

Lisa S. Starks and Courtney Lehmann, eds. *The Reel Shakespeare: Alternative Cinema and Theory*. Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2002. 298 pp. ISBN-10: 1611472326; ISBN-13: 978-1611472325. \$49.50 (cloth).

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In their introduction to *The Reel Shakespeare: Alternative Cinema and Theory*, editors Lisa Starks and Courtney Lehmann establish the broad goal of providing "a theoretical tour through important, non-mainstream films and the oppositional messages they convey" (14). *The Reel Shakespeare* certainly achieves this aim.

In the fine tradition of punning Shakespeare studies titles, the "reel" under examination in this essay collection is not only a particular set of movies but also notions of "the real" throughout the first century of cinema Shakespeares. As the introduction explains, cinema Shakespeares may have provided the early film industry with the credibility necessary to survive its infancy, but it also gave audiences the need for a reality check, so to speak. What was more "real" — the earliest movies that showed ordinary events from everyday life (called "actualities"), or the fictional stories that patrons could see on the stage? Did it feel more "real" to share a theater with the live bodies of stage actors or simply view the "ghostly, flickering shadows" of bodies onscreen? (10). As I read the introduction, it struck me that changing entertainment contexts since *The Reel Shakespeare* was published in 2002 have presented us with the "3.0" version of early cinema audiences' negotiations with "the real," for actual film reels are disappearing from theaters as more of them convert to digital exhibition. Furthermore, partnerships between the production and distribution arms of the film industry and instant-streaming venues such as Netflix may eventually endanger the very existence of both movies as physical objects and "real" movie-watching venues outside the home.

The Reel Shakespeare is divided into four parts. Part 1 contains the least overtly "theoretical" piece in the collection, an essay by the late, great Kenneth Rothwell doing what he does best: silent cinema history. Although there is some cross-over from Rothwell's *A History of Shakespeare on Screen*, he focuses here on silent *Hamlets*, including a good deal of information not featured

in the monograph. Part 2 features three essays (by Peter Donaldson, Alan Walworth, and Lia Hotchkiss) that each deal with a notable auteur's avant-garde negotiation of mainstream cinema "realism" via Shakespeare. Donaldson offers an excellent analysis of Peter's Hall's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, showing how characteristics of avant-garde style, such as jump cuts and hand-held camera movements shift in meaning during the course of the film from markers of "leftist social critique and Brechtian distancing" to a more ideologically conservative "celebration, along Laurentian lines, of marriage as a 'stellar equilibrium' between self-sufficient though not quite equal individuals" (44). Whereas Donaldson balances a careful formal analysis of the film with traditional literary theory, Walworth occasionally allows Slavoj Žižek to dominate his exploration of the image/sound disjunction in Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* as a "hysterical protest against the restrictively commercial circumstances of its own production and the limitations of language itself" (60). Of all the essays in this collection, Walworth's requires the greatest background in film studies in order to appreciate its fine qualities. Readers unfamiliar with Godard's work will not get a sense of his importance in film history or of this film's marginal position within the Godard canon. Hotchkiss offers a strong conclusion to this section by examining how Peter Greenaway, in *Prospero's Books*, represents competing claims to "the real" among the book, stage, and screen. A particular strength of this essay is her analysis of how the film uses motion studies by cinema pioneers Muybridge and Marey.

Part 3 is also composed of three essays (by Lisa Starks, Bryan Reynolds, and Kathy Howlett), this time exploring counter-cinematic depictions of "the real" through "the violence of the cinematic image in postmodern films that appropriate a radical Shakespeare on the margins of dominant culture" (16-17). Reynolds and Howlett deftly blend their theoretical approaches with film history and early modern history. Howlett looks at the influence of *Chimes at Midnight* (Orson Welles, 1965) upon *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991), and Reynolds places the Polanski *Macbeth* (1971) within the cultural contexts of both Renaissance England and the United States of the 1960s and early 1970s. Starks masterfully provides a double dose of Julia Kristeva, applying her theory of the abject to both the play itself and to Taymor's *Titus* via Barbara Creed's application of abjection to the classic horror film. *Titus* refuses to conform to the genre's cathartic convention of expelling the abject, the fear of which is embodied in "the monstrous-feminine" (124). Instead, the film revels in a discomfiting exploration of "the real/surreal, inside/outside, [. . .] the borderline of that which is and is not" (122). Ultimately, *Titus* foregrounds the act of horror spectatorship via the character of Young Lucius and an arresting, often "absurd" visual style that discourages the sense of immersion in a "realistic" world promoted by the Classical Hollywood filmmaking tradition.

Part 4 takes us into the "radical" classroom with two essays about teaching mainstream Shakespeare films and concludes with a selective bibliography of criticism that contains pedagogical resources, but also covers a wide range of significant scholarship on cinema Shakespeares. The contributions by Douglas E. Green and Don Brett Mischo should be required reading for anyone who brings screen Shakespeares into the classroom. Their methods, however, are not so much "radical" as simply *responsible* ways to teach film in a literature course. Green shows how Branagh's films can open up discussions of sexuality in both Shakespeare's day and our own, and Mischo discusses how screening both the Taylor/Pickford/Fairbanks and Zeffirelli/Taylor/Burton *Shrews* can set up conversations about "original texts" and authorship. José Ramón Díaz Fernández's outstanding selective bibliography of cinema Shakespeare criticism includes works published until 1999. He introduces the bibliography by mentioning a dozen or so sources forthcoming when the book was published in 2002. Díaz Fernández, the reigning king of bibliographies and checklists, has since produced resources on more focused Shakespeare/screen subjects: film and television derivatives, Orson Welles, criticism of the comedies filmed between 1990 and 2001, and criticism of teen films.

If *The Reel Shakespeare* has a weakness, it is that the pedagogy essays seem geared toward those without a substantial film background while the rest of the book seems to be written for an audience of screen Shakespeare experts. Newcomers to the field, and especially to film studies in general, may find themselves confused by some of the book's basic concepts. Although the second section is devoted to "avant-garde cinema" and the third to "countercinema," for example, the introduction does not precisely articulate the difference between the two terms — or that in film studies these categories also often overlap. More fundamentally, however, the introduction discusses these films in terms of "formal experimentation" without providing any context about the formal elements of "mainstream" cinema, the classical Hollywood mode of narrative and stylistic realism against which alternative cinema rebels. Non-experts can get by with just their "life experience" of watching movies and knowing what looks "normal," but a few more introductory pages devoted to defining terms and contexts would prepare many readers for a more robust appreciation of the collection's second and third parts.

Of course, no book can be all things to all readers, even one with as much to offer as this one. If *The Reel Shakespeare* is to raise the profile of "the marginal, radical, and experimental uses to which Shakespeare has been put in twentieth-century film culture" (14), however, making these films more accessible to a larger academic audience seems like a worthwhile endeavor, especially since several of these films have been garnering attention from critics of screen Shakespeares for

decades now. This year marks the tenth anniversary of *The Reel Shakespeare's* publication; what better occasion for an expanded edition?

References

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