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Julie Taymor's Titus Is Beautiful, or Shakesploi Meets (the) Camp

by RICHARD BURT

Il cinema è l'arma più forte
(Cinema is the strongest weapon)
—Mussolini’s motto

Every day I'll read something that is right out of Titus Andronicus, so when people think this is “over the top,” they’re absolutely wrong. What could be more “over the top” than the Holocaust?
—Julie Taymor

“Belsen Was a Gas.”
—Johnny Rotten

SHAKESPEARE NACH AUSCHWITZ?

ONE MORNING in the summer of 2000, I was channel surfing the trash talk shows to get my daily fix of mass media junk via the hype-o of my television set. After “Transsexual Love Secrets” on Springer got a bit boring, I lighted on the Maury Povich Show.1 The day’s topic was “My seven-year-old child drinks, smokes, swears, and hits me!” Father figure Povich’s final solution, like Sally Jessie Raphael’s with much older kids on similar episodes of her show, was to send the young offenders to boot camp. Footage rolled of the kids crying in camp as they were being yelled at an inch from their faces by paramilitary guards. The live television audience hooted, laughed, and applauded the more the girls cried. “What is going on here?” I asked myself. Was the Povich show unforeseen confirmation of Giorgio Agamben’s thesis in Homo Sacer that the concentration camp, not the prison, is the paradigm of modernity?2 Here was Povich playing the role of father as fascist (the children were all girls, and no father was present, or even mentioned). The audience’s hoots, laughter, and applause, I took it, functioned as a cathartic release from their roles as parents, and the audience were allowed to identify with the sadistic guards and fantasize hurting children, perhaps even their own. The show was a backlash against the child-centered generation that has come to dominate U.S. culture.

Or was the Povich episode, a sensationalistic use of a neofascistic boot camp for higher ratings, also some bizarre universalization of what Norman

1. I would like to thank Laurie Osborne and Judith Haber for their typically astute and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay, and John Archer, Jonathan Bate, Don Hedrick, and Jennifer Stone for suggestions made in conversation about it.

2. See also Agamben 1999 and De Vries and Weber.
Finkelstein has caustically called "the Holocaust industry" and what others before have called, along similar lines, the "Shoah business" (as in "there's no business like Shoah business")? In the wake of Holocaust comedies like *Life Is Beautiful* (dir. Führer 1997), *Train of Life* (dir. Radu Mihaileanu, 1998), and *Jakob the Liar* (dir. Peter Kassovitz, 1999) and the recently opened theme park "Stalin's World" in the Ukraine, was a Holocaust World theme park just around the corner, opening somewhere in Germany or California? And how seriously was Povich's show meant to be taken? Was it really a fascistic *Kindergarten Cop* (dir. Ivan Reitman, 1990) development, with Vater/Führer Povich taking on Arnold Schwarzenegger's role in the romantic comedy thriller as undercover cop turned kindergarten teacher? Or not? Do seven-year-olds really smoke, drink, swear, or were they simply being coached to top Linda Blair's performance in *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1974)? Is boot camp camp, I wondered. Is Agamben's concentration camp camp? Is nothing sacred?

It is in relation to the possibly parodic routinization of the concentration camp in mass media that I want to read the appearance of the Holocaust in Shakespeare films and the appearance of Shakespeare in the Holocaust representations, with Julie Taymor's film *Titus* (1999) as my focus. Taymor pointedly invokes the Holocaust in interviews, seeing the violence in the play as a model of the violence that ended in the death camps. In one interview Taymor says, for example, "I keep using the Holocaust because it's the biggest event of our century—it can be twisted and manipulated" (de Luca and Lindroth 31). Unlike films set in concentration camps or on the verge of moving into them, however, *Titus* does not represent them. The analogy between ancient Rome and the Holocaust is made indirectly with references primarily to Italian Fascism and to the horror film genre. Benito Mussolini's Rome, particularly his E.U.R. government-center building, modeled on the Roman Colosseum, makes several dramatic appearances in the film, and Taymor intentionally alludes in an orgy scene at Saturninus' court to similar scenes from Luchino Visconti's film about Nazi Germany in the 1930s, *The Damned* (1969). Additionally, much of *Titus* was shot at Cinecittà, the film studio founded by Mussolini. Only one piece of music is not scored by the soundtrack composer Elliot Goldenthal, a traditional Italian song called "Vivere" sung by Carlo Butti on a recording during the banquet scene, and this song is meant to evoke Mussolini and 1930s Italy. Taymor also invokes Nazi cinema at one point. Commenting on the opening sequence of the sol-

3. Former Israeli Foreign Secretary Abba Eban was the first, as far as I know, to observe that "[t]here's no business like Shoah business." See also Kramer 261. And see Bauman for a similar and very powerful critique of the sacralization of the Holocaust.

4. On these films, see Zizek and Gilman. A gigantic Ferris wheel hung with deportation cars was proposed for the Holocaust memorial in Berlin. See Kramer 285. And recently one critic of the Berlin Jewish Museum has invoked Disneyland: "The Jewish Museum building is interesting, but to me it's a Holocaust sculpture, not a museum," said Julius Schoeps, the director of the Moses Mendelssohn Center, a Jewish research foundation, and a prominent member of the Berlin Jewish community. "And now there is an attempt to adorn it in a very American way, to make a museum of experiences with what I have called a Disneyland aesthetic" (Cohen).

5. See Taymor's commentary on the scene in the DVD edition.
diers marching into the Colosseum at night, she says, “If you’re shooting military marches and you do it well, on some level it’s going to look like the work of [German Third Reich filmmaker] Leni Riefenstahl” (Pizzello).

If the Holocaust is called up by references to Italian and German Fascism in a Shakespeare film like Titus, it is perhaps unsurprising that Shakespeare also shows up in Holocaust representations. Shakespeare’s King Lear is mentioned and lines from it are cited in the Holocaust comedy Jakob the Liar, a remake of Frank Beyer’s DDR film, Jacob the Liar (1974).6 (The lines from Lear in the remake are not cited in the DDR original, which makes no mention of Shakespeare.) And in The Prince of West End Avenue, a 1994 novel by Alan Isler, the octogenarian narrator is a Holocaust survivor who acts in an amateur production of Hamlet, with three intermissions to accommodate the bladders of the aged cast members, in the Emma Lazarus retirement home. Erwin Sylvanus has characters mention Hamlet and Ophelia in his one-act play Korczak and His Children (1958), and George Tabori brings up the gravediggers’ scene from Hamlet in his play Jubilaum (1983).7 There was a production of The Merchant of Venice set in a concentration camp at the Deutsches Nationaltheater in Weimar, Germany, in 1995 with Shylock as a camp prisoner forced to perform in the play. The director was an Israeli, Hanan Snir.8

This exchange between Shakespeare’s plays and fictional accounts either of the Holocaust or told by Holocaust survivors may serve to solve shared problems in performances and representations of both. If a film of such an excessively violent and bloody play as Titus Andronicus risks being construed as a schlock horror film or as a black comedy, then indirect references to the Holocaust via Italian and German Fascism in Taymor’s cinematic adaptation help save her film as a serious engagement with a serious tragedy. Responding to an interviewer’s question, “What is the function of combining violence with humor [in Titus]?” Taymor brings up the concentration camp: “I think that when we’re in our deepest, darkest circumstance, whether you’re a prisoner or in a concentration camp or something similarly awful, the only way to survive is through humor” (de Luca and Lindroth 31).

6. King Lear comes up in the context of a marriage negotiation. Misha (Lev Schreiber), a boxer, asks for the hand of Rosa (Nina Sieraszkko) from her father and mother, Mr. (Alan Arkin) and Mrs. Frankfurter (Grazyna Barzsczewszka). When Mr. Frankfurter opposes the marriage on the grounds that all of the Jews in the ghetto have no future, Misha replies that the war will end very soon because the Russians are at Bezonica. Misha asks Frankfurter, “Do you know where Bezonica is?” and Frankfurter replies: “Do I know where Bezonica is? I played King Lear there three times. Misha supports his claim that he heard it from Jakob Heym (Robin Williams), who has a radio. Frankfurter consents to the marriage but destroys his own radio, which he fears will be found and will then result in his being shot and hung after the Nazis find out about Heym’s radio and search the ghetto for radios. Coincidentally, the lines from King Lear cited in Jakob the Liar were meant to be suggested when young Lucius kills a fly in Deborah Warner’s production of Titus Andronicus. See Bate 67. Bate tries to link Titus Andronicus and King Lear throughout his Arden introduction. See Bate 2 and 121 for examples. See also his introduction to the screenplay (12). Some audience members of Jakob the Liar may also recall that Robin Williams, who stars in the remake, also played roles in films citing Shakespeare such as Dead Poets Society (dir. Peter Weir, 1989) and What Dreams May Come (dir. Vincent Ward, 1998), the title of which comes from Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy.

7. The reference to Hamlet and Ophelia is noted by Isser 92 and the references to the gravediggers and the ghost are noted by Feinberg 272.

Representations of the Holocaust similarly gain support from Shakespeare. The Holocaust is often represented as excessive, something beyond all aesthetic representation, particularly tragedy. Aesthetics and the Holocaust are a contradiction in terms: Theodor Adorno’s famous declaration “nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch” (to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric) might now be rewritten as “to write poetry about Auschwitz is barbaric.” And as Slavoj Zizek comments on the subgenre of the Holocaust comedy, this taboo on representing the Holocaust may also serve political purposes:

Paradoxical as it might sound, the rise of the Holocaust comedy is correlative to the elevation of the Holocaust itself into the metaphysical, diabolical Evil—the ultimate traumatic point at which the objectifying of historical knowledge breaks down and even witnesses concede words fail. The Holocaust cannot be explained, visualized, represented, or transmitted, since it marks the black hole, the implosion of the (narrative) universe. Any attempt to politicize equals an anti-Semitic negation of its uniqueness. However, this very depoliticization of the Holocaust... can also be a cynically manipulative political strategy to manipulate certain practices and disqualify others. It fits perfectly today’s culture of victimization: is the Holocaust not the supreme proof that to be human is to be a victim, not an active political agent... ? (27)

Holocaust comedies are preferable to serious and false films like Stephen Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993), Zizek maintains, because they “accept in advance [their] failure to render the horror of the Holocaust” (27). The turn to Shakespearean tragedy in Jakob the Liar might be regarded as a means of defending against a critique like Zizek’s of the Holocaust’s depoliticization. In Jakob the Liar, Shakespeare is represented as lost, no longer performed by the actors confined to the Warsaw ghetto. His sublime status, no longer performable or readable, available only through memory, is a means by which the Holocaust may indirectly be given a sense of tragic grandeur even as the genre of the film, namely comedy, keeps in place the depoliticized idea that all representations of the Holocaust will fail to do it justice.

Yet this mutually supportive exchange between Shakespearean tragedy and the Holocaust did not prove to be especially successful. Indeed, both Titus and Jakob the Liar bombed at the box office. I take the box office failures of Titus and Jakob the Liar and the post-theatrical release marketing of Titus to be representative of a larger failure, namely, that Shakespeare cannot save the Holocaust, nor can the Holocaust save Shakespeare. This failure is due not to the aftermath of the Holocaust, in which tragedy and poetry are no longer possible, but to the present desacralization of the aesthetic in mass culture. In his indictment of the Holocaust industry, Norman Finkelstein has pointed to the proliferation of museums and memorials, which, he incisively argues, have been used to support Right Wing policies in Israel and in the United States. Equally crucial to the construction of memory in these institutions and their legitimation is their status as art, both in their architecture and exhibition displays, Adorno's view notwithstanding.9

9. Thus in the Berlin competition there was “no aesthetic solution,” but the jury was certain one would be found. See Kramer 284.
At the center of neoconservative criticism of Shakespeare on film and of the Holocaust industry is what I call a neomodernist aesthetic through which adaptations and memorials may be saved as high culture even as they take the form of mass culture, either films like Titus or comic books like Art Spiegelman's Maus. Artists who represent the Holocaust face a similar problem to that of directors of Titus Andronicus: what Taymor refers to as the "over the top" status of the Holocaust, outstripping even Titus Andronicus in horror, may also produce laughter at the grotesque inadequacy of a given representation. Hence the controversy over a film like Life Is Beautiful, which might be said to allegorize this problem.

Shakespeare plays a central role in such controversies. For example Shakespeare comes up in Eichmann in Jerusalem when Hannah Arendt characterizes Eichmann's evil by contrasting it with Shakespeare's villains: "Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth and nothing would have been further from his mind than to determine with Richard III to 'prove a villain'" (287). Whereas Shakespearean evil is dramatic, Nazi evil is banal. The former fails to represent the latter.

Jakob the Liar and Titus share another problem as well, namely their emphasis on the child as survivor. The point of referring to King Lear may in fact be to dismiss it, not only because the antiheroic and antiromantic nihilism it represents in Frankfurter's memory has to be replaced by the heroism of Heym but because Lear does not manage to save the child he loves and who loves him. Jakob the Liar might even be regarded as a Nahum Tateish undoing of Lear. The remake revises the ending of the DDR Jacob the Liar so that, unlike Cordelia, the child Lina is saved by the Russians (in the original DDR film, Lina is almost certainly going to her death in the camps). The remake is thus in line, Sander Gilman insightfully argues, with 1990s representations of the Shoah: "The child must be rescued ... is innocence itself and ... must survive" (306). The remake's changes in a great DDR film result in an awful piece of Robin Williams' Good Morning in Poland schlock. Taymor's Titus also makes a child central, enlarging the minor role of young Lucius into a central role. Lucius appears in the opening and closing interpolated frame and is omnipresent in the film. And Taymor chooses to have Lucius let Aaron's baby live rather than kill it. The result of this focus on the innocent unless taught-to-be-bad child and baby survivors, as in Jakob the Liar, is schlock.

In this essay I argue that Taymor's Titus may not be saved by regarding it as an aftereffect of the Holocaust any more than Shakespeare's Titus
Andronicus either can be saved by regarding it as an anticipation of the Holocaust chiefly because of its reliance on the horror genre. Taymor casts Saturninus as a Fascist leader, the Daddy of Sylvia Plath's poem in Ariel (1965), and Titus as an anti-Fascist, serial killer father liberated from the obligations of paternity. Yet Titus' anti-oedipal, anti-Fascist violence only leads to the reinstallation at the end of the film of a Fascist romanticization of the child in a closing shot straight out of Stephen Spielberg's E.T. (1982). The desacralization of human life that made possible the concentration camp and mass extermination, according to Agamben (1998), extends, I maintain, to the aesthetic, undermining neoconservative attempts both to save Shakespearean representations of violence from mere sensationalism and to save Holocaust memorials from being condemned as part of a Holocaust industry. This same process of desacralization has implications for avowedly progressive Shakespeare criticism as well, as I will show in the conclusion to this essay, since that process erodes distinctions between neoconservative and avowedly progressive Shakespeareans even as the two kinds of critics both ignore or dismiss schlock Shakespeare.

I'M HAVING SHAKESPEARE TO DINNER

Though both Titus and Jakob the Liar bombed, the two films differed markedly in terms of their post-theatrical release marketing. While Jakob the Liar quickly disappeared from sight, a major blitz was undertaken to salvage Taymor's film. In what follows, my focus will be exclusively on Titus. Soon after Taymor's movie was released, a second edition of the lavishly illustrated Julie Taymor: Playing with Fire (Blumenthal and Taymor) was released, complete with a new chapter on Titus. And just before the two-disc DVD edition of Titus complete with director and actor commentaries and other extras was released, the screenplay (Taymor) was published, an equally lavishly illustrated expensive and exclusively hardcover edition coffee table book. Moreover, both Clear Blue Sky Productions and Twentieth Century Fox put up elaborate websites, and Taymor gave interview after interview about both the film and the DVD edition for film magazines and websites. In an interesting development, the neoconservative critic Jonathan Bate was enlisted to help save Taymor's film. In a nice piece of mutual backslapping, Bate's positive review in the New York Times was reprinted as an introduction to the screenplay, and a blurb saying "A great edition of a great play, Julie Taymor, Director of the major new motion picture starring Anthony Hopkins and Jessica Lange" was printed (in stick-on form) on the cover of

12. For a brilliant reading of the poem and Plath and the Holocaust, see Rose.
13. Spielberg reportedly supported Taymor's film after viewing a test screening (Carver).
14. Bate's introduction is reprinted in a slightly revised form on pp. 8-13.
Bate’s Arden *Titus Andronicus*.\(^{16}\) This marketing blitz appears aimed both at teachers and critics of Shakespeare and the serious, nonacademic connoisseur moviegoer, though that strategy is exactly the kind of thing mocked by a not-so-distant cousin of Hopkins’ Titus, the serial killer, hyper-discriminating yuppie aesthete Christian Bale in *American Psycho* (dir. Mary Harron, 1999).

Taymor’s *Titus* is one of four cinematic productions of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* released in the late 1990s, including Lorn Richey’s *Titus Andronicus* (1996), Christopher Dunne’s *Titus Andronicus* (1999), and Richard Griffin’s *William Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus* (2000).\(^{17}\) Taymor’s film differs from the other three not only in its much higher production values, star power, and acting abilities of its cast, but in its relatively less graphic representation of the play’s acts of violence. Richey’s *Titus Andronicus* lets the blood flow, as the close-up of Lavinia (below) and the shot of Titus killing Saturninus (next page) evidence.

*Laviana after her rape and mutilation in Lorn Richey’s Titus Andronicus, 1997*

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16. It was also included in an advertisement I received from Arden in July 2000.

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Richey advertises his film as follows: “Low Budget meets High Art in this ‘Shakes-ploitation’ extravaganza! Seattle cult movie maker, Lorn Richey has created a blue-screen ancient Rome as the setting for William Shakespeare’s bloodiest and most-muscular tragedy. Roman Generals and outlaw Goths clash in a drama of love, intrigue, brutality, adultery, murder, dismemberment, decapitation and cannibalism!” Similarly, Christopher Dunne’s film adaptation (1999) is advertised as follows: “This Cult/Horror motion picture is a wild but faithful adaptation of a classic hit. Set in early Rome, this is the saga of a man cruelly betrayed and brutally persecuted—ultimately to madness and murder by the ‘wilderness of tigers’ of the Roman court. This two hour and twenty-two minute feature tells the powerful tale it was intended, focused on the simple truth: violence & revenge begets only more violence & revenge. A tale of relevance and depth, yet a bizarre and exotic indulgence in the imagery of humankind’s inhumanity to itself.... MURDER, ODDBALL, CONSPIRACY, DEMENTIA, UNGlamORIZED, HIGH CAMP, GENERAL WHACKY BEHAVIOR, CANNIBALISM, INFANTICIDE ... and more!”

In contrast to these openly sensationalistic recodings of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* as a horror cult film along the lines of schlock Troma director Lloyd Kaufman’s *Tromeo and Juliet* (1996), Taymor combines in *Titus* both performance traditions of the play: graphic realism and stylized artifice. In high modernist fashion, Taymor tries to elevate the violence in her film...
above sensationalistic, exploitative violence in films she eschews such as Quentin Tarentino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1995). On the one hand, Taymor departs from Peter Brooks’s innovation of stylizing the violence by using red ribbons in place of stage blood. To give just a few examples, she shows Aaron cutting off Titus’ hand, Aaron killing the nurse, Titus slitting the throats of Chiron and Demetrius, blood drooling from Lavinia’s mouth when Marcus discovers her after she has been raped and her hands cut off, and Titus cutting the throats of Chiron and Demetrius and later sticking a table knife through Tamora’s neck. On the other hand, Taymor stops short of the gruesome explicitness of Dunne’s and Richey’s productions. She does not provide graphic representations of Alarbus’ execution, the beheadings of Quintus and Martius, nor of Lavinia’s rape and mutilation; instead, Taymor represents the rape and mutilation as Lavinia’s flashback, in the fourth of a series of what Taymor calls Penny Arcade Nightmares (P.A.N.s). Lavinia appears as a doe and her assailants as tigers.

18. See Taymor’s comments in two interviews: “I am so sick of stories like *Pulp Fiction* where you have a bunch of low-lifes being violent in a stereotypical low-life way. No real story” (Schechner 45). “It’s OK to have ‘The Matrix’ and blow everybody up and laugh at ‘Pulp Fiction,’ but, whoa, if you should do something that’s beautiful like sex, it’s so weird. It’s so sick.” Interview by Joel Snyder, National Endowment for the Arts, <http://bayarea.citysearch.com/E/V/SFOCA/2024/75/38/>.

19. In the Dunne production, all violence, including Lavinia’s rape, is represented as graphically as possible, and additional acts of violence are interpolated in separate scenes or added to scenes whenever possible. Martius and Quintus have their ears severed in a scene that recalls Quentin Tarentino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1993); and Aaron kills not only the nurse but the midwife as well. At the banquet Titus stabs Aaron’s child and Marcus smashes the child’s head into a wall.
Right after the rape itself, Taymor replaces Lavinia's severed hands with tree branches, as seen in the photo above, and later with wooden hands supplied by Lucius. Although Taymor has Lavinia carry Titus' hand in her mouth, Taymor does not have Lavinia kiss the heads of her brothers as Jonathan Bate has it in his Arden (203), the edition Taymor used. Bate, incidentally, is the first editor, as he points out, to use the stage direction for this "macabre kiss" (48). And Lavinia almost places the walking stick in her mouth, as Marcus does when showing her how to write with it, but then withdraws it, as if it were too phallic, when writing the names of Chiron and Demetrius in the sand. Similarly, when Titus kills his son Mutius, we see Mutius from behind as Titus stabs him in the stomach. No blood is visible, just a reaction shot of Mutius' face. Even when Aaron cuts off Titus' hand, we don't see the cleaver cut into Titus' wrist.

Along the same lines, Taymor does not represent the violence as camp. Like many directors of the play, she tries to prevent viewers from laughing at moments not meant to be funny by having the actors laugh as they commit various atrocities. The play is famous for moments of laughter or that produce laughter, including Titus' own laughter, "Ha, ha!" (3.1.165) when his severed hand and the heads of Quintus and Martius are returned to him; Quintus falling in the pit with the slain Bassianus after Demetrius falls in the pit Marcus, Lucius, Titus competing over whose hand should redeem Quintus and Martius; and Titus' severed hand in Lavinia's mouth. Taymor does use humor when she cuts from the killing of Chiron and Demetrius to the shot of steaming baked pies cooling on a window sill.

20. One interviewer comments, "She acknowledges that some people say there are specific scenes of beheadings or mutilations, but, she says, 'There's none of that stuff.' As an example, she refers to the depiction of violence against Lavinia, Titus' only daughter: 'You never see her hands being cut off, or her tongue, or any of that; that's off screen. But you do see the aftermath. Instead of stumps at her wrists, her arms end in twigs, and it's very surreal as she's left on a stump in the middle of a swamp.' Referring to one of the film's rare concrete and realistic scenes of violence, she notes 'There's a moment where, offscreen, Titus' hand is cut off in the kitchen. Again, you never see the cleaver go into the hand.' Not seeing it, she agrees, is probably more effective. 'It's about violence, as opposed to being a violent movie.'" Interview with Joel Snyder, National Endowment for the Arts, <http://bayarea.citysearch.com/EV/SFOCA/204/2024/538/17/0/11/0/>

21. The play is famous for moments of laughter or that produce laughter, including Titus' own laughter, "Ha, ha!" (3.1.165) when his severed hand and the heads of Quintus and Martius are returned to him; Quintus falling in the pit with the slain Bassianus after Demetrius falls in the pit Marcus, Lucius, Titus competing over whose hand should redeem Quintus and Martius; and Titus' severed hand in Lavinia's mouth. Taymor does use humor when she cuts from the killing of Chiron and Demetrius to the shot of steaming baked pies cooling on a window sill.
both the laughter and the violence and so not want to laugh themselves. Taymor adopts several techniques from contemporary filmmaking. For example, she uses Mad Cow’s Time Slice System, used notably in *The Matrix* (dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), when Lucius shoots Saturninus after having already killed him by shoving a long spoon into his mouth and then into his head. And the Lavinia P.A.N. is edited like a music video and is meant to recall the video arcade games played by Demetrius.\(^\text{22}\)

Even with its relatively restrained representation of violence, *Titus* had great difficulty getting a distributor. An independent group called Overseas Film Group optioned Taymor’s screenplay. Though the film’s preview at Cannes was a great success, no distributor would touch *Titus*. Despite Taymor’s successful Broadway musical adaptation of the animated feature *The Lion King*, Disney passed. Miramax then bailed. Eventually an independent studio, Clear Blue Sky Productions, produced it for about seventeen million dollars, and finally Twentieth Century Fox distributed it and produced the DVD. Once released, *Titus* was frequently compared by reviewers to *Pulp Fiction*, and leading actor Anthony Hopkins’ earlier role as cannibal serial killer Hannibal Lector in the horror film *Silence of the Lambs* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1993) was also called up by reviewers as a gloss on Titus’ cannibalistic feast prepared for his enemies, Tamora and Saturninus chief among them.\(^\text{23}\) *Titus* also showed up with an announcement of its DVD release at a horror Internet site called Gorezone.\(^\text{24}\)

The problems Taymor’s film faced in production, distribution, and theatrical release were in large part due to bad timing. In the wake of the Columbine High School shootings and the lawsuit against Oliver Stone and *Natural Born Killers* (1994) in Alabama for inspiring a series of copycat murders based on those committed by the characters in Stone’s, Hollywood executives got nervous. Even Shakespeare did not seem to be a legitimate cover. One of the Columbine murderers quoted Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (“Good wombs have born bad sons,” 1.2.140) in one of the last videotapes the killers made before their rampage (Janofsky).\(^\text{25}\) A journalist writing about Taymor’s difficulties finding a distributor commented that even Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo & Juliet* would have had a hard time getting a distributor had it been set for release in 1999.\(^\text{26}\) And Shakespeare did not save *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* (dir. Kevin Williamson, 1999). Williamson’s script, a film about three high-school students who kidnapped a terrorizing high-school teacher and then, in the original version, murdered her, was botched and butchered so that the film could be released with an R-rating (Mrs. Tingle is fired). Ophelia, Romeo, and Juliet are all mentioned in the film, and leading

\(^{22}\) See the DVD commentary in the *Penny Arcade Nightmares* chapter on disc two.

\(^{23}\) See, for examples, Stead and Stone.

\(^{24}\) <http://www.horror.net/gorezone/anglais/june00.html>.

\(^{25}\) Janofsly writes: “And, as if to lift from their parents any sense of guilt, remorse, or responsibility, Mr. Harris quietly quotes Shakespeare: ‘Good wombs have born bad sons.’” Holden B19 mentions the Columbine killings, though not the Shakespeare quotation, in his review of *Titus*.

\(^{26}\) Thompson.
actress Helen Mirren (Mrs. Tingle) has played many of Shakespeare’s female characters on stage and on film. Shakespeare’s cultural authority was not sufficient to prevent the film, even in its neutered form, from being assaulted in the press. Similarly, in 1999 Miramax delayed the release of O, a modern day adaptation of Othello starring Julia Stiles as Desi, because of the Columbine shootings (See Traister). Ironically, Taymor’s film was not spared the censor’s scissors either, though for explicit sex rather than violence. Ten to twenty seconds of sexually explicit footage of male genitalia during the orgy scene were left on the cutting-room floor, and Titus managed to secure an R-rating.27 Anything did not go in the name of Shakespeare.

The reception of Taymor’s film is due in part to what I am calling the desacralization of Shakespeare. This desacralization is due to a larger transformation in Shakespeare’s reproduction, one in which visual culture has displaced literary culture and a modernist aesthetic has gone to the wayside. If, as Richard Halpern argues, at an earlier time Shakespeare’s preeminence “depended on his sharing the stage with cultural ‘trash’” (66), Shakespeare is now in many, if not most, cases indistinguishable from such trash in that Shakespeare is most widely accessible on film or other visual media.28 And this displacement of the literary text by the movie, television, and computer screen involves another reversal. Most people, like the character Cher in Clueless (dir. Amy Heckerling, 1996), now come to Shakespeare first not through his texts but through some visual representation of them, a film, an advertisement, or a subgenre of fiction such as teen comedies, science fiction, or Harlequin romances.29 It is not surprising that both Taymor and Jonathan Bate use the same cliché that Shakespeare is a screenwriter.30

If we look for places where Shakespeare still has a sacred status, we find them in the romantic criticism of a Harold Bloom (1998) and in a romantic comedy like Shakespeare in Love (dir. John Madden II 1998). Significantly, Titus Andronicus is mentioned in Shakespeare in Love in a way that disassociates it from the mature Shakespeare who emerges during the course of the film. When Shakespeare sees a boy outside the theater feeding mice to a cat, the boy tells him he admires a play in which heads are cut off and a daughter is mutilated with knives. The play is Titus Andronicus and the boy says his name is John Webster. Shakespeare’s bloody tragedy is associated with his juvenilia, and poor Webster is represented as an inferior playwright whose development was arrested at a very young age.

Before we may examine the impact of Shakespeare’s desacralization as a writer of violent plays on Taymor’s stylistic choices in Titus, I think it is necessary to consider not only why the film faced so many hurdles in its production and distribution but why there have been so many cinematic adaptations of Titus Andronicus in the late 1990s and into the Millennium. In his analysis

29. On Clueless, see Burt 1997 and 1998. For a series of essays on Shakespeare’s appearance in these subgenres, see Burt 2001.
30. Taymor says, “Shakespeare’s plays are screenplays” (Pizzello), and Bate opens his introduction to the screenplay by saying, “If Shakespeare were alive today he would be writing and directing movies.”
of the modernist investment in Shakespeare as a means of unifying the public sphere without erasing social distinctions and so preventing social disintegration, Richard Halpern has pointed out that “Shakespeare's Roman plays assume particular importance for modern political thought because it is there that something like an urban, public space emerges” (52). *Julius Caesar* was chief among the Roman plays, as Halpern documents: the first Vitagraph film production was of the play in 1908, as it was the play Orson Welles chose to open the Mercury Theater with in 1937 (it ran for 157 performances) and was the first released issue of Classics Illustrated in the 1950s (Halpern 67). And *Julius Caesar* was a fixture of the high-school curriculum. The link between Caesar and modern dictators, including Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, Mobutu, and Abeid Karume, was made as well in the program notes to a 1972 RSC production of *Julius Caesar*. *Titus Andronicus* was almost nowhere to be found in theatrical production or in mass culture other than in the printed text. The reverse is now true, and Taymor even claims that younger audiences love her film. Whether or not they will be taught in high school, films of *Titus Andronicus* proliferate while, in the midst of an unprecedented glut of Shakespeare films over the last decade, no one has redone or announced his or her intention to redo *Julius Caesar*. And one would not expect a film of *Julius Caesar*, if one were made, to be compared to a horror film.

Some critics might interpret this reversal as evidence of the further decline of the public sphere where horror movies have overtaken tragedy. Audiences are more bloodthirsty, more interested in film than theater, and film technology can deliver better special effects, more realistic violence. In the terms of this decline narrative, versions of which one can find in both Left and Right versions, one would argue that it is no accident that Taymor’s *Titus* is set in a Colosseum and that ancient Rome has reappeared in films such as Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* (2000) and Oliver Stone’s *Any Given Sunday* (2000), which replays parts of the chariot scene in *Ben Hur* (dir. William Wyler, 1959) to make a typically obvious equation between gladiators and football players.

Departing from a moralistic and simplistic narrative of cultural decline, I would argue that *Titus Andronicus* is now so present on film both because of changes in Shakespeare’s reproduction and reception and because of global political changes after the end of the Cold War. While *Julius Caesar* was at the center of the major conflicts of the twentieth century (i.e., 1930s Fascism, World War II, and the Cold War), films of *Titus Andronicus* preside at a moment of globalization lacking in major ideological conflicts such as capitalism versus communism, a moment in which the only real superpower left is the United States, but in which there are more wars being fought than ever,

31. *Coriolanus* was the second most important play, staged by the Nazis, by Brecht, and by Welles. It was not filmed then, nor has it been since. See Halpern 51-52; Habicht; and Reynolds.

32. The chariot scene from *Ben Hur* was earlier updated in George Lucas’ *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999). Ancient Rome is called up in these films in a late imperial context. Unlike *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960), in which one can die a heroic martyr for a collective political good embodied in the surviving wife and son, *Gladiator* narrowly limits the meaning of the hero’s death to the fulfillment of a personal dream of reunion with his wife and son, who had been slain earlier by his enemies.
and with them more camps. In the present world scene, it is harder to get one’s political and cultural bearings, and divisions between Left and Right, it is commonly said, have shifted. In the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign, for example, Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan both wanted to see the end of the World Trade Organization. In this context it should not be surprising that what one might call Paul Verhoeven’s parafacist film, Starship Troopers (1997), was read by some critics as a glorification of Fascism, imperialism, and militarism, by others as a critique (D’Amato and Rimanelli). Given the universalization of the camp and the desacralization of the Holocaust, it makes sense that the reading of Julius Caesar and Coriolanus as plays about a Fascist leader and a fickle mob has become obsolete and that Titus, read as a play about a Fascist leader who cannot control the violence of his subjects, becomes of widespread interest.33

Of the Titus Andronicus films that have been released in the late 1990s and the first year of the Millennium, Taymor’s Titus is to my mind the most interesting, not because of what it does with Fascism, a problematic move I will explore shortly, but because of how it changes the meaning of anti-Fascism, locating it not so much in political values—republican conspirators assassinating an imperial dictator, say, in Julius Caesar—as in psychotic violence. In the scene with Titus in a steaming bath that deliberately recalls Jacques-Louis David’s famous painting of Marat, Taymor turns Titus into a kind of revolutionary journalist whose writings earlier literally pierced the court when carried into it on arrows. (The arrows puncture the floating mermaid and narrowly miss the people partying at court.)

Jacques-Louis David, 1793, Death of Marat

33. Julius Caesar has not entirely disappeared from view, of course. In the film Free Enterprise (dir. Robert Meyer Burnett. 1999), for example, William Shatner performs a rap version of Antony’s funeral oration called “No Tears for Caesar.” Originally, however, the script used Titus Andronicus. That play was rejected as too obscure to be recognized by the average filmgoer. See Director’s commentary on the DVD edition.
As Revenge, Tamora becomes a failed counterrevolutionary Charlotte Corday. Even this association of Titus with revolutionary, republican values is compromised, however, by the fact that, unlike Marat, who has just been assassinated while reading Corday’s letter in David’s painting, Titus writes letters with his own blood in a literal bloodbath of his own making. The quotation of Marat’s death calls up not so much the Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) as it does the Reign of Terror (1793–94). Moreover, the revolutionary political coding of Titus, insofar as it is clear in this scene at all, is overridden by the dominant and more familiar coding of Titus that colors the entire film. Because most audiences read backwards from film to Shakespeare, Taymor’s casting of Anthony Hopkins, given that Titus serves human flesh at his banquet, will inevitably call to the minds of many reviewers and other audiences the serial killer cannibal, Hannibal Lector. Perhaps Taymor had of necessity to cast Hopkins as the leading man because he was the only one with the star power and the ability willing to do it. 34 However she came to cast Hopkins, once she did and once she also decided on the Fascist setting, Taymor’s attempt to critique violence via Fascism and the Holocaust were inevitably in tension with her reinscription of the horror genre.

The consequence for Taymor, in my view, is not that she compromises her critique of extreme violence represented by events such as the Holocaust and unwittingly produces a horror film. The consequence is rather that in toning down the violence and making it a generational issue, Taymor subverts her own critique of Fascism and her redemption of the play as a work of art rather than trash by reinscribing a Fascist aesthetic. Given the coding of Saturninus as a Fascist politician, a Mussolini-like dictator, and Jessica Lange’s appearance as Tamora, Shewolf of the SS Goths, the horror genre gives Titus’ violence a new meaning. Titus becomes Lector/Titus, a serial killer who returns from one battle after another to do one sacrifice after another. He has come “five times/Bleeding to Rome” to do “sacrifice of expiation,” making up for the deaths of his “valiant sons” by slaying “the noblest of the Goths” in previous battles, according to Marcus (1.1.33–38). Taymor also changes the order of events in the first act, starting with Titus’ return to Rome and putting the first 68 lines in which Saturninus and Bassinius vie for election after Alarbus’ sacrifice. Changing the order of events in this way highlights not only Alarbus’ death and the dead Andronici that return with Titus but the fact that this violence has no origin and no apparent end. The scene in which Titus kills Mutius (Blake Ritson) is thus not really an aberration at all: having already lost twenty-one of his sons, what is the loss of another?

Resistance to Fascism becomes in the film a kind of massive death drive, and honor-killing in the play is transformed into psycho-killing in the film. Lector/Titus brings out the tendency already present in the play to produce an excessive amount of sadistic violence, an excess that lends itself to comedy.

34. The parallel was predictably noted by at least two reviewers. See Morrow and see Baltake, Titus <http://www.movieclub.com/reviews/archives/00titus/titus.html>.
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and parody. Lector/Titus’ decision to side with Saturninus rather than Bassanius is not merely bad judgment but an act of psychotic destruction. Despite his support of primogeniture, Lector/Titus is not a traditionalist. Lector/Titus is deeply into entombing his twenty-one out of twenty-five sons and sacrificing the prize Goth. Death for Lector/Titus is liberation:

In peace and hour rest you here my sons;
Rome’s readiest champions, repose you here in rest,
Secure from worldly chances and mishaps,
Here lurks no treason, here no envy swells,
Here grow no damned drugs, here are no storms,
No noise, but silence and eternal sleep;
In peace and honor rest you here, my sons. (1.1.153-59)

Thus Lector/Titus is as willing to sacrifice his own sons as he is Alarbus. Lector/Titus’ psychotic violence is liberating and anti-Fascist in that it contests the state’s monopoly on violence, its capacity to say that some acts of violence are legitimate and sacred while others are not. Lector/Titus’ freedom through violence extends to members of his own family, including Mutius and Lavinia (Laura Fraser), whom he earlier suggested should commit suicide.

In addition to these sadistic acts of violence, Hopkins’ Titus is revealed as a masochist. Hopkins has Titus smile before Saturninus kills him; his Lector/Titus does not raise a hand, much less put up a fight. Titus’ death is continuous, then, with his own death drive, announced after he agrees to let Mutius be buried in the Andronici tomb (“Well, bury him, bury me the next,” 1.1.391). Hopkins also invites us to see Titus as a cannibal, further blurring the distinction between Tamora’s family and his own. In two shots during the banquet, we see him chewing, but we can’t be sure whether he really has pieces of the meat pies containing Chiron and Demetrius in his mouth or is merely imitating those who do. Anti-Fascism in Titus is not collective Rational resistance to a tyrannical state, but is located in the subjectivity of a hero who is both sadistic and masochistic and whose acts of violence do not respect distinctions between people who are in or out of his family.35

Rather than play up Titus as serial killer anti-Fascist, however, Taymor tones him down and tends to play up children as relative innocents who have no legitimate access to violence. The P.A.N.s are meant to establish, according to Taymor, that the characters still have a conscience. In the case of Titus, the first two center on his killing of two children, Alarbus and Mutius. The first P.A.N. is a haunting of Titus and Tamora by Alarbus. Between the profiles of Tamora and Titus, we see marble-like body parts engulfed in flames flying toward the screen, then Alarbus’ torso, breathing. Titus and Tamora both know that the reconciliation between Saturninus and Titus will not last. In the second arcade, this haunting is made an effect of Titus’ con-

35. In contrast to Titus, Aaron kills the Nurse in order to defend his child.
science about his having killed Mutius. After Titus’ aside in 3.1.16-22, angels appear and then a sacrificial lamb; the sacrificial sword that Titus had used to draw blood on Alarbus’ chest then descends, and the head of the sheep turns into Mutius’ head. Both Alarbus and Mutius are represented as innocent victims, and the effect is to humanize Titus as guilty father.

To sanctify the child survivor, Taymor not only introduces these P.A.N.s but moves away from the play’s deconstruction of what René Girard would call good and bad violence toward an undeconstructed opposition between parents, who are violent, and children, who are less violent or nonviolent: the play, that is, deconstructs oppositions between violence enacted by the Goths and Romans, between Scythia and Rome ("Rome is but a wilderness of Tigers" [3.1. 54], "O cruel, irreligious piety" [1.1.133]; Titus’ speech about the crypt and eternal sleep in 1.1. 154-59 parallels Tamora’s to Aaron about a golden slumber in 2.2.25-29; Lucius' twice-made remark that the Romans will “hew [Alarbus'] limbs” [1.1.110 and 132] is echoed by Marcus’ description of the mutilated Lavinia, “lopped and hewed ... of its two branches” [2.3.17-18]). To be sure, there are a few visual parallels between Romans and Goths in Titus such as the cut from Saturninus reading in his court to Lucius reading in his tent between 4.4. and 5.1, and the echoing of Aaron’s licking his tongue in the air at Lucius when Lucius beats him and Titus’ licking his tongue in the air at Chiron when Chiron appears at Titus’ house cross-dressed as Rape. Yet Taymor’s central focus is on generational differences. Lucius looks better than Titus because of major cuts Taymor makes in the ending. And Taymor’s Lucius lets Aaron’s child survive as well. Taymor even turns Titus into a child. In the bath that recalls David’s painting of the death of Marat, Titus is, Taymor says, a “naked baby.”

The sanctification of children registered in these P.A.N.s is present as well in the greatly expanded role of young Lucius (Osheen Jones) as a framing character at the beginning and the end, as in Jane Howell’s 1985 BBC television production, and a witness throughout the film. The sanctification is clearest in the ending of Titus, which I believe to be its weakest part. Taymor cuts the grotesque moment in the play when Marcus, Lucius, and then young Lucius all successively kiss the lips of Titus’ corpse. Instead, she has young Lucius open up the cage in which Aaron’s infant has been placed and then picks him up and holds him. In the final, prolonged and schlocky shot of the film, young Lucius walks with the baby out of the arena into a sunrise, much as the boy Eliot carried E.T. when they rode off together on a bike in Spielberg’s film.

To her credit, Taymor makes the difference between adults and children a nuanced one. Children are not inherently innocent, nor are all children innocent in the film. The redemptive force of the final scene is heightened by its contrast with earlier scenes in which Lucius appeared to be a violent succes-

36. DVD commentary.
sor to Titus (like grandfather, like son): in the opening frame, Taymor has the boy anticipate Titus in eating food as he stabs his toys and spills sugar and ketchup on them. Along similar lines, she has the young Lucius rather than Marcus kill the fly at dinner and speak the lines about doing so, and young Lucius accompanies Titus when Titus enlists other relatives to shoot arrows to the gods so that he may gain justice. This early violence, then, including the opening scene of the boy playing with his war toys, throws Lucius’ later pacifism into bold relief.

Lucius is similarly contrasted with the Clown and the little girl the age of young Lucius. Unlike Lucius, who becomes less violent as the film proceeds, the Clown, who rescues Lucius when his kitchen gets bombed, is later associated with violence, driving a truck much like the murderous strongman Zampano’s in Fellini’s *La Strada* (1954). The Clown turns out to be a man who uses violence as entertainment. A little girl arrives with him and initially seems to be innocent, setting up chairs for the smiling Lucius, Titus, Lavinia, and Marcus so they may watch an entertainment. As it turns out, however, she is the bearer of horror, for the side of the truck flies up to reveal the decapitated and embalmed heads of his son and his severed hand. She is perhaps a future Tamora. Nevertheless, by confining the horror genre to Lector/Titus and by playing up children as less violent, Taymor actually reinstalls a fascistic celebration of the child, as Kenneth Branagh did earlier in his *Henry V* (1989) when he interpolated a scene in which Henry V carries the boy Davy’s corpse across the muddy battlefield after the English have won the battle of Agincourt as “Non nobis domine” (Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory) plays on the soundtrack. It is precisely the innocent child, dead or alive, who often legitimates violence against the Other in German and Italian Fascist cinema.37

**SPRINGTIME FOR SHAKESPEARE IN ITALY**

It is not a surprise that Taymor should have tuned into the Fascism channel for her adaptation of Shakespeare’s tragedy. In this respect, as in so many others, Taymor’s film is quite derivative.38 The analogy between *Titus Andronicus* and the Holocaust has been around at least since 1955, when one reviewer faulted Peter Brooks’ influential production for making the play too remote historically. “For post-Buchenwald generations,” one reviewer wrote, “the play’s profligate brutalities no longer seemed comfortably remote, or ridiculous” (Dessen 21). Douglas Seale mounted the first Fascist *Titus* production at the Center Stage in Baltimore in 1967, with Saturninus looking like Mussolini and Titus as a Prussian officer. The Andronici were portrayed as Nazis and the Goths as Allied Forces (Dessen 33-34). When the Clown is

37. To be sure, Fascist cinema does not have a monopoly of images of innocent children. Bertolucci condemns a Fascist in *1901* (1976) by having him brutally and horrifically kill a child by smashing his head in.

38. Jane Howell used the young Lucius to frame the play’s action for her 1984 BBC television production. Peter Greenaway’s representation of Caliban in *Prospero’s Books* (1991) led one reviewer to compare Caliban to a concentration camp victim. See Adair.
executed we see a Jewish star on his back. Trevor Nunn (1972) had the cast see Federico Fellini’s Satyricon (1969) and supplied a stage orgy at the beginning of 4.2. (Dessen 37). And Titus Andronicus was not the first Shakespeare play to be viewed in the light of 1930s Fascism. In addition to the Orson Welles production I mentioned earlier, Joseph Mankiewicz filmed an anti-Fascist production of Julius Caesar. And some reviewers compared Taymor’s film to the more recent stage production and film of Ian McKellen’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s Richard III as a 1930s English Fascist leader. Shakespeare had also been enlisted in the much earlier anti-Fascist comedy To Be or Not to Be (dir. Ernest Lubitsch, 1942) with Jack Benny and Carole Lombard and then remade in 1983 by Alan Johnson with Mel Brooks and Anne Bancroft. The comedy is set in the Warsaw ghetto just as Hitler invades Poland, with Benny/Brooks playing Hamlet and impersonating Hitler.

Yet, as in so many other areas, the Nazis’ uses of Shakespeare complicate anti-Fascist attempts to critique them by pinning the Nazis down on one side of a given binary opposition, either for or against Shakespeare. Shakespeare was the most produced playwright in Nazi Germany until World War II, and criticism produced pro-Hitler commentary. Coriolanus, for example, was compared favorably to Hitler by one critic. And Hitler expressly forbade the bombing of Stratford-upon-Avon because it was Shakespeare’s birthplace. The Nazi Propaganda Ministry’s protocols for the Jewish Kulturbund Theater, organized, sponsored, and protected (until 1941) by the Nazis, stated: “On principle, theater is allowed. There are no reservations about Shakespeare. All authors of German descent or those who belong to the Reich Theater Chamber are excluded from consideration” (Rovit and Goldfarb, 77). And, strikingly, Shakespeare was even approved by the Nazis in the camps. The SS encouraged productions of Shakespeare among other dramatists. One prisoner translated Measure for Measure into Czech and another told precis of Shakespeare plays. Yet knowing how to act Shakespeare, we probably will not be surprised to learn, didn’t save one’s life in the camps. A planned production of Twelfth Night in Terezin, the “model” concentration camp just outside Prague, had to be abandoned after the actors were taken away in a new wave of transports (Rovit and Goldfarb, 181, 243). The capacity of a Shakespeare actor to be on both Communist and Nazi sides was explored in Mephisto (Istvan Szabo 1981).

Taymor’s shift of the Fascist setting from Germany to Italy complicates her critique of Fascism even further. Mussolini outflanked Hitler in architecture, painting, and the cinema, which he ranked as the most potent weapon, by combining the avant-garde with classicism instead of turning away from

39. On Julius Caesar and Fascism, see Anderegg 26-29 and Halpern.
40. Joanne Akalitis set her 1989 New York production of Caroline dramatist John Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, starring Val Kilmer, in Mussolini’s Italy, and Ian McKellen and then Richard Loncarine had set Richard III in an English Fascist setting of the 1930s.
41. See Halpern 52 and on Coriolanus Reynolds.
the avant-garde to embrace socialist realism. Unlike Germany, Italy has made next to no attempt to own its Fascist period and its own participation in the Holocaust, and many of its major filmmakers’ postwar work was compromised. Roberto Rossellini and Fellini had made Fascist propaganda films, and Fellini made films soft on Fascism such as *Amarcord* (1974). Even attacks on Italian Fascism are problematic, including Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Conformist* (1970) and *1900* (1976), Vittorio de Sica’s *The Garden of the Finzi Continis* (1970), Paolo Pasolini’s *Salo* (1975), Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (1974), Lina Wertmuller’s *The Seven Beauties* (1976), Luchino Visconti’s *The Damned*, (1969) and, most recently, Roberto Benigni’s *Life Is Beautiful* (1998). The Fascist appears in these films as the sexual pervert, notably in *The Damned*, which uses imagery taken from the gay cabaret scene to indict the upper classes as decadent. They deploy the same imagery and rhetorical strategies, as Kriss Ravetto argues, that the Fascists had deployed to attack the Left.

*Titus* has several obvious flaws along these very lines. Taymor’s film uses Shakespeare to make a critique of violence issuing ultimately in the mass exterminations of the Holocaust, but ends up redeploying Fascist iconography so that the Fascists are also sexual perverts. Some critics might say that Julie Taymor’s *Titus* should really have been called Julie Tamora’s *Titus Androgynous*. Chiron is made to look gay as he dances like a go-go dancer in the poolroom and later wears his hair in braided pigtails. The orgy scene begins with a shot of two men making love. Saturninus is also a sexual pervert, more like the son of Tamora than her husband, as we see her holding him when they are in bed in the nude. And the polymorphous perverse Saturninus is not, of course, a father. Ironically, Alan Cummings had a haircut while filming *Titus* as a consequence of the fact that he was playing the flaming gay Master of Ceremonies in a Broadway revival of *Cabaret*, the musical inspired by gay writer Christopher Isherwood’s *Berlin Stories*.

The Andronici are desexualized by contrast. Taymor’s Tight-ass Andronicus, as it were, has no interest in sex. He strolls down the street with prostitutes on it, for example, lost in thought as he walks to the crypt. This desexualization produces a problem similar to the sexualization of Saturninus and the Goths when it comes to Lavinia’s representation. Taymor adopts a Right-Wing feminism in which women and sex do not mix. Lavinia and Tamora are deliberately contrasted in terms of their sexuality. Tamora goes from unkempt Goth at the beginning of the film, pleading earnestly for her son’s life, to a sexual monster with armor and massive hairpiece. Her sexualization is to be read as a sign of her moral corruption by her desire for revenge. By contrast, Lavinia’s moral purity is represented by her lack of sexuality. In the P.A.N. of her rape, Lavinia is sexualized as in the iconic

42. On how Mussolini installed the cinema industry, defended against Hollywood product, and endowed Cinecittà, see Bondanella. On Italian Fascism see Nowell-Smith, and on the cult of ancient Rome in Italian Fascism, see Duggan 227-28. See also Landy 1998 and 1986, Sitney; and Mancini.
moment in *The Seven Year Itch* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1955) where Marilyn Monroe stands over a grating without embarrassment while the air from the subway passing below blows up her dress. Taymor hyperbolically condemns this wonderful comic moment: “There’s something about that image of Marilyn Monroe with the wind blowing up her dress which is an incredible rape. This woman has to hold her skirt down and there’s the roar of the subway going underneath ... (Warthall 26). To stress Lavinia’s purity, Taymor put her on a tree stump pedestal like a ballerina of Edgar Degas.

Sexuality, then, is made the equivalent of the violent act of rape, something that happens to (good) women rather than something that is a part of them. Only bad women like Tamora are in charge of their sexual pleasure. Finally, some critics may also fault the film for casting a light-skinned black man to play Aaron and for having a white child pick up the baby in a way that makes the exit from the Colosseum appear to be the introduction of a new, racialized hierarchy, as if young Lucius were taking up the white boy’s burden.

The film’s indirect analogy between violence in the play and violence in the Holocaust also produces an unsettling deconstruction of aggressor and victim. The ethnic group that risks extermination here—the imprisoned Goths—moves rapidly from being arbitrary and dehumanized sacrifices to having the run of the place and ruling the ruler. Aaron’s status as a member of another marginalized group, who comes totally, if briefly, to power and who is then tortured to death, complicates things still further.

In addition to reproducing a Fascist aesthetic and Fascistic sexual and racial politics in the name of a child-centered anti-Fascism, *Titus* is also open to an almost opposite critique, namely that it is not political enough, that it depoliticizes violence. As Taymor’s comments in the epigraph to this essay, she reads “every day” something out of *Titus Andronicus*. The Holocaust is one atrocity among others. And even the oft-drawn parallels between the Holocaust and the concentration camps in Bosnia go without comment, as does Shakespeare’s relation to the Bosnia conflict. Although the Colosseum Taymor used in *Titus* is located in Pula, Croatia, and although the audience sitting in it at the end of the film are Croatians, Taymor does not mention (nor does any other critic of the film) that Shakespeare’s Sonnet 66 (“Tired with all these, for restful death I cry”) has been extremely popular in Croatia as a protest song since the 1950s (Pfister).

Yet to dismiss *Titus* on the basis of these criticisms would be a mistake, I think. For one thing, to ask *Titus* or any other film to unmake Fascism is to ask it to meet an impossible standard. Even if Taymor had played up Titus as serial killer more and played down the role of children, similar problems would have come up as the film took a turn toward camp. Mel Brooks acknowledged the unpredictability of representations of the Nazis in *The
Producers, in which a musical called \textit{Springtime for Hitler} intended to be a flop instead becomes a smash hit, and Brooks also alludes to the tasteless production in his remake of \textit{To Be or Not to Be} in which the Jewish cast performs a number called \textit{Naughty Nazis}.\footnote{There is an awkward moment that approaches the grimness of Lina Wertmuller’s \textit{Seven Beauties} near the end of Johnson’s \textit{To Be or Not to Be} when the gay dresser of Anna Bronski helps a frightened elderly couple dressed as clowns to make their escape from the theater full of Nazi officers in the audience. The dresser slaps Jewish stars on the couple, fires a toy gun at them from which a Nazi flag pops out, and then marches them out while shouting “Juden, Juden” as the officers laugh.} And a deliberate turn toward a campy representation of the camp would not have saved \textit{Titus} either. That strategy was already tried and adopted by the Sex Pistols in the late 1970s with “Belsen Was a Gas” and “Holiday in the Sun.” In \textit{Lipstick Traces}, Greil Marcus sees the Sex Pistols as the end of the avant-garde, their songs imploding in the band’s short-lived career and soon taken over by events such as a Holocaust theme park proposed in 1980. A former English army sergeant came up with an idea for what he thought to be the ideal British vacation, namely, a trip to an imitation Nazi prison camp. “They’ll have a horrible time and love every minute of it, or I’ll want to know the reason why,” the sergeant was quoted as saying (Marcus 122-23).

I would also want to defend \textit{Titus} for the way it mixes historical periods. Taymor comments, “In productions in Shakespeare’s day, they wore Elizabethan clothes and togas. Shakespeare was blending times and so am I, playing with reference points so you get a feeling about the 20th century—this imagery of totalitarianism” (Wrathall 25). In the opening sequence, children’s toys are taken from different periods and include Star Wars figures, G.I. Joes, and Goths and Romans. Similarly, in the Colosseum the soldiers drive tanks and ride motorcycles and horses, much as they do in the election parade. The costumes span periods with the soldiers wearing Etruscan armor, Lavinia dressed as Grace Kelly in the 1950s, and Tamora as a woman from the 1930s. Rome itself is represented as “stratified.”\footnote{Taymor uses the word in her DVD commentary.} Thus Rome is both Mussolini’s, itself a mix of the ancient and the avant-garde, and the emperor Hadrian’s (some of the scenes were shot in Hadrian’s villa). Fake cobblestones were also placed on the ground to form ancient Roman-like roads in modern settings. Other temporal markers are mixed technologically, as with the use of the archaic penny arcade and MTV video and time-slicing editing.

Despite the intended use of P.A.N.s to construct internal memories for the characters through lyric interludes, in my view they work against linear narrative and defy the conventions by which a sequence is recognized as a character’s flashback. They bear a relation less to realist than to avant-garde and expressionist cinema. By mixing historical periods, Taymor disrupts, perhaps in spite of herself, any attempt to construct a narrative in which one could say either that the Holocaust is foundational for Shakespearean violence on film or that Shakespeare is foundational for our understanding of the Holocaust.
Even if one were to persist in saying that the problem with Titus is that it depoliticizes violence and universalizes the Holocaust, the force of that critique would be limited by the fact that it is not clear what a political reading of either the violence in Titus or in the Holocaust would be. In his essay on Holocaust comedies, Zizek makes an abrupt swerve in his final two paragraphs to Muslims and Bosnia camps:

The Muslim is the zero point at which the opposition between tragedy and comedy, between the sublime, and the ridiculous, between dignity and derision is suspended, the point at which one passes into its opposite. If we try to present their predicament as tragic, the result is comic; if we treat them as comic, tragedy emerges ... Can one imagine a film rendering this? (29)

Zizek equates the Jewish concentration camp with the Muslim camp and reproduces the same claim for Muslim camps as the one that governed the Jewish Holocaust, namely, that film cannot render it. So the Muslim becomes a bigger victim than the Jew because not even comedy can represent (by knowing it fails to represent) the Muslim camp. Muslim suffering is thus legitimated on the model of the depoliticized Holocaust he critiques. If, as Agamben maintains, the camp is the paradigm of modernity, we might fault Taymor only for thinking it is possible to exit from it.

I WOULD LIKE TO CLOSE by considering some of the implications the exchange between Shakespeare and the Holocaust has for Shakespeare criticism. In addition to considering why so many directors want to make the film as we did earlier, we might also consider the resurgence of critical interest in the play, and not just in avowedly progressive critics. Why would a neoconservative like Jonathan Bate, we might wonder, want to redeem the play in his Arden edition and then defend Taymor’s film, which, after all, takes many liberties with the play, not only rearranging scenes and adding material but cutting about an hour and a half of the script? By way of an answer, I would say that Bate, like any Shakespearean critic in the present, has to write in response to what I earlier called Shakespeare’s trash, schlock status. Bate articulates a neomodernist aesthetic, defending what he anachronistically calls “Renaissance High Culture” through its reproduction in mass culture, especially in film. A fervent admirer of the reactionary film critic Michael Medved, Bate begins his introduction to the Arden edition by comparing the playgoer to the moviegoer: “Audiences may still be disturbed by the play’s representations of bloody revenge, dismemberment, miscegenation, rape, and cannibalism, but theatergoers who are also moviegoers will be familiar with this kind of material” (Bate 1-2). Turning then to the BBC production, Bate mentions that the actress playing Lavinia, Anna Calder-Marshall, compared the play to a “video nasty.” Following upon Calder-Marshall’s comment that Titus learns about love by being maimed and by Lavinia’s being maimed, Bate compares the play to King Lear and then elevates both plays above movies: “To understand Titus Andronicus thus is at once to perceive its prox-
imity to *King Lear* and to apprehend the difference between a slasher movie and a tragedy” (Bate 2). Yet this distinction between plays and slasher films falls apart the moment one turns to cinematic productions of *King Lear*. Bate is able to elevate *Titus* above horror films only by forgetting that Shakespeare is most likely to be encountered today by television and moviegoers, not theatergoers. Moreover, he has to ignore the ways in which *Titus* is itself schlock, and hence not completely distinct from the trashier film versions of the play nor from slasher films. An arch-conservative like Harold Bloom asserts precisely this equivalence in terms of the play itself: *Titus Andronicus* is “the Shakespearean equivalent of what we now respond to in Stephen King and in much cinema” (78). And it is this very equivalence which leads Bloom to dismiss the play. And while more conservative than Bate, Bloom too feels the need to engage with film and mass culture to provide a similar street credibility. Though Bloom denigrates performances of the plays and elevates reading them as literature, he went to see *Shakespeare in Love* and refers to media positively, despite his “Bloom brontosaurus” self-label, and his former student Camille Paglia does so even more. For example, having last seen *Titus Andronicus* in 1955, Bloom says, “I don’t think I would see the play again unless Mel Brooks directed it, with his company of zanies, or perhaps it could yet be made into a musical” (86). Like Bate, Bloom distinguishes between Shakespeare and schlock; he just draws the line between them in a different place.

More progressive critics might argue that Bate’s reactionary neomodernism is a canny attempt to co-opt the potential for radical representation that film offers while Bloom’s dismissal of the play is simply a more old-fashioned and funnier suppression of the play in the name of a more high-minded vision of Shakespeare’s invention of what it means to be human. But their shared distinction between Shakespeare and schlock is drawn by more progressive critics as well, who are caught in a similar contradiction between elevating some Shakespeares as the bearers of aesthetic and cultural value and dismissing other Shakespeares as trash. In one recent study of Shakespeare on film, for example, an avowedly progressive critic invokes films like *Clueless* to justify the study of Shakespeare on film but excludes any film that is not a canonical adaptation.47

In this reading of *Titus* and (the) camp and my discussion of the exchanges between representations of the Holocaust and performances of Shakespeare, I have tried to suggest that it is in the crosscurrents of schlock—sometimes in episodes of talk shows like the Maury Povich Show—that Shakespeare films (and Holocaust memorials as well) must now necessarily be read if we are to grasp fully both their strengths and their limitations. We might consider what it means to address trashy Shakespeare by asking how then we might deal with the openly schlocky cinematic produc-

47. There is no mention of *Tromeo and Juliet*, for example, nor any of many other examples of what I have called “unspeakable ShaxXXXspeares” (Burt 1999).
tions of *Titus Andronicus*. Both (neo)cons and many progressives would no doubt separate out Taymor’s *Titus* from the other slasher adaptation as an art-house film and as a pedagogical film. The child Lucius is set up as a witness to violence like the audience who appears in the Colosseum in the film’s closing moments. In her preachy director’s commentary, Taymor says she has Lucius kill Saturninus a second time because young Lucius has to understand “where the violence goes.” Young Lucius learns a lesson about playing war with little toys, and the lesson is reinforced when we see bad boy Demetrius playing video arcade games. As we have seen, however, this moralistic display of violence in order to abjure it foundered on its own excesses, and it is doubtful the film will be taught in high schools. Taymor participates in the present generational shift away from parent-centered child-rearing practices to child-centered child-rearing practices in a completely unself-conscious manner. And Shakespeare critics have yet to reflect on it, either in terms of what it means for the reception of “adult” Shakespeare adaptations or for the recent production of Shakespeare books and CD-ROMS for children.48

Yet inverting the hierarchy between art-house and slasher adaptations in order to find some kind of subversion in the unspeakably trashy versions would seem to founder as well through the opposite reason, namely, that they are not excessive enough: they are much too low tech in comparison with films like *Scream* (dir. Wes Craven, 1996), and the absence of special effects makes the violence represented in them seem laughable rather than gruesome and horrific. Perhaps a video game version of *Titus Andronicus* will someday be released, the goal being to kill and cook as many Goths or as many Romans as you can. Whether that game would have enough to do with the play for critics to be able to interpret it or would be yet another post-hermeneutic, unspeakably schlocky ShaXXXspeare, however, remains to be seen.

**Works Cited**


48. The list is too long to give here, but the books include adaptations and condensations of the plays themselves, novels about Shakespeare, novels which invoke Shakespeare, introductions to Shakespeare, and biographies of Shakespeare.
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Films and Videos Cited


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