

<p>BEYOND THE PAGE: THE SEMIOTICS AND CULTURAL TRANSPOSITION OF SHAKESPEAREAN ADAPTATION</p>		<p>Shakespearean Literature</p> <p>Keywords: Shakespeare's plays, film adaptation, adaptation theory, semiotics, cultural context.</p>
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Abstract

This paper explores why directors adapt Shakespeare’s plays for film, with particular focus on the shift from strict fidelity to creative reinterpretation in Shakespearean cinema. The main argument this study makes is that adaptation is of great importance, serving as a bridge between contemporary visual language and Elizabethan style, as illustrated by these two contrasting masterpieces, taken as a case study: “*The Merchant of Venice*” and “*Romeo and Juliet*.” The study develops ideas in adaptation theory, moving beyond a narrow reading of the original text and from a literal accuracy toward a broader awareness of cultural and semiotic innovation. In addition, works by Hutcheon (2006), Stam (2005), Leitch (2007), and Jackson (2000) help build a framework for the entire analysis by examining how film techniques, visual symbols, and cultural transpositions resuscitate Shakespeare’s plays for film’s contemporary audiences. The paper gives particular attention to two modern adaptations — Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) and Michael Radford’s *The Merchant of Venice* (2004) — which embody contradictory adaptive strategies: one radically reframing Shakespeare for a popular contemporary audience, the other tracking historical realism, naturalism, and emotional depth and authenticity. It argues that strong adaptations preserve the emotional and thematic core of Shakespeare’s works, while giving directors the freedom to generate new meanings for today's society. Then the study uses a blended methodology, integrating qualitative analysis of the films’ semiotic and cinematic strategies with quantitative audience data brought together through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with actors, directors, and viewers. The study concludes that film adaptations are distinctive artistic works that keep Shakespeare relevant and encourage creative exchange between the historical past and the present. The most effective adaptations function as what Hutcheon calls “hypertexts,” restoring the social and political energies of the source to modern audiences.

1. Theoretical Framework: Adapting the Original Play for Modern Screen Audiences

In a broader sense, film adaptation studies of the twenty-first century adhered to the belief that literary fidelity was the primary measure of a film’s value. Hence, original works were analyzed based on how closely they reproduced the text, and any departure was explained as a form of falsity or diminishment. That point has since moved substantially. Current scholarship has moved toward understanding adaptations on their own terms, as creative works that respond equally to their original text and the cultural circumstances of their production.

One similarity between these two media is that theatre and film are regarded as performance arts that depend on a collective audience experience. In addition, critics have long acknowledged the close relationship between the two forms, with many agreeing that theatre and film belong to the same generic family — sharing conventions of spectacle, narrative, character, and emotional address (Stam, 2005; Jackson, 2000). This shared heritage is essential to understanding how Shakespeare’s stage plays translate, and at times transform, when they move to the screen. The spoken word, which carries so much weight in theatrical performance, must now compete and collaborate with image, music, editing, and visual design.

This study directly addresses the gap in the specific transformations from stage performance to screen, where critical engagement remains insufficient despite the wealth of adaptation studies

available, in the cases of Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) and Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004), mainly when examined through the combined lens of interdisciplinary and semiotic theory.

Two principal research questions guide this study. First, what impact and efficacy do nonverbal aspects of theatrical and cinematic presentation — such as gesture, lighting, set design, music, and visual composition — have on twenty-first-century audiences compared to language-based elements? Second, how do audiences perceive and respond to Shakespeare's plays when performed on stage by actors drawn from the film industry, and how do those same works register when experienced in a cinema context? These questions open up the broader issue of whether the meaning of a Shakespearean text lies in its words, its performance, or in the interaction between the two. This research aims to analyse the most recent productions of Shakespeare's works adapted for the cinema — specifically Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) and Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004) — providing a comparative overview of how these two films interpret and portray the original plays and how they incorporate modern elements into the stories. The study therefore represents a critical contribution not only to illuminating what draws film directors to Shakespeare's works as material for adaptation, but also to demonstrating the growing importance of the visual image in contemporary culture and how semiotic and cinematic language have become primary vehicles for meaning-making in the twenty-first century.

Scholars of adaptation have long questioned the assumption that adaptation theory basically challenges fidelity-based criticism. As in Hutcheon (2006), who approaches adaptation both as a product and as a process, arguing that stories endure across generations precisely because they can be reinterpreted for new audiences and cultural moments (p. 4). This process, she insists, is not mere repetition — it is, in her own words, “a repetition without replication” (p. 7), a distinction that preserves the integrity of both the original and the new work. Understood this way, adaptation operates as a sustained creative dialogue with its source rather than a subordinate copy of it (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 8).

Such theoretical claims find practical grounding in Leitch's work. According to Leitch (2007), adaptations historically have inevitably reflected the era's cultural and historical preoccupations (p. 16). This helps explain why Shakespeare's plays are continually reimagined — each new version speaks as much to its contemporary moment as to the original text. Jackson (2000) similarly observes that Shakespearean films draw on cinematic language to make the plays accessible to modern viewers (p. 5), producing visual interpretations that could not exist on a stage (p. 12).

This distinction is particularly relevant in the theory of adaptation when referring to Stam's work. What emerges from this body of scholarship is that, as Stam (2005) argues, film and literature operate through fundamentally expressive systems (p. 20), making a direct comparison between the source and the adaptation theoretically unsound. He reframes the relationship as one

of creative transformation rather than reproduction (p. 25) — a position that shifts critical attention away from what is lost and toward what is newly created. This paper traces how adaptations have changed, from traditional stage versions of Shakespeare to more experimental and modern film adaptations in recent decades.

1.2 Methodology

The study uses a blended methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative research tools to capture both the experiential and measurable features of audience response to Shakespearean adaptations. Moreover, structured questionnaires were distributed to viewers of both stage and screen productions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors, directors, and audience members. These tools are designed to elicit responses from interviewees regarding the respective impact of nonverbal versus language-based elements and to compare participants' experiences of live theatrical and cinematic adaptations.

The film reflects the anxieties and values of its era, as Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) and Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004) were the two chosen films because they represent comparative adaptive strategies: one radically reinterpreting Shakespeare for a popular contemporary audience, the other pursuing historical realism and social depth. Thus, together, they provide the public with a productive comparative basis for examining how nonverbal cinematic language operates alongside, and sometimes in place of, the original text.

It is worth noting that what unites these theorists is the analytical framework. In other words, these perspectives integrate the semiotic methodology of Stam (2005), the cultural and intertextual model of Hutcheon (2006), and the historical and contextual perspective of Leitch (2007) to produce an interdisciplinary account of how meaning is constructed and received across different adaptations.

2. *The Merchant of Venice*: Transitioning from Performance to Contextual Analysis

These theoretical ideas become more concrete when looking at adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*. In addition, adapting this play is difficult because it is considered a “problem play,” especially given its portrayal of Shylock and its strong anti-Semitic themes (Schupak, 2025). Thus, Shylock is a complex character whose anger and desire for revenge stem from repeated humiliation and discrimination, which elicit both discomfort and sympathy in the audience (Yu, 2015, pp. 38–55). Consequently, the discussion becomes even more meaningful when one considers how a director handles this moral issue in the adaptation itself, as their choices reveal much about the cultural context of that time.

2.1 The Concept of the Theatrical Archive in Laurence Olivier (1973)

To begin with, the 1973 television production, directed by John Sichel, connects the grand style of the Victorian stage with the new medium of television (John Sichel - Wikipedia, 2023). Called a “faithful” adaptation, it emphasizes the strength of spoken words and the strong presence of its actors (Pope, 2019). The camera acts as a quiet watcher, rarely influencing the story, keeping a theatrical feel while keeping viewers emotionally distant (Owens, 2021). In addition, Davies (1988) notes that although Olivier’s Shakespeare films display strong artistic skill, they often shift between film and stage styles, underscoring his strong ties to theatre as a key part of his filmmaking. On the other hand, Stam (2005) points out that film adaptations should not be judged only by faithfulness, since film and theatre use “different semiotic systems” (p. 20). Hence, focusing too much on fidelity can limit a film’s creativity and stop it from using the special language of cinema.

Therefore, in parallel to this argument, Hutcheon (2006) states that adaptation means reinterpreting a story, not just copying it, with each new form and culture giving the story new meaning. Lastly, seen this way, Sichel’s production, though strong in theatre style, does not fully explore the possibilities of cinema.

2.2 Historical Realism and Empathy in Michael Radford’s 2004 Film

Michael Radford’s 2004 film comprises a significant departure from previous interpretations. While the dialogue remains Shakespearean, the visual language is purely cinematic. Radford uses the setting of sixteenth-century Venice not as a backdrop, but as a character in its own right. By opening the film with the historical reality of the Ghetto Nuovo and the ritualistic humiliation experienced by the Jewish community. Radford offers a sociological foundation for Shylock’s infamous “bond” (Oakes, 2016). This contextual framing alters the play’s moral view before a single line of Shakespeare has been spoken.

In addition, Radford uses chiaroscuro lighting and close-up shots, shifting the view of Shylock from a two-dimensional villain to a fully realised human being shaped by social exclusion and injustice. This shows how film adaptations can retain Shakespeare’s language while offering a new perspective (*An Evolution of Shylock*, as performed by Al Pacino, 2015).

Stam (2005) defines adaptation as a “process of creative transformation” (p. 25), which is mainly relevant in this context. The meaning of the play is not just moved from stage to screen. Instead, it is rebuilt within a new cultural and visual setting. As a result, Shylock becomes more than just an antagonist, thanks to the film’s setting, which adds depth to his character. In summary, this view supports Hutcheon’s (2006) idea that adaptation creates new interpretations instead of simply copying the original.

3. *Romeo and Juliet*: Exploring the Energy of Kinetic Interpretations Versus Timeless Classical Approaches

The different film versions of *Romeo and Juliet* provide a useful way to examine the distinction between “illustrative” and “transformative” ways of adapting Shakespeare. This difference shows a greater shift in adaptation studies, moving away from focusing mainly on how closely the adaptation follows the original toward a more detailed understanding of creative and cultural work. Hutcheon’s (2006) concept of adaptation as “a repetition without replication” (p. 7) captures this dynamic effectively — each new version transforms its source while maintaining a sustained dialogue with the original work (p. 8), allowing stories to remain culturally relevant across different media and audiences.

3.1 Zeffirelli (1968) and the Pursuit of Authenticity in Aesthetics

Franco Zeffirelli’s 1968 *Romeo and Juliet* is well known for its focus on realistic visuals, with actors of the right age and authentic period settings and costumes (*Romeo and Juliet* [Film], 1968). Natural landscapes, earthy details, and carefully chosen Renaissance clothing come together to create a world that feels true to its time and place (Pursell, 1986, pp. 173–178). This method shows how Shakespeare can reach a wider audience without missing historical or literary accuracy. Jackson (2000) points out that film versions of Shakespeare often try to turn the stage play into a “visually coherent cinematic world” (p. 12), influencing how viewers see and imagine the past.

Beyond just realistic looks, Zeffirelli’s film shows a deeper film style. Using truly young actors gives the lovers a sense of innocence and vulnerability, which makes the tragedy stronger (Brataas, 2018). The film creates a perfect version of Renaissance Verona, influenced as much by twentieth-century ideas and literary tradition as by historical facts (Pasternack, 2022).

3.2 Baz Luhrmann (1996) and Radical Recontextualization

Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) remains the most significant example of radical recontextualization in Shakespearean film. Luhrmann transposes the action to “Verona Beach” — a hyper-stylized, media-saturated contemporary metropolis — using this artificial urban landscape to represent the fractured, violent social world of the original play (Christopher, 2014). He draws on contemporary music, arresting visual imagery, rapid montage editing, and dense symbolism to translate Shakespeare’s emotional register into a cinematic language familiar to younger audiences (Butler, 2000). As Brode (2000) observes, Luhrmann preserves the play’s emotional core while deliberately constructing “a visual experience for the MTV generation” (p. 52).

One of the film’s most striking choices is replacing swords with designer handguns called “Sword 9mm.” This change updates Shakespeare’s violence for a modern setting while keeping

its meaning the same. The tribalism, machismo, and senseless violence of the Montague-Capulet feud fit easily into today's world. This ability to update surface details while keeping deeper themes is what Davies (1988) calls the main tension in Shakespearean film adaptations: the ongoing balance between theatrical tradition and cinematic possibilities. Luhrmann clearly chooses the visual side, especially in the fish tank scene. Here, close-up shots, soft lighting, and music take the place of dialogue, showing the sudden connection between Romeo and Juliet through images and sound alone (Luhrmann, 1996).

In addition, Hatchuel (2004) explains that Luhrmann connects Shakespeare's emotions to modern audiences through "visual symbolism and cinematic language" (p. 87). The fast, "MTV-style" editing also captures the lively spirit of the Elizabethan stage, where dramatic effects replaced elaborate sets (Pizano, 2019). Hutcheon (2006) says that adaptations change with culture and art, and their success relies more on strong themes than on literal adherence to the original text. That idea is supported by the fact that adaptations change with culture and art.

3.3 West Side Story: Examining the Constraints of Dialogue

Where Shakespeare relies on language, the film turns to imagery. *West Side Story*, first performed on stage in 1957 and later adapted into film, replaced Shakespeare's dialogue with music, dance, and striking visual elements, representing what Della Gatta (2021) describes as a shift in adaptation from the linguistic to the kinetic and musical. This shift demonstrates one of the key ideas in adaptation theory — that a story's emotional impact and social message can still come through even when the original language is not used. As Stam (2005) argues, film and literature operate through "different semiotic systems", yet meaning can still transfer between them without losing its essential force (p. 20).

West Side Story confirms Hutcheon's (2006) argument that adaptation is about reinterpretation rather than transcription. The story's power — its account of young love destroyed by social division, prejudice, and structural injustice — is not diminished by the loss of Shakespeare's verse. If anything, it is intensified by the physical immediacy of dance and the emotional directness of song.

All of these adaptations point to something bigger — that Shakespeare's plays are not fixed texts to be preserved, but collections of emotional and social themes that can be reimagined across different times, cultures, and artistic forms (Hutcheon, 2006; Stam, 2005; Leitch, 2007). What film does particularly well is bring those themes to life through image, sound, and movement in ways that the original stage could never fully achieve. In this sense, the most faithful adaptation may not be the one that keeps every word, but the one that makes a modern audience feel something close to what audiences felt watching the play for the very first time.

4. Conclusion

This study examined how Shakespearean film adaptations have changed over time, starting with the traditional 1973 *The Merchant of Venice* and moving to Luhrmann's visually striking *Romeo and Juliet*. The main finding is that Shakespeare's works are not set in stone. Instead, they are living stories that take on new meanings as they are adapted into different media, times, and cultures. Today, adaptation studies focus less on whether a film is faithful to its source and more on how well it uses the strengths of film to share the emotional, social, and political messages of the original.

This is precisely what Hutcheon (2006) means when she argues that adaptation is about reinterpretation, not just copying, and that meaning is shaped by new cultural and artistic settings.

On one hand, Stam's (2005) framework helps make sense of this, as he concludes that film and literature use different ways to express ideas (p. 20), so adaptations should not be judged solely by how closely they follow the original. On the other hand, as Leitch (2007) would put it, adaptations always reflect the culture and history of their time, so each version of Shakespeare is a product of its own era. Consequently, this connects directly to what Jackson (2000) observes, namely that Shakespearean films turn stage language into visual images, using film techniques to change how audiences experience the story. Finally, the theories of Hutcheon (2006), Stam (2005), Leitch (2007), and Jackson (2000) offer a solid foundation for this analysis. Taken together, these views show that the main question is not whether a film stays true to the original, but how well it captures the emotional, social, and political energy in Shakespeare's work. This can be seen in both traditional and modern adaptations, each of which helps keep Shakespeare important in today's culture.

The findings of this study also speak directly to the research questions posed at the outset. Concerning nonverbal elements, the analyses of Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* and Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* demonstrate that visual composition, lighting, music, and gesture are not supplementary to meaning — they are its primary carriers in cinematic adaptation. For twenty-first-century audiences conditioned by visual media, these nonverbal dimensions often prove more immediately affecting than the spoken text. This does not diminish the language of Shakespeare; rather, it confirms that his words gain new force when supported and reframed by a sophisticated visual apparatus.

Concerning the second research question — the difference between stage and screen reception — the study suggests that the presence of film actors on stage creates a particular kind of cultural tension. Theatre audiences frequently arrive with expectations influenced by prior exposure to screen media. Such expectations may enhance or complicate their engagement with live performances.

Overall, as Shakespeare's plays are adapted across different cultures and media worldwide, the framework developed in this study, based on signs, multiple fields of study, and audience focus, offers a way to evaluate future adaptations. In a nutshell, this study demonstrates that film adaptations are creative works that sustain Shakespeare's narratives' relevance in contemporary culture. Rather than diminishing the original, adaptations offer these stories opportunities to evolve and engage new audiences over time.

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