***Modernist Shakespearean Cinema****:*

SUMMARY:

From the moment of its birth cinema generated its own forms of Shakespeare. About 400 Shakespearean films were produced in the period of silent cinema, even though many of these were just a few minute long charades dealing with significant scenes from his plays. Shakespearean films were produced and shown in both Europe and the US. The *film d’art* and *film d’art*e movements promoted Shakespeare in both France and Italy. The talkies in the 1920s gave a new life to the Shakespearean text by taking up the challenges of its language. A series of influential talkies were made in the 1930s, but Laurence Olivier’s Modernist films were perhaps the first to capture the magic of Shakespearean drama on the screen. Olivier’s *Henry V* (1944) is influenced by the formidable Modernist filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, while his *Hamlet* (1948) uses impressionistic visuals to compliment his Freudian reading of the play. Orson Welles’s *Macbeth* and *Othello* are heavily influenced by German Expressionism. Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957) combines Noh theatre and cinema to situate *Macbeth* in Medieval Japan. Grigori Kozintsev’s uses Modernist film styles in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* to comment on the political realities of Russia.

MAIN ENTRY:

Early Shakespearean films were 5-10 minutes long charades dealing with key scenes from his famous plays. About 400 films were adapted from Shakespeare’s plays during the period of the silent cinema from late 1890s to early 1920s. In 1899 William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson shot a four minute scene from *King John* featuring the noted actor Sir Herbert Beerbhom Tree. Thenext Shakespearean film, shown at the 1900 Paris exhibition (produced by The Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre), was a duel scene from *Hamlet* (1900) with Sarah Bernhardt as the Prince fighting Laertes (Pierre Magnier). It was a film with sound recorded on cylinders for phonograph accompaniment. Bernhardt’s *Hamlet* and Tree’s *King John* initiated the evolution of Shakespeare from theatre into film. After Tree’s version of *The Tempest* (1907) about 50 one reel films were produced mainly by the Vitagraph and Thanhouser companies in the United States between 1908 and 1911. Noted British films of the period are Will Barker’s *Hamlet* (1910) made in a single day. In 1911 Sir Frank Benson’s stage productions of *Richard III, Macbeth*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* were all recorded.James Keane’s *The Life and Death of King Richard III* (1912), the first Shakespeare feature film, was shot entirely in medium and long shots, and placed Richard in the center of several interior tableaux.

The *film d’art* and *film d’art*e movements promoted Shakespeare in both France and Italy. The French filmmaker Georges Méliès, the inventor of trick photography, made a ten-minute version of *Hamlet* in which he played the lead role, and also made a film on *Shakespeare Writing Julius Caesar* in 1907. Jean Monet Sully, one of the greatest French actors of the period, recorded the graveyard scene from *Hamlet*, and his brother Paul Monet appeared in a one-reel version of *Macbeth* in 1909-10. Italy produced a series of films such as *Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Othello* and *Macbeth* in 1908-09. Italy’s senior director Enrico’s Guazzoni’s *Brutus* (1910) was praised for its action scenes. Svend Gade and Heinz Schall directed the path-breaking *Hamlet: The Drama of Vengeance* (1920) in which the Danish Actress Asta Nielsen’s played the character of Hamlet as a woman disguised as a man. Nielsen’s androgynous eroticism built on the tradition of a stage actress playing Hamlet which goes back to the eighteenth century. A notable German film of the period is Peter Paul Felner’s *The Merchant of Venice* (1923), which combines Shakespeare’s text with Giovanni’s Fiorentino’s fourteenth-century novella *II Pecorone*, one of Shakespeare’s main sources. Another unorthodox version was the German *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1925) directed by Hans Neumann, which was ‘forbidden for juveniles’ due to the heightened element of lust and the Rabelaisian nature of the film. Dimitri Buchowetzki’s German *Othello* (1922), which draws on Shakespeare’s principal source Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi*, was also released in an American version and ended up being a box-office hit in New York City.

Bernard Shaw in the *World Film News* (November, 1936) observed that “Shakespeare’s language is to a great extent a dead language,” but he observed that the medium of cinema could rejuvenate it. The challenges posed by the Shakespearean verse were taken up with the arrival of sound in cinema, and Sam Taylor’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (1929) became the first Shakespearean taking picture. The first influential talkie in Hollywood was jointly directed by the noted German stage director Max Reinhardt and his fellow German refugee film director William Dieterle for Warner Bros. in 1935. The star-studded production took liberties with the text, played with the order of the scenes. It was praised for replacing Shakespeare’s poetry with visual equivalents, but it was not a commercial success.

George Cukor’s extravagant *Romeo and Juliet* (1936) also failed at using the medium of cinema to capture the magic of the play. It was Laurence Olivier who fully realized the potential of the film medium by playing the title role and directing *Henry V* (1944), the first commercially successful Shakespearean film. Olivier’s *Henry V* merges three different historical moments by beginning the film in Shakespeare’s London, then moving back to Henry V’s time in the early fifteenth century, and returning in the end to the twentieth-century Globe theatre, which comments on the contemporary World War II period in Europe. The film was photographed in Technicolor and mingles theatre and cinema, realism and anti-realism: it opens in the real world with a shot of Shakespeare’s Globe theatre where the performance of *Henry V* is about to begin, but then creates anti-realistic settings of Henry V’s time based on medieval illustrations. The battle of Agincourt scenes are influenced by the works of the influential modernist filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. Olivier’s next film, *Hamlet* (1948) is one of the most famous Shakespearean films of all times. Olivier’s Freudian adaptation of *Hamlet* is complemented by impressionistic black and white visuals, which are combined with deep focus photography. The Freudian adaptation of the play was influenced by Ernest Jones’s essay on Hamlet’s character, first published in 1910 and later included in *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis* (1923). Olivier was influenced by Orson Welles’s use of deep focus photography in *Citizen Kane*, and used the technique to visually portray Hamlet’s isolation and alienation from the rest of the characters.

Olivier’s American counterpart Orson Welles’s *Macbeth’s* (1948) stylization is highly influenced by German Expressionism and echoes Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919). Welles makes an extensive use of Christian and Pagan symbolism, by adding the character of a priest, and makes the Witches construct a clay image of a baby, a symbol used throughout the film. The chiaroscuro lighting of German expressionism, along with compositional patterns influenced by Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) is employed consistently in the film. Some critics praised the film’s cinematography, while many criticized it for its badly spoken verse. Welles’s *Othello* (1952), which won the *Palme d’or*, was also influenced by Eisenstein’s use of montage, since the film successfully brings together bits and pieces of the play and reworks them into a mosaic, a sort of a variation of the jigszaw puzzle trope used repeatedly by him in *Citizen Kane* earlier.

Sergei Yutkevitch’s Russian *Othello* (1955) is also known for its effective use of montage. Grigori Kozintsev’s *Hamlet* (1964) is generally read as a political allegory, since the despotic Claudius can be equated to Stalin, who at the end is replaced by the liberal Fortinbras/Khruschev. Kozintsev retained several actors from his Leningrad *Hamlet* staged in 1954, and created an epic that portrays Hamlet’s belief that “Denmark’s a prison”. Fluid camera movement, images of stormy clouds and crushing waves convey Hamlet’s mental turmoil. The film anticipates Kozintsev’s *King Lear* (1970), another Soviet epic, which was also influenced by his stage adaptation of the play in 1941. Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957) is one of the most powerful adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, which mingles Japanese Noh theatre with cinema to situate the film in medieval Japan. Kurosawa’s use of *Macbeth’s* imagery to capture the spirit of the play demonstrates the effortless transformation of the text into a film script. Kurosawa’s adaptations have been praised by directors such as Peter Brook and Peter Brook, both of whom have also used modernist approaches to filming Shakespeare.

Further reading:

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