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“That Shakespearian Rome! Work in Progress...” An Experiment in Intermedial Criticism

A twelve minute video, an experiment in intermedial Shakespeare criticism, was viewed at the international conference, *Shakespeare and Rome: Identity, Otherness, Empire* held at the Università di Roma Tre, in the Eternal City, in May 2005. The authors of the video, Maddalena Pennacchia and myself manipulated a variety of mediatic materials and genres to bring into focus the key words of the conference – identity, otherness and empire.¹ Exploiting such montage techniques as alternation, superimposition and synchrony to combine materials, we projected those terms through time and geographic space. We thus explored shifts in their meaning since the Elizabethans appropriated Roman history and culture to use them as a mirror of their own epoch. The video aimed to interrogate the Bard’s Rome, four hundred years later, in our own postmodern, postcolonial, multicultural times so profoundly marked by their own forms of expansionism and by great cultural and political crises around the globe.

The first frames of the video present the Coliseum as it stands today – a traffic island, a tourist destination and “stage” for fake centurions and gladiators. In a voice-over, one of Italy’s great pop idols, Antonella Ruggiero, sings in a voice which is both aggressive and nostalgic:

¹ As “authors” we scripted and directed the video. The conference convener, Maria Del Sapio, is responsible for the original idea of producing a video for the conference. Claudio Mosticone, Head of the Multimedial Laboratory for the Dipartimento di Letterature Compare, which hosted the conference, joined us with his wide ranging experience and expertise, from local filming to montage to projection.

Roma, dove sei,
 Roma, antica città,
 ora vecchia realtà
 non ti accorgi di me
 e non sai che pena mi fai...²

(from *Vacanze Romane*, on the album *Registrazioni moderne*, Universal, 1997). As the camera lens slowly pans across the Coliseum's mass of stone, that archaeological monument, logo of international cultural consumerism, returns to its original self, the popular stadium frequented by the citizens of Rome in the days of the Caesars. This transition is brought about by the introduction of a video quotation from Julie Taymor's *Titus* (Fox Searchlight, 1999). The images here of the Coliseum are animated by centurions marching through archways towards the central arena. While the soundtrack to this martial choreography remains unaltered, the images begin to alternate, keeping to the tempo of the march, with a sequence of photographs from our own times: a modern day "militia", clasp construction tools – hammers and saws – in the place of swords and shields. This present day "army", displaying the same warrior-like muscles as its ancient counterpart, is constructing a new Roman monument: the Globe Theatre of Villa Borghese, a replica of London's neo-Globe, inaugurated in the autumn of 2003. A "borrowing" from another time and another place, this architectural capriccio completes in a certain sense the dialogue of cultural reciprocity between Rome and Shakespeare initiated four centuries ago when London theatres like the Globe hosted Shakespeare's Ancient Rome.

Accompanied by the powerful musical crescendo of the *Titus* sound track, our video then brings the completed Globe construction triumphantly into full view, as a short clip from a CNN broadcast (from *Paula Zahn Now*, 13 Oct. 2003) fades in, announcing the inauguration of the Roman Elizabethan theatre to its worldwide audience. This TV quote serves as the vehicle for a brief guided tour of the theatre. After the camera lens has panned the full round of the wooden "O", and is bringing the stage itself into focus, an animation clip of a similar stage takes its place, with none other than Shakespeare in the limelight, stroking his beard as he is about to present a performance (from *Next*, dir. Barry Purves, Momentum, 2002). With a wave of the hand, our plasticine bard conjures into view a sequence of cinema citation that focus on characters from Shakespeare's Rome: Mark Antony delivering the funeral oration; Antony gazing at Cleopatra as she glides down the Nile on her barge; Lucius, son of Titus, and Aaron, black friend of the Goths and artificer of horrible deeds, in a violent encounter. All these scenes invite the viewer to reflect on the meaning of Roman identity and the relationship with the Other in a sequence that does not follow the chronology of Shakespeare's artistic achievements, but rather that of Roman history: from the days of the Republic in a state of political

² "Rome, where are you, Rome, ancient city, now an old reality, you don't take any notice of me and you don't know how I pity you..." (translation mine).

crisis to those of the Empire in the glorious days of its expansion and then to the last stages of its decline.

In the video, these themes are transferred to our times in part through the use of cinema appropriations of Shakespeare and Ancient Rome, but more forcefully through intermedial provocations that interfere with the scenes presented. It is a male member of a cleaning squad in the Campidoglio, Rome’s town hall, from *Gente di Roma*, (dir. Ettore Scola, Istituto luce/Roma cinematografica, 2003) who, while dusting a statue reputed to be of Julius Caesar in the Council Hall, recites the famous Shakespearian oration with a very marked Roman accent. And it is he who, in alternating frames, becomes the ventriloquist projecting his own voice onto the lips of the youthful Marlon Brando/Marc Antony (in *Julius Caesar*, dir. Joseph Mankiewicz, MGM, 1953).

Then follows a citation from *Cleopatra* (dir. Joseph Mankiewicz, 20th Century Fox, 1963) which materializes a well known scene only described in Shakespeare: Enobarbus’s description of the Egyptian queen. Richard Burton/Antony, with lust in his gaze, follows the barge that bears Elizabeth Taylor (Burton’s wife)/Cleopatra down the Nile. The original sound track is replaced by the seductively languid jazz notes of a composition by Duke Ellington, *Half the Fun* (on the album *Such Sweet Thunder*, Columbia, 1967), and a mellifluous male voice-over reciting Enobarbus’s line:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne
Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold;
Purple the sails, and so perfumèd that
The winds were lovesick with them. (2.2.201–204)

Ellington composed his piece for *Cleopatra*, as he imagined her gliding down the Nile alone, without her Antony. This clip is rendered more dreamlike by being projected in slow-motion.

In the next cinema quotation, from *Titus*, diabolical Aaron confesses the crimes he has fathered, in a deal with Lucius that highlights by contrast – owing to cuts we made to compress the scene – the lovingness he reveals about his biological paternity. Then Aaron is brutally beaten by Lucius while the soundtrack plays funky pop beats and Michael Jackson, conjuring up all his own personal history of transgression and conflict, sings:

...You know I’m bad
I’m bad – you know it
you know
And the whole world has to answer right now
Just to tell you once again. *Who’s bad?*

(From the song *Bad*, on the album *Bad*. Sony, 1987). The Roman world portrayed here is in full decline, infested with malice and depravity. And this

state is reflected, as ancient beliefs would have it, in the macrocosm. The Imperial Eagle – a citation from the animated *Julius Caesar* (dir. Yuri Kulakov, Metrodome, 1994) – takes flight, ascending into a threatening sky where it mutates into a shrill-shrieking crow. Struck by lightening, this sinister raptor splinters, generating dozens of its own likenesses.

The lightening then, bearing all the anger of the gods, descends on Rome, but it is, once again, the Rome of today, where, through a shift to a new quote, this one from *The Core* (dir. Joh Amiel, Paramount, 2003), the thunder bolts strike the Coliseum, which explodes, hurling huge masses out toward to the audience. The terrifying supernatural powers of the ancient world have morphed into a postmodern sci-fi cataclysm. But the scattering fragments of the Coliseum can also be read as a metaphor for the cultural dissemination, over centuries of readings and re-readings, adaptations and appropriations, that was the very object of study of the conference where the video was viewed.

There is an infinite variety of intermedial manipulations that can be performed. *That Shakespearian Rome* worked with some of them. In the end, thanks to a rewind command on the moviola, the Coliseum is recomposed and the metropolitan noises of traffic around the monument can be heard once again. Thus concluded *That Shakespearian Rome! Work in Progress...* and its provocative series of manipulations and interferences. And thus it posed, within the context of the conference, an invitation to reflect on the very nature of critical and cultural re-appropriation and on the contaminations which are embedded in them.

Works Cited

- Bad*, sung by Michael Jackson. *Bad*. Sony, 1987.
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