## Contents

*List of Illustrations*  
List of Illustrations x

*Acknowledgements*  
Acknowledgements xi

*Abbreviations/Acronyms*  
Abbreviations/Acronyms xii

*Preface to the Second Edition*  
Preface to the Second Edition xiii

*Introduction*  
Introduction xiv

### Part I  Shakespeare and the Language of Film  
1 Filming and Staging Shakespeare: Some Contrasts 3  
2 The Audience: Individual and Collective Experience 5  
3 The Space of the Movie Screen 9  
4 Imagery: Verbal and Visual 12  
5 Bringing It All Together 15

### Part II  The History of Shakespeare on Film 1899–2014  
1 Silent Shakespeare 21  
2 The Thirties: Hollywood Shakespeare 28  
3 The Forties: Olivier and Welles 32  
4 The Fifties: Post-war Diversity 34  
5 The Sixties and Seventies: Cultural Revolution, Filmic Innovation 40  
6 The Nineties: Branagh's Renaissance and the Shakespeare on Film Revival 51  
7 Shakespeare on Film in the Twenty-first Century 62

### Part III  Communicating Shakespeare on Film: Modes, Styles, Genres  
1 The Theatrical Mode 85  
2 The Realistic Mode 96  
3 The Filmic Mode 99
Part IV Critical Essays

1. COMEDIES
   Introductory Note
   Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing* (UK, 1993)
   Adrian Noble’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (UK, 1996)
   Michael Hoffman’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (USA, 1999)

2. HISTORIES
   Introductory Note
   Laurence Olivier’s *Henry V* (UK, 1944)
   Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V* (UK, 1989)
   Laurence Olivier’s *Richard III* (UK, 1955)

3. TRAGEDIES
   Introductory Note
   Franco Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* (UK/Italy, 1968)
   Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (USA, 1996)
   Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet* (UK, 1948)
   Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet* (UK, 1996)
   Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (USA, 2000)
   Orson Welles’s *Macbeth* (USA, 1948)
   Roman Polanski’s *Macbeth* (UK, 1971)

Part V Shakespeare on the Small Screen

1. Film, TV and Small-screen Shakespeare
2. The BBC-TV Series: Shooting the Complete Canon
3. The Stage–Screen Hybrid: Shakespeare on TV/DVD/Blu-ray
Contents

Appendix: Filming Shakespeare for the Small Screen – An Interview with John Wyver, Illuminations filmmaker and producer 281

References 291

Suggested Further Reading 295

Glossary of Terms 300

Index 307
Part I

Shakespeare and the Language of Film
Filming and Staging Shakespeare: Some Contrasts

It seems obvious to state that the conditions of performance and reception of a Shakespeare play produced for film on the one hand, and stage on the other, are going to be different. However, exploring some of these differences will provide us with a useful way into learning about Shakespeare on film. To start with a very broad contrast between the two forms of production, it has been said that ‘in the theatre we accept theatricality; in the cinema we demand actuality’ (Manvell, 1979, 266). This requirement for an impression of actuality, or reality, is directly linked to the fact that film is a recorded medium of performance, a completed ‘product’ that is played back to cinema/DVD/Blu-ray/internet audiences watching in a space and time entirely remote from the original performance. Very obviously, a film audience can play no part in affecting the performance they are watching. By contrast, in the theatre where the performance is continuous and live, there is always some kind of interaction between the stage and the live audience. Consequently, if a narrative film (as most Shakespeare film adaptations are) is to communicate accessibly and coherently with the film audience, it needs to be made as realistically involving as possible, for an audience that will always be ‘virtual’. As we all know, a continuous film performance is made from many smaller bits of filmed performance, edited together. The very different conventions of performance and reception operating in theatre and film also mean that movie actors need to use rather different performance techniques if they are to communicate with us effectively. The sound amplification technology, enabling a cinema audience to hear what is being said from anywhere in the screening auditorium, means
that the actors are not required to ‘project’ their voices in the way stage actors do. Instead, they need to speak more at the level used in the interactions of everyday life that we all experience.

Without a live audience to cater for, film actors instead perform more exclusively to/with one another, such that the ‘eye of the camera’ is satisfied, the ultimate decision in this regard normally remaining with the film’s director. The director usually has final say over whether their visualization of the script the movie is following has been successfully realized into filmed performance. This decision-making process points to another of the vital differences between the playing conditions of film and theatre. In a theatrical production, the cast frequently rehearses a play for weeks before it opens to the public, hopefully to ensure a high level of artistic performance. For a film, without a live audience, a scene can be repeated again and again until played and filmed to the satisfaction of the director (budget permitting), mis-haps being eliminated and the best shots or shot sequences (takes) chosen for the ‘final cut’ of the movie. Once shot and edited into the connected sequences of the finished product, a filmed performance is ‘fixed’ forever, in and of its time of making. It provides a record of what all who have been involved in the production no doubt hope is the best that can be dramatically achieved, a complete recording ‘secured’ for all subsequent viewers of the film, who may eventually watch in thousands of locations around the world, wherever cinemas, DVD playback facilities or internet access are available.
The Audience: Individual and Collective Experience

Most new theatres these days are replacing the ‘two-room’ division of spaces produced by the old-style proscenium arch with more prominent stages that bring actor and audience closer together, in ‘one room’. The main house of England’s Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon has used this type of ‘bold thrust stage, inspired by the Renaissance courtyard’ since 2010. The aim is ‘to articulate what’s distinctive about theatre through the intimacy of the relationship between actor and the audience, and the audience with one another’. In England this kind of dramatic intimacy can best be experienced at the rebuilt Shakespeare’s Globe on Bankside in London. Contained in the Renaissance outdoor-style amphitheatre playhouse, the audience inhabits the open yard and galleries ranged closely around the stage on three sides, their close proximity to the actors in ‘same-light’ performance conditions encouraging a frequently stimulating interactivity of experience between performer and spectator.

The kind of intimacy experienced by a cinema audience is very different from that achievable in even the most informal of playing spaces. However emotionally involved they may become in the recorded screen events, since they are physically remote from what has been filmed and edited in another time and place, moviegoers will relate differently to what they see on screen compared to the experience of the theatregoer (the ‘hybrid’ case of live stage to cinema productions are discussed in Part III). How film audiences receive, decode and engage with movies is therefore of prime importance to the
people who create the drama projected on screen. Although they will never meet the audience for whom the movies they create are made, producers, directors and actors all want to attract and hold the attention of audiences who have paid to watch their cinematic work. This is why audience **test screenings** are used so much for big film projects. In an era when commercial film production is very costly, producers, directors and distributors seek an assurance that film audience members will understand, like, and be held by a film if their enterprise is to make large profits, or to gain slimmer returns in the case of **arthouse** movies.

Filmgoers are therefore most likely to be appealed to as ‘self-contained’ perceiving **individuals**, successive screen images and sounds being geared to producing in them emotionally and psychologically engaging **private** experiences. This audience requirement is quite unlike that made on a live theatre spectator. In the live theatre, although each individual’s response to stage events will ultimately be their own, meanings and effects are generated in the context of a public, **collectively** interactive experience. A feature of this collective experience is that it is ‘pluralistic’ and relatively unpredictable, the theatrical spectator choosing which aspects of the performance to look at and focus on. The cinema or small-screen audience’s focus, on the other hand, will be dictated by what the **camera** ‘sees’, and **only** by what the camera sees. Consequently, the film viewer’s perception of the actions and images of the filmed story is mostly governed by what the film director, principally, chooses to show. Quite literally, it is the producer, the director and the editor who in the end ‘call the shots’ to be transmitted on film.

To the extent that the audience’s viewpoint can therefore be directed by the sequence of images and actions put up on the screen, there is great scope for the audience’s viewpoint and feelings to be **shaped** or manipulated in certain ways. (Once alerted to the fact, followers of Kenneth Branagh’s Shakespeare films will notice how much the music soundtracks are used to stir up and shape their emotions.) On the other hand, the act of watching a **narrative film** can be and often is a complex process. The manipulation of cinematic techniques of **montage** and **mise-en-scène** by filmmakers in telling a story always makes demands on the perceptual capacities of the viewer, their ability to ‘construct’, from the sequence of images shown, an understanding of what is being conveyed to them. In a stage performance, our impressions are overwhelmingly defined by the strong presence of actors.
communicating with us through the mutually accepted pretence of *stage conventions*, mostly conveyed by their live dialogue. The impressions we experience from a narrative film are created instead by what Christian Metz calls our ‘constant impulse to invest’ those ‘ghostly creatures moving on the screen’ with ‘the “reality” of fiction’. This ‘reality of fiction’, he says, ‘comes only from within us, from the *projections* and *identifications* that are mixed in with our perception of the film’ (Metz, 1974, 10, emphases added). Constituting the total world of the story that some film theorists call a film’s *diegesis* (Greek for ‘narrative’), this comprises everything we assume to exist in the world the film depicts – characters, objects, settings, and so forth. Besides the explicitly presented events we all see and watch in common, as mesmerized viewers we will also be subjectively adding unseen elements into the fictional mix. Such elements will include presumed and *inferred* events, objects and places that are not shown, as well as our feelings, fantasies and valuations about the characters depicted – the projections and identifications Metz speaks of. We construct and internalize a story that will make some kind of personal sense to each of us.

Whatever the ‘impression of reality’ we negotiate for ourselves in the transaction between the images on the screen and our own perceptions of them, it should not be forgotten that what is seen will also be dependent on an economic process and reality, lying behind the process of production. The range of cinematic techniques available to be used at any one time by a director will vary, partly depending on the production budget available, and partly depending on the connected question of the kind of cinema audience being targeted. A small but apt example linking Shakespeare adaptation and budgetary issues concerns a view expressed by film director Roman Polanski. In 2000 he said that were he to remake a film of *Macbeth*, he would use the *digital imaging* or *CGI* techniques available to modern filmmakers to create the outdoor castle sequences. To get the results he wanted in 1971, he was forced to use the unpredictable, time-consuming and expensive methods of outdoor location shooting.

The way economics relate to the respective targeting of *arthouse* or popular film audiences can be conveyed briefly and broadly by contrasting the approaches taken to filming Shakespeare by Orson Welles and Baz Luhrmann. In each of his three adaptations (*Macbeth* [1948], *Othello* [1952] and *Chimes at Midnight* [1965]), Welles’s highly individualistic cinematic style makes no concession to the requirements or
perceptual capacities of a worldwide popular movie audience. This meant his having to work within severely constrained production budgets for each film. In turn, this also ensured the audiences for his films would only ever be arthouse, i.e. commercially speaking very small, and attending a limited number of global cinematic venues. In the case of Baz Luhrmann, for his Romeo + Juliet (1996) he aimed from the start to communicate with an MTV-influenced youth audience. His stylistic approach and casting were designed for large-scale internationally popular appeal, an approach that attracted ample funding from Hollywood both for making and (a long lead-time of) publicizing the film. As a result, backed by highly successful test screenings, it was almost guaranteed that on release the movie would open wide (i.e. simultaneously across over 1000 cinema screens in the USA), massive audiences and profits being the result.
Index

Note: Page numbers in bold denote a glossary entry

Acker, Amy 79–81, 118
Ackroyd, Barry 77
action films 15, 54, 59, 115, 183
actors 44–6
  differences in performing on stage and film 3–4, 9–11, 12–13
  movements of and small-screen viewers 15–17
  and theatrical mode 85
see also casting; individual names
ADR (automated dialogue replacement) 46, 300
All's Well That Ends Well
BBC series production (1981) 254
NT Live production (2009) 89
Almereyda, Michael 62–3, 82, 100, 103, 105, 106, 219
Hamlet see Hamlet
An Age of Kings, BBC TV cycle of History plays (1960) xvi, 246–50
Andoh, Adjoa 279
Annis, Francesca 233, 234
Antony and Cleopatra
  Heston's production (1972) 49
  Nunn's stage-to-TV production (1974) 259, 264
apparent motion 10, 300
Aristotle 190, 267
Artaud, Antonin 48
arthouse 6, 7, 8, 61, 62, 82, 103, 194, 219, 225, 300
As You Like It
BBC series production (1978) 252, 253
Branagh's production (2006) 68–70, 292
Edzard's production (1992) 55;
  as periodized adaptation, 105–6
Astaire, Fred 120
Atkins, Eileen 247
ATV 259
audience(s) 5–8, 10–11, 107–9
  and comedies 134–5
  positioning the 112–13
  ‘test screenings’ 6, 8, 63, 197, 286
backlit 26, 228, 300
backstory 24, 91, 175, 184, 218, 300
Bamber, David 261
Barber, C.L. 45
Barber, Frances 265
Barber, Samuel 172
Barton, John 46
‘battle of the sexes’ theme 117, 118, 138
Bazin, Andre 162, 251
BBC xii, xvi, 37, 51, 246, 257, 259, 261, 262, 267, 275, 277, 280, 281, 288, 290, 298
BBC-TV Shakespeare series 37, 51, 246, 251–7
Beale, Simon Russell 276
Beckett, Samuel 48, 186
Beerbohm Tree, Sir Herbert, King John (1899) 21–3
Bening, Annette 181, 182, 183
Bennett, Alan 253
Bennett, Rodney 255
Benthall, Michael 192
Bergner, Elizabeth 32
Berry, Cicely 60
Billington, Kevin 253
Biziou, Peter 181, 182
Blair, Tony 264
Blakely, Colin 261
Blessed, Brian 69, 136, 169, 213
Bliss, Sir Arthur 249
blocking 86, 254, 300
Bluhdorn, Charlie 198
Bogdanovich, Peter 44
Bond, Samantha 64
Boswell, Simon 155, 156
Branagh, Kenneth 6, 51–2, 121, 135
approach and credo 53–5, 97–8, 137
As You Like It see As You Like It
background 52–3
Hamlet see Hamlet
Henry V see Henry V
Love’s Labour’s Lost (2000) 63–4, 68, 92, 97, 115
Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein 213
Much Ado About Nothing see
Much Ado About Nothing
plays lead role in stage-to-cinema
Macbeth (2013) 81
populist approach 53–5
quoting from earlier Hollywood
movies in Shakespeare
productions 55, 92–3, 172
and realistic mode 68
setting up of the Renaissance
Theatre Company 52–3
stage-to-TV production of Twelfth
Night (1988) 262–3
Brando, Marlon 36
Briers, Richard 136, 169, 213, 263
British Clarendon Film Company
The Tempest (1908) 24, 100–1
broadcasters, working with/
without 90
Bronson, Charles 202
Brook, Peter 49, 50, 51, 99, 100, 101
filmic approach 101
King Lear (1971) 47–9, 97, 102
Buchanan, Judith 58
budgetary issues 7
Buhler, Stephen 60, 68
Burge, Stuart
Julius Caesar (1970) 49
Othello (1965) 86–7
Burnett, Mark Thornton 146
Burton, Richard 44, 118, 137, 193, 194, 197
Butler, Gerard 77–8, 120
Cagney, James 30, 118, 140, 188
camera set-ups, 29, 37, 279
camerawork 26, 46, 58, 79–80, 103, 106, 170, 178, 231, 247–8, 258, 262, 264, 283–6 see also
individual techniques
Carney, Reeve 75
Castellani, Renato 34, 38, 121, 197, 253
Romeo and Juliet (1954) 36–7
casting 8, 29–30, 36, 37, 53, 71, 72, 118–19, 137, 142, 152, 166, 182, 203, 217, 233, 235, 253, 259
Castle Rock Entertainment 213
‘centre of interest’ 16, 244
chiaroscuro lighting 27, 80, 119, 212, 227, 254, 300, 302
Children’s Midsummer Night’s
Dream, The (2001) 64–5
Chimes at Midnight, aka Falstaff
(1965) 7, 42–4, 97, 120, 172, 276
cinema
and audiences 5–8
visual bias of 12–13
see also film
Cleese, John 254
Clifford, Richard 64
Close, Glenn xiv, 54, 97
close-ups 13, 16, 29, 90, 91, 116, 164,
170, 179, 195, 197, 202, 222, 228,
247, 260, 262, 300
in silent films 27
in televised Shakespeare 244–5, 255, 260, 262
and theatrical mode of filming 86, 88
use of by Branagh 53–4, 116, 169–70
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Index

Cleese, John – continued
    use of by Fiennes 13, 244–5
    use of by Zeffirelli 195
    used in tragedies 190
Coleman, Basil 253
comedies 15, 63, 68, 106, 134–5, 153, 160, 263
    on television 263
    see also Midsummer's Night Dream; Much Ado About Nothing
    communal, social context of theatre 290
Connery, Sean 247, 248
continuity editing 15, 254, 300
conventions 3, 7, 9, 11, 27, 32–3, 41, 54, 111–13, 123–4, 170, 216–18
Cook, Ron 257
Coriolanus, Ralph Fiennes’s production (2011) 13, 75–9, 245:
    as periodized adaptation 105, 106, 109–10; intensified continuity in 244–5
    costumes 21, 29, 36, 37, 96, 98, 117, 182, 194, 259, 260, 305
Cox, Alex 78–9
    crane shot/overhead 48, 91, 92, 138, 143, 165, 212, 300
    critical flicker vision 10, 301
    cross-cutting 66, 138, 301
Crowl, Samuel 55, 57, 60, 62, 64, 97, 103, 137, 142, 145, 152
Crystal, Billy 117, 215
Cukor, George, Romeo and Juliet (1936) 30–1, 121, 193, 197
cutting see editing
    cutting of text see text, Shakespeare
Cymbeline
    Almereyda’s (2014) film 82
    BBC series production 254
Czinner, Paul 32, 68
Davies, Anthony 174, 229
Davies, Oliver Ford 267
Davis, Desmond 252
deep-focus 26, 101, 119, 120, 179, 209, 210, 211, 301
Delhomme, Benoît 66, 67
Dench, Judi 46, 53, 121, 169, 193, 247, 260
Denisof, Alexis 79, 80, 118
Dent, Alan 163, 174, 207, 212
Depardieu, Gérard 215
depth of field/focus 245, 246, 249, 251, 301
detective films 117
Dews, Peter 247, 250
Dexter, John 86, 88
dialogue 7, 9, 12, 13, 15, 28, 29, 32, 46, 63, 77, 79, 81, 82, 94, 136, 144, 198, 169, 184, 195, 294, 231, 252, 254, 255, 300
DiCaprio, Leonardo 199
Dickson, William Kennedy-Laurie 22
diegesis 7, 13, 155, 301
diegetic sound 13, 301, 302
Dieterle, William 29, 30, 46, 98, 101, 152
digital imaging/compositing 7, 157, 244, 301
Dignam, Mark 49
director function 284
director/DoP relationship 285–6
dissolve 72, 101, 103, 127, 140, 175, 209, 221, 228, 229, 230, 232, 231
Dolan, Monica 144, 265
Donaldson, Peter 128
DoP (Director of Photography) 77, 264, 270, 272, 278, 306, 280, 283–6, 301
    DoP/editor relationship 285
Doran, Gregory 91, 92, 263–4, 267, 269–70, 277, 278, 281–2, 284, 288
    RSC stage-to-TV Macbeth 263–4
    RSC stage-to-TV Hamlet 267–71
    RSC stage-to-TV Julius Caesar 277–80
Downey, Robert, Jr 59, 181, 182, 184
Downie, Penny 267, 268
Index

downtage 94, 165, 301
DVD 3, 4, 15, 16, 65, 68, 80, 86, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 95, 146, 201, 229, 243, 247, 251, 258, 272, 275, 277, 279, 301

Eastwood, Clint 59, 202
editing 15–16, 36, 90, 118, 126, 137, 220, 222, 223, 233, 243, 301
continuity 15, 16, 254, 300
Edzard, Christine
As You Like It (1992) 55, 105–6
Elliott, Michael 258, 261–2
Ellis, John 245–6
epic films 47, 60, 115, 116, 117
establishing shot 200, 301
Expressionist cinema 26, 27, 33, 98, 119, 207, 212, 227, 233
eyeline match 142, 301
Eyre, Richard vi, xi, 107, 181, 187, 262, 266, 276

Fairbanks, Douglas 28–9
Faithfull, Marianne 49
Falstaff see Chimes at Midnight
Fearon, Ray 279
Feast, Michael 272
Fiennes, Joseph 67
Fiennes, Ralph 100, 105
Coriolanus (2011) 13, 75–9, 109–10
Fifties 34–9
Fillion, Nathan 80
film
differences between stage and 3–4, 12–14, 32–3
differences between televised Shakespeare and 243–6, 286
see also cinema
film codes see genre conventions
film genre, conventions and codes 111–13
film noir 33, 40, 79, 80, 119, 207, 212, 230, 233, 302
film techniques, and genre conventions 119–20
filmic mode 99–103
Finch, Jon 233, 235
Finlay, Frank 87
Fishburne, Laurence 57
flat 24, 147, 287, 302
Fleetwood, Kate 272–3
focalizer 139, 302
Forties 32–3
Fox, Edward 105
‘framing’ approach 33
Gade, Svend, Hamlet (1920) 24, 26–7
gangster films 111, 115, 118, 120, 183, 187–8, 235
Garai, Romola 70, 265
Garrick, David 23
Geary, Karl 219, 225
genre conventions 25, 54, 113, 114–21
film techniques 119–20
iconography 120–1
mixed-genre 80, 111, 112
plot elements 114–17
themes 117–19
genre expectations 112
German Expressionist cinema see Expressionist cinema
Gibson, Mel xiv, 27, 54, 55, 120
Gielgud, Sir John 36, 43, 49, 174, 193, 253
Gladiator 60
Globe on Screen 89, 92–5
Gold, Jack 253, 255–6
Goold, Rupert 271–5, 284
stage-to-TV Macbeth 271–5, 274
TV film Richard II 275–6
Goodman, Henry 261
Gough, Michael 179
Granada TV 261, 264
grandeur 30, 153, 215, 245, 276
Index

Greenblatt, Stephen 22
groundlings 92, 94
Guntner, Lawrence 27, 212

Hall, Tony 290
Hall, Peter 39, 46, 51

Hamlet 104, 111–12
Almereyda's vision 220;
camerawork 103; casting 225–6;
communicating of reflections through glass and surfaces 103, 223–4; contrasting visual viewpoints 220, 223, 225;
editing 220–1; first two-minute sequence of visual fragments 221–2; Hawke as Hamlet 223, 225, 225–6;
periodized setting 106, 219; ‘to be or not to be’ soliloquy 62–3, 223, 224
BBC series production 255
Branagh's production (1996) 16, 191, 213–18: Branagh's vision for 213–14; casting 117, 215, 217; and filmic and theatrical representation 216–17, 218; genre conventions 116–17; and Ghost 214–15; and ‘point of view’ 215; political dimensions 214; religious context 215–16; setting 214; silent flashbacks 218; third soliloquy 217
Doran's RSC production 267–71, 281, 283–4, 288–9
Gade's production (1920) 24, 26–7
Kozintsev's production (1964) 33, 40–2, 43, 47, 99, 100, 101–2
Olivier's production (1948) 33, 40–1, 191, 207–12: camerawork 207, 208–9, 210, 211; cinematic style 212; comparison with Welles's Macbeth 227; cutting of text 33, 208; genre conventions 33, 119, 120; music 207; ‘oedipal’ conception of Hamlet’s character 207, 209, 210; psychological dimensions 208, 212; shadows in 212; use of deep-focus photography 209–11
Richardson's production (1969) 49, 86, 87–9, 258, 264
Zeffirelli's production (1990) xiv, 54–5, 97, 137
hand-held shot 264, 302

Handy, Scott 272
Hardy, Robert 247
Harvey, Laurence 37
Harvey, Tim 57
Hattaway, Michael 105, 134
Havelock-Allan, Anthony 86
Haviland, Olivia de 30
Hawke, Ethan 62, 82, 221, 223, 224, 225–6
Hayes, Michael 247

Henry V 160, 184
Olivier's production (1944) xiv, 32–3, 45, 101, 160, 162–8, 194: Agincourt battle scene 9, 168, 172; cutting of text 163–4; distancings of audience from characters 169–70; genre conventions 115–16, 166; music 167; Olivier’s
Index

performance 166; as part of war effort 162; portrayal of French 167, 170; portrayal of Henry 163–4, 167–8; shift from metatheatrical to metacinematic 32–3, 167; use of Elizabethan performance to frame movie 32–3, 164–5, 170

Henry VI (BBC series production, 1983) 256–7

Henry VIII (BBC series production, 1979) 253

Herlie, Eileen 210

Heston, Charlton 49, 117

Antony and Cleopatra (1972) 49

Hiddleston, Tom 276

high-angle 207, 210, 254, 302

histories 134, 160–1

see also Henry V; Richard III

Hoffmann, Michael, A Midsummer Night's Dream see Midsummer Night's Dream

Holland, Peter xi, xv, 99, 100, 148

Hollow Crown, The (BBC made-for-TV series, 2012) 258, 275, 280, 298

Hollywood cinema, in Thirties 28–31

Holm, Ian 46, 262

Hopkins, Anthony 49, 59

horror films 119, 179, 215, 229, 272

Hounsou, Djimon 74

Houseman, John 35

Howard, Bryce Dallas 70

Howard, Jean E. 70

Howard, Leslie 30–1, 193

Howard, Tony xi, xviii

Howell, Jane 253, 255–7

Hunt, Chris 264

Hurt, John 261

Hussey, Olivia 192, 197

‘hyperreal’ 59

iconography 114, 118, 120–1

identification 7, 77, 106, 134, 168, 190, 215, 217, 302

image system 42, 101, 302

imagery 12–14

intensified continuity 17, 244, 245, 280, 302

internal diegetic sound 13, 302

intertextuality 200

Ionesco, Eugene 48

Irons, Jeremy 67, 276

Irving, Sir Henry 22, 23, 30

Irving, Laurence 29

Jacobi, Derek 53, 64, 169, 170, 213, 255

Japanese Noh drama see Noh drama

Johnson, Richard 49, 259

Jones, David 252

Jones, Felicity 74

Jones, James Earl 85–6

Jones, Osheen 60, 144, 145

Jordan, Gabrielle 261

Jorgens, Jack xi, xiv–xv, 45, 47, 48, 84, 85, 96, 97, 99, 100, 126

Shakespeare on Film 84

Jory, Victor 30

Joseph, Paterson 279

Julius Caesar

BBC series production (1979) 252

Burge’s production (1970) 49

Illuminations/RSC production (2012) 277–80, 281, 289

Mankiewicz’s production (1953) 35–6, 37

Kay, Charles 170

Keane, James, Richard III (1912) 24, 26

Keaton, Michael 136, 137, 141

Kierkegaard, Søren 70

Kinematagraph and Lantern Weekly 25

King John, Beerbohm Tree’s production (1899) 21–3

King Lear 40, 190

Brook’s production (1970) 46, 47–9, 97, 102, 103
Index

King Lear – continued
Kozintsev’s production (1970) 38, 42, 100, 101
Michael Elliott’s Granada TV production (1983) 258, 261–2
part of New York Shakespeare Festival (1974) 85–6
Richard Eyre’s stage-to-TV production (2004) 262, 266
Trevor Nunn’s stage-to-TV production (2008) 264–7
Kingsley, Ben 253
Kinnear, Rory 276
Kirwan, Peter 275–6, 298
Kissoon, Jeffery 278
Kline, Kevin 57, 70, 135, 152, 153, 155, 157
Kott, Jan 38, 47, 50, 188
Shakespeare our Contemporary 47
Kozintsev, Grigori 33, 99, 130
Hamlet (1964) 38, 40–2, 43, 100, 101–2
‘Hamlet and King Lear’ essay 100
King Lear (1970) 38, 42, 47, 100, 101–2
Krasker, Robert 36, 162
Kubrick, Stanley 116
Kumonosu-Jô (1957) xvii, 34, 38–9, 40, 101, 122–30
camera and lighting techniques 126, 127
means of revealing Washizu’s emotions 129
music and soundtrack 124
and samurai film genre 40, 101, 123
spatial techniques 126, 128
Spiderweb image 125
use of Noh drama methods 101, 124, 126, 127, 128, 130
Kurosawa, Akira 38, 100, 101, 122–30
The Bad Sleep Well 40
Kumonosu-Jô see Kumonosu-Jô
Ran 40
samurai films 123
Lang, Fritz 212
Lanier, Douglas 148
Lapotaire, Jane 91
large screen/small screen difference 286
Laughton, Charles 179
Lemmon, Jack 117, 217
Lenk, Tom 80
Leonard, Robert Sean 136, 137, 142
Lesser, Anton 263
live stage productions of Shakespeare on film in the twenty-first century 89–95, 290
lighting 10, 26, 29, 91, 92, 120, 125, 262, 279, 282, 288 see also chiaroscuro lighting
location shooting 7, 10, 25, 65
Loehlin, James 26, 182
Logan, John 76, 77
Loncraine, Richard xiv, xv, 105, 107, 108
Richard III see Richard III
long shot 85, 100, 116, 120, 141, 142, 150, 165, 170, 209, 264, 302
Love’s Labour’s Lost
BBC series production (1985) 254
Branagh’s production (2000) 62, 63–4, 68, 97, 115
low angle 43, 223, 303
Luhrmann, Baz, Romeo and Juliet see Romeo and Juliet
Lynch, Finbar 144, 150
Mac Liammóir, Micheál 13–14
Macbeth 97, 100, 101, 190
BBC series production (1983) 255–6
Doran’s RSC stage-to-TV production (2001) 263–4, 282–3
Goold’s stage-to-TV production (2010) 271–5
Kurosawa’s Kumonosu-Jô see Kumonosu-Jô
Nunn’s stage-to-TV production (1979) 259–60, 282
Macbeth – continued
Polanski’s production (1971) 7, 13, 50, 51, 97, 233–9: animal imagery 237; blood and violence in 25, 50, 236, 237; casting 234–5 circle motif 238; commercial failure 51; music and soundtrack 233, 236–7, 239; psychological dimensions 233, 234; relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth 235–6; Ross character 237–8; setting 233; visual and aural motifs 236, 237; witches 233
Vitagraph production (1908) 25
Welles’s production (1948) 11, 33, 35, 37, 42, 62, 119: comparison with Olivier’s Hamlet 120; dramatic effects 227–8; genre conventions 119–20, 229; Macbeth/Lady Macbeth scene 231–2; use of camera to convey meanings 230–2; use of pictorial method 228; and witches 227–9
male bonding 116, 171
McCarthy, Senator Joseph 36
McCown, Alec 170
McCurdy, Sam 272
McEnery, John 192, 197
McEwan, Geraldine 53
McKellen, Ian 121, 260
performance in Nunn’s TV King Lear 264–7
performance in Nunn’s TV Macbeth 260
Richard III see Richard III
McKern, Leo 261
MacLachlan, Kyle 224, 225
McLuhan, Marshall 222
Mandela, Nelson 277
Mankiewicz, Joseph, Julius Caesar (1953) 35–6
Manvell, Roger 28, 32, 42, 47, 175
match cut 201, 303
matte-shot 205, 303
Measure for Measure (BBC series production, 1979) 252
medium or mid shot 16, 27, 38, 70, 90, 91, 160, 170, 171, 172, 179, 209, 260, 275, 286, 303
medium-close shot 48, 49, 88, 244, 265, 268, 303
mercante di Venezia, II (1910) 65
Merchant of Venice, The
BBC series production 255
Nunn’s stage-to-TV production (2001) 260–1
Messina, Cedric 253
Met Live in HD, The 89
metacinematic 126, 127, 165, 167, 169, 184, 216, 222, 303
metadrama 33, 303
metatheatrical 57, 85, 135, 149, 164, 167, 216, 249, 257, 303
metonymy 29, 33, 41, 120, 126, 129, 176, 187, 208, 224, 229, 270 303
Metz, Christian 7
mid shot see medium or mid shot
Midsummer Night’s Dream, A
BBC series production (1981) 254
Edzard’s Children’s (2001) 64–5
Hall’s production (1969) 46–7
Hoffman’s production (1999) 57, 152–7: Bottom character 57, 135, 153, 154; casting 152; characterization 153; dialogue 156; fairyland wood scenes 57, 156–7; Hoffman’s vision 153; music 154–5, 156; Titania/Bottom scene 154–5, 157
Noble’s production (1996) 56–7, 135, 144–51: allusions to childhood fictions and films 60, 146; comedy-producing
Index

Midsummer Night's Dream,
A – continued
mechanisms 135; eroticism in 144, 145–6, 147–8; mediated through young boy’s dream 60, 144–6, 149, 150–1; music 123–4; stage setting for forest scenes 148–9
Reinhardt/Dieterle’s production (1935) 29–30, 98
Vitagraph production (1909) 25–6
Miller, Jonathan 37, 253–4, 255, 259, 261
Mirren, Helen 71–2, 74–5, 121
mise-en-scène 6, 9, 26, 102, 103, 107, 121, 148, 167, 229, 233, 237, 249, 251, 303
modes
filmic 99–103
periodizing 104–10
realistic 96–8
theatrical 85–95
montage 6, 66, 77, 101, 116, 154, 200, 201, 222, 231, 233, 251, 254, 271, 303
Morricone, Ennio 202
Morris, Mary 249
Moshinsky, Elijah 253, 254
motif 42, 101, 177, 178, 195, 202, 202, 210, 233, 236, 238, 239, 303
Much Ado About Nothing
Branagh’s production (1993) 10, 16–17, 55–6, 70, 97, 116, 118, 135, 136–43; Beatrice/Benedick relationship 56, 137–9; camerawork 16, 139, 141; casting 98, 137; comedy-producing mechanisms and comic moments 135, 139–40; dialogue 136; genre conventions 116, 118, 138–9; Hollywood codes 137–8, 138–9; influence of Zeffirelli 54, 137; location 55, 137–8; music 137, 138, 142–3; ‘overhearing’ scenes 139–4; treatment of Claudio/Hero 141–3
Whedon’s production (2012) xiii, 79–81, 118: location setting, 79–80; film noir influence, 79, 80; fine comedy, 80–1; genre conventions, 118–9
multiple camera approach in small-screen shooting 263, 282
multiplex cinemas 52
Murnau, Friedrich
Nosferatu 26, 27, 212
Murray, Bill 225
musicals 56, 59, 63, 64, 97, 111, 115, 120, 143, 183
narrative film 3, 6, 7, 11, 15, 14, 24, 54, 55, 75, 78, 103, 113, 123, 126, 139, 141, 146, 164, 174, 182, 202, 220, 222, 231, 268, 270, 303
National Theatre 46, 50, 86, 193, 298
nature 38, 46, 47, 48, 69, 72, 96, 101–2, 116, 129, 207, 262, 266
Neil, Hildegard 49
Nesbitt, James 78
New York Shakespeare Festival 85
Newton, Robert 166
Nielsen, Asta 26–7
Nineties 51–61
Noble, Adrian, A Midsummer Night’s Dream see Midsummer Night’s Dream, A
Noh drama 101, 124
non-diegetic sound 77, 155, 205, 236, 304
Nosferatu 26, 27, 212
Nri, Cyril 279
NT Live 89, 93, 95
Index

Nunn, Trevor 46, 259–61
   RSC stage-to-TV *Antony and Cleopatra*, 259
   RSC stage-to-TV *King Lear* 264–7
   RSC stage-to-TV *Macbeth* 259–60, 282
   RNT stage-to-TV *The Merchant of Venice* 260–1
   RSC stage-to-TV *Othello* 260
   stage-to-TV productions 259–61
   *Twelfth Night* (1996) 56

Old Vic 45, 192, 193
Olivier, Laurence 9, 40, 45, 46, 100, 121
   cinematic style of Shakespeare films 174
   and filmic mode 101
   first role in Shakespeare film 32
   grasp of differing conventions 33, 115
   *Hamlet* see *Hamlet*
   *Henry V* see *Henry V*
   in *King Lear* stage-to-TV production (1983) 261–2
   in *Othello* (1965) 86–7
   *Richard III* see *Richard III*
   and Second World War 162
   in Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* 45
   ‘Olivieresque’ Shakespearean
   cinematic style 174
   open wide 8, 304
Ornstein, Bud 194
Orwell, George 187
Othello
   BBC series production (1981) 254
   Burge’s production (1965) 86–7
   Nunn’s stage-to-TV production (1990) 260
   Parker’s production (1995) 57–8
   Welles’s production (1952) 7, 10, 13, 34–5, 37, 42, 101
   Yutkevich’s production (1955) 38
   overhead shot see crane/overhead shot

Pacino, Al 65, 66, 67
   pan/panning shot 116, 185, 194, 195, 202, 256, 282, 304
Papp, Joseph 85
Parfitt, David 52
Parfitt, Judy 49
Parker, Oliver, *Othello* (1995) 57–8
Pasternak, Boris 42
PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) 251, 258, 299
Pennington, Michael 49, 91
   periodizing mode 77–84, 104–10, 115
Pfeiffer, Michelle 152, 157
Pickford, Mary 29
   pictorial approach, and televised
   Shakespeare 253–4
   pictorial stage realism 23
Pinter, Harold 48
   *Platoon* 116, 172
   plot elements 114–17
   ‘poetic’ approaches of filmic mode 103
Polanski, Roman, *Macbeth* see *Macbeth*
   ‘positioning the audience’ 112
Postlethwaite, Pete 199, 201
POV (point of view) 125, 139, 142, 147, 150, 170, 171, 179, 208, 210, 215, 217, 220, 230, 231, 238, 268, 269, 304
Powell, Dick 30
Preminger, Otto 212
   prestige of Shakespeare for BBC TV 281, 286
   producer role 286–7
   proscenium arch 5, 24, 85, 89, 93, 205, 206, 304
Index

Rackham, Arthur 145, 146
Rakoff, Alvin 252, 253
reaction shot 11, 29, 139, 171, 268, 285, 304
realistic mode 96–8, 100, 102, 103
and televised Shakespeare 252–3
Redgrave, Vanessa 78, 79
Reeves, Keanu 137
Reinhardt, Max 29–30, 46, 98, 101, 152
Rembrandt 254
‘Renaissance look’ 37, 193
Renaissance Theatre Company (RTC) 53, 169, 262, 290

*Richard III* 160
BBC series production (1983) 256, 257
Keane’s production (1912) 24, 26
Loncraine/McKellen production (1995) xiv, xv, xvii, 58–9, 77, 105, 106, 109, 181–8: casting 182; characterization 182–3; cinematic approach 107, 182; contrasted with Olivier’s production 182–3; cutting of text 181; death of Richard scene 188; and gangster genre 115, 187–8; genre conventions 58–9, 115, 118, 184; initial three-minute sequence 183–4; music 186; periodized setting 107–9; portrayal of Richard 186, 187; 1930s setting 58, 107, 108, 115, 181
Olivier’s production (1955) 34, 37–8, 58, 121, 174–80: camerawork 160–1, 174; coronation scene 176; difficulties in bringing to screen 175; music 175, 178–9; Richard’s addressing of audience 37–8, 177; Richard’s death scene 180; seduction of Lady Anne scene 177, 178; starting and ending of film with crown image 175–6; use of shadows 177–8
Richardson, Ian 46
Rigg, Diana 46, 49, 261
Ripper, Michael 179
Rix, Oliver 92
Robards, Jason, Jr 49
Rockwell, Sam 57
Rogers, Ginger 120
romantic comedies 111, 117, 118, 138
*Romeo and Juliet*
BBC series production (1978) 252, 253
Castellani’s production (1954) 34, 36–7
Cukor/Thalberg’s production (1936) 30–1, 32
Luhrmann’s production (1996) 11, 55–6, 191, 199–206: as an item on TV news programme 200, 204; association of water with lovers 203; box-office success 55–6; camerawork 201–2; cross motif and Christian iconography 201–2; death scene 203–4; dialogue 204–5; Friar Laurence’s ‘vision’ 202–3; locations 10, 106, 199; Mercutio’s death scene 205–6; music 202, 204; parodying previous film styles 199–200, 201–2; periodized setting 106; ruined proscenium theatre arch setting 199, 205–6; title 201
Romeo and Juliet – continued
Zeffirelli’s Old Vic production (1960) 45, 192–3
Zeffirelli’s production (1968) xiv, 11, 44, 45, 55, 56, 97, 121, 137, 191, 192–8: casting 194; changes in visual style in second half of film 196; dialogue 195; locations 194; ‘look’ and cinematic style of Zeffirelli 194–5; motif of hands 195; preference of action over dialogue and non-verbal devices used 195–6
Rooney, Mickey 30
Rothwell, Kenneth 23, 26, 28, 29, 53, 237, 258
Roundhouse 49, 87, 88, 258, 263, 264, 287
Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) 5, 45–9, 52, 71, 89, 144, 259, 260, 263, 264, 267, 271, 277, 278, 279, 281, 290, 299
RSC Live Stage-to-Cinema Productions 90–2
Russell, Ian 93–5
Ryecart, Patrick 253
Saire, Rebecca 253
samurai film genre 123
Scales, Prunella 253
Scarface 118
scenography 10, 304
science fiction films 120, 183
Scott, Ridley 60, 61
screwball comedy 80, 138, 140
Seager, Chris 270, 283
Sharrock, Thea 276
‘Shakespeare for the art houses’ 44
Shakespeare, William 35, 121, 260
name of 121
use of generically mixed style 112
Shearer, Norma 30, 193
Shentall, Susan 37
Shepard, Sam 62, 221, 225
Sher, Antony 264, 289
Sherin, Edwin 85
Shostakovich, Dmitri 42, 47
shot/reverse shot 16, 67, 85, 94, 139, 141, 147, 170, 176, 202, 205, 209, 252, 261, 304
Shylock 65, 66, 67, 261
silent films 21–7
Silent Shakespeare DVD anthology 24, 65
Simpson, Wallis 182
single-camera approach 280, 282
single location shooting 263, 280, 284, 287
Sixties/Seventies 40–50
slam-zoom 150, 200, 202, 304
small-screen Shakespeare 34, 241–80
Smith, Maggie 183
smoking xv
Smoktounovski, Innokenti 41
sound bridge 184, 254, 270, 304
Soviet Union 50, 108, 110
space of movie screen 9–11
Spielberg, Steven 119
Squire, William 249
stage
differences between film and 3–4, 12, 32
see also theatre
stage conventions 6, 134
stage-to-cinema productions 5, 81, 89–95, 290
stage-to-TV productions 258–80
stairways 80, 212, 264
star system 28, 32
Steadicam 16, 142, 154, 304
Stewart, Patrick 121, 259–60, 267–8, 271–6
Stiles, Julia 225
Stone, Oliver 116, 172
stop-motion shooting 24, 304
Index

Stride, John 193, 233
Sturges, Preston 80, 116
stylistic approach, and televised Shakespeare 254–7
subjective camera shots 16, 230, 231, 238, 305
Suzman, Janet 259
Schwarzenegger, Arnold 120
take 4, 11, 16, 85, 196, 221, 222, 225, 231, 232, 255, 256, 305
Taming of the Shrew, The
BBC series production (1980) 254
Taylor’s production (1929) 28–9
Zeffirelli’s production (1966) xiv, 44, 45, 97, 118, 137, 193, 194
Tate, Sharon 234
Taylor, Elizabeth 44, 118, 193
Taylor, Sam, The Taming of the Shrew (1929) 28–9
Taymor, Julie 100
The Tempest (2010) 71–5
television Shakespeare 245–6, 258–80
BBC-TV History play series (1960) 246–50
BBC-TV series (1978–85) 251–9
Tempest, The
British Clarendon Film Company (1908) 24, 100–1
Taymor production (2010) 71–5
Tennant, David 89, 92, 267, 268, 269, 270, 281
test screenings 5–6, 8, 63, 197, 286
text, Shakespeare
cutting of in films 14, 44, 45, 68, 76–7, 82, 102, 116, 163, 181, 204, 220
and filmic mode 99–100
and realistic mode 98
Thalberg, Irving 30–1
Thames TV 259
theatre
and actors 3–4, 9–11
and audiences 5, 6
differences between film and 3–4, 9–10
see also stage
theatrical mode 85–95
themes 117–19
Thirties 28–31
Thompson, Emma 56, 118, 136, 137, 139, 140, 141
thrillers 111, 119, 188, 212
Throne of Blood see Kumonosu-Jô
thrust stage 5, 89, 92, 305
time-lapse photography 154, 206, 236, 305
Titus Andronicus
BBC series production (1985) 257
Taymor’s production (1999) 59–61, 105
tracking shot 101, 116, 164, 168, 172, 173, 305
tragedies 190–1 see also Hamlet; King Lear; Macbeth; Othello; Romeo and Juliet
translation xiv–xv
Troughton, Patrick 179
Tutin, Dorothy 261
Twelfth Night
Branagh’s stage-to-TV production (1988) 262–3
Nunn’s production (1996) 56
twenty-first century Shakespeare on film 62–82
Twentieth Century Fox 32, 200
two-shot 142, 179, 235, 248, 249, 252, 254, 273 305
Tynan, Kenneth 50, 193, 233
‘un-American activities’
Committee 36
Index

Venora, Diane 219, 225
verbal imagery 12, 15
verité documentary shooting approach 36, 77, 282
Vermeer, Hans 254
Vincze, Ernie 264, 282
Vining, Edward 26
Visconti, Luchino 193, 194, 197
visual imagery 15
Vitagraph Company of America 24–5

Walter, Harriet 264, 289
Walton, William 162, 167, 168, 174, 175, 178, 207
war films 115, 117
Warde, Frederick 26
Warner Brothers 24, 29, 30, 98, 135
Warner, David 46
Warner, Deborah 281
Washington, Denzel 136, 137
Watteau, Jean-Antoine 254
Wayne, John 120, 166
Welles, Orson 7–8, 26, 100, 103, 121, 223
Chimes at Midnight 7–8, 42–4, 97, 120, 172, 276
Citizen Kane 101, 126, 227
and filmic mode 101
Macbeth see Macbeth
Othello (1952) 7–8, 10, 13, 34–5, 37, 38, 101
Westerns 114, 116, 123, 164
Whedon, Joss, xiii
Much Ado About Nothing 79–81, 118
whip-pan 202, 305
White Heat 118, 188
Whiting, Leonard 192, 197
wide-shot 85, 90, 91, 92, 93, 95, 179, 205, 268, 270, 306
Wiene, Robert 27, 212
Wilder, Billy 33, 80, 212
Willems, Michèle 251, 254, 259
Williams, Robin 117, 215
Williamson, Nicol 49, 86, 88, 258
Willis, Susan 251, 253
Winter’s Tale, The (BBC series production, 1981) 256
wipe 201, 330, 306
Woo, John 59, 202
Wyler, William 164
Wyver, John 90, 263, 281–90
Yutkevich, Sergei, Othello 38

Zeffirelli, Franco xiv, 11, 37, 97, 136–7, 213, 253
cinematic style 195–6
Hamlet (1990) xiv, 27, 54–5, 97, 137, 216
Old Vic production of Romeo and Juliet (1960) 44, 192–3
Romeo and Juliet see Romeo and Juliet
The Taming of the Shrew (1966) xiv, 44–5, 97, 118
zoom shot 150, 165, 195, 200, 201, 202, 209, 232, 256, 304