

Introduction to Shakespeare on Film in Asia and Hollywood

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.1 (2004)**  
**Thematic Issue *Shakespeare on Film in Asia and Hollywood***  
**Edited by Charles Ross**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/>>

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**Charles ROSS**

### **Introduction to *Shakespeare on Film in Asia and Hollywood***

Most of the articles in this thematic issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/>> derive from a 2003 graduate seminar on the topic "World Shakespeare on Film," sponsored by the Program in Comparative Literature <<http://www.sla.purdue.edu/complit/>> at Purdue University. The contributions <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/>> to this thematic issue by the participants of the seminar represent the work of an inter-disciplinary and international group of young scholars from the People's Republic of China, Italy, Romania, and Taiwan and the USA (in the past the seminar has included participants from Jordan, Korea, Turkey, and Ireland). The focus of the 2003 seminar, led by Charles Ross <[http://www.sla.purdue.edu/academic/idis/complit/Faculty%20Pages/Charles\\_Ross.htm](http://www.sla.purdue.edu/academic/idis/complit/Faculty%20Pages/Charles_Ross.htm)>, was Asia, particularly Kurosawa and his influence on Chinese theater, and the more recent Hollywood Shakespeare films, including the work of Kenneth Branagh. Each of the papers published in this thematic issue is conscious of cinematic techniques and the ways directors substitute for and supplement Shakespeare's text. In their theoretical approaches and methodology, the papers are examples of "comparative cultural studies," a notion developed from tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and from the approach of cultural studies, which define the objectives and scope of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/>> and of the Purdue University Press series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies <<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/Comparativeculturalstudies.html>>.

The seminar's approach to Shakespeare's film differs somewhat from that of Lynda Boose and Richard Burt, who argue in the introduction to their edited collection of essays *Shakespeare: The Movie* that it is impossible to make comparisons between modern products and an original because the original referent is "no longer there." It is true enough that few people have the sensibilities of an Elizabethan or can know for sure what those sensibilities are, but there are a few problems with insisting that the original is no longer there. The phrase is self-contradictory, implying some magic moment of disappearance, but by the same token also suggesting some previous moment when Shakespeare's original had not yet disappeared. That is, the statement implies the existence of a time when the original was "there," before it gradually disappeared either over the centuries or in our personal development because our investment in the original takes on less meaning as our critical consciousness grows. Our assumption, instead, is that moment of origin never disappears, because directors have always had access to the text, more or less, and always will have. We challenge the presumption that Shakespeare is disappearing because such thinking blurs the difference between knowing what Shakespeare intended or what his audience understood with the presumption that Shakespeare did not mean anything and his audience did not read anything into his plays, which seems unlikely.

The following essays look at both text and film, and at how the directors look at text and film, for however sophisticated we may become in the ways of the cinema and the cultures for which these films are produced, Shakespeare on Film as a pedagogy can always find something to say about what directors put into a film and what they leave out. Most of these essays that follow start with the basic text and then developing reasons for the changes made in the transition from text and theater to film. They look for the ways in which Shakespeare has been culturally translated, either by modifications of the text or by the way directors substitute visual images for words as they search for cinematic equivalents to what they perceive to be the meaning of Shakespeare's texts. A somewhat similar emphasis on film and performance characterizes one of many precursors to our work, the volume *Performing Shakespeare in Japan*, edited by Minami Ryuta, Ian Carruthers, and John Gillies, which included an essay "Weaving the Spider's Web: Interpretation of Character in Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (Kumonosu-jô)" by Paula von Loewenfeldt, a former member of the Purdue seminar. As the chair of the Program in Comparative Literature at Purdue, I am interested in such cross-cultural work but also, and especially, in essays that consider different languages as well as cultural translations.

Keeping to these double perspectives of language and culture, additions and substitutions, our special issue begins by connecting Japan and English-language cinema. Yu Shibuya's essay "Hamlet's 'Globe' and the Self as Performer in England and Japan"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/2/>> argues that Shakespeare fashions Hamlet as a performer. The author first looks at how a Japanese translation of *Hamlet* interprets Hamlet's role as a performer. Then, having established the performance as a cultural construct, the essay evaluates Kenneth Branagh's film version of the play in the same terms. Asian alterations of Shakespeare are also the subject of Lei Jin's essay "Silence and Sound in Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/3/>>. The thesis of this essay is that Akira Kurosawa uses silence, sound, and Noh music as cinematic equivalents to Shakespeare's text, playing on the emotions of the audience in scenes such as Kurosawa's version of Macbeth's murder of King Duncan. Similar Asian theatrical conventions are the subject of "Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* and East Asia's *Macbeth*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/4/>>, written by Yuwen Hsiung. Starting with the influence of Kurosawa on versions of *Macbeth* that were staged in China and Taiwan during the 1980s, she argues that the two Chinese cultures offer different perspectives on individuality. Her work includes a look at Chinese translations of Shakespeare in order to offer us some insight into literal Chinese translations of Shakespeare. Alexander Huang's "Shakespeare and the Visualization of Metaphor in Two Chinese Versions of *Macbeth*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/5/>> develops a similar topic using some of the same sources. Huang, a graduate student at Stanford who made some hard-to-obtain images of Shakespeare productions available to the Seminar, offers a theoretical essay on the use of metaphor in stage versions of Shakespeare.

The Chinese perspective on Shakespeare continues in Peirui Su's "Shakespeare and Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard*" <<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb04-1/su04.html>>. The subject of the paper is Pacino's film about producing Shakespeare's play *Richard III* and what the play meant to him as an actor famous for his role as Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*. The author provides a unique perspective because of her experience of American films, including *The Godfather*, while growing up in northern China. Next, Mei Zhu's paper "Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* and the Tradition of Screwball Comedy" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/6/>> analyzes Franco Zeffirelli's *Taming of the Shrew* as an example of the Hollywood genre of screwball comedy. The paper helps us see this genre in cultural terms by noting the influence of screwball comedy on Chinese film as well. Such cross cultural relations are nowhere more strongly contested today than in the relation of women to power, the subject of Xianfeng Mou's "Cultural Anxiety and the Female Body in Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/7/>>. Using the insights of her own reading in feminist theory, Mou explains how the way Franco Zeffirelli films Gertrude and Ophelia in his version of *Hamlet* expresses a certain view of women and power. She argues, in part, that the film techniques of Hollywood often disappoint us politically and as effective readings of Shakespeare.

The conventions and disappointing formulas of Hollywood film are also the subject of my own essay "Underwater Women in Shakespeare Films"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/8/>>. I look at the literary history of the underwater woman as an image of social oppression. I then find examples in various Shakespeare films from the 1990s, including Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet*, Branagh's *Hamlet*, and Taymor's *Titus*. My work on women leads into the related topic of race. In addition to the changing ways women are presented, the most egregious example of the way Hollywood substitutes its own culture for Shakespeare's is the subject of Laura Reitz-Wilson's "Race and *Othello* on Film"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/9/>>. The author looks at the racism of Shakespeare's play then analyzes what Hollywood leaves out or alters in various versions of *Othello*. She shows that Hollywood was highly conscious of the racial attitudes of its audience and presents a pedagogically useful accounting of the techniques filmmakers used to avoid the issue of race.

While skirting some issues, Hollywood took on others, as Simone Caroti shows in "Science Fiction, *Forbidden Planet*, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/10/>>. The author argues that an understanding of the conventions of science fiction helps us to appreciate the 1950s film *Forbidden Planet*. Reflecting the values of the Cold War, in this film Hollywood substitutes modern psychology and the threat of nuclear annihilation for the will to power that Prospero struggles against in Shakespeare's play. A final perspective on filmmaking conventions, in this case artistically successful ones, is offered by Lucian Ghita in his essay "Reality and Metaphor in Jane Howell's and Julie Taymor's Productions of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/11/>>. The author's upbringing in Romania during a period of political transition seems fundamentally relevant to his discussion of the politics of the observer in Taymor's *Titus*. Like the BBC video that preceded it, Taymor's film gives non-textual emphasis to the role of Young Lucius.

The thematic issue is entitled *Shakespeare on Film in Asia and Hollywood* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/>> in order to emphasize the work of the 2003 graduate seminar as well as to signal what was left out. The topic Shakespeare on film, like all Shakespeare studies, is not only a part of Renaissance studies but popular culture and pedagogy as well. We have used the talents that were at our disposal, both in referencing Chinese and Japanese texts and the way our various authors view the images that make up the films. Similarly, the "Bibliography for the Study of Shakespeare on Film in Asia and Hollywood" (Lucian Ghita, comp.) <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/13/>> is limited to works related directly to the featured areas of Shakespeare on film. Topics like fleeting references to Shakespeare in films not on Shakespeare (the subject of an extended thread on the listserv Shakspeare) or fragments of Shakespeare that show in Middle Eastern movies, for example, are not included despite our interest in these topics. We thank the editor of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/>>, Steven Totosy de Zepetnek, and the advisory board / associate editors of the journal for agreeing to this thematic issue.

Finally, in China and Japan it is the custom to write surnames first, but in keeping with practices the authors have adapted in the USA, names are given in the Western form with the given, or first, name first and the surname second.