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# Shakespearean Heritage and the Preposterous “Contemporary Jacobean” Film: Mike Figgis’s *Hotel*

PASCALE AEBISCHER

THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM saw something of a boom in film versions of non-Shakespeare Jacobean drama. Marcus Thompson released *Middleton’s Changeling* in 1998; Mike Figgis’s *Hotel*, which features an adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi*, was released in 2001; and Alex Cox’s *Revengers Tragedy* appeared in 2002. Following, as they do, a wave of productivity in high-profile Shakespeare adaptations on screen, these films are striking for the way in which they pitch themselves against the nostalgic, spectacular mainstream Shakespeare productions mounted, most prominently, by the significantly named “Renaissance Films” and “Renaissance Theatre Company” associated with Kenneth Branagh’s early career. Contrary to conservative Shakespeare films such as these, with their use of period costume, linear storytelling, and reverential attitude toward the Shakespearean text, the films by Thompson, Figgis, and Cox are deliberate in their use of anachronism, narrative disjunction, and irreverence toward their source texts. Adapting the terminology used by Susan Bennett in *Performing Nostalgia*, I would like to call the countercinematic and counter-Shakespearean aesthetic they cultivate “contemporary Jacobean.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* (London: Routledge, 1996), 106. While Rosalind Galt has recently argued that the boundary between mainstream heritage and countercinema is more porous than my formulation suggests, I want to highlight the ways in which Figgis’s *Hotel* tries to uphold that boundary and position itself as countercinematic and oppositional. See Rosalind Galt, *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (New York: Columbia UP, 2006), 7–11.

This essay is concerned with the ways in which one of these contemporary Jacobean films—Mike Figgis's *Hotel*—situates itself in the context of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century (not)Shakespeare industry. The film is arguably an example of what Douglas Lanier has termed “immanent theory”—“an artefact meditating on the theoretical grounds of its own existence.”<sup>2</sup> The plot, which includes Jacobean excesses such as cannibalism, murder, usurpation, necrophilia, and revenge, self-reflexively centers on an international film crew following the rules set down in the Dogme95 manifesto of filmmaking to produce what Figgis has called a “sort of ‘period punk’” adaptation of John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* in Venice.<sup>3</sup> The metacinematic reflection is reinforced, often to the extent of self-parody, by the addition of a documentary film crew headed by the obnoxious Charlee Boux (Salma Hayek), who is filming a Dogme-inspired, MTV-style documentary of the making of *Malfi*.

Using Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* as a “preposterous” pre-text, *Hotel* takes issue with Shakespeare's canonical status, challenging his preeminence through an aggressive riposte to the disparagement of Webster in John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1999), one of *Hotel*'s principal intertexts. Rather than offering *Shakespeare in Love*'s transparent correspondence between the plot of the frame narrative and the play-within-the-film, *Hotel*—much like Kristian Levring's contemporary Dogme reworking of *King Lear* in *The King Is Alive* (2000)—resists straightforward parallels and a “reliance on convention and the roots of culture.”<sup>4</sup>

*Hotel* shows that filming Webster involves the exhumation of a forgotten author, the piecing together of a corpus / corpse for a modern audience gorged on processed Renaissance-as-heritage. For Figgis's film, this processing of *The Duchess of Malfi* into consumer goods is linked to the way the film industry treats its actresses. Through the insistent use of *Doppelgänger* figures who reflect aspects of the Duchess's character, the film problematizes the commodification and consumption of Renaissance culture and the female body alike; it establishes a link between the oppression of the Duchess by her brothers and the oppression of female creative expression by the apparatus of film. *Hotel* disrupts the preconceptions of the mainstream Shakespeare and heritage industries, with which it engages through intertextual references and allusive casting. Sidestepping Shakespeare and using Webster allows the film to question its own investment in cultural and textual authority and to

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Lanier, “Drowning the Book: *Prospero's Books* and the Textual Shakespeare,” in *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, ed. James C. Bulman (London: Routledge, 1996), 187–209, esp. 204; Lanier refers to *Prospero's Books*.

<sup>3</sup> Mike Figgis, *Digital Film-Making* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Martha P. Nochimson, “*The King Is Alive*,” *Film Quarterly* 55.2 (2001–2): 48–54, esp. 52.

oppose heritage with disinheritance, celebration of literary tradition with an insistence on obscurity, and nostalgia with a relish for seeing a Jacobean classic as something that is alien enough to be new—a preposterously contemporary Jacobean text.

THE “CONTEMPORARY JACOBAN” REVISITED:  
NOSTALGIA AND THE (NOT)SHAKESPEARE INDUSTRY

Susan Bennett, describing Howard Barker’s rewriting of Thomas Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* as “contemporary Jacobean text,”<sup>5</sup> is concerned with the way “the Jacobean” has functioned “as a signifier bound to represent psychopathic violence and deviant desires.” She notes, “Unlike the idealized authenticity and authority of Shakespeare’s (great) texts, these Jacobean revivals point to a less than perfect past.”<sup>6</sup> On the face of it, there seems to be an opposition between these Jacobean revivals in British theaters in the 1980s and early 1990s and the nostalgic investment in the cultural revival of Shakespeare and Renaissance culture that has seen the building of “Shakespeare’s” Globe and the development of the “Shakespeare and Elizabethan heritage industry.”<sup>7</sup> This is evident in the continuing success of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and the National Theatre and the thriving Renaissance tourism focused on English Heritage sites, the National Trust, Historic Royal Palaces, and the various Shakespeare sites in and around Stratford-upon-Avon. On our screens, this industry has produced “Renaissance” films such as *Shakespeare in Love* and Shekhar Kapur’s two *Elizabeths* (1998, 2007); their Continental counterparts, Patrice Chéreau’s *La reine Margot* (1994) and Agnès Merlet’s *Artemisia* (1997); and, most visibly, the Shakespeare films of the “Kenneth Branagh Era”<sup>8</sup>—cinematic Shakespeares “rooted in [the] realist and heritage conventions” associated with James Ivory’s 1985 *A Room with a View*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bennett, 106. On “neo-Jacobean” theatre of the 1980s, see also Richard Boon and Amanda Price, “Maps of the World: ‘Neo-Jacobeanism’ and Contemporary British Theatre,” *Modern Drama* 41 (1998): 635–54.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Julianne Pidduck, “Elizabeth and *Shakespeare in Love*: Screening the Elizabethans,” in *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. Ginette Vincendeau (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 130–35, esp. 130.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between Shakespeare films and heritage cinema, see Deborah Cartmell, “Fin de Siècle Film Adaptations of Shakespeare,” in *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovisions since the Mid-1990s*, ed. Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2004), 77–85. The term “Kenneth Branagh era” was coined by Samuel Crowl in *Shakespeare at the Cineplex: The Kenneth Branagh Era* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe, *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 16. For the centrality of *A Room with a View* in the heritage canon and remarks on how Branagh’s *Henry V* fits into it, see Andrew Higson “Re-Presenting the National

In spite of their apparent rejection of Shakespearean nostalgia, Bennett argues, the Jacobean revival productions are less transgressive, less oppositional than their harnessing of “the Jacobean” initially suggests, for the imperfect past they invoke is “nonetheless one which can help us legitimize our own defective present. The designation’s function, even as it marks transgression and dissidence, points to a continuous and repetitive history, the inevitability of which we can do no more than accept.”<sup>10</sup> Despite the difference in tone that sets late twentieth-century “Jacobean” productions apart from Shakespeare productions at the RSC and the National Theatre, the impulse behind both is nostalgic. Instead of critiquing the present, these Jacobean revivals are as conservative as their Shakespearean counterparts because they encourage cynical complacency: the past was no better than the present, so we can do nothing to improve things; we can at least be proud that we have taken a long-term view of the problems. The anachronism of “contemporary Jacobean,” for this group of productions, emphasizes continuity and coherence.

A glance through reviews of Jacobean revivals by the RSC confirms the accuracy of Bennett’s analysis: there is much self-congratulation at having made the effort to offer a non-Shakespeare production in the first place and a wistful acknowledgment of the relevance of Jacobean themes to present crises. Margaret Ingram’s review of Michael Attenborough’s 1992 staging of *The Changeling* (a review significantly entitled “Driven to Destruction amid Jacobean violence”) is representative. Ingram commends the “pleasantly traditional manner” of Attenborough’s “sympathetic production” and goes on to explain, “Violence was a Jacobean escape from the routine of dullness of daily life and an exploration of what drives human beings to destruction. Once one is attuned to that time[,] the message behind the disguises, poisonings and intrigues is just as applicable to the problems of today and this is a play to be recommended.” Another reason for recommending *The Changeling* is implicit in Ingram’s opening statement, in which she eagerly tells her readers of the “17th century preoccupations with lust, violence, murder, clandestine passion and revenge, embroidered with virginity tests, lurid scenes from the madhouse and ‘carnal, bloody and unnatural acts’” that fill the play.<sup>11</sup> If readers recognize that “carnal, bloody and unnatural acts” is how Horatio describes the plot of *Hamlet* to Fortinbras, then those readers will not only feel flattered in their cultural knowledge, but will also feel reassured that the ultimate reference point for this production of Middleton and Rowley’s

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Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film,” in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester Friedman (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 109–29.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Ingram, “Driven to Destruction amid Jacobean Violence,” *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 13 November 1992, 8.

disturbing, alien play is the ever-familiar Shakespeare. What takes precedence, historically and culturally, is Shakespeare; the Jacobans are his successors, who are intelligible only in relation to their eminent precursor.

PUTTING THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE:  
THE PREPOSTEROUSNESS OF THE CONTEMPORARY JACOBAN FILM

In view of the nostalgia that characterizes most Jacobean revivals in the late twentieth century, it is not surprising that it is only in a few cases, notably in Derek Jarman's films of *The Tempest* (1979) and *Edward II* (1991), that Bennett finds that "the 'Jacobean' provides one site where the contradictory impulses of nostalgia perform themselves in a disruptive and occasionally emancipatory mode."<sup>12</sup> Juxtaposing demonstrations by OutRage with Edward's humiliation at the hands of his nobles in the latter film, Jarman replaces complacency with protest and textual reverence with "the fracturing of the narrative."<sup>13</sup> Instead of reassuringly Shakespearean "carnal, bloody and unnatural acts," the violence of *Edward II* is unsettling in its insistently eroticized nature: Edward's sodomitical death at the hands of Lightborn, instead of being "real," is removed to the realm of fantasy while Queen Isabella's involvement in Kent's death is transformed into a horrid scene of "vampiric slurpings" as she bites his neck.<sup>14</sup> Rather than embodying a complacent nostalgia, Jarman's films "attempt to shape the present by means of the past" and use "deliberate anachronism" to inject the concerns of the present into that past.<sup>15</sup>

Jarman's use of Shakespeare and Marlowe—to rewrite English history and to intimate that state terror and establishment power are contingent on the suppression of homosexuality and "the rigorous policing of desire and excess"<sup>16</sup>—opens up a contemporary Jacobean aesthetic that is deliberate in what George Puttenham would have called its "preposterousness." The "*Histeron proteron*" or the "preposterous," Puttenham explained in his *Arte of English Poesie*, is "disordered speech," a figure in which "ye misplace your words or clauses and set that before which should be behind & è conuerso." Most of Puttenham's examples of the trope are temporal as, for instance, "*My dame that bred me up and*

<sup>12</sup> Bennett, 95.

<sup>13</sup> Michael O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 188.

<sup>14</sup> O'Pray, *Derek Jarman*, 186.

<sup>15</sup> Mike O'Pray, "Damning Desire: Mike O'Pray talks with Derek Jarman about *Edward II*," in *Film / Literature / Heritage*, 115–120, esp. 116; and Thomas Prasch, "*Edward II*," *American Historical Review* 98 (1993): 1164–66, esp. 1165.

<sup>16</sup> Colin McCabe, "A Post-National European Cinema: A Consideration of Derek Jarman's *The Tempest* and *Edward II*," in *Screening Europe: Image of Identity in Contemporary European Cinema*, ed. Duncan Petrie (London: British Film Institute, 1992), 9–18, esp. 12.

*bare me in her wombe.*"<sup>17</sup> It is in this sense that the term "contemporary Jacobean" is a preposterous anachronism, as it implies that the present is at the origin of the past, or that the past is located in the present.

Preposterous misplacements can also be spatial: in his attempt to explain the figure, Puttenham referred to the "English prouerbe, the cart before the horse."<sup>18</sup> The spatial use of the preposterous is suggestive of a different order of transgression than the confusion caused by anachronism: it becomes a matter of precedence, of the disruption of social hierarchy and the "natural" order of things. Moreover, as Jonathan Goldberg notes, Puttenham's stress on how close the preposterous is to "notoriously undecent" ways of speaking makes it "a trope involving questions of sexual decorum," which can be applied to images of sodomy.<sup>19</sup> Patricia Parker explains, "References to such preposterous inversion appear in early modern texts in contexts both heterosexual and homosexual"; the term "preposterous venery," in particular, "was also implicated in other discourses of insubordination and subversion, part of a larger network of unorthodoxy threatening to the orthography of right writing and proper place."<sup>20</sup> The preposterous is thus a transgressive trope that disturbs temporal, social, sexual, and gendered order. No wonder that Puttenham ranks it alongside other "figures Auricular vworking by disorder" under the general name "*Hiperbaton*" or "the Trespasser," intimating that the preposterous is close to modes of speaking "so foule and intollerable" as to be downright "vicious."<sup>21</sup>

Taking Jarman's lead, Mike Figgis's *Hotel*, which was filmed employing rigs of Figgis's own design (nicknamed "Fig-rigs"), night vision, various split screens, and three frame sizes, almost programmatically espouses the preposterous aesthetic of Jarman's contemporary Jacobean film. Rather than taking on the Shakespeare industry from the inside, as an increasing number of alternative filmmakers are doing in what Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe identify as a movement of New Wave Shakespeare,<sup>22</sup> Figgis follows Jarman in jabbing at the industry from the marginal position of the "Jacobean" text. Figgis and Heathcote Williams, who helped him adapt *The Duchess of Malfi*, capitalize on the transgressive connotations of the Jacobean by focusing their script on "six

<sup>17</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie. Contriuied into Three Bookes: The First of Poets and Poesie, the Second of Proportion, the Third of Ornament*, 3 vols. (London, 1589), 3:141, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Puttenham, 3:141.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992), 4.

<sup>20</sup> Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), 20–55, 280–94, esp. 26–27.

<sup>21</sup> Puttenham, 3:140.

<sup>22</sup> Cartelli and Rowe (9–24, esp. 17) trace this "New Wave" tradition back to Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985), Jarman's *Tempest*, and Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* and *Hamlet* (both 1987).

scenes—the weirdest bloodiest, sexiest scenes in John Webster’s extraordinary [*sic*] play.”<sup>23</sup>

The choice of the “weirdest” scenes of a Jacobean play is complemented by the use of unconventional methods and technology. Because it was filmed with digital cameras, using digital video technology rather than a standard thirty-five-millimeter print, Figgis’s screened film ended up being literally preposterous. As Figgis explains:

In 2000 I shot a film called *Hotel* on four Sony PD100 digital cameras. But most people who saw it saw it projected as a 35mm print, and there were all kinds of problems in getting it on to 35mm—for instance, it had to project at a different speed from the speed I shot it [twenty-four frames per second instead of twenty-five]. And it had to have Dolby sound on it [Dolby being an older technology]. So at a certain point you have to ask: *is the cart pulling the horse or the horse pulling the cart?*<sup>24</sup>

Figgis’s echo of Puttenham’s “cart before the horse” to describe the effect of using outdated technology to screen his material highlights the preposterousness that seemingly affects every aspect of his film, including the conception of both characters and plot.

Apart from the extracts from a heavily edited *Duchess of Malfi* and the hotel maid’s monologues, the film’s dialogue was entirely improvised by the actors. In the documentary that accompanies the film on the DVD and which is a crucial component of *Hotel*, Mike Figgis explains to an understandably confused Burt Reynolds that the plot, along with a sense of how the different characters and strands of the emerging story relate to each other, was to be created through editing *after* the completion of the shoot:

- |          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| REYNOLDS | I would like for the relationship part to suddenly start coagulating, if you will, in the scenes, so that you, you know what these people’s names are, and where they’re going and . . .                                                       |
| FIGGIS   | As I said, that will come in an editing process.                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| REYNOLDS | . . . I’m just telling you that for the actors, you need just a little bit of “what is my name, what is the relationship, how long does it last.” Do, do we get together, and make that up ourselves and bring that to you and show it to you? |
| FIGGIS   | The idea is that, that unlike a regular film, I guess, where people do come and say “my name is Pete and this is my wife” and so on, erm, I would, obviously                                                                                   |

<sup>23</sup> Mike Figgis, *In the Dark: Images and Text by Mike Figgis* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2003), 158.

<sup>24</sup> Mike Figgis, *Digital Film-Making*, 6 (emphasis added).



with an ensemble of over thirty people, if everybody did that, then there wouldn't be any time left to do anything else.<sup>25</sup>

From the position of mainstream ideas about cinema, represented here by a reluctant Burt Reynolds, it is preposterous to act a scene before the script is written, to be in a story which is yet to be created, to impersonate a character who will emerge only in post-production through the director's editing. *Hotel* is insistently not a "regular" film: it is as preposterous in its approach to plot and characterization as in its use of technology.

Figgis's film follows close on the heels of John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love*, itself a "novel, post-heritage kind of costume film" centered on the performance of an early modern play.<sup>26</sup> While *Shakespeare in Love* has been praised for its "post-modern irreverence toward canonical narratives," it has also been critiqued for its "safely conventional sexual politics" and, crucially, for its reproduction of "the Bard as *the* dominant popular cultural icon for our particular sociohistorical moment."<sup>27</sup> The film, with its all-star cast, encompassing widely recognized RSC veterans Dame Judi Dench, Antony Sher, and Joseph Fiennes and Hollywood draws such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Ben Affleck, fuses high culture and popular culture to reinforce the message of Shakespeare's "universality": "Shakespeare" becomes the cultural glue that binds our society together in a moment of communal understanding and rejoicing at the transhistorical power of love, as transmitted by Shakespeare's immortal words.

In his answer to *Shakespeare in Love*, Figgis also employs an all-star cast: apart from the actors already named, Saffron Burrows, Lucy Liu, Danny Huston, and John Malkovich (a significant choice in view of his mixed Hollywood, quirky indie film, and British stage credentials) and an array of top-tier continental actors, including Ornella Muti, Chiara Mastroianni, and Mía Maestro, all vie for attention. Notably absent from the list are established British actors with Shakespearean screen credentials or extensive RSC experience. The telling exception is Heathcote Williams, who scoffs at the "Ridiculous Shite Company" for which he never appears to have worked, but who played Prospero in Derek

<sup>25</sup> Documentary, *Hotel*; DVD, directed by Mike Figgis (MGM Home Entertainment LLC; Malibu, CA: Innovation Film Group, 2005). (Quotations from and references to the film are based on this DVD.)

<sup>26</sup> Pidduck, 130. For the categorization of *Shakespeare in Love* as "post-heritage," see also Claire Monk, "The British Heritage-Film Debate Revisited," in *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, ed. Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (London: Routledge, 2002), 176–98, esp. 181–82.

<sup>27</sup> Pidduck, 131, 133; and Elizabeth Klett, "Shakespeare in Love and the End(s) of History," in *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, ed. Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter, and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto, 2001), 25–40, esp. 25.

Jarman's *Tempest* and appeared as himself in Al Pacino's offbeat *Looking For Richard* (1996).<sup>28</sup> In *Hotel*, Williams plays Webster's Bosola and reprises his real-life role as the scriptwriter for the film-within-the-film. Williams's doubling as scriptwriter and the spy whose gaze surveys and directs the action makes him an author / director figure in whom Prospero-like control and Ariel-like spying are combined.

That Figgis's casting choices self-consciously eschew associations with Shakespeare is also made clear in one of the web shorts on the *Hotel* DVD. Entitled "Cliff's Diary," it features the actor playing Ferdinand, "Clifford Beacham" (Mark Strong), recording a video diary in which he looks forward to working on the *Malfi* film with Alan Rickman, whom he remembers seeing in *Richard III*. The expectation is thwarted as he discovers that the Cardinal is to be played not by Rickman, but by Brian Bovell, who here has a Jamaican accent that marks him as distinctly "un-Shakespearean." Figgis's casting, which he has said is based on "very precise decisions, to be made after a lot of thought and observation,"<sup>29</sup> thus signposts *Hotel's* position within the emergent alternative tradition of the preposterous contemporary Jacobean film.

Rejection of the Shakespearean performance tradition and challenge to Shakespeare's cultural hegemony are carried further within the film. There, at the beginning of the shoot of *Malfi*, Charlee Boux interviews Jonathan Danderfine (the producer of the film-within-the-film) about the project:

- DANDERFINE The tentative title is *Malfi*. Ergh, from *The Duchess of Malfi*, which is a play written in, written by one . . .
- BOUX What do you mean . . .
- DANDERFINE . . . of Shakespeare's contemporaries. John, John Webster.
- BOUX John Webster? Do we have a chance to interview him later on? Is he around?
- DANDERFINE He's not around, unfortunately. You know what? I'll . . .
- BOUX But are you happy with the script?

Shakespeare, here, is no longer the stable point of reference that it was in Ingram's review of *The Changeling*. The scene is a striking reversal of the scene in *Shakespeare in Love*, where the sadistic urchin who loves *Titus Andronicus* for its gore, revels in torturing mice, and meanly betrays the cross-dressed heroine to the authorities is revealed to be John Webster. In *Shakespeare in Love*, this

<sup>28</sup> E-mail from Heathcote Williams to David Schwimmer; see Figgis, *In the Dark*, 202. The other exception is Danny Sapani, who played Bagot in Deborah Warner's television film of her National Theatre production of *Richard II* (1997). Like Jarman's *Tempest* and Pacino's *Looking for Richard*, this film, starring a cross-dressed Fiona Shaw as Richard, stands conspicuously outside the tradition of nostalgic mainstream screen Shakespeare.

<sup>29</sup> Figgis, *Digital Film-Making*, 135.

allusion is an obvious insider's joke directed at more knowledgeable viewers who will understand that Webster is in a conflictual relationship with his main influence Shakespeare and that his plays, unlike Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, are motivated not by love but by a relish of violence. In Paul Arthur's gloss on the scene, "Gratuitous violence, represented by the casual cruelties of an adolescent John Webster, is implied as inimical to humanistic values, and consequent social cohesion, imputed to Shakespeare's work."<sup>30</sup> In Figgis's riposte to *Shakespeare in Love*, Jonathan Danderfine's corresponding assumption that Webster can be understood in relation to Shakespeare falls spectacularly flat, as Charlee Boux's preposterous anachronism reveals her ignorance of that supposedly stable point of reference and its associated values. The butt of the joke is not so much Boux's ignorance as that of the Shakespeare industry which, by insisting that Shakespeare is our contemporary and universal, has succeeded in erasing his historical specificity.

CONSUMING THE RENAISSANCE:

AUTHORSHIP, EXHUMATION, AND "MAN'S CONTROL OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY" (I)

The joke evidently was crucial to Figgis's conception of the film, since it reappears, in a slightly different form, in the web short entitled "Charlee Boux." The victim of her physically aggressive interviewing style, this time, is Heathcote Williams's "John Charley," the scriptwriter of *Malfi*:

- BOUX            You are the writer of *Duchess of Malfi*. Can you please tell us, what was your inspiration for this very tormentous [*sic*] piece?
- CHARLEY        No, I'm not the writer of *The Duchess of Malfi*. It was written by John Webster, who was a contemporary of Shakespeare.
- BOUX            Oh, I got confused with the Johns, same thing. Is he around?
- CHARLEY        No I'm afraid he's not, no. He's died four hundred years ago.
- BOUX            Well, I guess we can't interview *that* John . . .
- CHARLEY        But you're very resourceful, you could dig up the bones . . .
- BOUX            . . . but we have *this* John, sweetie pie! [grabs Charley's face and squeezes it]
- CHARLEY        Ooh!
- BOUX            Okay, I would like to know . . . what's your character's name . . .

<sup>30</sup> Paul Arthur, "The Written Scene: Writers as Figures of Cinematic Redemption," in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 331–42, esp. 338.

- CHARLEY My character is Bosola.  
 BOUX Bosola.  
 CHARLEY He's a spy, yes.  
 BOUX He was a spyyyyyy, you dirty man. Who did you spied  
 [sic] on?  
 CHARLEY I spy on the Duchess. Would you like to know what  
 the *Duchess of Malfi* is about?  
 BOUX What was she doing, that little . . .  
 CHARLEY [laughs] Trying to get married.  
 BOUX Well, that's not so bad!  
 CHARLEY No, not in this day and age. But it's a play really about  
 man's control of women's sexuality . . . .

The scene touches on a number of crucial strands that run through the film. It challenges Shakespeare's status once again, it makes the production of Webster a re-remembering of his bones, and it draws attention to what the play is "really about": "man's control of women's sexuality." On closer inspection, these apparently random strands can be woven together into a narrative that takes us back and forth between *Hotel's* Jacobean pre-text, with its obsession with exhumation, cannibalism, and the policing of the Duchess's sexuality, and the film's own two governing obsessions. These are, on the one hand, the exhumation and cannibalistic consumption of Renaissance literature and, on the other, the exploitation, control, and consumption of actresses' bodies and sexualities in the medium of film.

While Charley's suggestion that Boux exhume Webster's bones for the purposes of an interview may seem like an offhand remark designed to put her in her place, it is thematically linked to *The Duchess of Malfi*. Ferdinand, suffering from the symptoms of lycanthropy, which causes men to "imagine / Themselves to be transformèd into wolves" so that they "Steal forth to church-yards in the dead of night / And dig dead bodies up," is seen walking around at midnight "with the leg of a man / Upon his shoulder" (5.2.9–15).<sup>31</sup> Earlier in the play, the guilt-ridden Ferdinand had warned Bosola: "The wolf shall find [the Duchess's] grave and scrape it up, / Not to devour the corpse but to discover / The horrid murder" (4.2.299–301). The image of exhumation associated with Boux's desire to interview the author of *The Duchess of Malfi* is thus merged with the desire, within Webster's play, to unearth the Duchess herself, to discover her "horrid murder." Play and titular character become one in that the unearthing and revival of the one will lead to the discovery of the crime committed on the other.

Early in the film, a complex web of associations between the re-remembering of Renaissance drama and culture and the notions of processing and consumption

<sup>31</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, 4th ed., ed. Brian Gibbons (London: A. and C. Black, 2001). All quotations from the play are taken from this edition.

is spun. In the opening sequence, Omar Johnsson (John Malkovich) registers at the hotel reception and is next seen at a dinner table, conversing through bars with the hotel staff and consuming what one of the diners calls an "international agricultural harvest" of cured and smoked hotel guests, whose limbs are suspended above a table bearing a platter of meat. There is a nod, here, at the association of the Renaissance with cannibalism, which began with the meat hooks in Peter Greenaway's deliberately Jacobean *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989). The motif was picked up, significantly, in Jarman's *Edward II*, in which Gaveston's killer is hung onto a carcass before being butchered himself. It crossed into the mainstream as a conjunction of cannibalism and Renaissance connoisseurship in Thomas Harris's character Hannibal Lecter, as popularized in the film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and the sequel novel *Hannibal* (2001), before finally returning, as a self-conscious cliché (signposted by the casting of Anthony Hopkins), to the countertradition in Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999), where Lavinia's rapists are suspended from the ceiling like carcasses before they, too, are "processed" and eaten.

In *Hotel*, the association of "the Renaissance" with cannibalism, now both a cliché and a signifier of the oppositional stance of the contemporary Jacobean, is reinforced by the inclusion at the dinner table of a British tour guide who attempts, in the opening scenes, to establish himself as the true authority on smoked meat, Renaissance Venice, and cultural production. Played by Julian Sands, whose casting evokes the "heritage" values of *A Room with a View*, the guide explains how Venetian citizens would find the dismembered entrails of their friends and neighbors hanging from gibbets and describes Venice as "the first police state," in which the quality of life was "as magnificent as the patriarchy that ruled it." When his group of tourists, whom he attempts to impress with his listing of "Tintoretto, Titian, Tiepolo," encounters the *Malfi* film crew, it becomes clear that the tour guide not only admires that patriarchy but also embodies its values. Advising his group to "bypass this display of not very interesting street theatre," he shouts, "The Duchess of Malfi was a slut!" He sets himself up as the ultimate judge of which bits of the Renaissance and cultural production are worth remembering and consuming and which are not: disembowelled Venetians alongside Tintoretto and Titian are worthy of survival, while *Malfi*, with its portrayal of the Duchess's transgressive sexuality, is not. No wonder that, munching a particularly tasty bit of flesh in the opening sequence, he roundly condemns the film of *Malfi*, explaining to his fellow diners that "in this case, 'dogma' means unwatchable, unwatchable garbage. They've got a completely senseless interpretation of *The Duchess of Malfi*."

This reference to *The Duchess of Malfi* at the cannibalistic dinner table invites the viewer to realize the thematic link between the human limbs on meat hooks

and the way in which Webster's play almost obsessively unearths, displays, and instrumentalizes various real and fake body parts or corpses. In the play, the Duchess is made to shake a dead man's hand and shown a macabre little exhibition of waxwork figures of Antonio and her children. Additionally, her own strangled (and not quite dead) body is presented for Ferdinand to view, as are her children's strangled bodies. Webster's physical tableaux are accompanied by recurring allusions to and metaphors of cannibalism. Ferdinand's desire to "boil [the Duchess's and Antonio's] bastard to a cullis / And giv't his lecherous father to renew / The sin of his back" (2.5.71–73) is given particular prominence in the film, where the actor playing Ferdinand, memorizing his lines, addresses the camera directly with "updated" words: "Or boil his ill-born bastards into a broth and give it to their lecherous father and have him retch up his ungodly life with his own liquid offal." While Ferdinand's lines advertise the play's relationship to its generic predecessors and, in particular, the *Ur*-text of revenge tragedy, Seneca's *Thyestes*, the play's most coherent metaphors of cannibalism are applied to the Duchess-as-food. Her body, described as a "salvatory of green mummy" (4.2.118–19), is to be "hewed . . . to pieces" (2.5.31) and "fed upon" by "many hungry guests" (4.2.191), in particular by her brothers, as she specifies in her dying words: "Go tell my brothers when I am laid out, / They then may feed in quiet" (ll. 226–27). Bosola's reference to the Duchess's brothers as "most cruel biters" (5.2.333–34) rounds off their representation as cannibalistic in their efforts to control the Duchess's body and sexuality. The play's obsession with corpses thus boils down to an obsession with one particular body, the Duchess's, which is to be investigated, carved up, and consumed by guests and brothers alike.

In *Hotel's* opening sequence, the thematic association of the human limbs on meat hooks with the Duchess's body is complicated by the superimposition of the credit "Directed by / Mike Figgis" over the limbs (Figure 1). The body that is offered for consumption, it seems, is not simply that of the Duchess of Malfi, but that of the indigestible Jacobean text, which must be processed by the director into something more edible. This becomes apparent a few scenes later, when the entire film crew assembles and an actor complains that the script, as it now stands, has lost some of the poetry. In response, the scriptwriter explains that the group has decided to "cut the iambic pentameters, heptameters, archaisms in order to create a fast-food McMalfi, as it were, that would be very easily digestible and accessible even to aspiring Hollywood stars." Clearly, this is not what the updating of the text achieves. Certainly, the substitution of "broth" for "cullis" in Ferdinand's line quoted above is arguably more "digestible" (especially if the term "cullis," paired as it is with "the sin of his back," is understood to invoke Latin *culus* ["arse"] for a sodomitical pun). Nevertheless, while the pseudo-Jacobean "have him retch up his ungodly life with his own liquid



Figure 1: Director's credits.

offal," which replaces Webster's "to renew / The sin of his back," may be more "accessible," it also clearly signals indigestibility. *Hotel's* fast-food McMalfi will not be so easy to swallow, nor will it dodge the question of how the text might relate to "aspiring Hollywood stars" and the industry they work in, whether in Hollywood or Europe.

VOYEURISM, FETISHISTIC SCOPOPHILIA, AND THE DUCHESS AS FUNCTION  
AND EFFECT: "MAN'S CONTROL OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY" (II)

One of the most impressive aspects of the film is how it uses *The Duchess of Malfi* as a pre-text for an examination of the control, oppression, and consumption of the female body and female sexuality both in Webster's play and in contemporary culture, as epitomized by the film industry. That is, Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* functions as a critique of twenty-first-century film, exposing the extent to which, through the direction of the gaze, "man's control of women's sexuality" is intrinsic to the medium.

The play's distinction between the idealizing, fetishizing gaze of Antonio and the inquisitive and punishing gaze of Ferdinand and his "creature" Bosola anticipates Laura Mulvey's influential analysis of conventional cinema.<sup>32</sup> Mulvey's "fetishistic scopophilia," where the male figure "builds up the physical

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed critique of Mulvey, see Judith Mayne's *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993), 13–52. Mulvey's "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema," first published in *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6–18, was revised and criticized by Mulvey herself in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989), 21–22, which is the edition used here. The essay

beauty of the [female] object [of his gaze], transforming it into something satisfying in itself," is a feature that can be recognized in Antonio. Its nasty twin "voyeurism," which "has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt . . . asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness," fits Ferdinand's punitive scrutiny of his sister. It is voyeurism which Figgis, as filmmaker, finds particularly challenging: writing about *Hotel*, he admits to having "always had a problem with cinema's essentially singular, voyeuristic eye," an eye which puts the artist "suddenly in an area of perversity."<sup>33</sup> Figgis's film translates the active desiring gaze of Webster's Duchess and her quest for autonomy into a defiance of the film industry's dominant modes of representation of the female subject.

That this is partly what is at stake in *Hotel* becomes apparent early on, when Isabella, the Italian actress playing Julia (Valeria Golino), complains about the wholesale cutting of her and Cariola's lines. Since she will appear naked in both her scenes, her concern that she doesn't want to be "upstaged by [her] tits" exposes the way the female actors' bodies are offered up for consumption by a male-dominated industry that uses "the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look."<sup>34</sup> The juxtaposition of the actress's complaint with the patriarchal tour guide's appropriation of Ferdinand's lines—

Foolish men,  
That éer will trust their honour in a bark  
Made of so slight weak bullrush as is woman,  
Apt every minute to sink it!  
(*Duchess of Malfi*, 2.5.33–36)

—creates a link between early modern misogyny, the authority of the cultural elite, and the cinematic exploitation and control of the female body.

This association of early modern misogyny with film's exploitation of women underlies a phenomenon where one female character after another acts out aspects of the Duchess's oppression and rebellion, until the film is crowded with *Doppelgängers* of Webster's defiant heroine. Using the terminology suggested by Cartelli and Rowe allows a distinction between *Doppelgänger* figures who embody a "Duchess function" and those who embody a "Duchess effect." A Duchess function is a *Doppelgänger* who "does things, performs behaviours that are integral to the working out of a dramatic design." By contrast, a *Doppelgänger*

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remains a very powerful hermeneutic tool, especially when applied to a film like *Hotel* that openly engages with the problem of the gaze in mainstream cinema.

<sup>33</sup> Figgis, *In the Dark*, 68.

<sup>34</sup> Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 21.



acting as a Duchess effect “suffers or embodies the consequences”<sup>35</sup> of the Duchess’s oppression. Isabella / Julia serves as a particularly clear example of such Duchess functions and Duchess effects. In the play, her initial sexual assertion, marking her as a Duchess function, is quickly revealed to be but a cover for her exploitation by the Cardinal, who poisons her and makes her suffer as a Duchess effect. In Figgis’s film, this trajectory is reversed. There, her role as a Duchess effect is made nastily obvious early on in her only scene in *Malfi*. Told by the director to “get down, suck his cock,” Isabella crawls under the Cardinal’s robes as he is warning the Duchess not to remarry. She reemerges only to wipe her mouth.

Although she is thus literally brought to her knees during filming, Isabella is offered an alternative to the domination of the male gaze in *Hotel*, enabling her to move from the position of Duchess effect to that of Duchess function. Storming out of the rehearsal room, she is accosted by Claude (Chiara Mastroianni). Claude, whose gender-neutral name and cigar smoking signal her appropriation of the phallus, compliments Isabella on her beauty and kisses her abruptly and passionately. In the underground passages of the hotel, the night vision camera—a significant inversion of the mode of viewing associated with what Figgis calls “regular film”—shows Claude’s seduction of the blindfolded Isabella, who is as “stark blind” (1.1.402) as the Duchess makes Antonio through her revelation of *her* transgressive desire (Figure 2).

The preposterous class and gender transgression of the Duchess of Malfi’s wooing of her steward is inverted and troped as lesbianism here as Claude, a member of the staff, seduces a hotel guest, introducing her to a hidden underground world of transgressive desire. If, as Bonnie Burns argues, classic Hollywood cinema consistently represents lesbianism as “at the limit of the visible, or indeed, *as* the limit of the visible,”<sup>36</sup> this perception is literalized in *Hotel*’s representation of lesbian desire as blinding and located in the underground space of the repressed and the dark—the space of cannibalism, another form of transgressive desire for “the same.” The film, through this move from the Duchess effect’s heterosexual subjugation to the Duchess function’s lesbian eroticism, plots a trajectory of empowerment for this marginal figure (although this is tellingly qualified by her erotic subjection to the dominant Claude).

<sup>35</sup> Cartelli and Rowe, 154.

<sup>36</sup> Bonnie Burns, “*Dracula’s Daughter*: Cinema, Hypnosis, and the Erotics of Lesbianism,” in *Lesbian Erotics*, ed. Karla Jay (New York: New York UP, 1995), 196–211, esp. 197. The attention given to lesbianism in this film is yet another way in which *Hotel* opposes “heritage” films, from which “lesbianism has generally been absent”; see John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1999), 98.



Figure 2: Lesbian encounter between Claude (Chiara Mastroianni) and Isabella (Valeria Golino), filmed with night vision.

Lesbian sex might seem to be far removed from Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*. Nevertheless, a connection to the play is established in *Hotel's* rendering of the Duchess's offer of marriage to Antonio, which is central to both Figgis's metacinematic reflection and his interpretation of Webster's play. The scene is pleonastic in that, like the joke about interviewing Webster, it occurs twice. The first time, *Malfi's* director, Trent Stoken (a manic Rhys Ifans), surprises the actors playing Antonio and the Duchess while they are rehearsing the wooing scene on their own as a "straight" love scene, with the Duchess set up as the object of Antonio's fetishizing desire. Trent's criticism of the actors' version of the scene amounts to a programmatic rejection of the "heritage" films of the Merchant-Ivory team that keep haunting *Hotel*: "But, of course, you must try all different ways, and I love the Merchant-Ivory version you're doing at the moment. Sweet, pungent smell of rose meadows, Earl Grey and a wet saddle on the back of a horse. That sort of thing. It's fucking shit!" Minutes later, having just instructed Antonio that he must "fuck [the Duchess] like a criminal" during the scene, Trent is shot by an assassin.

The "shagging scene," as Trent had called the wooing, is reprised in the second half of the film with film producer Jonathan Danderfine in charge. This time, the subject-object positions are reversed as the Duchess undresses Antonio in her bedchamber, turns him around, pulls up her dress, and energetically sodomizes

him (Figure 3). The transgression of social boundaries in the play is here troped as doubly preposterous, female-on-male sodomy. The groans of the Duchess's orgasm mutate into the groans of labor as she collapses on her bed. She is told by Cariola, who has been there all along, to "push, push" and then gives birth to twin plastic babies. Lying on her bed after the delivery, the Duchess is framed by the figures of Antonio and Cariola, who kisses her on the mouth. At the margins of this scene of the Duchess's preposterous desire, this desire is associated with lesbianism.



Figure 3: The Duchess (Saffron Burrows) sodomizing Antonio (Max Beesley) while Cariola (Mía Maestro) does her needlework.

The threesome on the bed embodies and sexualizes the implicit causal link in Webster's play between the mutual affection of mistress and maid, which creates "a secret space in the midst of male society" and "a haven where the normal modes of subjection are cancelled,"<sup>37</sup> and the Duchess's ability to express her autonomous identity and her desires. It is the homosocial (and potentially homoerotic) egalitarian intimacy between the Duchess and her female bedfellow that is exposed in *Hotel* as the unacknowledged origin of the Duchess's preposterous heterosexual transgression of class and gender boundaries. As Valerie Traub argues, this intimacy is "insignificant" in Renaissance culture in not being seen as a threat to order because it does not in itself challenge heterosexual marriage.<sup>38</sup> In Webster's Act 3, scene 2, the scene giving us the

<sup>37</sup> Frank Whigham, "Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *PMLA* 100 (1985): 167–86, esp. 172.

<sup>38</sup> See Valerie Traub's discussion of female bedfellows in Renaissance drama in her chapter "The (In)Significance of Lesbian Desire," in *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 158–87.

most intimate insight into the Duchess's and Antonio's marital life, it becomes clear that the Duchess's credentials as Cariola's "sprawling'st bedfellow" give her yet greater piquancy for Antonio, who "shall like her the better for that" (3.2.13–14). Unlike the Shakespeare comedies that track the separation of female bedfellows as they move toward the heterosexual unions that lead to their "happy" dénouements,<sup>39</sup> Webster's tragedy of female "riot" insists, in this scene, on the compatibility and coexistence of female intimacy and heterosexual desire.<sup>40</sup> Cariola, the subordinate who preposterously presided over and authorized her mistress's marriage ceremony, is a constitutive part of the Duchess's preposterous sprawling family unit. By placing Cariola on the bed with the Duchess and Antonio, *Hotel* renders visible and *significant* the female-female bond that remains unremarkable in the play.

*Hotel's* scene of preposterous sex concludes with the camera panning away from the Duchess's widely spread legs, turning around to reveal Jonathan Danderfine filming the trio on the bed with a Fig-rig (Figure 4). Behind him, Bosola stands in the doorway, observing the scene. The line of vision of Danderfine's camera, which is focused on the Duchess's crotch, corresponds exactly to Bosola's, suggesting a precise equivalence between "man's control of women's sexuality" in Webster and in Figgis's film. If modern cinema is willing to put transgressive female desire center stage, the result is still a peculiarly "androcentric vision" of female desire, filmed by a man from the point of view of traditional patriarchal control, as embodied by Bosola.<sup>41</sup> The fetishizing gaze of Antonio's Merchant-Ivory take on the Duchess may be "fucking shit," but the alternative—an expression of polymorphous female desire which is monitored, recorded, and eventually punished by the voyeuristic gaze of Bosola—is no better.

#### PREPOSTEROUS *DOPPELGÄNGERS*: FANTASTIC MUTUALITY AND SELF-VIOLATION

Since it is so self-consciously implicated in the very structures it is criticizing, Figgis's *Hotel* cannot—and does not even try to—provide a realistic answer to the problem of "man's control of women's sexuality." The resolution of the film hinges on the semisupernatural figure of the anonymous hotel maid, played by Valentina Cervi, who Figgis wanted to be "very important" and "more exotic, strange, sexual as the film progresses."<sup>42</sup> Cervi is known principally for

<sup>39</sup> Traub summarizes this trajectory: "In Shakespeare's and Fletcher's plays, an originary, prior homoerotic desire is crossed, abandoned, betrayed; correlatively, a desire for men or a marital imperative is produced and inserted into the narrative in order to create a formal, 'natural' mechanism of closure" (175).

<sup>40</sup> See also Maurizio Calbi, *Approximate Bodies: Gender and Power in Early Modern Drama and Anatomy* (London: Routledge, 2005), 26–27.

<sup>41</sup> Karla Jay, "On Slippery Ground: An Introduction" in *Lesbian Erotics*, 1–11, esp. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Figgis, *In the Dark*, 71.



Figure 4: Jonathan Danderfine (David Schwimmer) holding the Fig-rig.

her performance of the title role in Merlet's *Artemisia*, a heritage biopic of the Renaissance painter Artemisia Gentileschi. Cervi's casting invokes a film which is insistently preoccupied with the dual issues of sexual violence and the ownership of the artistic gaze: as Rowland Wymer notes, *Artemisia*, while celebrating Gentileschi's creativity, makes it unclear to what degree "she achieves real agency and escapes being an object of the gaze of others."<sup>43</sup>

This ambivalence about the degree to which the female artist can avoid being the object of the gaze is fully exploited in *Hotel*, where Cervi's hotel maid delivers two elaborate erotic monologues spoken to the comatose Stoken and filmed with the night vision camera. In the first monologue, she tells him about a colleague of hers who is "willing to *play a role*" (emphasis added) to heighten the sexual excitement of the men who watch her and sleep with her. Cervi's hotel maid contrasts this sexual exploitation of the role-playing woman as object of the gaze with the way she herself has "perfected the art of being invisible as a woman. I can walk into a room full of men without exciting the slightest interest." Making herself "invisible as a woman" by refusing to act exempts the hotel maid from being trapped by the "to-be-looked-at-ness" Mulvey insists is characteristic of women in "normal narrative film." And indeed, although she is the most intriguing and alluring figure in the film and the character whose "visual presence" most conspicuously "freeze[s] the flow of action in moments

<sup>43</sup> Rowland Wymer, "'The Audience Is Only Interested in Sex and Violence': Teaching the Renaissance on Film," *Working Papers on the Web* 4, online at <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/renaissance/wymer.htm> (accessed 6 July 2009). For an account of the film and the way in which it misrepresents its subject and her art, see Susan Felleman, "Dirty Pictures, Mud Lust and Abject Desire: Myths of Origin and the Cinematic Object," *Film Quarterly* 55.1 (2001): 27–40.

of erotic contemplation" in a way typical of the exploitative cinematic gaze she objects to,<sup>44</sup> within the filmic narrative, the hotel maid remains unremarked in the upstairs world of the hotel's public areas, exciting no desire.

Whereas the hotel maid's first monologue focuses on the desiring gaze of others, her second monologue is concerned with her own desire. Figgis's editing places this monologue after the strangulation of the Duchess and *her* maid Cariola in the film-within-the-film. Using a split screen, Figgis shows us the faces of the two murdered women side by side (united in death), while on the soundtrack Franz Schubert's *Der Doppelgänger* is sung by Maestro, the actress playing Cariola, on whose dead face we gaze. Heinrich Heine's lyrics tell of the speaker's encounter with his uncanny, pale double, whose face is marked by the pain the speaker felt long ago.

The night is quiet, the streets are resting,  
In this house my loved one used to live,  
She left the town long ago,  
But the house still stands on the same spot.

There, also, stands a person who is staring upwards  
And wringing his hands with the power of his pain,  
I am horrified when I see his face—  
The moon shows me my own shape.

You *Doppelgänger*! You pale fellow!  
Why do you ape my woe of love,  
Which used to torture me in this place,  
So many a night, long ago?<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Mulvey, 19.

<sup>45</sup> The translation here is my own. In all of the published translations I have been able to identify, one or more nuances of the poem important to my argument are lost. The German text (below) is that of Heinrich Heine, "Still ist die Nacht," in *Heinrich Heine's Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Adolf Strodtmann, 21 vols. (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1861–84), 1:105.

Still ist die Nacht, es ruhen die Gassen,  
In diesem Hause wohnte mein Schatz;  
Sie hat schon längst die Stadt verlassen,  
Doch steht noch das Haus auf demselben Platz.

Da steht auch ein Mensch und starrt in die Höhe,  
Und ringt die Hände, vor Schmerzengewalt;  
Mir graust es, wenn ich sein Antlitz sehe—  
Der Mond zeigt mir meine eigne Gestalt.

Du Doppelgänger! du bleicher Geselle!  
Was äffst du nach mein Liebesleid,  
das mich gequält auf dieser Stelle,  
So manche Nacht, in alter Zeit?

The lyrics thematically link this moment to the film's repeated use of the preposterous: the speaker's past is preposterously confronting his present, aping the pain he thought he had overcome. Doubling the self-recognition prompted by the perfect alignment of the gaze of camera and spy at the end of this scene of preposterous sodomy, the film's incorporation of Heine's lyrics draws attention to the way in which Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* functions as a hideous mirror held up to film, revealing the extent to which "man's control of women's sexuality" continues to govern this ideological apparatus through the direction of the gaze.

*Der Doppelgänger* continues on the soundtrack as the camera, using night vision, moves along a canal covered by a bridge, an image which is dissolved to reveal the hotel maid entering the room belonging to the wounded Trent, who remains unconscious. The sound bridge linking the modern maid to her early modern predecessor and her mistress makes her the ultimate Duchess function, a particularly uncanny *Doppelgänger* of these two victims of the male controlling gaze. As embodied by the comatose film director, that gaze is disabled. The gaze that dominates here belongs to the hotel maid, whose eyes are turned into two dots of light by the use of night vision. Asking, "Why should my body be interesting to him?" the maid slowly removes her shoes, apron, and underwear before climbing on top of the impassive Trent. As she languidly begins to make love to him, she tells him of her seduction of a man who wanted to "make love to [her] in a conventional way" but whom she prevented by "clos[ing] his eyes, as if he had just died."

Once she achieves a position of total control over both the man in her narrative and Stoken, the maid, reaching her sexual and narrative climax, tells Trent how she relinquished some of her control over the man and "watched him all the time he watched [her]." At this moment, Stoken's eyes open, his face turns to the camera, and he slowly rises into her embrace (Figure 5). Evoking Antonio's assessment of the Duchess as capable of reviving someone "That lay in a dead palsy" with the sweet look "She throws upon a man" (1.1.192, 190), the hotel maid's desiring gaze and the reciprocity she allows magically raise and arouse the film director, a reformed, all-seeing character.<sup>46</sup> In the (otherworldly) world inhabited by the hotel maid, the problem of the male gaze is "solved" by a woman's desire to be watched as she is watching, her desire for the very gaze that she has identified as problematic.

The maid's monologues thus lead to a narrative and noticeably *heterosexual* and normative resolution of a film which works to erase its "queerness": the maid's initially polymorphous desires, evident from her cannibalism and connection with Claude, are no longer at the fore. Focusing the audience's attention firmly on the problem of the gaze, this ending once more uses *The Duchess of Malfi* to reflect

<sup>46</sup> On Webster's sexual pun, see Celia R. Daileader, *Eroticism on the Renaissance Stage: Transcendence, Desire, and the Limits of the Visible* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 83.

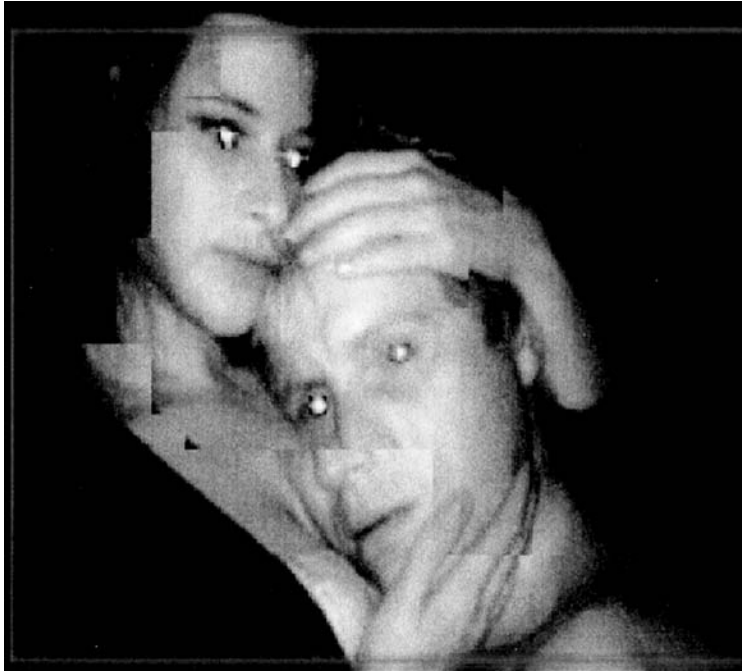


Figure 5: The desiring gaze of the hotel maid (Valentina Cervi) with Trent Stoken (Rhys Ifans), filmed in night vision.

on desire and power in film. Insofar as the resolution seems to hinge on the hotel maid's heterosexual desiring gaze (as Duchess function) rendering her acquiescent to her own objectification (as Duchess effect)—a point made self-consciously obvious in her assertion that she “violat[ed her]self the way [the man] would have violated [her]”—that resolution fails to satisfy. The allusion to the Duchess's ability to revive a man “That lay in a dead palsy” preposterously sends the viewer back to the beginning of *The Duchess of Malfi*, proposing that the Duchess's desiring look, for which she is punished, is the solution to the oppression she suffers.

*Hotel* seems ultimately unable to transcend the structures it attacks. Although Figgis privileges male over female nudity, it is still the female body that remains the erotic object of the gaze, above all in the lesbian scenes that are arguably meant to show a rebellion against such objectification. In fact, these scenes lead to a narrative dead end that cancels out their potential challenge to dominant structures. It is no coincidence, I think, that *Hotel's* most explicit critique of the cinematic gaze is contained in the words of the hotel maid, the only words in the film to have been scripted by Figgis himself.<sup>47</sup> The critique of the director's

<sup>47</sup> Steve Erickson, “Cannibals in Venice and Other Unanswered Questions: Mike Figgis' 'Hotel,’” *IndieWire*, 28 July 2003; online at [http://www.indiewire.com/article/cannibals\\_in\\_venice\\_and\\_other\\_unanswered\\_questions\\_mike\\_figgis\\_hotel](http://www.indiewire.com/article/cannibals_in_venice_and_other_unanswered_questions_mike_figgis_hotel) (accessed 7 July 2009). The uncut monologue is reproduced in Figgis, *In the Dark*, 184–85.



controlling male gaze ventriloquizes the director's own words: no female subject, whether the Duchess or the maid, actually achieves sexual or artistic autonomy in this film.

TRESPASSERS: THE PREPOSTEROUS AESTHETIC OF *HOTEL*  
AS A CONTEMPORARY JACOBEOAN FILM

At this point, I want to return to the beginning of my argument and to my contention that, following in Jarman's footsteps, Figgis self-consciously employs a contemporary Jacobean aesthetic that is intrinsically preposterous, a mode of expression belonging to the general category of "trespassers" and associated by Puttenham with "vicious" and "undecent" modes of speaking signaling transgressive, queer desire. In *The Tempest* and *Edward II*, Jarman used the preposterous contemporary Jacobean aesthetic to suggest that "the modern English state [is founded] on a repressive security apparatus and a repressed homosexuality."<sup>48</sup> Figgis is similarly preoccupied with the "patriarchy" running a "police state." But here, that state is represented by the film industry, which polices female desire and artistic expression and relies on the transformation of the (desiring) female gaze into an erotic spectacle of heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian desire for the benefit of a male director / viewer. As one reader commented, "Mike Figgis seems to really like 'his' women and portrays them accordingly, maybe lovingly, who knows."<sup>49</sup> The difficulty, for Figgis as for Jarman, is that both directors work within the structures and culture they seek to subvert. Bound within a mode of film creation and projection which is preposterous in that it continually imposes outdated technology on newer media and the conventional narrative mode of montage on his preferred use of "collage,"<sup>50</sup> and unable, it seems, to transcend the alternatives of fetishistic scopophilia and voyeurism, Figgis adopts a dual strategy of self-reflexivity and self-vilification.

In view of the self-criticism embedded in *Hotel*, it is no wonder that Figgis strays beyond the "tolerable enough" disorder of the preposterous to embrace the modes of presentation that Puttenham condemns as "alwayes intollerable and such as cannot be vsed with any decencie, but are euer undecent."<sup>51</sup> Unlike *Shakespeare in Love*, where the international cast all make an effort to speak

<sup>48</sup> McCabe, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Reader comment by "Marco" to Jason Wood, review of *Hotel*, in *Kamera*, 30 August 2007, online at [http://www.kamera.co.uk/reviews\\_extra/hotel.php](http://www.kamera.co.uk/reviews_extra/hotel.php) (accessed 7 July 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Peter Keough, "Leaving Montage: Mike Figgis Breaks Hollywood's Time Code," *Boston Phoenix*, 23 October 2007; online at [http://weeklywire.com/ww/05-15-00/boston\\_movies\\_2.html](http://weeklywire.com/ww/05-15-00/boston_movies_2.html) (accessed 7 July 2009).

<sup>51</sup> Puttenham, 3:141, 209.

"Shakespearean" English, or Received Pronunciation, *Hotel* makes no effort to harmonize even the strongest Italian and Spanish accents, resulting in what Puttenham terms "barbarousnesse."<sup>52</sup> Instead of the linear structure of Madden's film, Figgis's use of split screens juxtaposes different sequences that are not necessarily temporally related (Puttenham's "incongruitie"); his near-identical repetitions of scenes introduce pleonastic redundancy (Puttenham's "surplusage").<sup>53</sup> Figgis's film, as its reviewers insistently complain and Figgis himself highlights, is "an aching pretentious slab of total nonsense" (Puttenham's "fonde affectation" and "extreme darknesse"), and its actors "shout and use the F-word as much as possible" (Puttenham's "unshamefast or figure of foule speech").<sup>54</sup>

Openly disenchanted with the conventional cinema Figgis lambastes, *Hotel* unearths Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* to expose the would-be elite's and mainstream's cultural consumption as a form of cannibalism and its efforts to make Renaissance literature more "digestible" as the creation of tasteless and indigestible fast food, to boot. The "Jacobean," as in Bennett's analysis of late twentieth-century revivals (quoted above), is coupled with everything Puttenham finds "vicious" and "undecent" in order to make it function "as a signifier bound to represent psychopathic violence and deviant desires."

Contrary to the revivals discussed by Bennett, however, Figgis's *Hotel* is not underpinned by latent nostalgia for a "gentle" Shakespeare, nor does he wish to deny the historical specificity of his Jacobean pre-text as does Baz Luhrmann, for example, in his anachronistic *Romeo+Juliet* (1996). To the cultural heritage that screen Shakespeares from Branagh to Luhrmann invoke and rely on, Figgis opposes cultural disinheritance: his actors are not familiar with Webster, read the play in three different editions (Penguin, Revels, film script), and are nervous about their interpretation of this unknown text. Employing the preposterous contemporary Jacobean aesthetic, Figgis makes Webster not only a contemporary, but a new author, an author who is not yet read, whom one would like to interview, whose script may not be satisfactory, but whose text has to be studied attentively. If *Hotel* is a film "about" how to produce a fast-food *McMalfi* for a contemporary audience, Figgis's use of the preposterous contemporary Jacobean aesthetic makes of *The Duchess of Malfi* a play "about" the making of *Hotel*, "about" man's control of transgressive female sexuality through the medium of film.

<sup>52</sup> Puttenham, 3:208.

<sup>53</sup> Puttenham, 3:210, 215.

<sup>54</sup> Puttenham, 3:210, 208, 212; for Figgis's quotations, see "Hollywood Reporter Review of 'Hotel' at the Toronto Film Festival," reprinted in Figgis, *In the Dark*, 205.