GABRIEL EGAN

Introduction to the Proceedings of the Conference "*Ha le* on Screen" held at Shakespeare's Globe, London, on 28 April 2001

The play *Hamlet* is at or near the centre of the intellectual and commercial domain which is the "Shakespeare" construct. It is the only one to which an entire academic journal is devoted (*Hamlet Studies*), it contains the best-known lines of all dramatic literature – perhaps of all literature – and its imagery (especially of contemplation of a skull) is frequently employed synecdochically to connote Shakespeare and his works generally. The centrality of *Hamlet* is arguably a Romantic phenomenon – John Keats and S. T. Coleridge were typical in finding in themselves something of the indecisive prince – and the ageing Western world population of the twenty-first century might find *King Lear* more relevant. On 28 April 2001 a project intimately concerned with Shakespeare's original theatrical context, the International Shakespeare Globe Centre in London, in conjunction with King's College London, convened a conference for scholars to explore how this currently central work, *Hamlet*, has been represented on the cinema and television screen. The papers in this issue of *EnterText* comprise the published proceedings of that "*Hamlet* on Screen" conference.

As Mark Robson observes in his paper, every *Hamlet* since the first one is a repetition,

material effectively achieved the same outcome of simplifying the characters and presenting the action in a straightforward “avenging-hero” key.

James Hirsh too thinks that there is something clearly amiss with the text as it is

discovery (or invention, as is now often claimed), but not the violence, since clearly Branagh, Hopkins, argues, was concerned to confront his powerful male artistic predecessors. Branagh cast several famous stage Hamlets (John Gielgud, Derek Jacobi, and Michael Maloney) but none who had played the part on film, and indeed he does not allude to other films in this one. Equally revealing is his casting of women actors (Kate Winslet and Julie Christie) unencumbered by the faintest experience of performing Shakespeare. Hopkins relates these insights into the directorial mind to Branagh's filmic techniques, which here might be most simply characterised as tumescence: the swelling scene of his vast set, the galaxy of acting stars, the widest possible film stock, and a text with all its parts unexcised. Repeated images of portals suggest that Branagh wants to take the spectator by stages further within Hamlet, but the effect, argues Hopkins, is quite the reverse, and the film's abiding flaw is its lack of intimacy.

Mark Robson finds the same struggle with forbears in Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet*, and in "'Trying to pick a lock with a wet herring': *Hamlet*, film, and spectres of psychoanalysis" he moves from a Freudian to a Derridean understanding of obsessive repetition. Branagh, Robson argues, was obsessed with a number of "first times," such as using all the words, not quoting preceding *Hamlet* films, and excluding Freud's interpretation. This itself is, of course, an Oedipal struggle with his forebears and hence the appropriateness in the opening shot of the inscription which is the wrong Hamlet (the Senior), not our hero. The film *Shakespeare in Love* shows Shakespeare speaking lines which we know from the plays, so its screenwriters

-2.1(ve)]TJ/--2(b)-1.s

Derrida a ghost is a suitable bearer of the tricky conceptual instability at work here, since it can appear only as a body and yet has no body. A ghost's apparent body might be said to be merely a citation of the once-possessed body, a ghostly presence marking a corporeal non-presence. Alternatively, a ghost might be thought of as the animation of a prosthetic body, returning us to Derrida's celebrated argument about the ontological instability of zombies and horribly suggesting that perhaps our bodies are merely prosthetic. Presence is, as ever for Derrida, a form of absence.

The five essays discussed so far have been concerned with what we might call engagements internal to the artistic world, engagements with the performance history and cinematic history of *Hamlet*. The remaining four essays look outwards to the wider artistic cultures and to politics. In "*Hamlet* in Warsaw: The Antic Disposition of Ernst Lubitsch," Nicholas Jones considers the 1942 film *To Be Or Not To Be*

Tempera observes that in modern Italy a similar polarisation obtains between high and low culture, and in "To Laugh or not to Laugh: Italian Parodies of *Hamlet*" she records low-culture mockeries of bookish elitism via attacks on Shakespeare, exemplified in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare is not on the Italian school curriculum, but is widely known in general terms from Verdi's operas

meeting with the ghost on the beach in order to suggest the realm of the unknowable. For “To be or not to be...” on the beach, “land's end becomes synonymous with life’s end,” a place of meeting where the undiscovered country (the sea) could be seen; the sea becomes in this film what T. S. Eliot complained that this play lacked, an objective correlative.

Kozintsev used dissident artists Boris Pasternak (translator) and Dmitri Shostakovich (music director) for his film, and of course the Soviet economic-political system against which they defined themselves no longer exists, although many of the same people are still robbing the former country’s poor. The American economic-political system which appears to have emerged triumphant from the grand twentieth-century binarism is the context for Michael Almereyda’s 2000 film of *Hamlet*. It is a world of commodification in which Shakespeare’s words are constantly drowned out by extraneous sounds, as though Shakespeare cannot be expected to survive the din of the modern world. Much of the noise is of postmodern splitting, and in “A ‘Harsh World’ of Soundbite Shakespeare: Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000),” Elsie Walker

an electronic imaging or texting device such as a facsimile machine or closed-circuit television system. The horrors of global capitalism are not merely equal to the feudal machinations in Shakespeare's play: its distortions of human sensual experience serve to dwarf the individual in a specially sinister way captured by the film's cinematography which magnifies and compresses the human form.

Advertisements are the Denmark prison bars in this film, but one is entitled to ask if a Shakespeare film really can critique global capitalism. Almereyda says that, far from being product placements, his use of brand logos required him to pay the companies involved, or to thank them in the film's credits. Walker thinks Almereyda is being naïve in this: it *is* product placement, and Almereyda is *not* really subverting it. The subversion/containment debate has been a familiar element of mainstream Renaissance studies since the rise of New Historicism in the 1980s, but it surely is an optimistic sign that a Hollywood director working on a major project with international acting stars feels the need to engage with it, even if one believes (as Walker does) that he