

Shakespeare and World Cinema
Seminar Leader: Mark Thornton Burnett

ABSTRACTS

Melissa Croteau

Negotiating the Colonial in Bhardwaj's Maqbool

As other adaptations of Shakespeare's bloody tragedy Macbeth have done, Indian director Vishal Bhardwaj sets his 2003 film Maqbool in the context of a criminal mob syndicate. Interestingly, the Mumbai 'mob' that is the focus of the film is Muslim in the predominantly Hindu nation. This is the backdrop for my argument, which will center on negotiating the colonial in Maqbool. I will explore the ways in which both Islamic and Western influences are presented as 'other' as well as 'native' in the context and narrative of the film. For instance, Maqbool is one of the few characters who consistently wears Western clothing throughout the film; he is thus allied with the imperialist British as the plot proves he is indeed an usurper of 'native' power. (Cleanth Brooks' discussion of Macbeth's 'ill-fitting robes' is clearly applicable here). Hybrid identities and the use of music are other elements of the film I will explore.

Elizabeth Pentland

From Bianca to Billo: The Courtesan Figure in Vishal Bharadwaj's Omkara

This paper traces the evolution of the courtesan figure from Shakespeare's source text, the tale of the Moor of Venice in Cinthio's Hecatommithi, and his play Othello, to a recent film adaptation, Omkara (2006), by Indian director Vishal Bhardwaj. The figure of the courtesan appears only as a minor detail in Cinthio's text (she is mentioned only once, almost in passing), but in adapting the story for the English stage, Shakespeare significantly augments her role, depriving the Captain (Cassio) of the wife who plays such a pivotal role in the original tale and associating him, instead, with the prostitute Bianca. The courtesan figure (Billo) is given even greater prominence in Omkara, where she dances to the film's 'hottest' songs and where her bold sexuality stands in measured contrast to Dolly's (Desdemona's) innocence. The paper suggests that as a figure for what is 'common' or shared, the courtesan not only serves as a dramatic foil for representations of chaste or virtuous womanhood, but has also worked, in the case of Othello, to facilitate the process of transcultural adaptation itself.

Lalita Pandit Hogan

The Sacred and the Profane in Omkara: Vishal Bhardwaj's Hindi Film Adaptation of Othello

In the proposed essay, I will focus on how Vishal Bhardwaj, in his 2006 adaptation of Othello, translates emotion by changing emotion triggers at critical places in the narrative. The film is made in Bhojpuri Hindi, an archaic form of Hindi, spoken in the

region that emerges as an authenticated part of the story world in Omkara. Historically, the film may refer to India in the mid 70s to 80s, before the Cold War ended. In the proposed essay, I will focus on the mythic significance of naming, or re-naming of the main characters (who are named after gods of the Hindu Trinity, but are all members of a gang involved in criminalizing the electoral politics of Uttar Pradesh/Bihar, and countering criminalization of the electoral process by the other party). I will also discuss some of the song sequences Bhardwaj uses. My contention is that the song sequences invoke not the mythic past, but the middle period of Indian history, the time when Sufi and Bhakti poetry flourished in many vernacular languages. Like Shakespeare, Vishal Bhardwaj uses and elevates a vernacular, synthesizes many co-existing traditions, speech patterns, rituals and cultural practices – primarily to entertain, but also to enlighten through visual style (montage, angles of framing, and graphic match). Mythic reference is juxtaposed with history, and history is ultimately seen as māyā (an illusion). Only poetic-cinematic thought and metaphor remain: to authenticate emotion.

Maurizio Calbi

‘Street...Sweet Home...This Is My Home, Too’: Migration, Spectrality and Hospitality in Roberta Torre’s Sud Side Stori (2000).

The paper will focus on one of the most distinctive experimental Italian films of recent years, Roberta Torre’s flamboyant Sud Side Stori (2000), a partial re-vision of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet which stands out in comparison to mainstream Italian production of ‘teensploi’ Shakespeare-related films, the most recent example of which being Volfrango De Biasi’s romantic comedy Iago (2009). Torre’s Sud Side Stori replaces ‘fair Verona’ with an oxymoronic version of the Sicilian city of Palermo, an ‘anti-post-modern’ cityscape which is at once gritty and oneiric, replete with realistic details and utterly grotesque. In the film, a sui generis camp musical with no professional actors which frequently shifts into a documentary mode, the ‘pair of star-cross’d lovers’ are Toni Giulietto (Roberto Rondelli), a local rock singer who is a pale imitation of the Italian King of Rock’n’roll Little Tony (himself a pale imitation of Elvis Presley), and Romea Wacoubu (Forstina Erhabor), a beautiful Nigerian prostitute. This interracial passion is opposed by both Toni’s matriarchal ‘household’ (i.e. his three ugly and overweight aunties who recall the witches of Macbeth) and the whole Nigerian immigrant community, and in particular Romea’s closest friends Mercutio and Baldassarra. Not even the Friar Lawrence-like figure, a Catholic priest / padrino whose confessional is a giant bottle, and speaks like a Dalek, takes their side.

The paper intends to show that in the film ‘Shakespearecentric’ and ‘Shakespeareeccentric’ emphases intersect with and displace one another. In terms of the former, it is worth noticing that the film intervenes in—and interrupts—the gender politics of recent filmic versions of Romeo and Juliet, especially Luhrmann’s, by underlining the main female character’s active role: it is Romea who falls in love at first sight with Giulietto who stands on his balcony; it is again Romea who rushes back from Africa to Palermo on a train as soon as she reads about the (fake) death of Giulietto. More generally, the paper argues that Torre’s film unashamedly exhibits its status as postmodern pastiche, in that it parodically and critically engages with a wide

variety of cultural material, ranging from Italian popular music to fragments of Shakespeare's text; from the cinematic style of West Side Story (which it echoes in its title) and Baz Luhrmann's Romeo + Juliet to the news commentary on the exploits of the local mafia; from popular devotion to religious icons (especially Saint Rosalia whose privileged status as patron saint of Palermo is undermined by the Rock Mayor's suggestion that she shares her power with the Moorish or Black Saint Benedict to promote 'ethnic integration') to superstitious beliefs in black and white magic. As it incorporates these cultural items and forces them to interact with one another, the film shows the extent to which apparently idiosyncratic music styles, visual and literary cultures and even culinary practices are inexorably subjected to a process of 'translation' which blurs the boundaries between the 'local' and the 'global' and effects some kind of uncanny rapprochement between a number of mutually opposing terms. In turn, this process of 'translation' parallels the migration of bodies across the 'black Mediterranean', from the south (i.e. Africa) to the south (i.e. Palermo) and back again, as well as the movement of bodies within the city of Palermo 'from six o'clock at night on'. This movement, which involves the 'thirty thousand feet that keep on dancing' of the Nigerian prostitutes, 'carnivalizes' a space rife with ethnic conflicts and promises—or threatens—to extend to 'the whole world'.

If 'Shakespearecentric' and 'Shakespearecentric' concerns are inextricably intertwined, the paper concludes, it is also because Sud Side Stori experiments with the invention of languages of hospitalities—the non-representational quality of hybrid music and dance; the performative gesture of silence; the broken Shakespearean verse—which attempt to respond to the singular alterity of the other / foreigner as well as to the 'foreignness' of the Shakespearean text. Exposing the disquieting continuity between hostility and the 'liberal' hospitality of the rhetoric of integration (as embodied by the Rock Mayor), the film intermittently but cogently articulates the asynchronous hospitality of love, a kind of hospitality which, as Derrida argues in Of Hospitality, 'can only last an instant'.

Keith Harrison

Kurosawa, Kozintsev, Kaurismaki, and Almereyda: Hamlet and Transnational Dialogism

From a Bakhtinian perspective, the first unfinalizable cinematic utterance after World War II of Shakespeare's most famous text takes the form of Laurence Olivier's Hamlet (1948), and finds its first important reply in Grigori Kozintsev's Hamlet (1964). However, an intermediary voice in this Hamlet dialogism that needs to be reckoned with is Akira Kurosawa's, via The Bad Sleep Well (1960). Aki Kaurismaki, the Finnish director of Hamlet Goes Business (1987), praises Kurosawa, acknowledges Kozintsev, and, significantly, disclaims any indebtedness to Olivier's Hamlet: 'a leotard drama, clumsy and floundering'. When this multiple, other-languaged conversation spirals back to the originating, mostly sealed-off Anglophone world, it is evident that this Japanese-Russian-Finnish dialogism provides an alternative to proprietary and purist concerns with fidelity to an English text, and offers an imaginative loophole inside the prevailing monoglossia of heritage stage loyalties.

Kaurismaki's absurdist voicing of Shakespeare within a corporate setting (with debts to both Karl and Groucho Marx) becomes repetition with a difference in Michael Almereyda's New York Hamlet (2000). In responding to a 'foreign' global conversation while returning to the language of origins, Almereyda's millennial utterance articulates little nostalgia for the Hamlet of court setting and theatrical traditions that Olivier enunciated, but, instead, emerges from a filmic dialogism that is mostly non-Anglophone.

Alfredo Michel Modenessi

Looking for Mr Goodwill in 'Rancho Grande': The Presence of Shakespeare in Mexican Cinema

Presumably as a result of the 'globalization' of Shakespeare studies, the (now-not-so-) recent film Huapango (dir. Iván Lipkies, 2003), avowedly based on Othello, seems to be drawing the attention of scholars world-wide far more quickly and productively than the only other movie unabashedly adapted from a Shakespeare play in Mexican cinema ever could—Cantinflas's Romeo y Julieta (dir. Miguel M. Delgado, 1943). Although in Mexico those two pictures still stand alone in fully deriving from a Shakespeare play, they aren't, of course, the sole cases in Spanish-speaking cinema, where through the years a handful of films have been made with similar premises. All of them share a simple but potentially revealing feature, however: no Spanish-speaking film made from Shakespeare can be deemed a 'straightforward' performance/translation of its source. Nonetheless, films that 'recontextualize', 'cite', or somehow 'ex/ap-proprieate' Shakespeare may not be wanting in Mexico. After briefly re-cycling some points I have elsewhere made on the two aforementioned pictures by way of introduction, my (very preliminary and hence mostly descriptive) paper will aim to identify the 'actual' or 'ghostly' 'presence' of Shakespeare in a small number of films made at diverse stages in the history of Mexican cinema.

Yu Jin Ko

Martial Arts and Masculine Identity in The Banquet

As cinematic clichés go, the image of the Asian martial arts master is about as well-worn as it comes. And yet in the hands of a director like Feng Xiaogang, the image gets revitalized in ways that not only make the image fresh again, but also reflect how he re-imagines Shakespeare's characters. In this paper, I would like in particular to think about the role of the martial arts in the conception of masculinity in Feng's The Banquet. As an adaptation of Hamlet, The Banquet subtly negotiates the strand in theatrical and critical history that effeminizes Hamlet as the sensitive melancholiac--but within a specifically global context in which China is an emerging superpower. As the paper examines how Feng refigures masculine identity in Hamlet, it will also argue that the film is confronting the issue of Asian masculine identity itself as represented in global cinema.

Elinor Parsons
 ‘in Russian habit’: a reassessment of Russian Shakespeare on screen

Three Russian film versions of the tragedies have been firmly accepted by Western scholars as part of the Shakespeare on film canon: Sergei Yutkevich’s Otello (1955), Grigori Kozintsev’s Gamlet (1964) and his Korol Lir (1970). However, significantly less attention has been granted to versions of Twelfth Night, The Taming of the Shrew and Much Ado About Nothing. My paper seeks to direct attention towards Yan Frid’s Dvenadtsataya noch (1955), Sergei Kolosov’s Ukroshenie strotivoy (1961) and Samson Samsonov’s Mnogo shuma iz nichego (1973).

None of the DVD releases has been distributed with subtitles. My argument focuses upon the pictorial register of each film. Visual deception plays a crucial part in all three plays, and I consider the subtle relationship between each film and Shakespeare’s stagecraft. My exploration is supported with ‘stills’. I write with a self-conscious awareness that I am an English-speaking viewer looking at the versions now. Rather than locate the films in their original cultural context, I have chosen to engage with their visual impact.

Laurie Osborne
 World Wide Shakespeare: Hamlet-X and Media Change

For my seminar contribution, I will explore how our interests in global Shakespearean film intersect with the emergence of new media. Access to multinational Shakespearean film poses an ongoing problem for working with and teaching non-Anglocentric films of Shakespeare. One alternative to the frustrating quest for such films in theatres or on DVD is the internet access that now makes some films, at least, available and potentially more broadly influential. To explore new modes of cross-cultural cinematic exchange, I will focus on Hamlet_X: Ein Projekt von Herbert Fitsch. While the Projekt is a multimedia performance archive with strong ties to the Berlin Volksbuehne, which defines itself as ‘a research laboratory of experimental theatre’, the central performances are 111+ individual small films, many of which are available on the website. An array of these films has also been ‘published’ on DVD three ‘volumes’ of Hamlet-X. My work with this unusual German ‘film’ of Hamlet not only promises to bring in connections between global theatre and but also potentially extends our seminar’s consideration of how global cinema might involve analysis of new potential dimensions of delivery and media format.

Gregory M. Colón Semenza
 Globalism and Silent Shakespeare Cinema

Recent debates regarding the ethical and political complexity of transnational Shakespeare cinema look similar to those engaged by early twentieth-century theorists focused on film as a new artistic medium. Such theorists openly questioned early film’s vying fascistic and revolutionary tendencies. The similarities might remind us

that Shakespeare cinema at its very inception was just as global as silent cinema in general. Further, in these early international films, as in those being produced today, the image dominated the word and limited the hegemonic potential of the imported master or 'original' language. One could argue, then, that the gradual Americanization and Anglicization of Shakespeare cinema was only truly realized with the incorporation of sound into Shakespeare films produced after about 1929 (beginning with Sam Taylor's The Taming of the Shrew). How might a comparative awareness of this earlier history cast light on modern global Shakespeare cinema? I would like to think further about how current conversations can be informed by recognizing the globalism of silent Shakespeare cinema and the importance of the cinematic movement from inter-titles to subtitles to spoken dialogue.

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Web Resources

Hamlet-X. Available at <http://www/hamlet-x.de>

Shakespeare Performance in Asia. Available at: <http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia> and co-edited by Peter Donaldson and Alexander C. Y. Huang