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Shakespeare Reloaded

The Shakespeare Renaissance 1989-2004

SALS

Studien zur anglistischen
Literatur- und Sprachwissenschaft

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Band 36

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 **Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier**

Gerhards, Vanessa: Shakespeare Reloaded.

The Shakespeare Renaissance 1989-2004 / Vanessa Gerhards. -

Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011

(Studien zur anglistischen Literatur- und Sprachwissenschaft, Vol. 36)

ISBN 978-3-86821-241-9

Dissertation zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades Dr. phil.

(Universität Siegen, 2010)

Cover Illustration: Troma Entertainment, *Tromeo & Juliet*

Cover Design: Brigitta Disseldorf

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ISBN 978-3-86821-241-9

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier

Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier

Tel.: (0651) 41503 / 9943344, Fax: 41504

Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Dr K.-Ludwig Pfeiffer for supervising my PhD project and Prof. Dr Eckart Voigts-Virchow for his support and advice. In addition, I extend my gratitude to my colleagues at the University of Siegen for their assistance. I would also like to thank everyone at Troma Entertainment for their permission to use the cover art. Last but not least I thank my family and friends for inspiration and encouragement.

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1. Prologue

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene! (*Henry V*, Prologue 1-4)

Thus begins Shakespeare's *Henry V* with the Chorus urging the audience to invoke its imagination for the upcoming play. Similarly, Kenneth Branagh uses the Chorus' words in his Shakespeare film from 1989 to initiate an incomparable revival in the genre of Shakespeare films. Many scholars – among them Lynda E. Boose, Richard Burt and Samuel Crowl – accredited Branagh for this role within the revival in their studies. One can even describe this revival of Shakespeare adaptations as a Renaissance in this film genre, because the preceding decades did not see a similar exposure of Shakespeare on the big screen. Branagh and his fellow directors literally reloaded the sleeping genre of Shakespeare film and infused it with new interpretations, new techniques and also new audiences. Therefore, I chose the title of this thesis: *Shakespeare Reloaded*. As I shall discuss in the following chapters, the conventional notion of a Shakespeare film – that of an adaptation close to the original text – is altered by the films of this Shakespearean Renaissance.

In his book *Shakespeare in the Media*, Jörg Helbig explores the development of Shakespeare on film in the 20th century. He states that “[a]fter 1947 Shakespeare films became even more marginalized” (170). He refers to a filmography by Holderness and McCullough according to which only 23 films based on Shakespeare's play were produced between the 1950s and the 1980s (170); this is a rather low number compared to the 1990s. My study is mainly concerned with the years following this meagre period in Shakespeare on film: the 1990s. The Renaissance started in 1989 and found its end in 2004 when the high productivity of the years before slowly faded.

It is an acknowledged fact that the Shakespearean Renaissance started in 1989. But the reasons for this sudden popularity of Shakespeare films remain vague. Therefore, this dissertation is concerned with both the reasons for such a sudden emergence of this Renaissance and especially with the films. Studies on the subject of the Shakespeare film revival mainly focus on particular aspects such as adaptations of specific directors, selected plays, cultural aspects or the cinematic value of the films. What those studies lack at times is a clear definition of the adaptations. In this dissertation, I will analyse a selection of films by channelling them into different categories of adaptations. Thus, the flood of films is structured and it is easier to interpret the films according to the main characteristics of the adaptation. Simultaneously, the categorisation highlights the significance of each film within the Renaissance. It is important to note that the categories do not represent a typology, but a device to structure and to interpret the films.

A number of recent studies have mainly been concerned with the process of transformation from literary source to film. Authors such as Samuel Crowl, Maurice Hindle and Douglas Lanier analyse various plays with regard to their cinematic conception. Apart from adaptation studies, the use of the filmic medium for teaching purposes is also being looked into. Deborah Cartmell for instance, analyses five plays (*Hamlet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Henry V*) and their respective adaptations with regard to the main topics of the plays: violence, gender, sexuality and race (Cartmell ix). Furthermore, she defines the place of Shakespeare films within the curriculum; this is a subject which increases in importance for teaching Shakespeare in the classroom. Films are embedded into the teaching process in order to make Shakespeare's plays more accessible to pupils. The book *Spectacular Shakespeare*, edited by Courtney Lehmann and Lisa Starks, also dedicates a chapter to Shakespeare in the classroom with essays by Elizabeth A. Deitchman and Annalisa Castaldo on this topic. The authors stress the way to access Shakespeare with the help of filmic appropriations. Teaching Shakespeare with adaptations has become a major influence on popularising the writer. Deitchman argues that the films "do not rely upon some meaning embedded within the texts waiting to be released by the 'right' reading, but rather upon the plurality carried by Shakespeare's name" (in Lehmann and Starks, *Spectacular Shakespeare* 183). Therefore, it is appropriate to use the films for teaching as they provide as much space for interpretation as the plays themselves. Furthermore, the status of Shakespeare as an icon of high culture changed through Kenneth Branagh's films; Douglas Lanier argues that Branagh "has reinvigorated the ideal of a 'popular Shakespeare', a Shakespeare set free from the taint of elitism and 'restored' to his proper status as a commercially viable, accessible playwright for the masses" (in Lehmann and Starks, *Spectacular Shakespeare* 149). The two aspects of popularity and accessibility are joined in the effort to introduce Shakespeare to the language classroom and to a young audience.

Lanier's statement mentioned above expresses what can be considered to be the essence of theories by Richard Burt, Samuel Crowl and Michael Bristol. They all agree in making Kenneth Branagh the central figure of the Shakespearean Renaissance and reward him with a status like Laurence Olivier's. The aspect of popularising Shakespeare for a mass audience is further stressed in Crowl's works: *Shakespeare at the Cineplex* (2003), *The Films of Kenneth Branagh* (2006) and *Shakespeare and Film* (2008). He argues that, "led by Branagh, this generation of Shakespeare filmmakers was unapologetic about wanting their films to entertain. Their embrace of Hollywood models released a new energy into the moribund genre and made it alive again in new, exciting, and sometimes even profitable, ways" (*Cineplex* 22). Crowl summarises the main goal of the directors during the Renaissance: entertainment. Apart from Crowl, Lynda Boose and Richard Burt also emphasised both the entertainment and the popularising aspects of Shakespeare films in their books *Shakespeare the Movie* and *Shakespeare the Movie II*. In the second edition, Lynda Boose states that the essays in that volume "engage new developments in Shakespeare, cinema, television, DVD and

other technologies and mass media in a variety of ways” (*The Movie II* 7). The essays thus establish the plays’ potential to be represented in various media.

In the following chapters, I shall analyse the status of Shakespeare’s plays with regard to their genre and also to the shift of media from play to film (ch. 2). As a Shakespeare film appears in multiple material guises and has various “existences” (various texts, performances, screenplays, films etc.), it is important to know their source. The main question of chapter 2.1 is “Text or Play?” which tries to determine the nature of Shakespeare’s works. Therefore, this chapter provides the basis for the further analysis of the transfer from text to film in chapters 2.2 to 2.5. In order to understand the process of adaptation, the relationships between the media involved – drama, literature and film – are highlighted. These comparisons lead to what appears to be the core of Shakespeare adaptation, i.e. their intermediality.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the analysis of a selection of Shakespeare films on the basis of the findings in chapter 2. Here, the intermedial connections within the films as well as the use of various media in their structure are discussed. In order to channel the films, I introduce a set of eight categories which are designed to structure the films and to describe the most vital part of each adaptation as well as its function. This chapter is structured according to the connections between the categories and the films. The first category is “Dramatic Documentary” (ch. 3.1) as it is a kind of starting point for the for the adaptations in this chapter. The film presented here – Al Pacino’s *Looking for Richard* – is a documentary about the process of making an adaptation, which is the common denominator for all the films analysed in this thesis.

From this chapter I move on to chapter 3.2, “Transparent Adaptations”. These films use a rather conventional method of adapting presenting the play without exploring cinematic techniques or their artistic possibilities. These films try to adapt Shakespeare’s plays unobtrusively to the conventions of narrative – often “Hollywood” – cinema. The “Commenting Adaptations” in chapter 3.3 show a slightly different method to adapt Shakespeare. Here, the directors supply the play with additional information and additional scenes in order to support their individual reading. Chapter 3.4 comprises “Period-Shift Adaptations” which involve a shift of the time frame given by the play. Thus they are linked to the “Commenting Adaptations”, as they alter a specific element to create a new interpretation. Along with the “Period-Shift Adaptations”, the category “Shakespearean Teen Flicks” can be put (ch. 3.5). These adaptations are made according to the rules of the “teen flick” genre, which emerged in the 1990s and focused on the lives and loves of teenagers. Thus these films are subject to a period shift as well. Another category to be linked to the “Period-Shift Adaptations” are the “Modernised Adaptations” (ch. 3.6); time, place and language are updated.

Chapter 3.7 is called “Free Variation” and represents another transforming adaptation. Apart from the setting and the language, these films are defined by their relatively free reading of the original text an interpretation which explores new ways to see the play. The final chapter (ch. 3.8), the “Multi-Cultural Adaptations”, turns towards the adaptations which are produced in different cultural contexts. They can be considered a subcategory of “Free Variation”, because they do not vary in theme, but they add the cultural component to their interpretation. The films directed by Kenneth Branagh are given special emphasis, because he is the only director to create several films based on Shakespeare during the revival. As Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles did in their time, Branagh shaped the face of the decade by using the full scale of cinematic techniques to expand the boundaries of Shakespeare films.

A study of Shakespeare films – and in particular the analysis of the reasons for this Renaissance – always has to consider Shakespeare’s cultural status and its development throughout the centuries. In terms of culture, cinema can be seen as a medium for entertainment and thus as a part of popular culture; Shakespeare is nowadays still the embodiment of high culture. The films based on Shakespeare’s plays therefore bridge the gap between high and low culture.

Apart from the historical and the cultural background, the filmic variety of the Shakespearean Renaissance also plays an important role. Chapter 3 shows that there are many different kinds of adaptation which were developed during this period giving us the basis for the revival. A detailed account of the reasons for the Renaissance follows in chapter 5.