Race, Cognition, and Emotion: Shakespeare on Film

Frederick Luis Aldama

New Wrappings

Like poor old King Lear, England’s Royal Shakespeare Company is “buffeted, homeless and feeling un-loved,” Alan Riding declares in The New York Times (Riding 2003, B1). With its London stage gone, its Stratford attendance at an all-time low, and fast slipping into massive debt, the Company, its new artistic director Michael Boyd has declared, needs to make “Shakespeare relevant to today’s audiences” (B5).

This aim is being achieved to a certain extent elsewhere, in television and film adaptations. While in recent times only Franco Zeffirelli and Roman Polanski managed to turn a significant box-office profit with their cinematic versions of Shakespeare, many in the film industry are now trying their hand at this. Indeed, Shakespeare was already present in celluloid in the initial stages of cinema, at the beginning of the 20th century, and has been the object of many filmic versions since

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then. But starting in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, there has been a sort of boom in art-house and mainstream studio productions devoted to the more or less literal reproduction of Shakespeare’s dramas or to the establishment of very imaginative, intertextual dialogues with them, also to varying degrees. Directors Michael Hoffman, Peter Greenaway, Al Pacino, Trevor Nunn, Baz Luhrmann, John Madden, Michael Radford, Greg Lombardo, Richard Loncraine, Gil Junger, Tom Stoppard, Julie Taymor, Michael Almereyda, Billy Morrisette, Tim Blake Nelson, James Gavin Bedford, Kenneth Branagh, and Oliver Parker, to name a few, have brought Shakespeare to large cinema audiences in new and exciting ways, and while doing so they have refashioned genres, created innovative visual and sound styles, and given new substance to Shakespeare’s characters.

These film adaptations have also been the object of scrutiny using a great variety of scholarly approaches. Postcolonial, multicultural, feminist, queer, and popular media studies now add their perspectives to the cinematic Shakespeare studies fold. At the same time, yesteryear’s evaluation criteria, such as “fidelity” to “original,” “good” vs. “bad” accents, and so on, no longer have currency and can no longer sustain the hierarchical divide between high and low brow culture concerning the way Shakespeare should be performed. As Russell Jackson remarks: “It is probably as much a mistake to ask whether ‘film’ can do justice to ‘Shakespeare’ as to reproach ‘Shakespeare’ with being inappropriate material for ‘film’” (2000, 9).

Alongside studies following the aforementioned approaches are inquiries focusing on issues of race. For example, in Shakespeare at the Cineplex Samuel Crowl (2003) explores how the social context of the O. J. Simpson murder trial influenced the way certain scholars interpreted Parker’s Othello: Iago as a stand-in for American race relations at the expense of the film’s complex exploration of interracial romance. Barbara Hodgdon reads Parker’s film as an allegory of America’s fear of and desire for inter-racial eroticism within a “white male viewer’s potentially racist, misogynistic specular economy” (2003, 91). Richard Burt (2002a) zeroes in on how “racial signifiers” are mediatized in Shakespeare filmic adaptations and how a hip “blackness” is made to circulate as a commodity in popular culture. In the work of bell hooks, a white elite uses filmic representations of African Americans, as those seen in Nelson’s Othello, as a means to control and contain race relations.

Those are but a few examples of the rich and varied scholarship that has sprouted up at the edges of this recent wave of filmic adaptations of Shakespeare’s oeuvre. Common to all this criticism is the assumption that it has pinpointed the central issues and the precise way in which viewers are “led” to understand and emotionally respond to the adaptations at hand. This supposition, of course, is always highly problematic and should not be taken
for granted. Also, not all approaches are equally valid, nor do they all yield results that are interesting and can be further built upon.

Here, I explore four Shakespearean adaptations from the point of view of four directors’ perceptions of race and ethnicity, and the reactions they seek to elicit in their audiences. In the course of this exploration, I also delve into the expression and perception of emotions and violence, as well as the ways behavior becomes comprehensible to us through the ascription of intentions, desires, beliefs, affects, and knowledge to our fellow humans (what is technically called “mental-state attribution” or “theory of mind”). For this purpose I apply analytical tools developed by cognitive neuroscience and narratology. Their usefulness for literary and filmic analyses is a fairly well established fact, but they are still far from being fully identified and utilized.¹

In what follows, I take stock of Oliver Parker’s Othello (1995), Tim Blake Nelson’s O (2001), James Gavin Bedford’s Street King (2002), and Uli Edel’s King of Texas (2002). Each of these directors uses the generic codes and conventions of contemporary cinema—time, language, imagery, sound, perspective, editing, and so on—to prime, cue, and trigger a number of determinate cognitive and emotive responses in their audiences. But these narrative techniques are reshaped in their hands, both stylistically and thematically, to give a powerful rendition of Shakespeare’s stories of racial and social conflict. Thus, they better address an audience presumably conditioned by a pervasive multiplex/televisual environment. My aim is to show how these directors seek this result.

New Directions

In Parker’s Othello we can better understand the addition of a prologue and of an epilogue if we see how this procedure is used to frame the story and to organize the time-flow in order to emphasize the film’s worldview. In Bedford’s Street King we can better understand the re-schematizing of “Richard III” if we see how it serves the director’s purpose to create a de-romanticized representation of Chicano gang life in East L.A.² In Nelson’s O we can better understand the role played by a systematic accumulation of details if we see how this method is used to show the protagonist’s psychological transformation without suppressing the audience’s feelings of empathy towards him³ and without pushing the viewer past the cortical and subcortical emotive thresholds, a move that would presumably deprive the audience of a cathartic pay-off.

But before going further into this, I wish to turn briefly to several notions discussed by Per Persson in his Understanding Cinema. These notions, drawn from neuroscience, refer to those cognitive-emotional dispositions present in all human beings that serve us to stabilize and make meaning of
the phenomenal world by guiding our "encoding of information," infusing "coherence to the incoming stimuli," and structuring "the experience" (2003, 13). It is these dispositions that allow us also to reconstitute and make meaning out of memories and dreams, to feel intellectual or emotional empathy, and to reason, explain, and predict. In fact, they are the organic bases by which all our intellectual and emotional states come to be.

All the choices that a director makes, from script through shooting to final editing, are ultimately choices about how she conceives the spectator as the receptor of the filmic stimuli she has created, and about how she wishes to guide the spectator in his mental process of assembling the film's fragments into a coherent whole by encoding and classifying the images and sounds (establishing mood, filmic genre, and so on), identifying latent as well as patent meanings, and structuring sequences in the development of the plot. Indeed, it is the director's sense of the other and of herself (thus also of herself as spectator) that will orient her work both intellectually and technically, and that will project on the spectator's mind (following a similar process of empathy) a distinctive mood concerning the film as a whole. As Persson elaborates,

meaning emerges out of the interaction between a disposition-equipped spectator and the film text. Just as in non-discursive realms, meaningful experience is preceded by active mental processing by the spectator. Dispositions and processes of understanding transform, abstract, and add to the text to such an extent that we may talk about creative and constructive processes. (Persson 2003, 23)

Persson distinguishes several levels in these dispositions and processes, according to the manner in which the film's narrative techniques cue, prime, and trigger various types of "cognitive-emotional reactions and meaning construction efforts" (2003, 43). For instance, the first levels of meaning-making arise from the film's basic formal effects, such as the synchronization (or not) of moving imagery with sound patterns. Persson's classification of levels is as follows:

- Level 1: "Entering the domain of representation or mimesis, spectators start to extract meanings by processes of perception, which refers to the means by which experience of objects, events, sounds, tastes, and so on, are constructed by the perceptual systems" (Persson 2003, 28). Here, for example, lines, shades, and surfaces conjoin as the mind processes and interprets them as being a person, a dark sky, a goat, a lamp, and so on.

- Level 2: "At a deeper level, perceptual meanings become more sophisticated and abstract. Spectators may recognize and identify a character across different appearances in a film ('X in this shot is the same person as the one in the previous shot')" (Persson 2003, 29). This relates to recognizing and
categorizing entities and events on the basis of causality, time-frame, and behavior schemas that inform how we recognize and experience cues in a given scene (triggering a threat and/or an intimacy response, for example).

• Level 3: "An understanding of the situation of the referential meaning involves yet another level of processes that aim at constructing a mental model of the situation. . . . Much of the meaning produced here is tied to characters and their behavior" (Persson 2003, 30). For Persson, this is the level where we understand personality traits and patterns of behavior, in terms of folk psychology, through the filmic activation of our own stored behavioral prototypes and schemas: perceived actions and reactions, goals, beliefs, emotions, for example, that we attribute to such and such a character.

• Level 4: "The understanding of situations and the establishment of temporal, causal, and spatial relations between situations enable scene and plot summarizations" (Persson 2003, 32). This allows one to grasp parts of the whole before knowing the whole but progressing toward that full knowledge, and therefore to "find more symbolical, associational, conceptual, and metaphorical understandings that transfer the literal meanings of motifs, events, and objects established on lower levels to a higher level" (32). Persson relates this to different types of editing that invite the spectator to make conceptual parallels between the different segments of discourse (camera–narrator's narrating techniques) and story (plot, characters, events).

• Level 5: "Interpretative level," defined as that step we make from a globally thematic understanding to one of aesthetic evaluation.

Of course, the combinations in which directors may use the different narrative techniques to induce, prepare, and initiate these five levels of cognitive–emotional dispositions are potentially infinite. But from the basics, like establishing eye–line–matches or creating a consistent music score and/or dialogue for the spectator to build a continuous and coherent sense of space and time to the more sophisticated alternations of backgrounded and foregrounded images, for instance, all such techniques, though innumerable, are not arbitrary; if they are to accomplish their mission they must, as Persson states, "exploit, trigger, and 'tap into' the structure of joint visual [and aural] attention" (2003, 100). For example, by using different frames (close up, medium, long shot) the director aims at manipulating what Persson identifies as the "spectator's personal-space dispositions" (141). Thus, the director knows that a close-up tends to produce in the viewer an intense sense of immersion into a personal space, while a long shot may have an estrangement effect and thereby tend to appeal to the audience's "real-world expectations of personal space" (110) pointing in the opposite direction. In what follows we shall see how some of these techniques and visual clues work on the spectator's meaning-making faculties.
Othello as Archetype

In Oliver Parker’s *Othello* a prologue-like sequence unfolds as follows:

- Classical orchestra fills sound channel with deep timbre of tuba smoothed over by (violent) string notes (composer, Charlie More).
- The camera-narrator’s visual uses a long shot to introduce and frame the setting: a vaguely discernible canal banked by ornately architectured waterfront mansions. (If familiar with the play’s epoch, the viewer infers the place to be wealthy Venice at the height of its mercantile existence.)
- A gondola passes from screen right to screen left and then toward the audience, revealing two men rowing (both wearing white shirts and black leather vests) and a man (identifiable as of African descent) with a woman (identifiable as of European white descent); her head rests on his shoulder.
- As the gondola moves into the foreground and off screen left, the black figure holds up to his face a mask bearing signs of sadness (mouth turned down and a tear).

The camera-narrator’s visual (the buildings, gondola, sartorial wear) and the dominant sound (Charlie More’s majestic composition) bespeak grandeur. Other meaning-making processes are also set off: the two figures appear as a couple having recently experienced intimacy and returning from or going to a masquerade ball. This is for the moment a conjecture only, one that excites the spectator’s curiosity and therefore brings expectancy with respect to things to come. From this a larger picture begins to emerge: one in which the viewer starts grasping the deceptive nature of appearances. This will become even more concrete when the spectators meet Desdemona and Othello—actors whose morphology is similar but not an exact match to the figures just shown in the gondola.

With this opening sequence the audience is brought gradually into a macro level of interpretation (Persson’s level 5), where the images may be read as a self-reflexive cinematic gesture pointing to illusion and artifice. This is further emphasized by the orchestra sounds of “classical” music and by the way Parker inter-cuts the title “OTHELLO,” writing it with an ornamental font in white and setting it against a black background, and adding a splash of red inside the first O. The music, the lettering, and the spilling of red from the initial O are meant also to attune the audience to a self-reflexive revision of the “classic” Shakespearean play.

The story proper begins as follows:

- Long shot of a woman’s figure (dressed in a yellow, white, and black dress and with a diaphanous veil over her face) stepping out of a covered gondola with curtain.
The camera-narrator pulls back to a larger descriptive frame to depict the figure stepping off the gondola and walking briskly through a deserted plaza. This move includes a dog and garbage scattered on the ground (a contrast to the opulent prologue sequence).

The camera-narrator cuts to a medium close shot of a male figure (Kenneth Branagh) dressed in off-white and brown leather and talking intimately with another person (those familiar with the play will infer that this is Rodrigo). Later, once this first figure is identified as Iago, the color of his clothing takes on added significance: ironically, the less distinctively clad character (neither black nor white), the one who stands out least, will prove to be the most decisive of them all.

The music picks up in beat and rhythm and so, too, the tempo of shots increases: cut from woman walking briskly to rich interior space filled with figures dressed in stately and official garb discussing the war against the Turks in Cyprus; then cut to interior of church and the appearance of a black and white figure.

The camera takes pause with a medium shot of a black man and a white woman—the film’s central protagonists. For most cinemagoers, the actors will be easily recognizable as Laurence Fishburne and Irène Jacobs.

The camera-narrator cuts to a close-up of a black, tattooed hand as it places a ring on a sharply contrastive lily-white finger. It then pulls back to a medium shot showing the figure the audience will identify as Othello at the church kissing the woman who will be identified as Desdemona.

Once the identification of Desdemona and Othello is anchored in the viewer’s mind, he or she recalls the “Prologue” sequence almost automatically and compares body types, gestures, costumes between Irène Jacobs and the woman who appeared in the uncovered gondola, and between Laurence Fishburne and the black anonymous figure. This comparison and lack of exact match between the figures allows Parker to subtly point to the more general occurrence of tragedy (sadness inscribed in the mask) in mixed race romance—Othello and Desdemona’s story is only a sliver of a widespread malady but a sliver that becomes archetypical because it is narrated under the impetus of an aesthetic will to make it permanently memorable.

While this establishing sequence will be working at the back of the spectator’s mind as the rest of the story unfolds and as more and more information about characters (perceived behavior and inferred psychological states) accumulates, so, too, the audience’s meaning-making processes will become more layered and sophisticated. A few such crystallizing moments come readily to mind. The camera-narrator’s framing and character description cue us to interpret Iago’s behavior as born of his villainous disposition set loose by his jealousy for Casio, his deep envy of the respect Othello commands as a
warrior, and the fervent love Othello and Desdemona feel for each other. As the film unfolds, the camera-narrator complicates this initial interpretation and leads the viewer to infer from other Iago’s gestures and acts that he is both fearful of and desirous for Othello as a sexualized Other. The end sequence is particularly telling in this respect: the camera-narrator frames Iago reaching passionately for Othello as the tragic hero exhales his final breath.

An O Between Presence and Absence

There is a clear “will to style” in Tim Blake Nelson’s high school pop cultural O, from his use of a hip-hop music score (with rappers such as Roscoe, Black Star, Crush, and Outkast) to the way his camera-narrator avoids a more theatrical approach, such as Parker’s, and renders a resolutely contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare’s Othello in all matters concerning the plot, the characters, the events, and the settings.4

Nelson proceeds by contrasts between the underlying Shakespearean tragedy and the film’s urgent present-day preoccupations. In his adaptation, the play is in the background as a constant, phantasmal presence, that is to say, a present/absent referral and reference that never get in the way of a truly cinematic narration.

Nelson contemporizes Othello, setting it at Palmetto Academy in Charleston, South Carolina, where high-schoolers listen to hip-hop and sport a MTV sartorial look; but if the story seems to simply unfold much like that of Shakespeare’s tragedy, it has clearly an American twist. In O, Odin James (Mekhi Phifer) is a young African American basketball star and a brilliant student whose life ends tragically because of jealousy, drugs, and deep-seated racial prejudices (both external and internalized). The school’s basketball team coach, Duke Goulding (Martin Sheen), awards Odin the VIP player medal and expects him to bring the team to glory in their upcoming season. Fellow player Hugo Goulding (Josh Hartnett), the coach’s son, is jealous and hateful of Odin, not only because of his talents and success, but because Odin doesn’t acknowledge him and instead showers praise on Michael Casio (Andrew Keegan). To make matters worse in Hugo’s eyes, Odin (the only African American in the Palmetto Academy) has also won the love of the white popular girl at school, Desi Brable (Julia Stiles). The film unfolds showing how Hugo deceives and manipulates Odin (along with others like Rodrigo), to destroy his relationship with Desi, his happiness, and eventually his life. A devious, resentful, drug-packed, scheming and maneuvering evil-doer, Hugo rather easily drives Odin to murder Desi in a jealousy-crazed, drug-induced fit and to commit suicide.

While Nelson’s high-school revision follows closely the tragic plot of Othello, there is much in it that differs from the play. In part this is what
makes the film engaging: our minds are continually working to see what is and what is not similar, what corresponds to Shakespeare's concerns and what has been added or subtracted to convey Nelson's worldview. For example, Othello's short temper and frequently uncontrolled fits of violence are part of his natural personality; these traits, translated into Odin, are artificially induced by the use of steroids and quickly result in abrupt swings of mood and murderous anger and rage.

Villainy in LA

Not only by rendering a plot contemporary, but also by conferring it on a certain rhythm and duration in the editing process, by framing, characterization, sound, special effects, and many other means, a director can guide and even abruptly re-direct the spectator's meaning-making dispositions. Among those means is also the inscription of the movie in a certain genre, for instance, the film noir. Such is the case of Street King, director James Bedford's adaptation of Richard III, where the gangster film mode and the Shakespearean tragedy are made to work in harmony and tension.

Shakespeare's Richard III frames and organizes the story that takes place within a contemporary Chicano gangbanger setting and is about the rise and fall of a Chicano drug mafia in East LA. The film begins with an epigraph-like sequence:

• Bedford's camera-narrator presents us first with only an urban soundscape: train and traffic noise along with hip-hop rhythms and beats.

• The camera-narrator's visual channel then frames in medium long shot a graffiti portrait of a man wearing a styled look (Elizabethan white furled collar) that the spectator automatically maps against stored schemas of the way people dressed from a much earlier period in history (and presumably identifies as a portrait of Shakespeare).

• Quick succession of jump-cuts follow as the camera-narrator depicts the graffiti make-over of this portrait.

• The end result: the words "Plata" (Spanish for silver and for money) and "Plomo" (Spanish for lead and for bullets) appear, followed by the letters "LCN," a red baseball cap, a bandanna, dark sunglasses, a beauty mark, and a golden cross earring that now adorn the portrait. (Rikki will define "plomo" and "plata" later as living and surviving by "bullets or bribes.")

Richard Burt identifies this initial sequence as Bedford's collapsing of low (street) and high (Shakespeare) brow culture, turning upside down preconceptions of "cultural centers and margins" (2002, 16). In Burt's view, this is director Bedford announcing that Shakespeare is neither "squarely on the side of hegemonic, dominant culture" nor on the side of the "counter-hegemonic, resistant subculture" (16). This is surely hyperbole.
Perhaps a more level-headed interpretation is that the viewer is watching the camera-narrator announce the film’s double function: to overcome the limitations of the formulaic gangster story and simultaneously to reach beyond the conventions that assume absolute rights in judging what is or is not a “faithful” adaptation of a Shakespearean tragedy.

Bedford follows this initial sequence with a prologue that establishes further how the audience is to engage emotionally and to interpret cognitively the story he is about to tell. A voice-over (later identified with Jon Seda as Rikki) describes the division of gangs in Northern and Southern California. As Seda narrates, the camera-narrator describes this division of gangs in a graphic, cartoon-like style, presenting California in white outline against a black backdrop and with a red line separating the “Norteños” from “La Eme” of the South. The use of cartoonish drawings is self-reflexive and pokes fun at the viewer’s expectation that the film will teach the audience something real about gang life, as if a movie such as this could somehow play the role of a pedagogical and/or ethnographic device. After, Seda’s voice-over shifts to an autobiographical style as the camera-narrator cuts to a sequence shot through a grainy filter: little boy handed from one woman to another by the roadside; then, the same boy in the back of an open-bed truck parting in the opposite direction. The voice-over explains that this is Seda’s recollection of the moment his mother handed him over to someone else when he was a little boy. The camera-narrator then cuts to a sequence (also grainy and sepia hued) of three boys (two older and one younger) spraying graffiti on a boulder. Again, the voice-over guides the spectator’s reading. This is a pre-pubescent Rikki, now in East LA after having spent his early childhood in Fresno. The other figures are his brothers (Eduardo and Jorge). Their gang affiliation is also mentioned.

The camera-narrator moves from the prologue sequences to the story proper, throwing the audience in media res: figures smashing up a methadone laboratory situated in the middle of a junkyard. Here, a man talks directly to the camera and is easily identified by the viewer as the narrator heard before as voice-over. This man states: “Oh yeah, I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Rikki Ortega, this is my story.” After the methadone laboratory is destroyed and Rikki kills one of its workers, he concludes, “So you might be wondering what’s going on…. We’re all looking to move up in life. That’s the American way. We ain’t no fucking leaf blowers.”

Rikki has been a victim of physical abuse by his older brother and of abandonment as a child by a mother he addresses by the affectionate term “Jefecita” at the same time that he describes her as tough and uncaring. Like everybody else, in and out of the film world, he needs and he seeks love and recognition. Nevertheless, in all his endeavors he proves to be an irre-
deemable villain. In the scene where he is courting Anita, he tells her: “I don’t sleep. I’m with no one. Inside I feel like a child, un niño. You’re all I think of. Duele mucho. It’s like a stone crushing something. Ayúdame.” However, once Anita leaves, Rikki turns to the camera and in a direct address says triumphantly, “Not bad for a first day.” By portraying Rikki’s actions as increasingly violent and manipulative, by pushing to the limit of the audience’s empathetic threshold, Bedford exposes the struggle for power in all its nakedness.

The strategy Rikki uses to seduce Anita is cold-heartedly devious, of course, but it is not based simply on empty words. Anita is not blind to reality: she simply and naively believes she will be able to make it conform to her wishes. In The Mind and its Stories, Hogan discusses how most societies establish romantic union as “the prototype eliciting condition for happiness” (2003, 244). He continues,

This is no doubt partially based on a biological given, the sex drive. But it is also the result of human society. After all, cross-culturally, romantic union is far more than sexuality. It is a matter of living together, of sharing intimacy and affection, and of having children. It is, in other words, a very complex aspiration, and one that arises socially, even though it arises universally. (Hogan 2003, 244)

Rikki knows how to manipulate this aspiration to his sole advantage. Born on the wrong side of the racial and socioeconomic track in a society ruled by profit and therefore based on oppression and exploitation, Rikki is not a capitalist; he does not own means of production; he is an ersatz of a capitalist, a member of the underworld enriched by the laundering of money, peddling of drugs, selling of stolen goods and prostituting of bodies. And simply to arrive at his position of power and to hold onto it, he has to be ruthless in all his dealings with all human beings, including his whole family, and to kill and risk being killed.

*Street King* works in the final instance because it makes relevant Shakespeare’s *Richard III* to our present lives. This picture, situated in “glocalized” LA (see Burt 2003), is a tragedy that concerns not only its underworld protagonists, but all the victims of the same self capitalist system that produces that underworld and throws it into an ever increasing number of people, while rushing about worldwide in a murderous frenzy (today most of all in the Middle East and Africa). Perhaps this is why Rikki’s death in the end feels tragic: not because we as viewers ever considered Rikki a hero or applauded his doings and his methods, but because we empathized with his struggle to overcome the odds and find fulfillment and happiness. Bedford shows that Rikki’s debacle is to a certain degree that of everybody today. And we as spectators keep our eyes riveted to the screen as Bedford’s film unrolls, feeling we understand this tragedy all too well because we share an aspira-
tion for a better tomorrow, and we know to what extent our attempts to fulfill it may be misdirected, painful, cruel, distorted, and ultimately barren.

Another Kingly Adaptation

Uli Edel’s film, *King of Texas*, is Shakespeare’s *King Lear* taking place in the 19th century, one year after the proclamation of the Republic of Texas. In its new guise in the Western film genre, it is still a story about power, greed, betrayal, and love. It is also a story about hate, murder, racism, lack of empathy, and literal and metaphorical blindness.

The film begins with an establishing shot that depicts the harmony of life as askew. The camera-narrator’s wide-angle shows a seemingly endless desert, a lone tree positioned to the frame’s left, and two bodies hanging from the tree; as the sequence unfolds, a man riding a horse approaches from the right of the frame. Even before the story proper begins, this prologue-like shot situates the coming events in a seemingly boundless land where the human figures are but specks. The sight of the hanging men is ominous and the land appears as a threatening expanse. The camera-narrator cuts to a long-medium shot of three men speaking Spanish. In this prologue sequence, Edel announces the film’s affiliation with a number of Westerns, including *The Good, The Bad, The Ugly*, and *The Wild Bunch*. Quickly and economically, he announces that whatever will follow will involve Mexicans, land barons, violence, and issues of property and territory. (The audience learns almost immediately thereafter that the figures along the horizon had come across the hanging bodies of fellow Mexicanos lynched by John Lear. Driven from their lands and left without means of subsistence, their compatriots had been forced to steal a cow from Lear to feed their families, a crime they paid for with their lives.) Such is the setting in which the tragedy will unfold.

The story proper begins with a long shot of a Spanish colonial-styled hacienda. The camera-narrator then gradually focuses on a wrought iron shaped “L” (looking like a cow-brand) over the gated entrance to the building. Informed by the opening credits, the viewer knows it stands for Shakespeare’s character, and will soon learn it also stands for John Lear, Edel’s revisioned Western “king.” As the camera-narrator takes its time depicting certain details and sights—the hacienda, its “L” brand, its massive and arid surroundings—the viewer is made to feel that much wealth has been amassed on such an inauspicious land. Then the camera-narrator’s dissolve to an interior shot portrays in a slight sepia hue a warm and silent environment that contrasts sharply with the bright outside takes. Here, the camera-narrator pans right over a topographic map on a yellowed parchment paper: “Rio Grande,” “Mexico,” and “Lear Ranch” (extending over most of the area) are identified. The camera-narrator pauses below the right corner of the map: a
gray, long-haired man wearing glasses is sitting at a desk writing. This introduces John Lear (Patrick Stewart), followed by the entrance of Claudia (Julie Cox). When the camera cuts to an outdoor shot, it shows many people dancing and celebrating the first anniversary of the Republic of Texas in the hacienda’s courtyard. It is in this space that the audience sees the arrival of Toribio Menchaca (Steven Bauer), a young Mexican landowner drawn towards Claudia, who has come to express his indignation at Lear’s decision to hang the cow thieves. When the camera-narrator returns to Lear’s study, it focuses once again on the big map on the wall and the sequence shows Lear dividing up his two hundred thousand acre property among his three daughters, each part to be allotted according to the magnitude of the love they profess for him, starting from the eldest to the youngest (Claudia). Here, the exterior ominousness spills into the interior. The spectator meets elder daughter Susannah (Marcia Gay Harden), and her husband, Tumlinson (Colm Meaney), as well as Rebecca (Lauren Holly) and her husband, Highsmith (Patrick Bergin). To viewers who remember Shakespeare’s play, it comes as no surprise to learn that John Lear proceeds to banish Claudia, who refuses to “perform” her love for him, and that he divides his enormous property between Susannah and Rebecca. Greedy and power-thirsty, the two sisters will in their turn banish their father and plot with Highsmith to expand their territories by the forceful takeover of the land owned by Menchaca, among other Mexicans. The failure of the two sisters to usurp Menchaca’s land, Lear’s eventual reconciliation with Claudia, her sorrowful death, and his own demise, are all fundamental events that follow very closely Shakespeare’s play while taking place and being performed according to the particular requirements of cinema.

As this bare bones summary already tells us, King of Texas is also an illustration of the paradigmatic sacrificial plot that Hogan characterizes as addressing “the conflict between the human need to consume nature and the ethical imperative to respect or revere nature” (2003, 199). Coherent too with the sacrificial plot generally, as analyzed by Hogan, is the fact that a sense of social harmony is restored only when John Lear learns to “value self-denial as reparation for greed and arrogance” (199). But then, of course, this epiphany occurs too late.

The viewer’s empathetic connection to Lear is a rollercoaster ride that culminates in the scene showing him dying alongside his youngest daughter. It breaks down as follows:

The camera-narrator shows Claudia frantically looking for her father during the battle. The wind becomes stronger and blows Lear’s hair wildly as he carries Claudia’s body outside the gates while men are shooting.
With Claudia’s body in his arms, Lear drops to his knees a few steps away from the hacienda’s gates.

A medium close shot shows him kissing her forehead. He holds a feather and says, “this feather stirs, she’s breathing; she’s alive . . . this is her breath. She’s alive.” Howling with pain, he looks up at the sky where an eagle flies. He laughs madly and then states, “she’s dead as the ground.” The sequence ends with the sound of an eagle’s screech, Lear falling to the ground, and dying beside his daughter.

The camera-narrator frames Lear and Claudia dead on the ground in a yin/yang head to foot position.

The film ends, as it began, with a panoramic shot. But Edel’s camera, while optically opening and closing the tragic cycle the same way, is now set to serve a new purpose. This time the image is not a bird’s eye view of a barren region and two corpses; it is the placid picture of a grassland and a stream, signaling life and promise, as seen through the eyes of a young man, Henry Westover’s son Thomas (Liam Waite). He is now in charge of the ranch and attends to his father (Roy Scheider), Lear’s old loyal friend, rendered blind with a red-hot iron by Suzannah, Rebecca, and Highsmith. Their partner in crime, Thomas’s elder brother Emmett (Matt Letscher), is dead, and so are Suzannah and Highsmith.

Interestingly, this tragedy is set in motion by a lack of empathy on John Lear’s part, that is, by a cognitive flaw that makes him persistently incapable of representing in his mind the “topography” of other people’s minds. Lear is undoubtedly intelligent, strong-willed, brave, and honest. But he does not possess the ability to put himself in the other person’s place, and therefore he cannot apply his powers of induction, deduction, and abduction to interpret adequately other people’s intentions, desires, beliefs, feelings, and emotions. A tragic victim of this deficit, he unleashes the criminal passions that Suzannah and Rebecca had been successfully restraining for years. Moved by greed, lust, hate, and the ambition to rule with absolute power over land and people; willing to go as far as to torture and nearly kill an old man to guarantee their success; forming a private army of mercenary men they despise as much and consider as expendable as the Mexican children, women and men they are ready to massacre and plunder and despoil of their lands, Suzannah and Rebecca turn out to be evil incarnate the moment John Lear cedes his property to them. No longer having to feign love or to obey even the rules of common decency, hospitality, and care, they rapidly become moral idiots and, worse, psychopathic murderers.

John Lear loses his mind when he experiences reality in synchronous empathy with the eagle he spots after the night storm; Suzannah and Rebecca become violent psychopaths when they stop lying and feigning
emotions. At the heart of the tragedy spectators recognize a cognitive deficit. The direct victims are, of course, the protagonists. But for the “chorus” in the background, the brown-skinned people who only a year ago were citizens of Mexico, it was a close call.

It's a Wrap

As we have seen, the directors of Othello, O, Street King, and King of Texas have each made their filmic adaptation of Shakespeare according to their technical cinematographic choices and their individual worldviews, while taking into account what they intuitively foresee as the spectator's reactions, seeking to guide them step by step. The study of the technical options and their effects on the viewer is a highly complex matter that no present theory has managed to describe and explain in a scientifically satisfactory way, and perhaps a satisfactory theory will never be within our reach. But this in no way means that no progress has been made.

It is true that the theoretical and empirical investigations concerning the production and reception of cinematographic fictional narratives are still in their infancy. But over the years the concepts, the taxonomies, and the questions asked have become more and more relevant, clear and delimited. And the progress achieved is very much the fruit of research and discussion in the fields of narratology, evolutionary psychology, and cognitive science. Indeed, these disciplines offer the possibility to identify more precisely among the many disparate phenomena that make up the viewer's cinematographic experience the ones that are verifiably central to the formulation of solid explanations and others that cannot be submitted to any interesting scrutiny. This is an important beginning that will certainly be followed by other encouraging results.

We have seen four different ways of treating the complex and emotionally conflicted relations of race and ethnicity. Each in some way seeks to relate Shakespeare's stories to consequential contemporary concerns, and to re-understand those contemporary concerns through the models provided by Shakespeare's plays. Othello stresses the sexual motifs that are obviously central to our modern self-understanding. O, too, takes up sexual issues, but in relation to the fundamental American traumas of high school dating and athletic competition. Street King sets out to universalize the dilemmas of ethnic minorities, while focusing on experiences that are literally shared only by a tiny percentage of viewers. Finally, King of Texas takes up the relation of sacrifice to familial and inter-ethnic divisions and resentments, while showing also how strong social bonds depend crucially on intersubjective phenomena such as empathy and "theory of mind" (i.e., our neurobiologically based capacity to understand others and ourselves in terms of mental states). In each case, the
director has managed to give new vibrancy to Shakespeare’s work—just what the Royal Shakespeare Company has, it seems, failed to do. The analytic tools of cognitive science and cognitive narratology allow us to understand just how they have achieved this and to appreciate their accomplishments, not only in their broad outline, but in their verbal and sensory details.

Notes

1 David Bordwell has worked tirelessly to guide film studies toward a narratological (and implicitly cognitive) approach. I think here of his 1985 published Narration in the Fiction Film, where he shows in a very detailed way how the audience transforms flashes and sounds that hit the senses into a coherent story. In Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies, a volume he co-edited with Noël Carroll, he strongly advocates the use of a cognitive and narratological approach to film studies. Among the most impressive recent studies applying cognitive science to literature is Hogan’s (2003b).

2 In Cognitive Science, Literature and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists, Patrick Colm Hogan discusses at length how film directors employ visuals (for instance, soft lighting we associate with affection) and sounds (sharp variations we associate with anger and/or quick tempo we link with the comic) that trigger a “sub cortical emotive arousal” (2003a, 176), as well as a cortical response (when we judge, for example, that what a given film is doing is fictional). Also, such means “affect our response to literature, film, and other arts just as they affect our responses to the natural world” (186).

3 M.R.I. machines have shown there is a neurological basis for empathy. In a study that measured activity in the brain regions that process pain, it was found that while the somatosensory cortex, where touch is perceived, was quiet when one partner in a couple watched the other experience pain, the springing into action of the emotional centers of that same watching partner indicated “that she was reliving the experience without the physical stimulus or sensation” (O’Connor 2004, D5). The most recent and most interesting research concerning empathy derives from the study of the mirror neuron system, a class of neurons discovered in the frontal cortex, about twelve years ago.

Works Cited


