

Samuel Crowl. *Shakespeare and Film: A Norton Guide*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. ISBN-13: 978-0393927658; xxv + 238pp. US\$27.50

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Shakespeare and Film: A Norton Guide reads, in many ways, like a love letter to the genre of Shakespeare on film. Crowl's enthusiasm and love for Shakespeare, film, and the marriage of the two is evident in every word he writes, resulting in an exceedingly likeable work. His passion is also wonderfully catching—one cannot help desiring to sit down with him over the proverbial cup of coffee and have a lively discussion about which film titles rank among the best examples in their fields. While not many could write a love letter as keen and erudite as Samuel Crowl does, he states in his introduction that he intends to produce “a comprehensive guide to Shakespeare and film focused specifically on the use of the Shakespeare film in the undergraduate classroom” (xi); in this regard, the book, to my tastes, sometimes comes up short. Though it is sometimes frustratingly redundant, one, nevertheless, still leaves it with a fresh appreciation of how filmmakers translate Shakespeare's text from the poetry on the page to the images on the 35mm film.

Shakespeare and Film is divided into two parts: the first surveys the history of Shakespeare on film; the second provides a guide to critically approaching the genre. (The book also contains a filmography and glossary of film terms for undergraduates studying the genre.) Part I begins forcefully—the Introduction and first Chapter are sharp and engaging. The latter provides an overview of Shakespeare on film, with the early section on Shakespearean films being particularly illuminating and well written.

Part I proceeds to investigate the major directors of the genre, Shakespeare on television, and Shakespeare on film in the 1990s. Unfortunately, here the redundant character of the book first appears: what has been discussed in one chapter is rehashed in another (and sometimes even in another), diminishing the effectiveness of the preceding sections. For instance, in Part I, a segment is devoted to Kenneth Branagh in the first chapter, and again in the following chapter, and yet again in the final chapter. At first, I assumed the reason for the repetition was instructional reinforcement, but examples are also duplicated—in Kenneth Branagh’s case, Crowl repeatedly discusses the grittiness of his *Henry V* and the commercial success of *Much Ado About Nothing*. If Crowl’s intent is to enhance the original point, he might do so more effectively by introducing different examples every time he returns to that point. Certain phrases also appear and reappear throughout the book, and their reappearance does not clearly enrich their presentation. For instance, Crowl writes several times that “the last decade of the twentieth century, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, proved a rich revival for the Shakespeare film genre,” (80) but never provides any further historical or cultural context for this statement, leaving the reader to wonder why he points to these specific events so often and whether they sparked some specific transformation with respect to Shakespeare on film.

Part II of the book is stronger than the first. Crowl is at his best when he makes specific connections between the visual medium of film and the verbal medium of Shakespeare and when he highlights how directors succeed in creating “a film grammar and rhetoric to express Shakespeare’s rich language in visual images and patterns” (xii). As one who approaches Shakespeare on film as a student and scholar of Shakespeare rather than of film, I often find myself frustrated by what filmmakers leave out. In

Chapter 7, which is particularly eloquent, Crowl tackles the issue of translating Shakespeare's text to a screenplay with an adroitness that left me reconsidering my opinions of virtually every Shakespeare film I've seen (most of those that are available). He skillfully sets up his argument, seamlessly flowing from the accepted presumption that "Shakespeare conceived of his plays as scripts for performance. Scripts, he knew from practice, might be trimmed, amended, or enlarged in the collaborative nature of theatrical rehearsal and performance," to concluding that "as intelligent consumers of film entertainment and as students of the genre, our job is not to lament what has been left out of a Shakespeare film but to understand what has been retained" (129).

Considering his desire to make this book an undergraduate guide to Shakespeare on film, some of Crowl's choices about what to address or omit are curious and limiting. Despite highlighting the contributions of six major directors of Shakespeare on film (Olivier, Welles, Branagh, Kurosawa, Kozintsev, and Zeffereilli) in Part I, Part II generally ignores the work of Kurosawa and Kozintsev. Crowl turns instead towards staples of Branagh's *Henry V* and *Hamlet*, and Welles' *Othello* and *Chimes at Midnight*, demonstrating a particular affinity for Olivier's work. Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* and Almereyda's *Hamlet* also appear frequently throughout the book. In his introduction, Crowl explains that he uses these selected examples purposefully because they are the works that are "most likely to be used in traditional survey courses devoted to Shakespeare," (xiii) but by limiting himself to repeatedly using the same examples, the hypothetical student to whom the book is directed receives less of a *comprehensive* analysis of Shakespeare on film and more an overview of the greatest hits of Shakespeare on film. Certainly, one cannot cover an entire genre in roughly 200 pages, but if Crowl had trimmed some of the repetitious examples, he would have had room for

more thorough coverage of a wider range of films, resulting I believe in a more useful undergraduate reference work.

Another curious choice and a source of potential confusion for students is that Crowl says that he will not address adaptations of Shakespearean plays in *Shakespeare and Film*, yet he repeatedly refers to Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* and places both Welles and Kurosawa amongst the major directors of Shakespeare on film. While it would not be possible to write a Shakespeare on film book without including a discussion of the work of Kurosawa, Crowl does not identify Kurosawa's films as adaptations, missing a potentially interesting educational opportunity. An inquisitive student might be interested in learning about the differences between *Ran* and *Scotland, PA*, as Shakespearean adaptations and why one might be more appropriate in the classroom than the other.

What Crowl sets out to do with *Shakespeare and Film* is admirable, and as a fellow teacher, appreciated, but this book falls just short of being the comprehensive undergraduate guide it purports to be. Iterated discussions of films, directors, and cinematic examples reduce the breadth of material the book could cover, and Crowl rarely demonstrates his reasons for repeatedly examining the material he does consider. Crowl notes that in Part II he will teach students how to write an intelligent film analysis, but he never clearly does so. His writing is also inconsistent; at times, it is insightful and moving, while at others he provides little more than page-long lists of songs in movie soundtracks. Though the book in its entirety may not be the best resource for the classroom, Crowl's history of Shakespeare on film and his acumen regarding the metamorphosis of Shakespeare's text into a director's vision as detailed in chapters I have already highlighted in this review serve as excellent resources for

students. For English majors who frown upon the artistic license and script cutting that film directors take when interpreting Shakespeare, this book may be just what they need to see the field in a new light. This book may not be as useful in the classroom as Crowl intends, but it articulately and persuasively explains the reasons why we must judge Shakespeare on film separately from the plays, as more than adaptations, and as a genre in and of itself—in these respects, *Shakespeare and Film: A Norton Guide* wholly succeeds.