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SHAKESPEARE

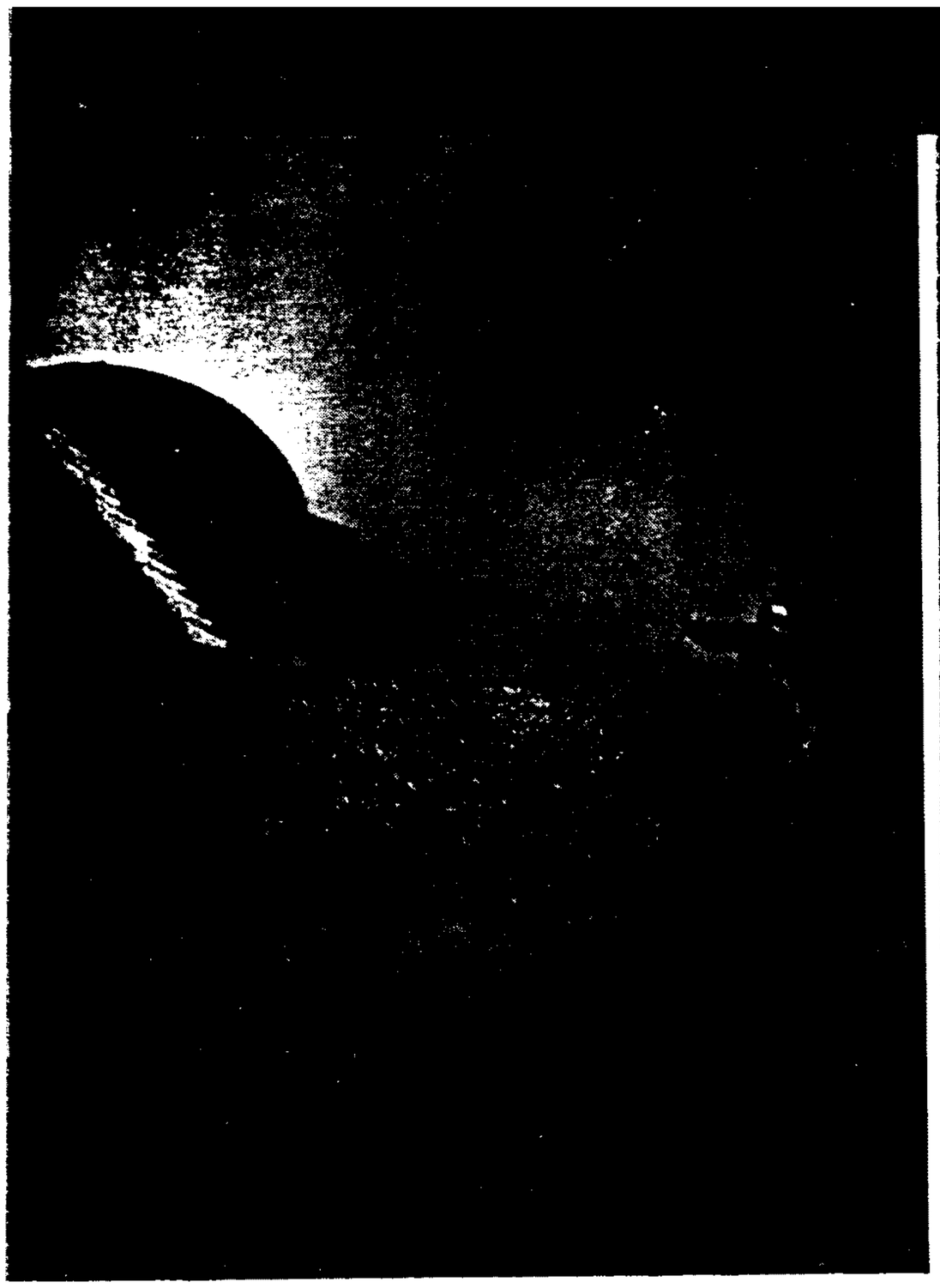
Peter Brook interviewed by

THE SAD HISTORY OF Shakespeare on the screen—which is really pretty pitiful if you think about it—is that apparently over a hundred films have been made of his plays, and most of them are unspeakably bad. What this sad history does is to recapture some of the history of Shakespeare on the stage through its worst periods. There is no golden beginning in the Elizabethan theatre: you start in the worst nineteenth century tradition of big spectacle. It's incredible the number of Shakespeare subjects that were used between 1900 and 1910, all because they gave the opportunity for the cinema to show that you could have crowds of people, masses of costumes, great epic shots, and so forth.

Then they moved on to Recording the Star Performance. So one has films designed to show off people like Barrymore, Bernhardt, Forbes-Robertson. These are recordings of big actors' solos, following the nineteenth century idea that there are these big moments in Shakespeare, and therefore—*wrong conclusion*—that this is what Shakespeare is all about. The basic wrongness of the entire nineteenth century conception of Shakespeare lies in the belief that what are seen from the outside to be undeniably the big values, the marvellous musicality of the lines, the marvellous theatricality of the situations, were therefore Shakespeare's intention. This is a very simple but totally mistaken way of thinking. The big moments are certainly there, but they weren't the reason why the man set out to write the plays; and this is why people like Stephen Phillips, who set out to write imitation Shakespeare, could never bring it off. Instead of working like Shakespeare from a particular core, trying for something whose end product had as a by-product great situations and great lines, they set out to write great situations and great lines, so of course the result was awful.

It was exactly the same in the cinema. The producers looked for the big situations, and between the wars the cinema was dominated by big stars who all wanted to crown their careers with prestige, and all had a go at Shakespeare: Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Elisabeth Bergner, Leslie Howard, Norma Shearer. Again it's mid-nineteenth century acting, by second-rate, well-loved actors who want a go at the big parts. Artistically, it's not worth considering.

The interesting thing is that, although the cinema is the medium which has attracted the most intelligent directors of this century, none of them has been particularly interested in cracking the nut of Shakespeare on the screen. It seems to me strange that from Pabst to a theatrical director like Kazan, none of these directors has wanted to do a Shakespeare film. However there are two major, if freak, cases of talented men, actor-directors, having a go: really both Olivier and



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Welles approach their Shakespeare films more as actors than as directors. They certainly like big subjects, but then so does Fritz Lang; but the fact is that they could stick *themselves* into the middle of those big subjects. So that, up to very recently, the two best Shakespeare films—in fact the first two attempts at filming Shakespeare that one can think of seriously —are by *theatre standards* late nineteenth century productions, of the sort where an intelligent actor-manager put on his *Henry V* or *Othello*, viewed entirely from the actor-manager's point of view. If one looks at Welles' *Othello* and *Macbeth* in cold blood, they don't begin to compare with his attempts at Cinema, *Kane* and *Ambersons*, which are objective pieces of film directing with the actor's performance subordinated to the whole. Welles clearly loved acting in *Citizen Kane*, but this is a piece of film thinking; in *Macbeth*, this is the man who loves the smell of greasepaint doing a rare actor-manager's version of *Macbeth* and getting the cameras to follow him around. I think the same goes for a lot of *Othello*.

Olivier's films succeed, to the degree that they succeed at all, by having the classic English virtues of quality and good taste: into this world comes the Rolls-Royce of Shakespearean film-making. *Henry V* was a landmark because no producer before that had had the intelligence to think that he could, for his money, buy good performances. When Reinhardt, with all that money, did his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, it didn't occur to him that he could, at that very perlod, have persuaded Ralph Richardson, Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud to come to Hollywood and play for him. Instead he had James Cagney, Joe E. Brown and Mickey Rooney in a farcical sort of joke film.

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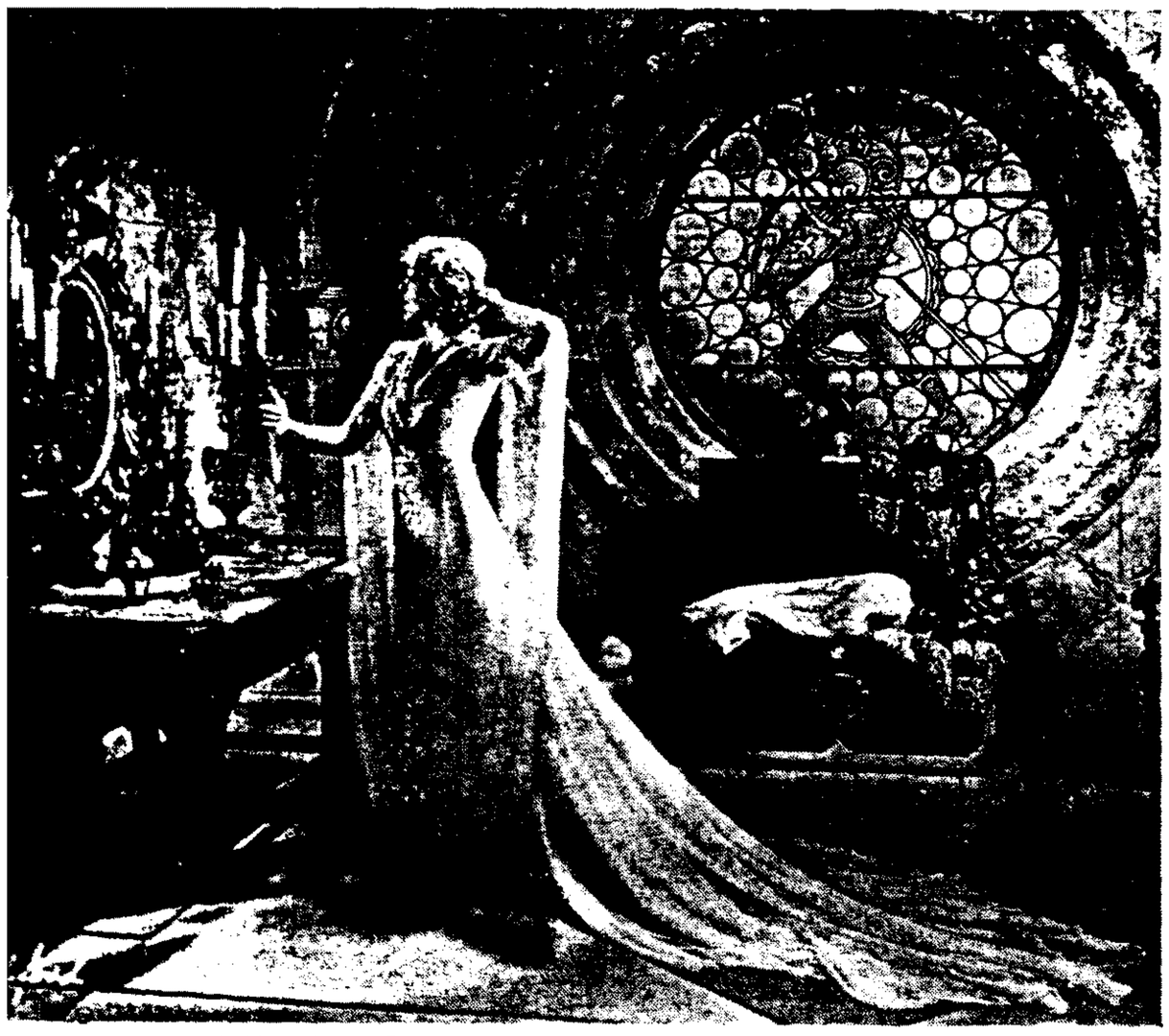
The thing that Olivier is most quoted for and is most proud of, was to invent a gimmick—as a very practical actor, it was naturally an actor-manager's gimmick. This was to say that the big stuff, the Shakespearean big speeches, are embarrassing in close-up: therefore you come into close-up for the unimportant thing, and as a soliloquy develops and broadens, gets epic and big, you pull the camera away to a high shot so that the actor isn't embarrassed by being shown grimacing on the big stuff. This is a real actor's directing solution. It's a purely stylistic one, like an actor in a play saying he feels better placed centre stage than downstage for a particular speech. That is a very different kind of theatre from the one where the moves and the business and objects and everything else come from a sense of meaning, so that you may say to

LEFT TO RIGHT: OPHELIA'S FUNERAL PROCESSION IN KOZINTSEV'S "HAMLET"; OLIVIER'S HAMLET ON THE BATTLEMENTS OF ELSINORE; MIFUNE'S WARLORD MACBETH IN "THRONE OF BLOOD".



HAVING A GO: MARY PICKFORD IN "THE TAMING OF THE SHREW".

the actor, "This may be the big bit, but if it's done in a big way it will be against the real meaning of the play; so you've got to do it in a bad position in a small way." And the same thing is true of the cinema; the idea that the placing of the camera can be done in terms of "This speech is a big one so we won't use a close-up" is too primitive. *Henry V*, which is Olivier's best film, shows this—the *Hamlet* was a terrible simplification, less than half the text and a millionth bit of the meaning. The same thing goes even more for *Richard III*, which seems terribly operatic now, decorative, and with no real core of action or meaning.

Then there was that awful *Romeo and Juliet* that isn't even worth talking about, Castellani's Italian neo-realistic one. You can't just put a lot of people together who can't act, get them to walk around in real settings, and think it's neo-realistic . . . it's just pathetic. So you come to the two serious pieces of work: the Soviet *Hamlet* and the Japanese *Macbeth*. Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* is the stepping-stone to Kozintsev because it came from an intelligent reading of the play. The whole thing was built up from meanings. Mankiewicz isn't a very imaginative director, but here was an intelligent man who assessed what he thought the play was about, and then set in his own way about putting it on the screen.

The Kozintsev film is attacked for being academic, which it is, but there is not a thing which comes on to the screen, whether it is his selection of the place, of the type of castle, of the fact that Hamlet meets Ophelia on a staircase, or whether there are people in the background or not—there is not a selection which doesn't relate to this man's carefully thought out structure and meaning. The film has a strength and a clarity which come entirely from that. It has all the strength and virtues of Olivier, of having good actors, and being well and expensively done; but this is the first time that there is the proper directorial approach of a man working from his own conviction of what the real threads of meaning are, not the theatrical meaning but the actual meaning of the play. That is why I think it's the first good Shakespeare film.

I talked to Kozintsev in Paris. He knows where he stands in his own thinking, politically, socially; he knows where he stands in more epic terms; he knows what stone and fire mean to him, and bars and wood, all those different elements that he uses; he knows what his blackness and his whiteness, his full screen and his anti-screen, his close-ups and his long shots, all relate to in terms of content; and you feel his film is much firmer than any of the others. The great thing about this *Hamlet* is that Kozintsev wanted to get away from the Russian theatrical tradition of the operatic. He used the new Pasternak translation which is much colder, quicker and more realistic than the traditional nineteenth century translation; and he didn't use a single theatre actor—none of them has ever played Shakespeare on the stage. So I can see what he was looking for. The film's limitation, though, is that it is within a style; and that style, which is a very attractive post-Eisenstein romantic one, is still not essentially the right Shakespearean style.

The great masterpiece, of course, is the Kurosawa film, *Throne of Blood*, which doesn't really come into the Shakespeare question at all because it doesn't have the text. Even though Kurosawa follows the plot very closely, transposing it into Japan in the Middle Ages and making Macbeth a samurai, he has new Japanese dialogue and is really doing another *Seven Samurai*. It doesn't matter where the story comes from: he is doing what every film-maker has always done, which is to construct a film out of an idea and get the appropriate dialogue to go with it. It doesn't tackle the problem of how you make a film of Shakespeare which is a movie and yet uses the fact that you've got a text which is continually changing gear.

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The interesting thing is this: the Elizabethan theatre had a complicated yet marvellously free technique of blank verse at its most sophisticated. Shakespeare could conjure up images such that, if you could chop open the head of anybody watching his play and pull out the impression from the brain matter, you'd get something more like a Rauchenberg, more like a piece of pop art, than anything else. Because the effect on the mind in the course of any one of the vivid lines of Shakespeare is that you would most likely have one word written in letters across the mind, and three overlapping pictures. You would see the actor as a man standing in the distance, and you would also see his face, right on top of you—perhaps his profile and the back of his head as well. And you would also see the background, the fact that he's standing in front of a beautiful forest, or a great dawn, or something. You would see this, but not complete. Because when Hamlet is doing any one of his soliloquies (to take the crudest example) the background that Shakespeare can conjure in one line evaporates completely and other images take its place. I think that the freedom of the Elizabethan theatre is still only very partially understood. People have talked their heads off about the non-localised stage. The non-localised stage obviously means that you can change background. What people don't fully face is that it also means every single thing under the sun is possible: a man can turn into twins, change sex, be his past, his present, his future, be a comic version of himself and a tragic version of himself, and be none of them, *all at the same time*.

Kott's great essay on Gloucester's suicide is marvellous from that point of view. He points out that the suicide only means something if he does it on a bare stage without a rock to jump from, because then it becomes the whole of Pirandello and the whole of Ionesco and the whole of Beckett. It is a man doing a meaningless jump, and an actor doing a jump, at one and the same time. This is where you come right up against the problem that, if we say the best Shakespeare on film so far is the Kozintsev, we still don't have a style which can enable us to demonstrate all these complexities simultaneously. Kozintsev has done something to cope with the epic realism of *Hamlet*, but I was talking to him in Paris about the idea of filming *Lear*. If you take the scene of Gloucester's suicide you are forced, in the theatre, to make Gloucester do it on a windy

heath of some description. Fifty per cent of the extraordinariness is that it is happening on an imaginary heath and yet on the boards of the theatre. There's a meaning there that is released by that double tension which isn't there if you take either aspect on its own. If it's just a leap on a bare stage, it hasn't the meaning; and if it is really a man on a heath doing a leap it also hasn't; but in Shakespeare, without any effort at all, you get both. It's like an idea itself striking you.

The problem in filming Shakespeare is, how can you change gears, fluctuate between gears, styles and conventions as lightly and as deftly as the mental processes inside a person, which can be reflected by blank verse but not by the consistency of each single image? It is the same problem that every film-maker has to face in relation to all filming now, thirty-five years after the invention of sound. Sound stopped the cinema right in its tracks. People thought at the time that it took away the mobility of the camera. Well, very rapidly they found a way back to the full mobility of the camera, but the mobility of *thought*, which the silent cinema had, is only just being recaptured in the cinema of Godard. This is why in experiment, if not in actual subject matter, Godard is the most important director. In *Bande à Part*, for the first time, he liberates the picture from its own consistency, so that at one second you are genuinely looking at a photograph of three people in a bar, then you are half alienated, then three-quarters alienated, then you are looking at it as a film, then as something made by a film-maker, then you are reminded that it is made by actors, and then you are thrown right back into believing it. This is the changing relationship that you have in Shakespeare.

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In a way, however, this is in its infancy. Godard at one extreme, and Antonioni at the other, are both tackling the same problem: that the information thrown up by photographic naturalism is insufficient, that to have a man sitting in front of a camera while it objectively records him is not to capture an objective reality. People have been lost in this particular cul-de-sac for a number of years, forced to think that it has its realism. Gradually they are coming to realise what film is: an event at the time of projection, so that the only reality is the moment of projection where an image is thrown on the screen. The reality of six weeks before of a man sitting in a room doesn't cut any ice, therefore it isn't real, therefore what is the virtue of the so-called 'naturalism' of the photographic process? It would be real if it gave you the totality of information of that one man sitting in that spot; but of course it doesn't begin to do that.

We did a very interesting exercise in the studio at Stratford. I got one of the actors to sit in front of the group and think up an elaborate situation for himself; then I asked him to live as an actor all he could of the inner conditions of this situation. The group were to find out what was going on without questioning him. All this was purely to drive home in a dramatic way the fact that external realities are completely non-narrative—like, in *Bande à Part*, the marvellous close-up of the man in the train giving the different readings of the face. What we found was an actor who in his own mind was going through—oh, I forget, waiting for his girl-friend to go and see a doctor to discover if she was pregnant, because if so she would have to have an abortion and where was he going to get the money, and would she tell his wife, and all that—while the group naturally had all kinds of way out interpretations. Without means at his disposal, the actor couldn't communicate anything of his scenario, and the group couldn't reach it. It was a very primitive but good exercise, because gradually the frustration built. They couldn't reach him and he couldn't reach them.

It's this dissatisfaction that leads both Antonioni and Godard to their very different ways of working. Antonioni *accepts* the stability of the shot, and then tries by all manner of other devices to capture the invisible; Godard *attacks* the stability of the shot, and tries to get all the aspects by going round and round. What both of them are reacting from is a sense that the frame, by itself or in juxtaposition, carries the meaning—that a single frame is a full unit. It is the classic Eisenstein theory of cutting that is really false: the belief that what you are juxtaposing are units in themselves, which stand up, or potentially stand up, on their own. The whole of *Moderato Cantabile* was an elaborate exercise to see whether it is possible, in a medium that has always been considered to have an essentially documentary flavour, to photograph an almost invisible but tangible reality. Whether it is possible to get under the surface photographically.

You see, I'm greedy. In the theatre and cinema, more than in any other medium, I want all possible pieces of information about something, and the search for form is really that search. The self-imposed consistency of any stylistic decision at once acts as a barrier which precludes one knowing something which one wants to know. If you have a purely intimate story about two people, then one wants to know the social reference; if it's an epic subject, one wants to know something of the inner life; and it's only in Shakespeare that you really find a proper balance where nothing is sacrificed, nothing is made less.

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When you consider a major achievement of writing such as a play by Shakespeare, you are continually reinterpreting it. This object is there and it's like a sputnik, it turns round, and over the years different portions of it are nearer to you, different bits are further away. It's rushing past and you are peeling off these meanings. In that way a text is dynamic. The whole question of what Shakespeare intended doesn't arise, because what he has written not only carries more meanings than he consciously intended. but those meanings are altering in a mysterious way as the text moves through the centuries. If you dig into it you may find some new aspect, and yet you never seize the thing itself. Beckett is also a clear example of this. Notice how consistently he is criticised, and yet how serenely his plays go on. The mud is slung and it doesn't stick. The entire press said *Endgame* was boring, negative, useless, the end of theatre: but then you get *Happy Days*. The plays go on: they stand there, withholding analysis and interpretation, until you come back to the fact that they are

ANASTASIA VERTINSKA AND INNOKENTI SMOKTUNOVSKY IN KOZINTSEV'S "HAMLET".

PAUL SCOFIELD AS LEAR. A SCENE FROM PETER BROOK'S PRODUCTION FOR THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE THEATRE.

proper objects. They are what their simplest definition is: just a woman in a hole, two men talking—and yet they aren't.

The first problem with Shakespeare's technique in the cinema is that you can't get away from certain basic requirements, any more than you can in the theatre. You cannot do Shakespeare on a ten foot stage with twenty people as well as you can given certain material conditions. Stratford's *The Wars of the Roses* couldn't have been done as well without those sixty people and that size of stage. The Godard cinema isn't the complete answer: it is leading the search for a new style, but I don't think it's the right style for Shakespeare because it depends on a kind of light scale cinema. But I have seen another technique which it is possible to shape to Shakespeare.

A man called Francis Thompson has made a lyrical documentary for Johnson's Wax, which was the sensation of the New York World's Fair. This is a fifteen-minute film using the old Abel Gance technique of three screens. And the result is extraordinary. The three screens put side by side make something as large as a Cinerama screen. It is basically the same principle, but Cinerama pretends that the joins don't exist, that if the three screens don't quite register this is a mistake you should have the good manners to overlook. You are meant to pretend that you are looking through a vast window on the world. Thompson's is a more Brechtian technique: never for one moment are you asked to forget the fact that you are looking at three separate screens, three frames with a gap between them. If you sit in an old-fashioned theatre behind the pillars, you're not surprised if someone goes behind one and then reappears on the other side. It's exactly the same here. They have enormous canoeing scenes, and the canoes shoot across the picture, passing across the breaks from one screen to the next. But the fact that those breaks are there as continual reminders means that as soon as the director no longer needs a full Cinerama scale and wants to reduce it, he can cut to something quite different.

In classic film-making, there is no problem for the audience in cutting from a long shot to a close-up. Here, if you want to go from three shots showing the same thing to three showing different things, it makes no greater imaginative demands on the audience. This is what is so interesting: the film was a terrific hit in New York, the thing that people fought to get into, and it is just a little documentary about boys growing up in different parts of the world. The three screens are showing, say, traffic in America, a wedding in Italy, and a landscape in Africa; you cut, and it splinters so that all three screens show different views of the same thing; next cut all three are identical close-ups, say, top shots; next cut one remains on the top shot and the other two show different views of it.

Now every possible permutation is open to you. For the first time a device exists which does break the inner consistency of each frame. You can have Hamlet and the battlements of Elsinore, he can be on the right hand screen, while the other two show a rampart and the sea. Or, to go back to Gloucester, you can show the heath, and the moment a soliloquy begins, nothing prevents you from dropping the heath out of your picture to concentrate on different views, above and below, of Gloucester himself. If you like you can throw one of your screens over to a caption, a subtitle. The realistic action could be in colour, the other in black-and-white, with a caption on the third screen. You could have statistics, or a cartoon parodying the photographic action. This is a very elaborate device, which goes right back to Abel Gance. I think these multiple screens are the real opening, because the technique has exactly the same possibilities, in a different way, as the Brechtian stage. It is obviously going to come, and I believe that, gradually, this is the way that a style for filming Shakespeare can be found.

Brook, Parenthetically . . .

When I was at Oxford I wrote an article on spec for what was then SIGHT AND SOUND, arguing that the only logical development for the cinema was towards a wide screen. I think I called it something like the Long Screen—I've never understood why. Anyway, I wrote this long piece saying that it seemed clear to me that the identification which came from the angle of vision of the little screen and the eye being the same, made for a subjective cinema which had come to the end of its line, and now had to give way to something that could be looked at objectively. To look at something objectively the eye must be free, because if the spectator once moves his head from right to left he is then back in his seat, while if he is glued to the little hole, he never moves his head and the camera cuts or pans for him.

My argument was based on the fact that the development of colour made this an inevitable historical thing, because the moment you had your first colour shots you had two points of interest, and so the eye travelled. The moment the eye travelled it would want to travel further, and therefore a wide screen was absolutely inevitable, and with the wide screen would come a new possibility of doing Shakespeare, ballet and opera. I sent this article in, and got a letter back from the man who ran the magazine saying . . . this is too fanciful, I can't print this because the theory you develop is too fanciful, I am returning it with regret, etc.

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