Although ‘film’ remains in common usage as a generic term, digital technology has made it inaccurate when applied to work no longer shot, edited or distributed on chemically coated celluloid. The ‘photochemical era’ has ended, and rapid developments in the distribution and consumption of audio-visual products have reduced distinctions between what is viewed in the home and what is seen in public. This *Companion* takes as its remit feature-length productions, both those commonly perceived as ‘delivering’ the plays, and those that appropriate them as the starting-point for work that makes no such claim. These are all to some degree adaptations, but some are more adapted than others: consequently the first group of chapters focuses on the various ways in which screen versions of Shakespeare’s works have figured in a changing media environment.

**Part I  Adaptation and Its Contexts**

In all the audio-visual media the relationship between emotional intimacy and a wide view of the context of the action remains significant. The older style of television production, dominated by studio-based staging (sometimes with filmed inserts) and editing between a limited number of cameras, has given way to techniques closer to those of the cinema. Across the visual media, digital technology has changed the choices available in aspects ranging from focus, the scope of images and editing to the use of Computer-Generated Imaging (CGI) to create complex and expansive environments for action. Nevertheless, screen adaptations still have to accommodate such characteristic techniques of the playwright’s theatre as soliloquy, the reporting of offstage action, the ‘turns’ of clowns and heightened and rhetorically organised speech. In Shakespeare films from before the advent of synchronised sound, discussed by Judith Buchanan in Chapter 1, the viewer encounters a range of techniques developed by filmmakers anxious to translate these elements of the plays into their new
medium. Spoken dialogue did not simply overcome these challenges, and study of the ‘silent’ cinema reveals a rich variety of responses to them. Since the early 1930s the history is not so much one of movement towards a goal (‘now we can do it properly’) as a widening of the range of possible approaches: a continuum rather than a success story. There is no definitive way of making a ‘Shakespeare film’, let alone an exemplary production to serve as some sort of gold standard.

Despite the increasing availability of Shakespearean product for individual consumption, many productions gain from being viewed on a large screen in the company of an audience. However, ‘opening wide’ — simultaneous initial distribution to a large number of multiplexes — is usually reserved for films that aim for ‘blockbuster’ status. Cinema release remains a requirement of the annual Academy Awards competition, but it is not unusual for films to have only a brief initial exposure of this kind. In recent years, the streaming of theatre performances to cinemas has added to the range of Shakespeare on screen. Critical and theoretical questions raised by this ‘Shakespeare “live”’ are discussed by Peter Holland in Chapter 3.

The plays have been seized on with a variety of cross-fertilisation strategies comparable to the cherry-picking of source materials in the playwright’s own theatres. In Chapter 2, Deborah Cartmell considers adaptation in relation to the promotion of films, in which perceptions of closeness or distance from a source text play a significant role. Rather, then, than answer the question as to whether Olivier’s 1944 Henry V ‘does justice to the play’ more fully or faithfully than Kenneth Branagh’s 1989 film, reference to their common source is more properly employed understanding the task the films’ makers have undertaken. Especially when a popular play is in question, Shakespeare films inevitably participate in the industry culture of reboots and remakes. Many of these present themselves as revisiting both the plays and earlier versions of them in terms of current social and political concerns — or at least of current popular culture. Baz Lurhmann’s William Shakespeare’s Romeo+Juliet (1996) was in part a response Zeffirelli’s Romeo and Juliet (1969), displacing the earlier film’s appeal to the an earlier generation of the ‘youth’ audience. Samuel Crowl observes that Lurhmann ‘recasts Shakespeare as a secular saint, and Romeo and Juliet as a revisionary film’.²

Although Shakespeare film can be a ‘prestige’ commodity, attracting generous spending in production and distribution regardless of limited expectations for box-office profits, the pressures of the marketplace are hard to avoid, even for independent filmmakers who assemble finance from a range of sources, and they apply as much to broadcast and cable

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television and streaming platforms as to the cinema. For this reason, work produced beyond the immediate scope of Hollywood (which encompasses many films made outside the United States) has a distinctive value, addressed directly in this Companion by Chapter 4 on ‘World Cinema’ by Mark Thornton Burnett, in Victoria Bladen’s survey in Chapter 7 of versions of two ‘Tragedies of Love’, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* and in Poonam Trivedi’s discussion in Chapter 18 of the films of Vishal Bhardwaj.

**Part II Genres and Plays**

The chapters in Part II take questions of genre as their starting-point. In offering Shakespearean products, distributors commonly invoke movie genres, and although the categories used by the editors of the 1623 Folio have no particular significance in their decisions, ‘Comedy’, ‘Tragedy’ and ‘History’, remain influential. Nevertheless, these categories, the media themselves and for that matter ‘Shakespeare’ – the works and their cultural significance – cannot be regarded as stable entities. In the film industry, techniques of production have both informed and responded to changing audience expectations. Film financing, both within and beyond the Anglophone commercial mainstream, commonly depends on perceptions of a project as both similar to and different from what is already in the marketplace. As Steve Neale points out in *Genre and Hollywood*, ‘Genres do not consist solely of films. They consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process’.³

Although with rare exceptions ‘Shakespeare films’ have situated themselves (or been placed by producers) within a niche market, their makers usually hope to reach as wide an audience as possible, either through the attraction of established stars or kinship with such popular film genres as musicals, romantic comedies, ‘teenflicks’ and ‘action’ or costume dramas. Some categorisations common in academic study lack general currency: Michael Almereyda’s *Cymbeline* (2014), released without great success under the revised title of *Anarchy: Ride or Die* – even the play’s name would have been incomprehensible to the wider public – could hardly have been presented as a ‘late romance’. Viewers attracted by DVD box’s citation of a reviewer’s comment that it was a ‘mash-up’ of the television series *Sons of Anarchy* and *Game of Thrones* can only have been dismayed by its failure to match up to either. (There are only a few deaths, and hardly any riding.) Unlike the same director’s *Hamlet* (2000), his
Cymbeline lacked the support of a source with a clear narrative trajectory and a centuries-old track record across the popular media. The lesson to be learned is that for an adaptation to work, it is important to have both kinds of strength in the source, especially if the audience for a particular kind of genre film is being courted.

Part III Critical Issues

Increased attention to productions in terms of their degree of responsiveness to contemporary social and political issues is reflected in three chapters addressing questions of race (Chapter 11), sexuality and gender politics (Chapter 12) and violence (Chapter 13). The work done by productions in present-day society intersects with the politics within a given play. Analyses of (for example) the sexual politics of King Lear or The Taming of the Shrew co-exist with the strategies and influence attributable to performances of them, and commentary on the latter has to take account of the extent to which they aim to adopt or take issue with attitudes expressed in the original text. These chapters raise questions that measure the distance between the plays and their modern audiences and adaptors. In films of King Lear, what response is made to the underlying misogyny that arguably inhibits acceptance of the more elevated values associated with tragedy? How do filmmakers work with – or around – racial attitudes that are at issue in The Merchant of Venice and Othello but whose expression in these plays may sit uncomfortably with modern sensibilities? (And how do they engage with the plays’ scrutiny of prejudice in ways that do not patronisingly imply that somehow excuses must be made for them?) What is the relationship between treatments of comic and tragic violence in, respectively, The Taming of the Shrew and Coriolanus, and in the case of the former, where are the lines that must not be crossed?

Part IV Directors

Part IV includes chapters devoted to five directors: Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, Franco Zeffirelli, Kenneth Branagh and Vishal Bhardwaj. The selection does not imply that others (for example, Julie Taymor and Grigori Kozintsev) are somehow excluded from a privileged club: their films receive detailed attention in other chapters. In the case of Olivier, although his work does not receive a chapter of its own, he might be said to haunt commentary on several of the other filmmakers. Although they do not concentrate exclusively on traits that tend to identify the directors
as creative personalities, underlying these chapters is the question of who (or what) should be credited.

Since its first formulation by the filmmakers and critics of the French ‘new wave’ in the 1950s, the validity of auteur theory, which examines the inner coherence of films in terms of authorial control, has been both contested and defended with vigour. A film is both a collaborative work, and the product of its society, to be viewed historically (its cultural moment) and in terms of the cultural and ideological work it does. Sometimes this can seem a straightforward task: Laurence Olivier’s *Henry V*, proclaims its propagandistic agenda. But in other cases the connection is not so obvious: the same director’s *Hamlet* (1948) and *Richard III* (1953) spoke to and of their time in a less obvious manner. However, despite the actor-director’s presence in all of them, Olivier’s films are remarkable more for their dissimilarity from one another than any sense of being a coherent oeuvre.

Even when such factors are taken into account, engagement with productions in terms of a director’s track record remains a valid approach shared by many writers on film, as well as by the public at large and commentators outside the academic community. From an ‘industry’ point of view, as David Bordwell has pointed out, in Hollywood ‘the classic studio system maintained fruitful, sometimes tense, balance between directorial expression and genre demands’. Arguably, though, this has been fragmented, apparently producing a polarity between ‘big-budget genre films … and small “personal” films that showcase the director’s sensibility’. But, as Bordwell acknowledges, this analysis may not be sustainable in the case of many directors who have moved successfully between the two poles.

‘Shakespeare’: The Brand Survives

In recent years, as if to reinforce the hold of the ‘Shakespeare’ brand on the popular imagination, the dramatist himself has appeared as a character on cinema screens, whether as a lover (*Shakespeare in Love*, 1998), an untalented hack lending his name to a better qualified aristocratic author (*Anonymous*, 2011) and even in troubled but eventually serene retirement (*All is True*, 2018). In the animated comedy *Gnomeo and Juliet* (2011), the garden-gnome hero is exceptional among adaptors of the plays in making his way to the statue of Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon to argue for a happier ending. (His wish is granted.)

Meanwhile, the plays have also acquired a new sphere of existence, in adaptations and critical interventions on the Internet. Strictly speaking,
‘Shakespeare’ and the plays, beyond copyright restrictions and not owned by any one commercial entity, do not constitute a franchise of the kind that entails ‘the [commercial] exploitation of an intellectual property across multiple cultural contexts’. But their status is in many ways analogous, and Shakespeare-branded products take their place alongside other material in twenty-first-century ‘Convergence Culture’, with its opportunities for participation and – counterbalancing them – control of product on diverse media platforms. Like the cinema and video productions discussed in the chapters that follow, this new manifestation of ‘Shakespeare on screen’ is a continuation of a long tradition in which the story-worlds and characters of the plays and subsequent variations on them had already circulated in older media, with Shakespeare’s texts themselves participating in their own day in this ongoing process of making and remaking.

Notes