Radical Reflexivity in Cinematic Adaptation:
Second Thoughts on Reality, Originality, and Authority

Though filmmakers and scholars have long celebrated meta-cinema, or reflexivity, as a radical and artistically sophisticated mode of cinema capable of rupturing the bourgeois "realism" of the mainstream or "Hollywood" film, a curious double standard often is applied to reflexive adaptations of literary texts.¹ In discussing the reflexivity of such non-adaptations as Godard's *Weekend* (1967) or Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003), commentators focus on the creators' edgy and knowing playfulness: "By seeing themselves not as nature's slaves but as fiction's masters, reflexive artists cast doubt on the central assumption of mimetic art—the notion of an antecedent reality on which the artistic text is supposedly modeled" (Stam 129). By casting doubt on the elemental assumptions upon which mimesis is based, in other words, these anti-foundationalist films shed their secondariness—their derivativeness. Films such as *Weekend*, or novels such as Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* or Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, are praised for their ability to critique dominant ideological and signifying codes.

In most studies of reflexive adaptations of literature, however, the films are said to be secondary to a different category of antecedent "reality," which is the source text and, often, its own superior reflexivity—whether we mean by this a play's metatheatricality, a novel's or poem's narrative reflexivity, or any source text's explicit recognition of its own constructedness. In a brief chapter on cinematic adaptations of reflexive literature, Robert Stam concludes rather simplistically that while the films often "incorporate certain reflexive devices, they do not metalinguistically dissect their own practice or include critical discourse within the text itself" (159). Moreover, reflexivity, when it occurs in cinematic adaptations of literature, is typically said to accommodate, or provide a visual parallel for, the reflexivity of the adapted text. For example, in one of the first and most influential essays on Shakespearean metacinema, Kenneth Rothwell argues that "In making the means of representation a subject of representation, film-makers have only mimicked their stage forebears" (211). Rothwell's claim reinforces several problematic ideas: first, that modes of reflexivity are identical across such different media as theater and film; second, that the Shakespeare play is always before the Shakespeare film in the sense that the so-called original text manages to anticipate all its potential metamorphoses in later readings, adaptations, and appropriations. The "original" thereby remains always superior.

The 1916 Thanhouser film of *King Lear*, directed by Ernest C. Warde and starring his father Frederick as the king, demonstrates well why what we might call the "accommodation argument" has proven so persuasive. The original opening of the film features the scholarly Warde in a Victorian library-like parlor. Cigar smoke clouding the air around him, he is
deeply engaged in a Shakespeare volume, when suddenly—and in anticipation of Olivier's famous opening to *Henry V* three decades later—he begins to dissolve into King Lear himself, just seconds before the opening title sequence. In this particular case of reflexive filmmaking, William Shakespeare figures less as the world's most famous playwright and more as the signifier of refined cultural taste in his reading audience. More important, though, is the film's framing argument for the cinema as a natural extension of the book, and for actors as readers of a different sort. The scene demonstrates well why Agnieszka Rasmus views metacinema and "distancing effect[s]" in Shakespeare adaptations as "a kind of bridge between the mysterious world of Shakespeare's plays and the world of a contemporary spectator" (142). Rasmus's bridge metaphor functions usefully here as a means of measuring how some adaptations use metacinematic techniques to connect the unique arts of literature and film. I would not argue with the assertion that in such cases as Warde's *King Lear* reflexive cinema tends merely to *accommodate*, even defer to, the source text.

What I wish to do in this essay, instead, is consider an alternate tradition of cinematic adaptations in which reflexivity is used not to forge connections between the source text and the adaptation but rather to sever them through metaphoric displacement and substitution. Such consideration might begin with the utterly simple point that not all instances of reflexivity operate according to the same principles or terms. Indeed, there is a fundamental difference between the typical reflexivity of an artistic text that claims to be original and one that is forced to acknowledge its derivation from another well-known text. Whereas the former's primary burden is reality itself, the latter's is the earlier text. When Shakespeare's Prologue to *Henry V*, for example, refers to the unworthiness of the "wooden O" that must somehow serve as the setting for a legendary international military conflict, he acknowledges what he perceives to be the inability of theater to measure up to reality (Prologue 13). Indeed, how could such a "cockpit hold / The vasty fields of France?" (Prologue 11-12). The key dualism in such metatheatrical passages reinforces a strict line between representation and reality. Such passages might therefore be called classic Aristotelian laments about the inability of art to hold the mirror up to nature. When a cinematic adaptation of a literary text turns inward upon itself however, this relatively simple Aristotelian dichotomy is either destabilized or prevented from emerging as relevant at all, being replaced by a series of complex intertextual relationships that essentially obliterate or at least render unimportant the category of the real.

Whereas the major dichotomy operative in the case of presumably original reflexive texts is *art and reality*, in the case of reflexive adaptations it is usually the *adaptation and the original*. In what ways does the substitution of terms impact the specific functions of reflexivity within individual adaptations? In what follows, I hope to show that reflexive film adaptations can do a great deal more than merely announce their own constructedness or mimicry of a source text's openly declared position vis-à-vis reality. In their most reflexive moments, these films also are capable of critiquing and then providing a substitute for the authority and relevance of the source text, which, in many ways, has become a more intimidating bogey than reality itself.
Near the end of *Scotland, PA*, Billy Morrissette's 2001 modern-language adaptation of *Macbeth*, the Hippies (weird sisters) are helping Mac (James LeGros) brainstorm solutions to the McDuff problem, when Hippie #2 (Timothy Levitch) exclaims, "I've got it, Mac should kill McDuff's entire family. That'll stop him." This prompts Hippie #3 (Andy Dick) to respond: "Oh yeah, that'll work... [sarcastically] about a thousand years ago."

Hippie #2: What is that supposed to mean?
Hippie #3: These are modern times. You can't go around killing everybody!

In this highly reflexive scene, the adaptation hardly just "mimics" *Macbeth*. In fact, the film lightly mocks and then rejects its source text, going so far as to suggest that textual precedents have become all but entirely irrelevant—both in the sense that modernity cannot accommodate medieval historical events, and that this particular *Macbeth* adaptation cannot, or is not willing to, accommodate certain major plot turns in Shakespeare's play. The ambiguity is signaled mainly by Hippie #3's "a thousand years ago," which demands to be read in two ways: first, it highlights *Macbeth*'s irrelevance by suggesting that the 400-year-old play seems no less than a thousand years old; the play is ancient, dated. Second, it bypasses any reference to the play whatsoever by referring to the historic murder of MakDuffe's wife and children which, according to Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles, occurred roughly a thousand years ago, in 1056. Is the reference here, then, to events recorded in Shakespeare's play, to Holinshed, or both? In any case, the comment calls attention to the constructedness and mediated nature of historical "reality," a point underlined by the significant and well-known gaps between the "facts" recorded by Holinshed and Shakespeare's liberal fictionalization and manipulation of them in *Macbeth*. Further, just as the specific historical "reality" that Holinshed attempts to pass down must have seemed at a certain point irrelevant or at least burdensome to Shakespeare, the strategic dramatist, so too have some of the facts of Shakespeare's play come to seem irrelevant to Morrissette, the film's director, who goes so far as to announce this fact in the scene.

Rothwell claims that filmmakers adapting Shakespeare have from the beginning been "guilt ridden" about doing so, saying that they have "sought to appease Shakespeare's praetorians in the libraries and theatres with gestures of obeisance" (212). Eric S. Mallin makes a similar claim in his important essay on *Last Action Hero*, when he says that "Metacinema holds a mirror up to one form of nature—the nature of artistic self-consciousness" (134). While all this Bloomsian anxiety may be central
in many adaptations, and while "meta-cinema' may or may not assume the ... burden of apologizing for film's not being a ... book or a play" (Rothwell 211), reflexivity appears to serve no such purposes in Scotland, PA, which goes so far as to critique the idea that an original—however sacred—must be acknowledged or imitated at all. Stam's argument that "reflexive artists cast doubt on the ... notion of an antecedent reality on which the artistic text is supposedly modeled" would certainly apply to Morrissette, who uses meta-cinema here and elsewhere in the film to desacralize Shakespeare and pre-modern history to free himself to play God, which is the furthest thing from a gesture of obeisance.

Scotland, PA's meta-cinematic method is hardly unique among Shakespeare film adaptations. Consider an example from a film in which the reverence for Shakespeare remains firmly apparent from beginning to end. In the most famous scene of Orson Welles's Falstaff or Chimes at Midnight (1965), the remarkable battle of Shrewsbury, in which the director employs a relentlessly fast-paced montage style, stringing together hundreds of glaringly non-contiguous shots—including low-angle, dolly, close-ups, and pans—and manipulating drastically both sound and the classic 24-frames-per-second pacing, we have a most curious case of reflexive cinema. To begin, the scene is reflexive in that the battle is fiercely intertextual, both as homage to Eisenstein's great battle scene in Alexander Nevsky (1938) and as an explicit rebuke of mainstream cinematic renderings of warfare; it is also reflexive in its comprehensive exploitation of seemingly every camera technique available to a director—a kind of revealing of the cinematographic apparatus; finally, it is reflexive in its explicit ideological commitment to pacifism, in spite of the play's famous internal divisions over the question of war's ethicality and purposefulness.

The overall effect of Welles's scene is remarkably ironic in that a striking realism is achieved through cinematic methods that repeatedly break the basic rules of traditional illusionistic cinema. (The scene remains one of the best teaching texts for film instructors for exactly this reason: it lays bare the techniques and methods a director can employ in order to achieve a particular effect.) By depicting what appears to be a most realistic battle through such a transparent stylization of warfare, the scene reminds the audience through contrast that almost no subjective perception of the world is hardly ever neatly temporal, coherent, or focused—never unproblematically
linear or even very logical. In other words, it points to the \textit{constructedness} of reality as all these things. In \textit{Chimes at Midnight}—as in \textit{Scotland, PA}—film calls attention to itself as a myth-shattering medium, celebrating its ability to \textit{surpass} through its own unique possibilities both the theater and books in communicating certain powerful messages—even if the inspiration for many of the messages happens to be derived from a pre-existing influential written text.\textsuperscript{5} The two Shakespeare adaptations demonstrate distinctive modes of reflexivity that ultimately result in a similar effect: cinematic reflexivity serves not to accommodate the burden of a source text’s influence or even its own reflexivity but rather to exorcise or erase it. This dynamic is not unique or specific to Shakespeare film adaptations, however; as we will see, such moves have increasingly become a normal component of non-realist film adaptations of literature. The classic example, though—and perhaps still the best one—is the first scene of James Whale’s \textit{The Bride of Frankenstein} (1935).

In a wonderfully campy opening, the viewer is introduced to the characters of Mary and Percy Shelley and Lord Byron who, sheltered from a raging storm outside, are praising Mary’s (Elsa Lanchester) recently-penned manuscript \textit{Frankenstein}. Ever modest about her achievements and in response to Byron’s (Gavin Gordon) amazement, Mary explains that the novel simply responds to an “audience [that] needs something stronger than a pretty little love story,” collapsing the early-nineteenth-century reading public with the massive audience of horror fans who in the 1930s began seeking out Universal films for the sole reason that they wished to be terrified. She explains that her ultimate purpose was to “write a moral lesson.” Still, Byron wishes to describe “the great relish” he takes in “savoring each separate horror,” and as he begins to name each one, the scene temporarily dissolves into a voiceover-narrated “flashback” of such moments in the “novel” as the riffling of the corpses and the building up of a “human monster.” It is a remarkable moment for two reasons: first, because the “original” textual moments Byron describes are erased and systematically replaced by film images, as \textit{The Bride of Frankenstein} puts not itself or the novel forward as the primary text, but Whale’s 1931 \textit{Frankenstein}: that is, during Byron’s summary of the great novel, the viewer is treated to scenes from Whale’s earlier film. Second, the fact that Whale chooses to present scenes
that do not occur in Mary Shelley's novel at all—such as "Henry Frankenstein himself" (my italics) being thrown from the burning windmill by the angry villagers—suggests the very real possibility that the film of four years earlier has already emerged by 1935 as the new primary text for the movie-going audience. So who authored the "real" Frankenstein, Mary Shelley or James Whale?

In what must be a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgment of the directorial sleight of hand Whale performs here, the flashback sequence is followed by Percy's (Douglas Walton) declaration, "I do think it a shame, Mary, to end your story so suddenly," which prompts Mary to confess "That wasn't the end at all" (a true statement in multiple ways). Eager to tell them what really happened, Mary sits the two men down and begins a new voice-over narration that then dissolves into the film proper. Now the modern audience, like Byron and Shelley, will get the whole story, the truth, through a sequel that also adapts English history by rewriting the famous fireside conversation that led to the creation of the novel Frankenstein. The true story, the real ending, will not involve Mary explaining what really happened in her novel, (as opposed to Whale's Frankenstein) as the scene suggests; it will involve Whale taking over the narration from Mary Shelley and presenting the audience with The Bride of Frankenstein, only parts of which are influenced by the novel. Presciently the film plays on, anticipating the supplanting of the novel by the film[s], which would come to redefine popular conceptions of the "real" Frankenstein.

My final example comes from a more recent film adaptation that, while quite ambitious, will never be mistaken by viewers as an auteurist adaptation such as Chimes at Midnight, The Bride of Frankenstein, or Scotland, PA: Will Gluck's 2010 teen-film adaptation of The Scarlet Letter: Easy A. The film demonstrates the degree to which explicit aura-bursting reflexivity is increasingly becoming the norm in non-costume drama adaptations of literature, regardless of the films' intended audience. Easy A follows the travails of high school hottie Olive (Emma Stone), whose increasingly bad reputation as a slut (of course, she is really not promiscuous at all) leads her to view herself as a modern-day Hester Prynne. Her English class happens to be reading The Scarlet Letter at the time her woes begin. Early in the film, viewers witness a classroom discussion of the novel during which the likable teacher Mr. Griffith (Thomas Haden Church) begins to rap about The Scarlet Letter in front of his slightly horrified teenage audience. Their horror is our horror, I would insist, in part because the scene points in a general way to the utter conventionality of such reflexive English-classroom scenes in other teen films (see especially Clueless [1995], Ten Things I Hate About You [1999] and "O" [2001]) and more specifically to the cringe-inducing convention of rapping teachers (see especially Renaissance Man [1994]). This fact is not lost on the filmmakers, of course, and Mr. Griffith abruptly cuts off the rap, claiming "I'm not gonna rap for you guys, ok? It's pandering, and it's been done before in every bad
movie you've ever seen," and he then proceeds to lead an actual conversation about the novel.

The scene is interrupted by Olive, who speaks directly into the camera in order to provide her audience with what she considers necessary background details for following the film's parallels with the novel. Explaining that the "Books you read in class always seem to have some strong connection to whatever angsty adolescent drama is going on," she comments, "For those of you who never read The Scarlet Letter, or for those of you who said you did but really didn't, here's all you need to know." At this point she holds up a DVD of Robert G. Vignola's 1934 film adaptation of the novel, scenes from which play during Olive's subsequent voiceover summary:

This girl named Hester Prynne has an affair with a minister, is besmirched, and is made to wear a red "A" for adulterer, but then the town realizes she was too harshly judged, and she's a really good person, and she dies a saint. A whole bunch of other stuff happens too. If you have a test on it, rent the movie, but make sure it's the original [clips stop, and Olive is shown pointing to the DVD], not the Demi Moore version where she talks in a fake British accent and takes a lot of baths. To say that that one was freely adapted is [in cockney voice] a bit of an understatement, gov'nub.

The scene is reminiscent of The Bride of Frankenstein in its summary of a novel through combined voiceover narration and clips from a previous popular film adaptation. Gluck inventively comments on this younger generation's view of what constitutes a "faithful" adaptation, however, by making Olive emphasize the authority of the "original" against Roland Joffé's infamous 1995 version with Demi Moore. The "original" here refers to a Scarlet Letter that is neither the novel itself, nor any one of the seven silent film versions produced before it, nor any one of the numerous theatrical and operatic versions of the novel that influenced those earlier films. easy A manages to authorize its own method of adapting Hawthorne by judging, from a historically advantageous position, the quality of earlier adaptations, and by erasing the burden of the "real" original text by relocating originality itself to a text simultaneously familiar (it is a DVD, after all) and unfamiliar (it is a DVD that few audience members will have seen).

As these examples hopefully demonstrate, reflexive cinematic adaptations of literature very often dissect their own practices of adaptation, and they just as often include complex critical discourses on their own modes and priorities of adaptation—whether in an extended manner or not. Together they form a complex commentary on the palimpsestic nature of adaptation. In this sense, such films address the concerns of current scholarship on adaptation, perhaps challenging the common assumption
that fidelity models of adaptation continue to dominate Hollywood and mainstream films; clearly, this is changing, if it ever was true.

I do not think it was. In their 1896 marketing prospectus for the Vitascope—the first successful American motion picture projection system—Norman C. Raff and Frank R. Gammon described the magical effect of their machine:

> When the machine is started by the operator, the bare canvas before the audience instantly becomes a stage, upon which living beings move about, and go through their respective acts, movements, gestures, and changing expressions, surrounded by appropriate settings and accessories—the very counterpart of the stage, the city, the country—yes, more, for these reproductions are in some respects more satisfactory, pleasing and interesting than the originals. (qtd. in Musser 117-18)

The ideas expressed in this rich passage are poised between the argument that the cinema is reality and the confession, through a traditional terminology, that it is not. On the one hand, the authors acknowledge the difference between an ontological reality and a representation of reality. The settings, costumes, and backgrounds of the films are said to be "counterparts" to the actual spaces of the city and the country and the stage. But even in that final collapse of the space of the stage with those of the country and city, the authors tease out the blurry line between originals and representations. The film scenes have "become" a stage, after all—they have not merely begun to resemble one. Most important, Raff and Gammon boldly assert the possibility that the representations or "reproductions" can actually outdo reality itself. Though the passage flirts with this idea throughout, it is only rendered explicit in the final claim.

I quote the passage at length because it demonstrates prototypical claims during the early years of the cinema about film's ability to surpass previous art forms in its confrontations with an antecedent reality—in this case, with reality itself. No debilitating anxiety or concerns about film-images not being "originals" mark the passage. Returning to our central topic, I would argue that the seeming contradiction between arguments for the radical reflexivity of non-adaptations and the more conservative reflexivity of adaptations can be explained in terms of the differences between scholarship primarily interested in film and scholarship primarily interested in film's engagement of literature. The theoretical blind spot of much traditional scholarship in both camps is of course the result of the post-Romantic view of adaptations as derivative—with all that term's pejorative connotations of secondariness and unoriginality. It has further to do with an unwillingness on the part of the scholars who study the "original" texts to surrender those texts' authority. In a large number of cases the resistance seems quite reasonable. Especially where cinematic adaptations of literature operate according to a fidelity-based model of adaptation, their power and complexity is in fact quite limited.

Another tradition of adaptation exists, however, in which the reflexive cinematic moment of engagement with the source text is marked not by cinema's anxieties about what it is not but, instead, its bravura insistence on what it can do better than either the theater or the written text. In part because cinematic verisimilitude is so
profound, not in spite of this fact, a film's distancing effects are capable of shattering the conditions necessary for mimetic art in violent yet highly accessible ways. Finally, if what the most reflexive adaptations expose is the mythical nature of the objectivity and superiority of powerful antecedent realities, then they also ask us to consider very seriously the possibility that filmed literature is in many respects more satisfactory, pleasing, and entertaining than even all those burdensome originals.

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Notes

1 I am referring, of course, to the massive influence of Cahiers du Cinéma on subsequent filmmaking and film criticism. Editors Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni issued their famous manifesto in 1969, which practically sought to prescribe a proper course for future filmmakers: "Once we realize that it is in the nature of the system to turn the cinema into an instrument of ideology, we can see that the filmmaker's first task is to show up the cinema's so-called 'depiction of reality' [in order to] disrupt or possibly even sever the connection between the cinema and its ideological function" (815). While the legacy of the Cahiers school is too substantial to trace here, famous essays by Jean-Louis Baudry and Brian Henderson might be cited as exemplary of the range of meta-filmic techniques praised by subsequent film theorists for showing up the ideological functions of bourgeois cinema.

2 I begin with two examples from Shakespeare adaptations because, strangely at first glance, Shakespeare film scholars seem disproportionately interested in the somewhat under-theorized concept of metacinema. WorldCat reveals that of publications with "meta-cinema" in the actual title, a majority focus on Shakespeare films (see, for example, Rothwell). There is only one book-length study with "metacinema" in the title: Rasmus's 2008 survey of metacinema across Shakespeare films. (Stam's 1992 Reflexivity in Film and Literature is perhaps the only extended theoretical study of metacinema across different genres and historical periods.) The reason for Shakespearean's disproportionate interest in the topic has to do with the general awareness and appreciation of Shakespeare's own deeply reflexive mind and writing—what many scholars refer to as his "metatheater."

3 Perhaps the most obvious target would have been Olivier's colorful depiction of the Battle of Agincourt in Henry V.

4 On the play's fierce ambivalence about war, see Norman Rabkin (33-62).

5 The film's confidence in this regard is perhaps reinforced by its own successful and efficient combining of four different Shakespeare plays: I and II Henry IV, Henry V, and The Merry Wives of Windsor.
Works Cited


Rothwell, Kenneth S. “Representing King Lear on Screen: From Metatheatre to ‘Meta-Cinema.’” Davies and Wells 211-33.


