the history of Shakespeare on the screen. It was similar to, but surpassed, the great international phase lasting from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960-s, with directors as different as Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, Grigori Kozintsev, and Franco Zeffirelli. In an interview in 1999, on the eve of the production shoot for Love’s Labour’s Lost Kenneth Branagh spoke enthusiastically about the status of Shakespeare films: “I’ve been very encouraged by the liveliness with which the academic Shakespeare community has responded to this last seven/eight years of Shakespearean filmmaking. It’s a lively moment.


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It’s an exciting moment. It’s reinvented things a little, and, even if people have been against some of this work, they have been passionate, and there’s been interesting new writing, I think.’’

Undoubtedly, new critical approaches to Shakespeare on screen have been celebrating the “spectacle of multiplicity”, rather than lamenting over textual fidelity and artistic integrity. I think, nevertheless, that the concept of “multiplicity” is worth to be dwelled upon. It is true that we are offered a great variety of screen versions of Shakespeare. The 1990s produced several remarkable Shakespeare films ranging from Kenneth Branagh’s films, to Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo+Juliet* (1996), to Julie Taymor’s *Titus* (2000), to Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000). This is also the decade of numerous spin-offs, such as Gil Junger’s *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) or Tim Blake Nelson’s *O* (2001). To them can be added a group of films inspired by Shakespeare’s position in the cultural imagination. We should mention Al Pacino’s *Looking for Richard* (1996), or Branagh’s *In the Bleak Midwinter* (1995). Although all of these films offer different exciting reassessments of Shakespeare’s plays, and cover many different styles and approaches, a sensibility unites them as a group. They are intended to popularize Shakespeare for a hip film audience by using the latest technology of Hollywood filmmaking.

What distinguishes most of the Shakespeare films of the 90s from those of the 1940s and 1950s is their willingness to take the Hollywood film as a model. They all aspire to production values associated with mainstream Hollywood films. They have visual spectacle, and their all-star-cast is an attempt to entice a mass audience, especially a young one. Remarkably, most of them are generated by major studios. As a result of this interest, art-house Shakespeare is a rarity now, whereas for Welles, Grigori Kozintsev or Akira Kurosawa it was the effective norm. Of course not all of the Shakespeare films of the 90s participate in this process as fully as others: Hollywood’s influence is less pronounced eg. in Christine Edzard’s *As You Like It* (1992), which reveals greater affinities with the avant-garde genre than the commercial mainstream.

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3 As Samuel Crowl pointed out in his excellent book, for Welles and Olivier it was the European cinema dominated by Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni, Godard, and Truffaut which served as a model rather than the commercial Hollywood film of the time. Samuel Crow, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex: The Kenneth Branagh Era*, (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 7.
Intertextuality and incongruity

As I have already mentioned, it is the drive to recast Shakespeare as popular entertainment that unites the Shakespeare films of the 90s. A crucial element of this enterprise has been the assimilation of Shakespeare to popular film genres. The Shakespeare films of the 90s delight in quoting from Hollywood genres and specific films as well. Kenneth Branagh for instance, who is credited by Shakespeare scholarship with launching this cinematic deluge of the 90s with the success of his *Henry V* thinks it very important “to be familiar with the ways in which popular cinema tells its stories.” He uses the latest technology of popular filmmaking, and material drawn from popular genres of Hollywood filmmaking ranging from spaghetti western to popular musicals in the 1930s are effectively interwoven to make his films agree with late twentieth-century cinema tastes.

Branagh’s approach is basically conservative and traditional. His adaptations are exciting, comprehensive renderings of the text but leave Shakespeare as cultural icon untouched preserving the integrity of the original work. His adaptations lack that kind of self-conscious, self-reflective way of intertextual presentation and detached playfulness which characterize some of the cinematic interpretations of Shakespeare made towards the end of the 1990s. Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo+Juliet*, Richard Loncraine’s *Richard III* and Julie Taymor’s *Titus*, for example, revel in seemingly random self- and cross references and allusions making us perfectly aware all the time that what we see is a spectacle staged for our pleasure. These stunning post-modern reconceptualizations use the Shakespearean drama as a subtext in the intertextuality of their peculiar vision, while distancing the audience from the Shakespearean source by employing the playfully subversive artistic devices of *parody, pastiche, camp* and *grotesque*.

Parody is not a specific style but rather a transformational process. “Don Harris defines it in terms of its oscillation between similarity to and difference from the distinctive formal characteristics of a target film or genre. Parody, he argues, replicates either the visual lexicon, 

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4 In fact both *pastiche* and *camp* can be defined in terms of their relationship to parody: *Pastiche* like parody, offers the juxtaposition of incompatible formal components, but without the element of mockery or implied decorum. *Camp* shares with parody the element of exaggeration and humour, but it differs from it in employing stylistic excess as a means for “redeeming cultural objects or performances that are outmoded, marginalized, or despised by the mainstream. (...) camp involves an ironized appreciation for a cultural form. It is different from a naive attachment to or simple parodic mockery of some out-of-fashion or subartistic style; rather camp requires that one acknowledge a form or style is unfashionable by conventional standards, but that one nevertheless values precisely those excesses or stylistic failings that make it culturally denigrated.” Douglas Lanier, “Will of the People: Recent Shakespeare Film Parody and the Politics of Popularization”, in *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, ed. Diana E. Henderson, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), p. 179.

3 I usually use the concept of *parody* in my paper as an umbrella term on the basis of its capability to embrace those essential qualities of pastiche and camp 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.
syntax or style of its target while manipulating the other components, creating a comic *incongruity* that is its signature feature.” (my italics). Popularization of Shakespeare, that is, Shakespop is a cultural phenomenon which is innately incongruous. It appropriates Shakespeare by mixing qualities that mark Shakespeare as a traditional icon of cultural authority with pop images, styles, and genres. That is why parody found pop cinematizing of Shakespeare fertile material.

Shakespeare films from the mid-1990s onward self-consciously engage in problematizing Shakespeare’s relation to contemporaneity and use parody, pastiche, camp, and grotesque as a means to create some kind of meaning of this incongruity. To find out what kind of meaning these transformational processes create in these films, we should answer a question first: What do they aim at in these films? Do they aim at Shakespeare, popular culture, or Shakespop, that is, Shakespeare’s affiliation with popular culture? I think we can give an answer, if we look at the films which are typical examples of Shakespop hybridity.

**Bardolatry and Parody in Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo+Juliet***

Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo+Juliet* (1996) is a pivotal film in the history of Shakespop on screen. It is in fact a compendium of references to twentieth-century popular culture ranging from the images of contemporary urban youth culture to the pop music score and to the flashy eclectic style, which remind the viewer of contemporary video clips. The film successfully reconstructs Shakespeare’s play by using popular film genres, such as spaghetti western, Hong Kong action movie, soap opera and teen film. A good example of the post-modern tendency toward parody is the brawl scene, which is transpositioned as a gun battle at a gas station in the style of Sergio Leone and John Woo. This scene is only one example of the over-the-top allusions Luhrmann employs to introduce an ironic distance from the act of ‘modernizing’ Shakespeare, even as the film engages, or, we can say, revels in it.

Luhrmann’s ambivalent attitude towards the Shakespearean source is revealed throughout the film. His approach to the play is basically reverential: his retaining much of the text, his removing the young lovers from the squalid, frenetic world of Verona Beach, and sheltering them into a watery, romantic isolation, and, last but not least, his emphasising the bardic authority in the title of the film, all evince Luhrmann’s depending on Shakespeare’s cultural authority. On the other hand he undermines it whenever he can, using witty intertextual allusions. He replaces the linguistic complexity of the play with cinematic spectacle of equivalent virtuosity.

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A good instance of his combining bardolatry and parody is the presentation of the prologue. It is read twice: first, by a newsreader on a low-tech television from the 1970's, then by Pete Postlethwaite (Friar Laurence), a well-known Shakespearean actor. First, it is recited with sincere banality in an upbeat, bland style, then it is repeated by a deep, grave, 'Shakespearean-sounding' voice. Luhrmann delights in forcing Shakespeare’s high culture world into late twentieth century popular culture: Romeo and his friends learn about the Capulet ball by watching a TV show while hanging out at the 'Globe Theatre' pool hall. When Lady Capulet tries to persuade Juliet to marry the valiant Paris, her metaphorical praise of the young man as “a book of love” which ”only lacks a cover” (I.iii.80-1) rendered by a witty visual metaphor: a magazine cover appears on the screen showing a smiling, smug Dave Paris as “Bachelor of the Year”. These scenes are good examples of Luhrmann’s subversive approach to his Shakespearean source, and the film revels in such witty scenes. However, the object of Luhrmann’s bitter criticism is not Shakespeare at all, but the shallow, media-besotted culture that surrounds him.

Luhrmann provides a tangible presentation of this artificial, gaudy world of Verona Beach by juxtaposing contemporary kitsch with the high-culture world of Christianity, Renaissance art, and the medieval past of chivalry and courtly love. We can see a Christ figure on Tybalt’s shirt in the brawl scene, and there is a huge cross laid down on the back seat in the Montague parents’ car. The Capulet mansion is a Florentine palazzo, decked out for the masked ball with Christmas lights and metal detectors at the gate. In the tomb scene Romeo enters the church where Juliet’s body is laid, and walks among hundreds of candles and blue neon crosses. The double suicide is followed by Wagner’s “Liebestod” from Tristan and Isolde, and the young lovers are associated once again with a mythic past, which means that they have no place in this world.7

The film engages with some of the most pressing concerns of the millennium: violence, drug consumption, familial crisis, media saturation. Verona Beach is an urban dystopia of guns, drugs and civic breakdown. The Montagues and Capulets are competing mobs, driving flashy cars, shooting with oversized automatic weapons marked with the family crests. Sudden attacks of violence often intrude the romantic, idyllic scenes: when Juliet calls on the night to bring her Romeo (III.ii.1–31), her enraptured face is suddenly replaced by Romeo’s bloody and contorted face as he races his car after Tybalt. In the morning scene (III.v.1–36) the camera shows the young lovers’ discreetly nude bodies then suddenly intercuts Tybalt’s bullet-riddled body, and Romeo wakes up in terror. Scenes concerning drug consumption have high degree of wit and

7 All textual references are to the Arden edition of Romeo and Juliet, ed. Brian Gibbons (London and New York: Methuen, 1980).
8 At the Capulets’ masked ball Romeo is dressed as a knight, and Juliet as a Boticelli angel; costumes referring back to a cultural past that can give shelter to their love.
invention: Queen Mab becomes a hallucinogenic pill on Mercutio’s forefinger; the apothecary scene is effectively recreated as a drug deal.

The film ends with a bleak, reductive scene. After emerging from their limousines, the Capulet and Montague parents are standing stunned in front of the church, but make no move towards each other. They are watching as their children’s shrouded corpses on hospital gurneys are being loaded into an ambulance car. These last moments are newscast on TV, and the bland newsreader recites the closing words of the epilogue. Romeo and Juliet’s death becomes only another piece of news for a sensation-crazed populace, it is reduced, commodified, turned into televised spectacle.

Luhrmann’s film is all about the disruption of Shakespeare’s play, offering instead a bricolage, a made-up world comprised of images of late twentieth-century popular culture. His approach to adaptation is a typical example of pastiche, which is a distinctive feature of postmodern culture.

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody.9

Camp in Loncraine’s Richard III

As Jack Babuscio notes, the four features “basic to camp are irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour.”10 Another important element we should add to this list is exaggeration, which is a signature feature of parody as well. All these dominant qualities of camp are clearly at work in Richard Loncraine’s film, Richard III, (1995). It is predicated on “the profound truth of camp: if it’s worth doing, it’s worth overdoing”11 The resulting film has become a form of cinematic excess.

Loncraine offers an array of popular movie genres, which are gleefully and sometimes wickedly invoked. Most of the allusions are to the Hollywood musical of the 1930s, which relies on art deco styles and fashions, and the upbeat big band tunes creating an aura of divine decadence. Slender women vogue in elegantly slinky gowns, men wear Gatsby-era tuxedos and cruise in sleek Bentleys. The members of the royal family living in a dream world are blinded to the Realpolitik behind the scenes. Against the colourful royal lives Loncraine sets the bleak aura of

11 Stephen M. Buhler, “Camp Richard III and the Burdens of (Stage/Film) History,” in Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siècle, p.40.
modern industrialism and the ominous images of fascism. Richard’s figure as a tyrant lends itself easily to the idea of updating him as Hitler. The film, however, presents Richard not just as a fascist tyrant but also as a gleeful, grotesque parodist of rituals of sincerity, civility, love, and piety. He is a defiler of images of bourgeois familial concord.

The first scene shows the headquarters of the Lancastrians at Tewkesbury. King Henry VI and Prince Edward represent the typical English upper class. The Prince of Wales is having his roast dinner and wine as if he was in a peaceful family circle in his country house. In the next scene we can see the king piously praying when suddenly Richard’s tank turret bursts through the wall, breaks into the headquarters, and exterminates everybody.

At the victory celebration of the Yorks, Richard violates the image of a loyal dynasty in a bad taste. As the Yorks are dancing to the gleeful tunes of a big band, Richard starts his victory toast (he performs the first eleven lines of his ‘Now is the winter of our discontent’ soliloquy), only to abruptly shift the scene to the Water Closet where in private he pisses all over the sentiment he has just uttered, and the developing dynastic myth. While in the Great Hall he persuasively performs the emotions of brotherly love, family pride, and happiness over peace, after years of civil unrest, in the men’s urinal he reveals his real feelings, while addressing the viewer directly. We are drawn into seeing Richard as he sees himself. While he is urinating, he is commenting on an important reason for being not only disenchanted with dynastic triumph but also estranged from it. The film presents him as alienated from his family because of his deformity and because of his incapacity to continue the York line.

Richard is “half made-up”, with a “good” side (the right) and a “bad” (the left, or sinister).\textsuperscript{12} Ian McKellen (Richard) did not want to reduce the character to an emblem of wickedness, he wanted to explore Richard’s humanity as well. Richard is sinned against as well as sinning. The hostile environment, which is regarded as a precondition for camp by Jack Babuscio, is palpable in the Yorkists’ own view of Richard. McKellen thought that Richard’s relationship to his mother, the Duchess of York should be given an especially great emphasis in this respect. In his view her verbal and emotional abuses Richard has suffered from his infancy have played a considerable role in developing Richard’s ‘bad side’. To establish this McKellen transformed the Duchess’ character, and several of Queen Margaret’s bitterest lines were assigned to the Duchess herself. As a result, Richard’s mother in the film is a pitiless character, who cannot forgive her son his disability and incapacity to partake in the family’s continuation. In response to this behaviour, Richard seeks vengeance against her in his villainy and in making his villainy perversely comic.

The final scene, which is an over-the-top cinematic parody, matches the sardonic campiness of the beginning. Richmond is pursuing Richard alone, who is trying to elude Richmond. When cornered on the girders of the ruined factory, Richard reaches out with his “good” hand and invites his enemy to join him: “Let’s to it pell-mell, / If not to heaven, then hand-in-hand to Hell!” (V.iii.313–14). Then he falls backward, into the flames, grinning at the camera. Richmond is firing his revolver superfluously after him to finish out his heroic role, then turns to look directly at us, just like Richard a moment before, with a spreading smile. The final shot is of Richard laughing and waving as he is falling into the flames below, accompanied by Al Jolson’s version of *Sittin’ on Top of the World*. Richard’s fall refers to the descent of the damned into Hell, and thus evokes the providential scheme of the play’s ending, while the victory of the Tudor dynasty is presented as a divinely ordained event. The final sequence of the film changes this conception into camp. Even though Richmond does not accompany Richard in the fall, his smile links him to Richard, and what up to this moment has been presented to us as a clear moral opposition turns out to be an unsettling equivalence. This ending offers the viewer not just a parody of the culminating moral scheme of Shakespeare’s tragedy, but a parody of pop allusions (Al Jolson’s jaunty music, scenes from the action-adventure movie) as well, by playing them for campy excess, and thus pushing them into the realm of self-parody.

**Violence as Entertainment in Julie Taymor’s Titus**

Although Julie Taymor’s *Titus* (2000) takes European art film and not Hollywood mainstream as a model, with Fellini as its most important point of reference, it has a lot in common with popular Shakespeare films made in the nineties. The film is an intentional mix of styles from various periods and traditions ranging from the classical Roman times to fascist art and architecture, to the ‘goth’ youth sub-culture of the late 1980s, and it engages with one of the most pressing concerns of the end of the Millennium: Taymor was interested in the play especially because it could be appropriated to articulate Western culture’s fascination with violence as entertainment and because of its potential to illuminate the horrors of the twentieth century. As Taymor herself wrote: “the play speaks directly to our times, when audiences feed daily on tabloid sex scandals, teenage gang rape, and private details of a celebrity murder trial... Our entertainment industry thrives on the graphic details of murders, rapes and villainy.”

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The film is full of allusions to popular culture offered as examples of violence treated as play. The opening sequence is located in a bourgeois twentieth-century kitchen, where a little boy plays an increasingly frenetic mock war with junk food and toys as we can hear a montage of sounds of violence from cartoons, film, and television. In the following scene, the boy is transported from his real-life children’s game into a more real yet imaginary ancient Coliseum, where we can see Titus’ marching legion presented as if giant toy soldiers had frighteningly come to life.

Titus’s main antagonists are the queen of the Goths and her sons. Taymor appropriates the term ‘Goth’ to update her tribal characters to today’s pop culture. This category refers not only to a tribe of people from Central Europe, in what is now Germany, who attacked the Roman Empire several times between the 3rd and 5th centuries AD, but it refers to a youth sub-culture at the end of the Millennium too. A ‘Goth’ is a person who follows a fashion of the late 1980s and the early 1990s, consisting of pale skin and black or purple clothes. The Gothic savagery has been used as a cultural symbol throughout the history of Western Europe, most recently as part of a music style after the era of ‘new wave/punk’ rock. Taymor takes advantage of the parallel between the position of the Goths in the period of the Late Roman Empire and the current Goth cultural movement. She dresses Chiron and Demetrius and stages their antics in a manner appropriate to today’s rock music culture. Their predilection for punk rock and video games functions as a kind of anaesthetic to the consequences of their horrific acts. They do not behave as responsible, moral-conscious, mature men, but as young boys rejoicing in torturing and killing animals. They are “obsessed with their ingenuity in raping and mutilating Lavinia, make cruel jokes at their victim, and become caught up more and more in the fun of it...”15 The scene of Lavinia’s rape and mutilation involving the elements of wittiness and cruelty, laughter and suffering taken to extremes is only one example of the grotesque mode which prevails in the film.

The banquet scene, which is built on the irresolvable juxtaposition of the laughable and the horrifying, or even the disgusting, is a parody of the conventional bloody spectacles of the contemporary horror genre. The scene draws on the analogues between Titus and Hannibal Lecter, the psychopathic cannibal in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Anthony Hopkins’ most famous role. Titus, just like Hannibal, is a murderer and server of human flesh, who is speaking about the great feast with the same grotesque slavering as Hannibal does “when he once ate the victim’s liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti... Hopkins’ Titus oscillates between two oblique evocations of Lecter, one the quiet, chillingly deliberate murderer, the other an almost

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goofy parody that turns the revenger into a prancing, zany cannibalistic chef.”16 This strategy allows Taymor to prevent us from identifying with the revenger, having satisfaction with the revenges, responses typically elicited by contemporary horror films. Although she acknowledges pop horror analogues she simultaneously parodies them. Her ambivalent attitude toward cinematic horror reveals her critique of contemporary pop culture she sees as perpetuating fantasies of violence.

Conclusion

Although parody is not the prevailing mode in recent Shakespearean filmmaking, there are several remarkable ‘serious’ screen versions using parody as a means to highlight certain moral concerns. After examining three pivotal popular appropriations of Shakespeare with a strong parodic strain, we can conclude that Shakespearean film parody is profoundly ambivalent in its transgression: on the one hand it delights in deconstructing, undermining what it mimics, and in willingly violating Shakespeare’s ‘highness’, on the other hand it lampoons the terms by which Shakespeare has so often been modernized and popularized, particularly to a hip teen audience. It reveals fundamentally contradictory goals in recent Shakespearean film: at once to popularize Shakespeare and to preserve his cultural image as a valuable aesthetic touchstone or ethical resource. They problematize cinematic Shakespop hybridity even as they engage in it, and thus become an important cultural phenomenon we should deal with, in spite of the uneasiness we might feel towards the appropriation of Shakespeare by popular culture. Firstly, because we have to acknowledge that pop images, motifs, styles and genres make up the fundamental cultural literacy of modern audiences, secondly, because Shakespop contributes to sustaining Shakespeare’s cultural life and power. Popular appropriations of Shakespeare are important means by which Shakespeare’s cultural significance is constantly debated, revised, renewed, and extended.