Cary DiPietro

Shakespeare in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Cultural Discourse and the Film of Tree's 'Henry VIII'

In early twentieth-century England the general recognition among dramatists and theatre practitioners that the theatre had reached a crisis or turning point – that as an institution it no longer answered the social and moral requirements of a modern industrialized society – resulted in a profusion of books and articles which addressed alternative modes of theatrical production or proposed institutional restructuring. Simultaneously with these discussions of the social utility of the theatre as an institution, a broad debate about theatrical aesthetics was continuing under the influence of new European and avant-garde movements such as symbolism and expressionism. Examining the shift from the actor-manager system in conjunction with these campaigns, Cary DiPietro here considers the recurrence of Shakespeare in the theatrical tracts of the period, variously regarded as a cultural authority at the intersection of issues of class, new modes of mechanical reproduction, aesthetic value, and old versus new modes of theatrical production. He sees the making – and the wilful destruction – of the film of Beerbohm Tree's *Henry VIII* as paradigmatic of the ways in which the period tried to distinguish popular, mass forms from what was 'authentically' artistic. Cary DiPietro currently lectures at Kyoto University, Japan.

IN 1911, the film producer William Barker persuaded the distinguished Shakespearean actor, Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, to commit several scenes from his current stage production of *Henry VIII* to film. The result, first shown in March of that year, was the most expensive and most successful Shakespeare film to be thus far endeavoured. Six weeks later, after a stipulated period, all twenty prints of the film were collected, counted, and checked by Barker, unwound into a loose pile on a large iron sheet and, on a lot outside Ealing Studios in London in front of a small gathering of spectators and the press, set alight.

The twentieth century offered history numerous examples in which this kind of public demonstration, the almost ceremonial destruction of cultural artefacts, was indicative of political turmoil or of intimidating displays by authoritarian regimes. However, this was merely a publicity stunt, Barker having warned the public to see his film before it was quite literally too late. Moreover, this was a film from the infant years of the medium. Not only were new reels appearing at a phenomenal rate, many advertising an advance in the technology of film production, but there was little sense that films which had passed through the commercial cinema system needed to be preserved or that they contributed significantly, if at all, to art.

Indeed, the sooner a film deteriorated from use or the sooner it became no longer marketable, the sooner another was required to take its place. At any rate, those who had missed the opportunity in the cinema could see Tree perform in the stage version upon which the film was based – still running at His Majesty's Theatre in London for at least a few more weeks.

As the film is completely lost, and the few accounts which remain are brief descriptions culled from the trade journals of the period, discussion of the film's significance is necessarily limited; and those film historians who do not overlook the episode entirely tend to

  DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03000241

read Barker's film of *Henry VIII* in terms of its effect upon the cost of film production and distribution in England.[1]

By 1911, American melodramas accounted for the majority of films being distributed in England, with English films accounting for roughly fifteen per cent of the market.[2] The system of distribution in which intermediary companies bought large quantities of cheap film prints to distribute to cinema houses for short runs favoured the large volume of inexpensive American imports. Certainly, the cultural authority of Shakespeare contributed to the exclusivity of Barker's film, but, as the American Vitagraph company had been consistently demonstrating since 1908, having produced ten Shakespeare films in that year alone, the murders, intrigues, and romances of Shakespeare's plays provided as many thrills as the cinematic melodrama.[3]

This type of fare was consistent with that of the English music halls whose audiences were primarily working class. These audiences were also the primary spectators of early films – films often shown in the music halls themselves, interspersed with other forms of entertainment in variety shows. For these audiences, Shakespeare provided consistently popular material, and between the years 1908 and 1913 mostly American film companies produced no less than thirty-six Shakespeare film adaptations.

The Attraction of an 'Exclusive'

What significantly differentiated Barker's film from, for example, the Vitagraph films or, for that matter, his own 1910 film version of *Hamlet*, was not so much the nature of the film itself, but the marketing apparatus and the terms of distribution which he dictated. While Barker himself remained responsible for the film's distribution in London, the rights to the provinces were granted to a single distribution company to which the film was rented, not sold. Only twenty prints were made, ten for London and ten for the provinces, all of which were called in after a limited run of six weeks. By these terms not only could the exhibitors justify higher ticket prices, but the prospect of an unprecedented limited run, in contrast to the seemingly unlimited stream of cheaply made, mass-produced Shakespeare films coming mostly from America, proved a marketing success among a public anxious to see an 'exclusive' film.[4]

After the film's release, cinema house managers reportedly turned away large disappointed crowds. At the King's Hall in Shepherd's Bush, for example: 'Hundreds had to be turned away nightly, and the general impression of those fortunate to gain admission, was that it was the finest picture ever thrown on a screen.'[5] The success of the film, however, was not unwarranted, for Barker was a savvy producer. He augmented his announcement of the limited release with an unprecedented onslaught of pre-release publicity. Moreover, he engaged the well-known Shakespearean Tree for the similarly unprecedented sum of £1,000.

When Barker produced his *Hamlet* in 1910, he used an entirely unknown cast, many of whom were not actors, and he shot the entire film in one day on location at his own private studio and grounds. Taking such expedient measures, he assured himself of a moderate financial success. When he came to produce *Henry VIII*, Barker again attempted his trademark single-day shoot, but his second Shakespeare film project was both financially and aesthetically quite different: a comparatively expensive media stunt which set him the enormous task of organizing the immense cast and production team into the day's shoot.[6]

Tree was not unaccustomed to such ambitious film projects. He had experimented with the medium before, and is credited with producing the first ever Shakespeare film, the recently discovered 1899 *King John*.[7] Tree had also recently produced a film of the opening storm scene from his stage production of *The Tempest*, intending to incorporate the sequence into the stage version to go on tour. But for *Henry VIII* Tree was engaged in what may be the earliest instance of a headlining star whose marketability was seen to ensure the success of the film.

The *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* duly noted:

That this film would be a great artistic triumph was a foregone conclusion, and the interest it will create, coupled with the great influence it will have on the uplifting movement, will, we are certain, more than come up to our anticipations.[8]

Henry VIII was made a commercially 'exclusive' film by the apparatus of distribution upon which Barker insisted, and by the high cost of production but the credibility given the film by Tree acting Shakespeare ensured that it was equally exclusive aesthetically.

An Absence of Afterthoughts

Shortly after the run of the film, the stage version of *Henry VIII*, no longer commercially lucrative, was discontinued, the sets were decommissioned, and the actors turned to new projects, the production ending as had the film when the prints were called in and destroyed. A few years later, Tree published his book *Thoughts and After-Thoughts*, a broad collection of essays written over a period of years, which together offered a defence of his own theatrical style from the kind of changes being prescribed by more modernizing practitioners.[9] While his earlier publication, *Henry VIII and His Court*, written in 1910 to coincide with his stage production, was reproduced in full, nowhere does the volume mention either the 1911 film or any of Tree's other film projects.[10]

The omission reflects the manner in which Tree apparently viewed his various film projects – perhaps as entertaining experiments, but certainly outside the scope of the art which he practised in the theatre. Even if Tree had anticipated that the film would serve as a record of his stage performance, from his perspective the entire project was primarily intended to publicize and complement the stage run rather than to pass as a filmic performance in its own right.

Accordingly, the film was advertised during its release on a pamphlet distributed to the cinema houses as 'Scenes from Shakespeare's *King Henry VIII* As Given by Sir Herbert Tree at His Majesty's Theatre'. Although the five scenes selected were performed in the correct narrative order, the film was more or less composed of vignettes from the stage version, not as a coherent self-sustaining narrative. Moreover, the primary reason Barker gave before the release for his intention to withdraw the film was to prevent it, especially should it prove unsatisfactory, detracting from the stage production or interfering with ticket sales.[11]

Barker was by now well known for his ostentatious publicity tactics, and the promise of the film's destruction perhaps elicited enough anticipation to generate a handful of witnesses at the event. Tree himself did not attend, but, in an ironic twist, the entire episode was filmed by a cameraman for the company and Tree was supposedly given a copy of this new film as a commemorative souvenir. Regardless, Tree was clearly not impressed enough to mention either the original or the commemorative film in his memoirs.

There must have been some sense of the potential for this film to preserve what had become a monumentally successful and important theatrical production, as well as the feeling expressed by A. E. Taylor in *Moving Picture World* that it was a

great triumph of the kinematographer's art. The picture is without doubt the greatest that has even [*sic*] been attempted in the country, and I am almost tempted to say in any other.[12]

Nevertheless, both Barker and Tree's final attitude towards the project suggests that they viewed the film indifferently, or at least, as insufficiently important to necessitate preserving.

Given the general lack of regard for film posterity among early twentieth-century producers and distributors, their disregard for the film's posterity is unsurprising. But why destroy the film so completely, wilfully, and systematically? To secure his financial success, Barker maintained control over and then recalled the prints of the film; but was the insistent finality of a public incineration a necessary publicity stunt, especially after he had made his fortune? One is tempted to read something more significant and revealing in this episode than merely the effect it had upon the economic relations of film production and distribution. The film of *Henry*

VIII must have represented some kind of imposing threat not just to the run of the same play in the theatre, but to the existing apparatus for the producing and marketing of Shakespeare.

'High' Art in a 'Low' Medium

Short of suggesting that the film's destruction was a deliberately political gesture, a conscious act of propaganda or protest, what I would like to explore is a specifically politicized context for reading the whole episode, the film and its destruction, as a site demonstrative of the various issues surrounding the reform of the theatre in early twentieth-century England. Indeed, what must be emphasized is how important the 1911 film of *Henry VIII* was itself, both aesthetically and economically, in relation to the early twentieth-century theatre and the theatrical production of Shakespeare.

In 1911, this was the single most successful film of Shakespeare ever projected on screen, possibly the most successful film in England to that date – successful enough to rival the popularity of Tree's stage version of the play. Michael Booth estimates with reasonable accuracy that approximately 375,000 attended the stage version over the course of the run's 254 performances, making it Tree's most successful Shakespeare production by far at His Majesty's.[13] Given the absence of any records, the film's total audience is quite impossible to estimate with any claim to accuracy. But given the capacity of newer 'picture palaces' around this time of between 1,000 and 2,000 patrons,[14] and the circulation of twenty prints over a six weeks' run, we can arrive at a cautious estimate of 200,000 – an audience for the film which would have rivalled if not exceeded most contemporary Shakespeare runs in the theatre.

More importantly, however, Barker's publicity mechanism saw what was marketed as a culturally authoritative performance disseminated to an audience unprecedentedly diverse, both socially and geographically. The newer and larger picture palaces were neither primarily bourgeois institutions like mainstream London theatres, nor working-class venues such as the music halls: they appealed to a broader and more fluid urban middle class. So Barker's film could exploit the cultural authority of Tree acting Shakespeare well beyond the more traditional reach of His Majesty's.

At the same time, the growth of broader, more democratized entertainment venues, coupled with the sheer volume of films being produced, was increasingly stigmatizing film as a 'mass' or low medium. In America, the debate about high and low art, or about the representation of high art in a low medium, surrounded Shakespearean film adaptations such as those of the Vitagraph company, and finally led in the case of Vitagraph's *Julius Caesar* to the censorship of what were considered – when taken out of the context of Shakespeare's rich language – overly graphic and unnecessarily gratuitous depictions of violence and sexuality.[15]

In England as well, while Shakespeare lent cultural authority to the film medium, silent and uncompromisingly visual compressions of the written text were seen as threatening to debase Shakespeare's art into a merely commercial commodity: 'A photograph, even a moving photograph,' argued the popular actor John Drinkwater,

> may be an interesting thing, but it cannot be an artistically significant thing because in so far as it is anything, it is a literal reproduction of a natural object deprived of those dimensional aspects that make it susceptible to an art convention of the stage.[16]

For Drinkwater, film was merely commercial spectacle. Ironically, a similar criticism often made of Tree in the theatre was that his expensive and ornate productions threatened to reduce Shakespeare to commercial spectacle. Even though he was dismissive of his different film projects, the fact of Tree's participation in early film therefore represented a significant association between large-scale, mainstream theatre and cinema. Of the English Shakespeare films produced in the early years of the twentieth century, the majority featured older actor-managers such as Tree and Frank Benson. Johnston Forbes-Robertson was sixty when he agreed to play

Hamlet in the 1913 film produced by the Gaumont company, and Benson was in his fifties when his touring company was filmed performing a number of Shakespeare productions from 1911.

This association between what was increasingly becoming an outmoded style of theatre and the growing cinema arguably provided a major impetus to theatrical reform in the period. It represented the potential for an unlimited multiplication through 'mass' media like the cinema of a specifically bourgeois style of theatrical production identified with the actor-manager school.[17]

In other words, while the industrialization and urbanization of England in the late nineteenth century, when the actor-manager system predominated, was increasingly problematizing theatrical production, the ever more lavish scale of West End-style productions necessitated an appeal to the broader and less critical tastes of a growing middle-class audience. The resulting crisis of the theatre in the early twentieth century was further heightened by the development of film technology, the emergence of a culture industry to meet the appeal of this new medium, and the subsequent reorganization of class cultures into a mass culture.

And here we find the cultural authority of Shakespeare at the very intersection of these issues of class, new modes of mechanical reproduction, aesthetic value, and the traditional theatre institution as producer of art. In this sense, we might read the entire episode in the context of cultural revolution, the violence of the film's destruction as indicative of that revolutionizing of the entire apparatus of Shakespeare production, and of the potentially volatile relationship between Shakespeare as agent in the cultural enfranchisement of modern, urbanized mass society and the traditional theatre institution as a producer of art.

Organizing the Theatre

In his 1924 publication *The Organized Theatre*, St John Ervine posed the question: how would a young Shakespeare, carrying a manuscript of *Hamlet* to a West End theatre in contemporary London, fare in attempting to make a living out of dramatic writing? Having derived the title for his book from Matthew Arnold's call in 1880 to 'organize the theatre', Ervine considered the problems which would greet a young genius in what he regarded to be an age of confusion in theatrical production.[18]

As the first and greatest obstacle, the book sketches an image of the early twentieth-century audience, the audience of the machine age: an impoverished middle class demoralized by long periods of unemployment and war; vulgar, half-asleep, empty-minded. In the theatre, Ervine argued, the aesthetic of beauty was being replaced by a horrible contagion of commonness, a contagion which

> spreads itself over a modern community until at last people are so accustomed to ugly things that they are incapable of realizing that they are ugly at all – are even capable of believing them to be beautiful.[19]

Ervine saw the modern English drama as typified by commonness, vulgarity, and the comic light fare of the music hall, and subject to the prescriptive tastes of an undiscerning urban middle-class audience. This environment was not at all conducive to the creation of a dramatic exemplar like *Hamlet*. In contrast to popular comedies calculated for the tastes of a culturally impoverished audience, great tragedy of the kind produced by a figure like Shakespeare was seen to be the expression of individual genius:

> A man of genius is at once a sign of his own greatness, and a sign of his nation's greatness: he is the expression both of a unique personality and of a noble race.[20]

Such genius represented the history of progress – 'the history of the heart-rending attempts made by determined individuals to overcome the sloth and opposition of multitudes obstinately resolved not to have any progress at all'.[21] Thus, the question Ervine posed was how to reorganize the theatre so that, should a young dramatist with a genius equivalent to Shakespeare's come to London to begin a career in the theatre, he would find conditions equivalent

to those which allowed the kind of success Shakespeare had with such tragedies as *Hamlet* on the Elizabethan stage.

Among the numerous books and articles written in the early twentieth century which advanced theories of theatre aesthetics or which addressed the institutional organization of the theatre, Ervine's 1924 contribution was far from the most influential tract; and yet *The Organized Theatre*, with its reference to Arnoldian cultural reform, was a characteristic expression within that large body of writing. Ervine's elevation of Shakespeare to cultural and, more specifically, national and racial emblem, the cult of masculinity he seemed to advocate, and, most significantly, his characteristically politicized rhetoric about the need for a radical response to middle-class culture – all of these traits exemplified the period's broad debate about theatrical reform.

The nature, quality, and legitimacy of dramatic art and specifically theatrical art (the drama as produced in the theatre) was a central preoccupation of theatre practitioners, as demonstrated by the volume of discourse on the subject. The need to define such a category, either within the terms of theatre art for theatre art's sake or within the terms of the theatre's potential for social enlightenment and education, became more necessary in what was unanimously agreed to be a period of epochal change, of unprecedented societal transformation. Ervine's argument was thus a typical example of an attempt to rationalize the theatre as institution by invoking the art of the theatre, an art best epitomized by Shakespeare.

The Discourse on Theatrical Art

This idealization of Shakespeare as the exemplary symbol of genius and creativity in the English theatre was hardly unique to the twentieth century. But Shakespeare as a cultural exemplar who could unite a disenfranchised public under the aegis of nationhood, his individual genius and eternal value set against the image of a nation battling an effeminating loss of identity, is a theme which recurs insistently throughout a number of texts about theatrical practice written in early twentieth-century England – a body of texts which, chronologically, charts the aesthetic and institutional transformation of theatrical practice in this period from the actor-manager system predominant in the nineteenth century to the state-subsidized national and repertory theatres established later in the twentieth.[22]

Beginning around the time of Arnold's call in 1880 to organize the theatre, the numerous texts written by actors, producers, and critics which addressed aesthetic and institutional reform constituted one long, sustained, and unrequited plea, unanswered until the passing of the National Theatre Act in 1948. Occurring at the midpoint, Ervine's *The Organized Theatre* straddled the two categories of noticeably different kinds of writing on the subject: on the aesthetic debate, the kind of exposition which declared the art of the theatre through support for various aesthetic movements; and on the more pragmatic question of the theatre's organization – that which proposed institutional reform, usually through advocacy of a national or repertory scheme. These two approaches were, however, seldom entirely distinct: the art of the theatre required a certain kind of institution, usually a state-funded repertory theatre, while those who advocated such an institution also advocated certain kinds of drama and certain dramatists to be produced – the new art of the theatre.

Indeed, taking into consideration aesthetic differences and personal rivalries – perhaps most significant among them being the supporters of the naturalist and symbolist movements, as represented respectively by the antagonistic George Bernard Shaw and Edward Gordon Craig – what these differing theatrical movements shared was an ideological opposition to bourgeois capitalism and to the money-making actor-manager system, which united their pleas under the banner of comprehensive theatrical reform, upon the general principles of which most were agreed.

Most prominent in this discourse were William Archer and Harley Granville Barker,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03000241 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who endorsed the petition for a privately endowed repertory system in London as well as for state endowment of a National Theatre. While more local campaigns for repertory theatre in the provinces looked to the experiments of the Vedrenne–Barker Court seasons in London, the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre committee was also of considerable prominence. This combined the efforts of the London-based committee to establish a memorial monument to Shakespeare with the governing directors of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford who sought to establish a permanent, resident Shakespeare company in the town.[23]

So, despite their diversity, where these various aesthetic and institutional campaigns converged was in their attempt to regulate the production and reception of drama in the theatre by coding and institutionalizing an autonomous theatrical art, to counter the threat posed by what were perceived to be the prescriptive tastes of an emerging audience for mass culture. Commercial entertainment, either as represented by the large-scale theatres established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for bourgeois audiences, the working-class music-hall venues, or the now well-established cinema houses, necessitated the legitimation of dramatic art as aesthetically exclusive and institutionally legitimate.

As the calls for the reformation of theatrical practice in the early twentieth century became more insistent, the style of expensive and grand productions of Shakespeare, such as those of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree at Her (later His) Majesty's Theatre around the turn of the century, were regarded as being primarily commercially motivated. For the various proponents of theatrical reform, the actor-manager system represented theatrical production on a grand scale which not only was no longer viable, but more importantly, was not considered art.

Even before Tree's film of *Henry VIII* in 1911, Craig was criticizing the pageantry and spectacle of the degraded money-making theatre –

> the coloured Christmas card culture which in the teeth of common sense and conventional good taste displays its impertinence night after night, year after year upon our English stage and claims the right to be held as artistic.[24]

Attitudes to Mechanical Reproduction

If the burning of Tree's film in 1911 reflected on one level an emerging conflict between the commercial enterprise of marketing Shakespeare and a notion of Shakespeare as theatrical art, by 1924 this conflict had expanded into a rhetorically complex debate. Tree by then had been dead for seven years, but his lavish productions of Shakespeare, along with those of Henry Irving, still persisted in the public imagination as the most ornate and grandly histrionic productions of the contemporary stage.

Tree was famous for the sheer scale of his theatrical productions, with their meticulously decorated and historically researched settings and immense supporting casts of supernumeraries. His attempt to recreate the Renaissance in his stage production of *Henry VIII*, for example, required 380 expensive and ornate costumes for a cast of 172 actors. The pageantry and spectacle included, in one reviewer's opinion, 'kaleidoscopic tableaux such as have never been seen on any stage' (*Manchester Courier*, 2 September 1910).[25]

Tree's contemporary actor-managers such as Johnston Forbes-Robertson and Frank Benson could not parallel the scale on which Tree produced Shakespeare; indeed, his version of Shakespeare was so unapologetically grand and commercial that few producers could afford to follow that avenue successfully. For those who campaigned variously for the reform of the theatre, Tree's Shakespeare productions epitomized an outmoded histrionic style of acting largely descended from Victorian melodrama, while the unmitigated commercialism of his ventures was seen to accommodate the predominantly bourgeois tastes of his audience.[26] Actor-managers such as Tree were seen to have reduced Shakespeare to the level of expensive spectacle and pageantry, sacrificing integrity to the 'profit-seeking stage'.[27]

In his argument for the repertory system, P. P. Howe summarized the problem of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03000241 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Two of the 'kaleidoscopic tableaux' staged by Tree for the stage production of *Henry VIII*. Top: Buckingham's departure. Bottom: the Coronation scene.

treating the theatre as a trade to be exploited to the greatest possible profit:

> Everything tends to filter down to the level of the readiest possible popular acceptability. In other words, in the economics of the theatre it is the man in the street who is the residual claimant.[28]

For Howe, the phraseology of 'the man in the street' served to characterize a largely unintelligent and undiscerning growing mass public audience; and for the majority of theatrical reformers, this mass public audience was symptomatic of what was, as early

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03000241 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as Barker's 1911 film of *Henry VIII*, the firmly established cinema culture. Thus, where the reformers continued to promote the traditional antithesis between the theatre and working-class entertainments such as the music hall, the cinema threatened to absorb those social distinctions into a single mass commercial audience, as represented by 'the man in the street'. T. S. Eliot, in one of his brief forays into social criticism for the American *Dial* magazine, neatly summarized the problem in England:

> If it rejects with contumely the independent man, the free man, all the individuals who do not conform to a world of mass-production, the middle class finds itself on one side more and more approaching identity with what used to be called the lower class. . . . In other words, there will soon be only one class, and the second Flood is here.[29]

The emergence of film technology, followed by the rapid commercialization of this technology in the cinema system in the early twentieth century, initiated for the theatrical environment the same type of anxiety and ideological contestation which the introduction and commercialization of photography had earlier imposed upon the visual arts.

As early as 1916, Antonio Gramsci was able to recognize and manipulate this growing anxiety about the threat of the cinema in his criticism of theatrical practice in Italy. Admonishing the theatre for trying to produce the same effects as cinema, Gramsci, well ahead of his time, denounced the purely visual function of the film: 'It is silent; in other words it reduces the role of the artists to movement alone, to being machines without souls'.[30] For Gramsci, the film, lacking human content, was incapable of conveying the psychological truth, creative imagination, and passion of genuine art.

Authenticity and Uniqueness

By 1936, Walter Benjamin was able to articulate more clearly this apparently antagonistic relationship between a work of genuine art and what was mechanically reproduced. Benjamin ascribed to the genuine art object an aura of authenticity: an aura of human creativity, genius, eternal value, and mystery; a unique existence which withered when a plurality of identical copies are substituted.[31] Although written twelve years after Ervine's book, and outside England, this arguably reflects a corresponding fear among theatrical producers of the impact of film technology upon theatrical art.

Concentrating his argument on photography, Benjamin opposed the mechanically reproduced artefact to a notion of the authentic or the genuine artefact, defined by an actual presence in time and space – a 'unique existence at the place where it happens to be'.[32] In contrast, the mechanically reproduced artwork represented the potential for a limitless multiplication of the genuine artefact, a multiplication which was seen to jeopardize the authority, or more correctly the 'aura', that inhered within the genuine art object.

The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction thus became the work of art designed for reproducibility – for multiplication into the greatest possible number of copies. In the age of mechanical reproduction, art was therefore seen to be preconditioned by the mass audience response it would produce, and was, consequently, subject to the tastes and desires of an uncritical public.[33]

Of course, in the English theatrical environment of 1924, the language of Marxist aesthetic theory had not yet been fully or completely articulated.[34] While many of those who campaigned for reform were members of socialist groups like the Fabians or retained associations with private literary and dramatic societies, in their critique of the commercial system of theatrical production they lacked a developed theorized vocabulary to articulate effectively what they perceived as the threat posed by a massified, industrialized society; still, the threat of the mass predominated the images and language used to describe the audiences of the commercial theatre. Whether in visions of industrialized society or hypostasized as a mindless public audience, the threat of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03000241 Published online by Cambridge University Press

From the stage production of *Henry VIII*. Left to right: Tree as Wolsey, Arthur Bourchier as the King, and Violet Vanbrugh as Queen Catherine.

mass was equated with the levelling of social distinction, the sublimation of the individual and the genuine into an indistinct 'man in the street'.

In his collection of essays *The Foundations of a National Drama*, the dramatist Henry Arthur Jones thus qualified the 'humanizing' force of dramatic art against the threat of an endlessly multiplied image of the urban middle class: 'millions of our citizens living sedentary, monotonous lives in their little, square, drab, brick boxes'.[35] In architecture as in the theatre, Jones held that the aesthetic of beauty had been degraded by persistent repetition and replaced by a hollow, lifeless form. In his characteristic image of monotonous suburban life, the individual was endlessly multiplied into the mass, characterized as mechanical, imitative, and lacking in thought, texture, and life. Like the photograph, the 'man in the street' was held up as a representative of the endlessly multiplying and therefore threatening mindless urban middle class.

In his analysis of the English stage at the turn of the century, Mario Borsa also provided a characteristically modern vision of London,

> where the life of the streets, with all its phases and episodes, melts, as it were, and merges into one single, immense, confused, tiresome roar. . . . The crowd is so characterless and inscrutable.[36]

The tiresome roar is the anathema which echoes in the various hypostasized images of threat posed by the unintelligent and undiscerning audience for mass culture.

Those authors who, like Jones and Borsa, criticized the theatre using such terminology variously submerged the threat posed by a mass culture within different class associations, either criticizing the effete and imitative bourgeoisie, the impoverished middle class, or the 'lower instincts' of a working-class audience seeking pleasure.[37] Regardless, the 'mass' associations remained the same: undiscerning, unintelligent, and in need of guidance.

A National Theatre: Scheme and Estimates – the treatise jointly authored in 1907 by William Archer and Harley Granville Barker – similarly expressed a fear of the growing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03000241 Published online by Cambridge University Press

predominance of the mass culture audience in the theatre; and their scheme for a national repertory system employed a characteristically Fabian rhetoric to describe the effect upon theatrical art of the commercial system. The Fabian Society, among whose members the names of Shaw and Barker were prominent, supported a mass democratic base of art institutions; but their aim, ostensibly to facilitate social levelling, was in reality to infuse mass culture with the precepts of traditional high art.[38]

Disparaging the entrepreneurial commercialism of the theatre, Archer and Barker's scheme thus characterized the theatre as degraded by the social and economic relations of capitalism. In a preface to the scheme, Granville Barker insisted that it 'is essential to break away, completely and unequivocally, from the profit-seeking stage'.[39] In a similar vein, the poet and dramatist John Drinkwater warned that: 'All arts are in constant danger of becoming commercialized, and none more so than that of the theatre.'[40] In both cases, the exigencies of commercialism were seen to represent the greatest threat to the production of theatrical art: like the photograph, drama produced for the commercial theatre was drama produced for the reproducibility of the long-run system.

While these various theatrical discourses sought to define the crisis in theatrical production against the character of the commercial mass market, the notion of a dramatic art transcending its conditions of production and reception – the 'exigencies of the theatrical system'[41] and 'the limitations of its audience'[42] – was particularly problematic for the theatre. While popular art forms or entertainments such as the cinema (popular in the sense of having a wide appeal) were seen to be dictated by the tastes and frivolities of an undiscerning public, the drama, in so far as it was also produced for public performance and therefore depended upon a certain degree of popularity for success, could not easily escape commercial exigencies. As Howe reminded his readers, the theatre was ultimately a trade, and therefore 'must shape its policy in accordance with the general dictates of supply and demand'.[43]

Different Senses of the 'Popular'

For Archer and Barker, and those others who argued in favour of a nationally institutionalized repertory theatre, the solution to the problem of commercial theatre could be found on the continent in the examples of successful and, most importantly, 'popular' repertory theatres. Granville Barker had visited both the Deutsches Theater in Berlin and the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, and he greatly admired the work of producers such as Max Reinhardt. In the case of a National Theatre for England, he believed that it should be unmistakably a 'popular institution, making a large appeal to the whole community'.[44]

In the context of this argument, the notion of 'popular' theatrical art implied neither commercial motivation nor catering to the populist tastes of an undiscerning mass audience, but rather the more continental sense of 'popular' as a representative and organic, community-centred culture. The establishment of a truly national theatre would transcend the commercial system of theatrical production, offering instead a theatre institution that was popular in the sense of being representative of the people.

For Granville Barker, the mere promise of such an institution was already 'completing the belated conversion of the average public man from his steadfast belief that the Drama is nothing more than a twentieth-century substitute for cock-fighting'.[45] If there is a suggestion of elitism in his idea of theatre as public property, in his later revision of the scheme after Archer's death Barker provided a much clearer definition of what such non-commercial 'popularity' really implied: a National Theatre 'must appeal to all sorts of people and to every sort of taste – except bad taste'.[46]

Not unlike his Fabian contemporaries, Barker's socialism was decidedly idiosyncratic in its interpretation of the popular. In the scheme for a theatre which would be national, representative, and popular, a privileged place was reserved for the dramatist and for the class of intellectuals who would ensure the intelligence of the fare provided.

What Barker defined as popular, representative drama would in fact be limited and controlled by the proposed national theatre, an institution free from the strictures of commercial success and governed by an 'imaginative minority' who would take upon themselves the representation of the silent majority.[47]

The inherent elitism of the scheme was also reflected in Barker's plea for private patronage and the degree to which the plan vested the governing authority over the theatre in the nation's academic institutions. Most importantly, however, the undemocratic organization of the theatre was best exemplified in the scheme by the figure of the director with full executive power, 'who should have absolute control of everything in and about the theatre'.[48] Archer and Barker's scheme, rather than emancipating a 'popular' or representative aesthetic of drama from the limitations of an otherwise popular commercial theatre, or striving to represent a national ethos, instead invested authority in the leisured middle-class elite typical of the Fabian Society.

For the dramatists, producers, and critics who advocated schemes for a national or repertory theatre, the threat posed by a homogeneous mass culture and the emergent forms of mass media would be answered by the state institutionalization of dramatic art. The primary objective of a National Theatre would be to elevate the drama above popular amusements according to certain artistic principles. As William Archer argued:

> The acted drama of the English language ought to rank high among the intellectual glories, and among the instruments of culture, of the nation, or rather of the race.[49]

Archer here provided the appropriate language to characterize the movement: institutionalizing dramatic art, transforming the theatre into an instrument of culture, would provide a means of superintending the production and reception of drama, prescribing the ideal dramatic standard. State recognition would authorize dramatic art as national and representative, as a public social service. Similarly, Jones argued that,

> if we wish to inflame these millions and millions of city dwellers with enthusiasm for great national ideas . . . what instrument could be so swiftly and surely operative to these ends as a wisely conceived, wisely regulated, and wisely encouraged national drama?[50]

An Aura of Artistic Authenticity

The motive of the national repertory theatre as envisioned by Archer and Barker in their scheme, as well as by Jones and Howe, was 'the motive of securing a consecutive interest for intelligent people'.[51] This required that the intelligent drama be invested with an aura of artistic authenticity:

> The first demand of this theatre is that its plays be judged as art as distinguished from entertainment. All the plays of the free theatre have been marked by genuineness of substance and an artistic intent in composition.[52]

Thus, for the advocates of a National Theatre, the disorder and chaos of cultural and class dissolution would be answered by the integration of the mass culture into a national culture ordered and legitimated within state-sponsored national institutions such as the proposed theatre. This, in turn, necessitated an emphasis upon the cultural and racial superiority, the creativity and genius, of national dramatists like Shakespeare.

As probably the most successful actor-manager of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Tree himself was not ignorant of the debate around him, and he was also able to identify the sea-change which the world was undergoing in the terms of class and industrialization used by his younger contemporaries:

> The old landmarks are being swept away, the barbed-wire fences which separated the classes are being relegated to the limbo of the human scrap-heap. . . . Wherever we put our ears to the ground we hear a tiny tapping at the earth's crust; it is the upspringing of a new social creed; it is the call of a new religion; it is the intellectual enfranchisement of mankind.[53]

Defending himself from the charges made against the commercially successful metropolitan managers of pandering to public

taste, Tree was quick to note the intellectual snobberies of his adversaries, proclaiming himself reluctant to stamp the great mass of English theatregoers as ignorant fools.[54] For Tree, the popular representation of Shakespeare was justified by the wide appeal it made:

> Thousands witness him instead of hundreds. . . . Indeed, there should be more joy over ninety-nine Philistines that are gained than over one elect that is preserved.[55]

In his way, Tree saw his commercial success not only as justifiable, but as a modernizing agent in the intellectual enfranchisement of the lower classes. So even Tree was aware, as early as the publication of *Thoughts and After-Thoughts* in 1915, of an ideological confrontation between the mainstream commercial theatre and the reform movement. He refused, however, to idealize his own sense of dramatic art as authentic and genuine by setting it against the unfolding menace of a spiritless modern industrialized society.

Indeed, one might reasonably argue that Tree, through his forays into film, was more progressive and pioneering than his younger contemporaries. Although they reacted to the growing commercialization of the arts under the influence of a predominating mass culture in the modernized society of the early twentieth century, what their calls for state endowment or for privately sponsored repertory systems, as well as the various demands for aesthetic ideologies, ultimately reinscribed were primarily romantic and, as Benjamin argued, outmoded concepts such as creativity, genius, eternal value, and mystery – 'concepts whose uncontrolled (and at present almost uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense'.[56]

I would be cautious to suggest this kind of causal association with fascism. None the less, many of these characteristics written through this body of texts about theatrical practice in early twentieth-century England – the rhetoric of nationalism, the demand for an elite leadership, the predilection for tragedy and violence, and the emphasis upon genius – might seem to infer some deeper, darker anxiety underneath the idealism of these writers.

Perhaps, then, that is the anxiety which is reflected in the burning of the 1911 film of *Henry VIII*. The suggestion of a ritualistic and violent public display notwithstanding, the incineration neatly symbolized the convergence of several issues being 'hotly' contested in the English theatre of the period: the actor-manager system; the relatively new and increasingly popular technology of film production; the popularity and accessibility of Shakespeare in performance; the changing class associations of Shakespeare's audience – indeed, the entire apparatus of producing and marketing Shakespeare.

On one level, the destruction of Tree's film was a harmless publicity stunt, remembered as one of the film industry's early curiosities. However, read within the context of the emerging debate about the commercial enterprise of marketing Shakespeare and the early twentieth-century rhetoric about the art of the theatre, the burning of Tree's film becomes a far more significant, almost prophetic symbol of the paradigmatic sea-change which was engulfing the theatrical world of the time.

Notes and References

1. See, for example, Robert Hamilton Ball, 'The Shakespeare Film as Record: Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, III (1952), p. 227–36; Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks: the Prehistory and Early Years of Cinema in Britain* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 200–1; and John Collick, *Shakespeare, Cinema, and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 41–2. Given the obscurity of primary sources, I am indebted to secondary sources, and particularly to primary source material reproduced in Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: a Strange Eventful History* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968).
2. Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, p. 74.
3. William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: the Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 69.
4. Chanan, in *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 200, discusses the degree to which the 'exclusive' release and distribution of Barker's film increased its commodity value in the face of American industry dominance.
5. From *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, cited in Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, p. 81.
6. Cited in Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, p. 79.
7. Described in Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: a Century of Film and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 1–3.

8. Cited in Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, p. 79.

9. Herbert Beerbohm Tree, *Thoughts and After-Thoughts* (London: Cassell, 1915).

10. Herbert Beerbohm Tree, *Henry VIII and His Court* (London: Cassell, 1910).

11. Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, p. 78.

12. Cited in Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, p. 231.

13. Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850–1910* (London: Routledge, 1981).

14. Rachel Low, *The History of the British Film 1906–1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1949), p. 17.

15. On the censorship of Vitagraph's 1908 *Julius Caesar*, see Uricchio and Pearson, *Reframing Culture*, p. 65–95.

16. John Drinkwater, *The Gentle Art of Theatre-Going* (London: Robert Holden, 1927), p. 114.

17. The terms 'mass' and 'mass culture', as used here and throughout, rather than suggesting a specific class association, denote the reorganization of class relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, precipitated by the increased urbanization, industrialization, and democratization of English society and the attendant effects upon the production and reception of culture: 'Mass culture is not the expression of some pre-existing social group known as "the masses"; it is, rather, the sum of the conditions that *produce* the historically unprecedented phenomenon of massification and that reorganize the relations of different class cultures as they had developed during the nineteenth century.' See Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare Among the Moderns* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 54.

18. Cited in William Archer and Harley Granville Barker, *A National Theatre: Scheme and Estimates* (London: Duckworth, 1907).

19. St John Ervine, *The Organized Theatre: a Plea in Civics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1924), p. 57.

20. Ibid., p. 47.

21. Ibid., p. 13.

22. A comprehensive bibliography would be impracticable within my present scope, but beyond the numerous books and articles produced by those cited, I would refer the reader to Huntley Carter, *The New Spirit in the European Theatre 1914–1924: a Comprehensive Study of the Changes Effected by the War and Revolution* (London: Ernest Benn, 1925); Theodore Komisarjevsky, *Myself and the Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1929), and *The Theatre and a Changing Civilization* (London: Bodley Head, 1935); and G. Wilson Knight, *Principles of Shakespearian Production: with Especial Reference to the Tragedies* (London: Faber, 1936).

23. On the early history of the SMT in Stratford, see Sally Beauman, *The Royal Shakespeare Company: a History of Ten Decades* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), particularly p. 68–92.

24. Edward Gordon Craig, 'A National Theatre, Its Advantages and Disadvantages: an International Symposium', *The Mask*, II (July 1909), p. 81–9 (p. 86–7).

25. As cited in Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, p. 154.

26. Collick, *Shakespeare, Cinema, and Society*, p. 12–32, traces the history of the Victorian melodramatic tradition through to Tree's performance in Barker's film.

27. Archer and Barker, *A National Theatre* (1907), p. xviii.

28. P. P. Howe, *The Repertory Theatre: a Record and a Criticism* (London: Martin Secker, 1910), p. 24.

29. T. S. Eliot, 'London Letter', *Dial*, LXX, No. 4 (April 1921), p. 448–53 (p. 451).

30. Antonio Gramsci, 'Theatre and Cinema' [1916], in *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), p. 54–6 (p. 55).

31. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [1936], in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 211–44 (p. 212–15).

32. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 214.

33. Ibid., p. 218. Ultimately, Benjamin's argument was not strictly critical of mechanical reproduction, but was rather more dialectical, both evoking a nostalgia for a romantic category of art while denying the possibility of such a category in a proletarianized or massified society. Benjamin was a socialist greatly influenced by Marx's socio-economic theory, and the implication of his argument is a critique of capitalism: that under capitalist conditions of production, the art artefact was being reduced to an endlessly reproducible and therefore commodified mass culture product.

34. Raymond Williams, in *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), supports this claim by suggesting that the Marxist interpretation of culture did not become effective in England until the 1930s (p. 258).

35. Henry Arthur Jones, *The Foundations of a National Drama: a Collection of Lectures, Essays, and Speeches Delivered and Written in the Years 1896–1912* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1913), p. 6.

36. Mario Borsa, *The English Stage of Today*, trans. Selwyn Brinton (London: John Lane, 1908), p. 3.

37. See William Archer, 'The Case for National Theatres', in Archer and Barker, *A National Theatre* (1907), p. 172–6 (p. 173).

38. With regard to the Fabian critique of culture, see Ian Britain, *Fabianism and Culture: a Study in British Socialism and the Arts c. 1884–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

39. *A National Theatre* (1907), p. xviii.

40. *The Gentle Art of Theatre-Going*, p. 20.

41. Howe, *The Repertory Theatre*, p. 22.

42. Gilbert Cannan, *The Joy of the Theatre* (London: Batsford, 1913), p. 17.

43. *The Repertory Theatre*, p. 18.

44. *A National Theatre* (1907), p. xviii.

45. Harley Granville Barker, 'Two German Theatres', *Fortnightly Review*, LXXXIX (1911), p. 60–70 (p. 61).

46. Harley Granville Barker, *A National Theatre* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1938), p. 27.

47. Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 83.

48. Archer and Barker, *A National Theatre* (1907), p. 12.

49. Archer, 'The Case for National Theatres', p. 172.

50. Jones, *The Foundations of a National Drama*, p. 4.

51. Howe, *The Repertory Theatre*, p. 25.

52. Thomas H. Dickinson, *The Contemporary Drama of England* (London: John Murray, 1920), p. 206.

53. *Thoughts and After-Thoughts*, p. 4.

54. Ibid., p. 46–7.

55. Ibid., p. 49.

56. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 212.