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## RUPERT GOOLD'S *RICHARD II* (2012): A NETWORK OF VISUAL INTERTEXTUALITY

### ABSTRACT

*This paper tackles intertextuality in Rupert Goold's Richard II (2012). Through the impact of icons and cinematic traces, Goold attempts to address the viewers' generic horizons of expectations to help decoding the array of signifiers abounding in the film. We will concentrate on the areas of Christological imagery not entirely abandoned religious power perspectives. Secondly, we will review a series of visual signifiers from different film genres and the presence of popular tropes, including the figures of Michael Jackson and Oscar Wilde, who have helped build up Richard's characterization and spectacularly diegetic persona.*

### KEYWORDS:

*Intertextuality – Richard II – Icons – Genres – Pop culture*

### 1. Introduction

Sam Mendes openly dreamed *The Hollow Crown* (2012) would accomplish the shooting of the Second Henriad, and, by the way, the “kids” (my own translation) would get to know where *A Game of Thrones* comes from (Ordoñez 2012). I argue that, in order to achieve this ambitious goal, Goold has attempted to approach the audience's easier-said ‘horizon of expectations’ (Iser 1976: 83; Jauss 1982: 42) and appeal to the viewers through hegemonic practices so that the unfamiliar and cinematically untested text of *Richard II* can effectively work in film. For Leitch (2003: 2-8), we live in a text-marked society and any piece of fiction vertebrates through different texts. As an instance of this, Whaley (2007: 37-46) analyses Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and its relationship with texts like *Heart of Darkness*, the *Odyssey*, and *Inferno*, together with films belonging to American popular culture like

*Dr Strangelove* (1964) and *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini* (1965). Reliance on the spectators' schemata helps manipulating their previous experience on film genre, to help them interact and take part in the making of meaning one expects from spectators. Following Phillips (2011: 162), one genre-related item we need to recognise is iconography, a term ‘used to describe and categorise visual motifs in film’ (Watson 2012: 193). In film, icons can be objects, quotes or actors working as texts (Watson 2012a: 169).

As Philips writes (2011: 162), since the 1980s, genres have generally appeared mixed. The *Back to the Future* trilogy features a teenage hero, Michael J. Fox, that out of the paradigm of a high school film, ends up travelling to 1955 in a home-made time machine, and later on, he is transported to a 1885 frontier Hill Valley, where he finds the chance to play Clint Eastwood's steel chest-plate trick in *A Fistful of Dollars*. It is common to recognise this bricolage in Shakespeare's *Richard II*,

which certainly draws from other narrative sources such as Holinshed's *Chronicles*. We run the risk of excessively categorising genres and, for this reason, we have considered Watson's view (2012b: 204-205), which adds extra-textual factors. These variables emphasize the presentness and volatility of tropes (Watson 2012b: 205), that, nonetheless, generate meaningful and viewer-friendly cognitive frameworks. This way, our paper will not only include reference to cinematic genres but to other tropes and visual signifiers of contemporary popular culture that have shaped up this first episode in *The Hollow Crown*. In order to do so, I am going to deal with the religious iconography of the film. Secondly, I will tackle frames of reference related to film genres and popular culture icons. The third part of the essay will explore how the figures of several personalities have contributed to shape up Richard's cinematic characterization.

## 2. Body of the Paper

A wooden carved crucified Christ opens up the narrative. The image is flanked by images of St. Paul and St. John, hanging from the Irish oak ceiling of St. David's Cathedral. A camera tilt reveals the Plantagenet family tree on a tapestry piece and the descending movement recalls that of the Wheel of Fortune, that advises those who have the power not to get too comfortable. A medium shot shows a sceptre-holding Richard and the paraphernalia that clearly establishes his divine character and his ostentatious connection with a dramatic portrayal of a King Jesus of sorts.

As Jesus, Richard will certainly face martyrdom. We can anticipate the King's certain death when we listen voice-over to part of the "Hollow Crown" speech (*Richard II*, 3.2.145, 155-160). The combination of voice-over and other-worldly self-fashioning on Richard's behalf evokes the opening scene in *The Thin Red Line* (1998), in which the protagonist's voice questions the mysterious nature of human beings and, at the same time, a crocodile makes way into the muddy waters of some Pacific island, thus combining themes of spiritual communion with those of the violence

of wilderness and nature (Sterritt 2013). The courtiers stand up as wax statues, in Palestinian robes, in what seems a historical re-enactment, adding up to the Eastern liturgical mise-en-scène that Richard's court represents. Just a gesture of Richard's royal hand sets the frozen figures in motion. Bolingbroke and Mowray burst into the room, dressed in combat outfit, imposing their iron-dressed presence to contaminate the ceremonious court and to turn it into a space of potential disruption.

In a subsequent montage sequence, Richard is fascinated by the painting of St. Sebastian's arrow-covered body, and toys with the tiny red spots near the model's nipple. St. Sebastian's iconography was popular in the Middle Ages but the martyr's image is also an icon amongst part of the gay community. This picture will be (perhaps too easily) paralleled with Richard's execution, in which the naked and Peterpanesque body of the King will be revealed in a series of close-up and medium shots all covered in arrows and momentarily hovering through the air like Saint Sebastian in the picture.

At Coventry, Richard calmly marks the yellow leaves and the nature around him, thus developing the *The Thin Red Line* trope. Nevertheless, peace is interrupted by war horses approaching. The King's downfall is anticipated by the arrival of Bolingbroke's black horse and Mowray's devilish figure riding a chamfroned stallion and hiding his face with a Teutonic Order helmet. The terrifying whining of the black horse leads to Mowray and Bolingbroke towering through low camera angles. Their outfit relates them with the ghastly countenances of Nigel Terry and Robert Addie's creepy and dreadful Sir Mordred in a Sun-God mask in *Excalibur* (Boorman, 1981). The King is at the top of the Wheel of Fortune and seems not to regard the vigorous presence of military power and the machinery that does not respect neither liturgy nor protocol.

Bolingbroke asks to be embraced by the King and (for the first time) Richard descends upon Bolingbroke, who kneels. Richard caresses Bolingbroke's chain-mailed head while he looks up to his

King with sincere devotion and genuine desire for pardon. The shot of Bolingbroke receiving blessing from Richard resembles *Ben-Hur's* water-scene, in which Jesus saves the hero's life from thirst by giving him to drink from a ladle, except that this time Richard's opaque face is perfectly visible to the spectator and one doubts Richard's genuine love for Bolingbroke.

After the deposition scene, York tells his wife the events around the coronation and Richard's incarceration. Like Kenneth Branagh, Goold inserts flash-cuts that correlate with the speech. As King Henry IV rides through the bannered streets and a dwarfish man in an iron mask stares at him from the battlements, the isolated Richard remains in low angle while showers of trash and filth fall over him, that he bears with solid quietness dressed in a white tunic. The montage ends up with a close-up of Bolingbroke crowned as Henry IV of England, but he has not removed his chainmail from his shoulders. His reign will not go unquestioned and the real wars are about to begin. Cleverly enough, Goold makes many promises of epic violence and bloodshed that, in coherence with the text, are never entirely fulfilled in front of the spectator.

Does the array of steel, weaponry and preparation for fighting incense any suspense on the spectator? Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971), particularly known for its unusual amount of explicit and naked violence, is quoted through the training scenes in which Bolingbroke decapitates a target and Mowray essays his one-handed flail over a pig's head and against a helmet that resembles Bolingbroke's one. The spiked ball of the flail is revealed in close-up as if smoking with "bloody execution", echoing the violence in the first scenes of Polanski's *Macbeth*. Emphasis on weapons is made again at the lists when Mowray rejects the lance and demands his flail. Let it be said that this violence *aperitif* has been employed by Goold's magpie-like postmodern approach in his recurrence to reference oriented to Epic and Medieval films.

Likewise, instead of having Bushy and Green simply lectured by Bolingbroke, we attend their execution. The scene opens with Polanski's re-

source of showing the crowd through the eyes of the decapitated Macbeth. Nevertheless, this time the head of the bleeding Bushy sees everything through a ragged bag and Bolingbroke, who waits by the river shore in the executioner's company. Like Cawdor in Polanski's film, Bushy smiles unrepentant, in Bolingbroke's face, and does not allow the soldiers to take him towards the riverside pillory but walks towards the masked executioner alone. With every fall of the axe, a splash mixes the river water with blood and the beheaded bodies are left there like head-chopped mannequins. Considering the ceremonial and lyrical character that is generally attributed to the play, blood seems too much in the way and Goold seems willing to stretch the "less is more" maxim to the limit.

Richard's execution is carried out by Aumerle, Richard's cousin, instead of Exton, thus reinforcing the Biblical parallel. After King Richard's execution, a series of images of death pervade the last scene in the film. His hands stained with blood, cousin Aumerle walks along the road dragging Richard's wooden coffin over watery and muddy soil. A parallel-shot sequence shows Aumerle's journey and the entrances of the nobles who, in succession, throw at Bolingbroke's feet the heads of the different rebels as if playing bowls. Bishop Carlisle is also brought after having received an unrestrained bashing, three-quarters dead and nearly blinded. Even if forgiven, he has been taught a lesson. A close-up of King Henry IV shows him thanking the thanes for his loyalty, although he is finding it hard to keep calm. This Bolingbroke is not the calculating stern and opaque figure that Jon Finch played for the BBC, but a man who is, little by little, learning the bloody realities of kingship and takes serious efforts to govern this rush learning.

Actors, as we said previously, have the potential to mean things as objects or shots do. James Pufroy (Mowray in the film) can be regarded as a Medieval and historical film icon due to his many parts played in those films. Also, he often plays womanizers with an inclination to a certain sincerity of character and physical courage, narcissism,

charisma and violence. His particular intertext may inevitably connect him with the ambiguity of his other parts. Like his Antony, Puferoy's Mowray is an ambiguous sinner for whom honour and life "both grow in one" (*Richard II*, 1.1.182).

Is there perhaps any significance in the fact that only British actors compose the cast of this adaptation? It clearly makes a point in a film that helps itself with Hollywoodian cinematic conventions and that relies on the prestige and the talent of iconic actors of the British stage, TV and cinema. Cooke writes about British cinema as being overshadowed by the American Hollywood industry, for which the under-budgeted British cinematic directors cleverly borrow Hollywoodian resources, which derives into a combination of realism and melodrama (Cooke 2011: 358). Patrick Stewart and David Suchet might represent a former generation of actors that appeared in the celebrated John Barton series *Playing Shakespeare* in the 1980s. Stewart's "Sceptre'd isle" speech in close-up brings the question: Was this the face that starred *X-Men* and *Star Trek: The New Generation*? The elections of Patrick Stewart and David Suchet as Gaunt and York seem to convey an additional meta-fictional meaning to the film, as these two iconic actors of the British theatrical panorama somehow evaluate the younger generation in the story. Furthermore, the choosing of Patrick Stewart, a renowned English actor, helps clarifying Gaunt's function as intended *Vox Britannica*, the patriotic and fatherly figure of a Ridley Scott's film. His parental function is seen when he appears behind Rory Kinear (Bolingbroke) in the chapel at prayer, quoting a ritual of adventure and medieval films: the passing of the sword. Whoever is acquainted with this convention may understand the bond between a fatherly figure and a young knight as the bonding of honour and trust in the family, which is a familiar trope in Ridley Scott's films. The parental love theme extends to Bolingbroke's departing and farewell from Gaunt besides the river moat at an oyster collection point. Bolingbroke waves goodbye to Gaunt - or perhaps to an oyster wench that appears in medium shot? The ambiguous camera

does not really answer the question! -. Is Goold paralleling Kinnear with a Russell Crowe figure that, despite his heroic status, would rather remain in his lands taking care of his people in a sort of proto-democratic system? If he is doing it, Bolingbroke's self-projection will definitely disappoint the spectator who watches episodes two and three, in which Henry IV has rather turned into Commodus, a coughing and Machiavellian isolated Jeremy Irons who urges Hal to forge foreign quarrels.

Wyver (2012) argues that the ground of England is a key image (an icon) in the play and is well represented through an array of landscapes. One of the most emblematic ones in this film is the English coast, from where Bolingbroke departs. The coast invokes the iconography and mythology of British Nationalism that has been used and re-used in several historical and Heritage films such as *The Eagle Has Landed* (Sturges, 1976), *The White Cliffs of Dover* (Brown, 1944), *Elizabeth the Golden Age* (Kapur, 2007), *Chariots of Fire* (Hudson, 1981), etc. The English coast was a potent signifier for war films from the 1940's onwards that celebrated the triumph of Great Britain and the National cooperation to confront the invaders. However, the mythological status of the English coast is far more ancient than World War II or Heritage films of the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dover is, for Holderness (2001: 65), a 'spot of origins', a particular geographical location regarded by tradition as the source of a nation's genesis. Sentimentality sprouts in Bolingbroke's countenance as he walks towards a little boat awaiting him in the agitated sea, but he holds stills and looks back and once more caresses the ground of his dear England. A complete change of mood takes place after this and, in a long shot, we see Bolingbroke as a tiny spot walking towards the water, with a foreground of rocks amalgamated that resemble Richard's crown and dominion. As Bolingbroke strides towards the waters, he delivers the lines: "Where'er I wander, boast of this I can, / Though banished, yet a true-born Englishman." (*Richard II*, 1.3.308-309). Thus, the beach summarizes the idea of Englishness and its attributes of courage, mascu-

linity, sentimentality and humble love for the little island. Later on, Bolingbroke is revealed returning to England and, like Kevin Costner, leans on the beach's soil to kiss it. Instantly, Goold quotes again Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* – let us remember Maximus' return to Trujillum, the heather reaching his knees - while walking through the English fields.

The film combines different references to Western and War films in varied manners. As Bolingbroke finds himself in some crossroads he finds the three riders Northumberland, Willoughby and Ross, that reach their meeting point and bring a fourth horse for him and clear agreement and brotherly bonding are established between the four bringers of justice. The four of them ride through a rocky pass and are led by Bolingbroke and followed by a train of foot soldiers garnished with mail coats, helmets, shields and spears, all toward the same quest. A tracking shot reveals Bolingbroke and Northumberland walking hand-in-hand through an improvised base-camp with fire pots and horses resting all around. Like a cowboy character or Wilfred Ivanhoe, Bolingbroke is a returned exile and will use force to settle the world to rights. Nevertheless Bolingbroke finds his home spoiled and destroyed, and his father is dead in the chapel. After Kinear revises the situation, he turns around and a shot shows him striding towards the camera, which informs of his action taking. The action is precipitated with Bushy and Green's executions and the happy breed of heroes arrive in Flint Castle. This arrival is revealed in a short that resembles the climbing up the Mount Austen in *The Thin Red Line*.

As for Ben Wishaw's portrayal of Richard, how can a director bring to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century audience a historical character that in his time saw himself, clearly, as the Dypitch of Wilton testifies, God's representative on earth? Wishaw admits using Al Gaddafi, with his fashion for Eastern protocol and design, as a model for his Richard (Ford Rojas 2012). Like Richard, Gaddafi was someone who resisted giving up his powerful combination of violence and self-pity. Apart from the obvious divine apparatus with which Richard refurbishes

his dramatic persona, Goold found what I would consider a clever way of connecting with the audiences: a relationship with idols of pop culture such as Oscar Wilde and Michael Jackson.

Does it not make sense? Wishaw and Goold envisaged Jackson as someone who saw himself "not really as a human being, but as a demigod – a conduit for men on the earth to experience the divine, someone who revelled in a sense of magic and mystery about themselves (...) someone surrounded by people who just told him what he wanted to hear" (Ford Rojas 2012). It is known that Oscar Wilde, who had nothing to declare but his genius, was also flamboyant and caricaturized in *The Punch* and in English operettas for his far-fetched extravagance.

Many articles talk about the reference to Jackson through Richard's macaque, fed by the King constantly. However, more interesting to me is Richard's huge theatrical trick at Flint Castle, where he discloses himself in golden armour flanked by two trumpeting-angels, resembling Jackson's golden outfit in his History Tour. Richard resembles the Statue in *The Happy Prince* (1888), a figure that towers above the rest of mankind and is admired by all. A series of extreme-close ups focus on gold garniture, jewels, the ruby-hilted sword, his golden mail-coat and his golden gauntlet. A camera tilt scans Richard's outfit all over as if the Swallow were flying near the Happy Prince. Despite this, Richard's agitated breathing is perceived and we can see drops of sweat running down his face. Northumberland appears as a blurred figure in a high angle and, little by little, Richard can distinguish the merciless earl. The spectacle is intended to generate an impact similar to the one that Elizabethan audiences must have felt when they saw Richard descending from the balcony when commanded by Northumberland and suddenly Richard gains in cinematic authority, if not in military advantage. Despite Richard's authoritative voice and posture, the camera reveals Richard's armour clinking as chattering teeth.

Wishaw in golden armour brings his acting down a peg or two with a quietness and a calm-

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ness of acceptance that actually make him look regal as soon as he descends and resigns the crown. The King walks in isolation through a corridor made by the soldiers while the camera tracks back and follows his walk face up the camera, quoting Stephen Fry's portrayal of Oscar Wilde (Gilbert, 1997) walking through the corridor after the trial for sodomy. A final encore is given at Westminster during the deposition. Just before giving up the Crown, Richard still behaves like a pop star and the Son of God that walks away from Bolingbroke as if to re-enter and opens his arms while an arch shot quotes Kapur's last shot of *Elizabeth the Golden Age* (2007) in which the Virgin Queen of England seems illuminated like a procession figure. Light enters through the cathedral windows and illuminates the spot carefully chosen by him where his last performance is delivered before execution.

### 3. Conclusion

Being truthful to Shakespeare is always a dubious task – especially if we talk about Shakespeare on film –, but one of the film's achievements is that visual imagery manages to bring back to the audience something equivalent to the visual impact of stage metaphors like the probable appearance of Richard on the balcony, from which he descended, and narrative bricolage certainly attempts at juggling with whatever schemata can be gathered for the spectator and then introduce this potentially hard language for the audiences intended (let us remember Mendes openly toyed with the idea of competing with *A Game of Thrones*). Oscar Wilde and Michael Jackson are haunted figures familiar to the popular audiences that due to their artistic enormity and the scandal that surrounded them ended up socially or physically destroyed and, "All murdered" (*Richard II*, 3.2.160).

The religious iconographic element in the play and the parallels with Jesus Christ have been regarded as too labored (Orford 2012). Isachs (2013) writes about Goold's infuriating tendency to read too much into the story's Christian parallels inasmuch as they amount to no more than a surface-level interpretation of the play. However,

talking about surface and even excess for its own sake might have been fairly appropriate choices for Richard's portrayal. Wilde would have said, as he does in his *Truth About Masks*, that for Shakespeare's playing, reliance on the external details, on the surface, on garments, clothes, diadems, tiaras, crowns, jewels, etc. would be precisely the point in the production. Goold's imagery might be far-fetched and as an example of this we could mention the arc shot in which the hollow Crown simply floats and soars through the air within St. David's cathedral. All in all, if I wanted to direct *Richard II*, visual impact, even being camp, even propaganda, would be one of my most cherished resources. It is Richard's obsession with self-representation that calls for iconography and that is how the iconographic syntax becomes Richard's character, vision and obsession themselves and not just their photograph.

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