

The Propaganda Imperative:
Challenging Mass Media
Representations in
McKellen's *Richard III*

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"It's very exciting. It's very funny. It's very sexy. It's very violent. The audience I know will love it." (Ian McKellen, interview, www.r3.org/mckellen/fil/mckella.htm/.)

Forty years after Laurence Olivier's touchstone film adaptation of *Richard III*, a film that places Shakespeare's drama into the world of Britain's mythological history, Ian McKellen's 1995 *Richard III* puts Shakespeare back into a political context, albeit not its own. McKellen's film does not attempt to out-Shakespeare Olivier or even out-Olivier Olivier; instead, it challenges the very assumptions that guide Olivier's project. Operating under the Western assumption that Shakespeare was the best that literature had to offer, Olivier wanted to perform accurately a modernist reading of *Richard III*. Olivier

sought to extend Shakespeare's cultural capital to include his film adaptation, in a sense, to canonize himself. Conversely, McKellen's film explicitly interrogates this notion of canonicity as developed by Olivier's 1955 film by ignoring the modern conventions that Olivier employed and by representing Shakespeare's play as what *Time* reviewer Richard Corliss calls "all movie."¹ While McKellen's Richard may very well be "all movie" (in other words, appealing to a mass audience), it intertwines a layer of sophistication that both explores and dismantles the very appeal that it relies on to sell tickets. McKellen's film cultivates a climate of self-reflexive ambiguity, both criticizing politicized forms of mass media while fully exploiting its own sub-genre of mass media: film.²

In accordance with the precept of cultural materialism, my examination of McKellen's *Richard III* stresses the tension created between the implicit "high culture" quality that Shakespeare's name carries and the "low culture," or a better term, "mass culture," element that necessitates the survival of films and the motion picture industry. Corresponding to the latter, this essay is grounded in the fact that the film industry does not promote a free-floating of ideas. Instead, films are cultural products that reflect the views of subjects, in this case the directors while actors, in turn, respond to and replicate their ideologies.

The concept of ideology needs some clarification. Wrestling with the issue of whether ideology refers to the world of ideas and abstractions or whether it concerns empirical reality Louis Althusser suggests that "[i]deology interpellates individuals as subjects."³ This act of the subject both shaping and responding to ideology Althusser calls "interpellation." By acknowledging ideology, the subject attests to its "Truth":

It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are "obviousnesses") obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the "still, small voice of conscience"): 'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!' (Althusser 1986, 245)

So, ideology and the subject are concomitantly locked in a codependent relationship; ideology validates the subject as the subject validates ideology. I use the term "dominant ideology" to point out the overarching set of assumptions that I make about the culture from which McKellen's *Richard III* was produced, specifically a culture of capitalism in which McKellen's major aim was to use "Shakespeare" and common thematic and visual film tropes to sell tickets.

At the other side of this culture of capitalism, vis-à-vis the production end, stands the consumption end: film audiences. I use the term "mass culture" to designate these subjects of the dominant ideology. In a chapter enti-

tled "That Shakespearean Mob," from his book, *Shakespeare Among the Moderns*, Richard Halpern discusses mass culture as it relates to the commodification of Shakespeare. In the chapter Halpern, drawing from the insights of Jürgen Habermas, defines a "mass-cultural public" as a public that "passively consumes rather than critically debates its literature and art" (1997, 71). Halpern points out the distinction that Habermas makes between a "mass-cultural public" and a "culture-debating public."⁴ However, Halpern refines his definition of a mass cultural public in talking about "cynical reason." According to Halpern, a more accurate understanding of mass culture consists not in setting a mass-cultural public and a culture-debating public in opposition, but in realizing that the two overlap.⁵

Cynical reason "sublates," in a mock-Hegelian way, Habermas's distinction between a culture-debating and a culture-consuming public. It produces a public of consumers who see through the false claims of advertising but continue to buy and use its products—who aren't fooled by the sham rhetoric of politicians but vote anyway or retreat into a grumbling but submissive apathy. . . . Mass culture is neither more nor less critical than high culture; it does not eliminate but simply neutralizes criticism, while the system learns to subsist and reproduce itself on the basis of its cynical by-products. (Halpern 1997, 106)

My use of the term, "mass culture" most closely follows Halpern's revised definition. I relate the term to film consumers, ticket buyers. However, I intend the term to be understood not in terms of an ignorant mass, but a mass that critiques and debates as well as consumes its entertainment.

Halpern brings to light an interesting idea in casting mass culture and high culture in a dialectic: namely, that even when high culture imagines itself to be outside the parameters of mass culture or low culture, it still participates in those cultural forms. Or to put it in Althusserian ideological terms, even high cultural subjects must necessarily participate with or interpellate the mass cultural or ideological contexts in which they exist. This Althusserian concept of ideology as inescapable exposes the "sham rhetoric" of a clear dichotomy between high culture and low culture, rendering each participants in and manifestations of capitalist ideology. These divisions between high culture and low culture are for the most part imagined both by cultural producers and cultural consumers, for our purposes filmmakers and film audiences. Ironically, the interaction between film producers and film consumers breaks down the imagined dichotomy between high and low culture as film renders even high culture a commodity for purchase by the masses. Such is the case with the way that *Richard III* entered the post-WWII American and British imagination via film.

After his film adaptations of *Henry V* (1944) and *Hamlet* (1948), Laurence Olivier became a brand name and established his cultural capital in the post-war film market.⁶ He used this capital to contribute to the Shakespearean film tradition. More specifically, Olivier's fame presented him with a unique opportunity to render a lasting impression of the way in which *Richard III* should be adapted on a smaller scale and how Richard should be played on a larger scale, an opportunity on which he capitalized. Olivier's *Richard III* made an impression so distinct that any other filmic adaptation of the play would be rendered part of a larger cinematic tradition; in other words, Olivier's success with *Richard III* established the film as a cultural barometer by which all other adaptations must be measured.

Olivier's film understood itself as a form of high art, an extension of British literary supremacy.⁷ Olivier used the genre of film to capture his patented theatrical Richard, in a sense, to canonize himself. Olivier the actor was the authority, performing to instruct a less sophisticated film—and television—audience about Shakespeare's greatness; hence, the authentic setting, period-dress, and relatively strict adherence to Shakespeare's language. I propose that Olivier's interpretation was governed by modernist tendencies, or more specifically, modernist views of the Renaissance. Richard Halpern elucidates this idea:

The modernist view of the Renaissance . . . was of an organic and agrarian society undergoing an accelerated transition to modernity. . . . To put it bluntly, modernism constructed the English Renaissance as an allegory for the colonial encounter itself; the period's catastrophic experience of modernity and the disintegration of its organic and ritualized culture offered an historically displaced and geographically internalized image of the effects of contemporary imperialist penetration into indigenous third-world societies. (Halpern 1997, 26–27)

According to Halpern, the canonical validity given to Shakespeare and Milton (among others) during the modern period mirrored the validity claimed by Britain to rationalize its colonization of “underdeveloped” countries.⁸ Halpern writes that, “modernism influenced Shakespearean performance as powerfully and persistently as it did Shakespeare criticism, and the two develop in a meaningful if uneven tandem.” Further, the unquestioned greatness of Shakespeare was perpetuated by modernist ideology that stressed “Shakespeare's institutional base in universities” and “the intrinsic intellectual power of modernist reading of Shakespeare,” as it “responded to a novel set of social, cultural, economic, and political developments” (Halpern 1997, 2). These factors combined to solidify Shakespeare's canonical status, to reinterpret Renaissance popular culture as that “for all time.” This canonized, aesthetic understanding seems very much in line with Olivier's project. Olivier's

film protested its involvement with history and asserted itself as belonging to British legend. Olivier's film was a Richard for art's sake.

However, despite Olivier's attempts in his 1955 *Richard III* to present Shakespeare as *ars gratia artis*, there is a cultural aspect of the film that cannot be ignored. Debuting more than a decade after the end of WWII, Olivier's film is importantly situated in history. Richard's shadow is paralleled by the shadow that World War II cast over Europe and the United States. For Britain, the war and postwar years were a time of reconstructing British national identity. A decade before *Richard III*, Britain's involvement in the war and its growing awareness of its waning empire in part provoked the production of Olivier's *Henry V* (1944). Raymond Durnat notes the parallelism between the action of the film and world history:

Henry V invades France as Eisenhower was about to invade Festung Europa. Then Henry V marries a French Princess in a "United Europe" spirit, although whether France here = France our ally, to whom Churchill had in 1940 impulsively proposed "marriage," or Germany our enemy whom we musn't (sic.) hate for ever, is quite ambiguous. (Durnat 1971, 109)

Henry V gave Britain back its identity as a dominant political nation, an identity that was called into question both during the war as the United States and Germany assumed the dominant political roles and two years later when Britain needed to borrow \$3.75 billion from the U.S. and \$1.25 billion from Canada to cover its losses from the war.⁹ Durnat adds that the film "isn't about the historical Henry V, or even about Shakespeare's idea of Henry V. It's about the Demi-Paradise, Britain as happy home of poets and warriors alike" (Durnat 1971, 110).¹⁰

Other critics understand *Henry V* as a film that tries to reconstruct British national identity through "high culture"; since Britain no longer held the political power that it once had, at least it still had its literary and cultural reputation. Shakespeare was the embodiment of Britain's cultural elitism. Sarah Street elucidates Britain's exploitation of its literary reputation during wartime:

The Second World War was an exciting period for creative adaptation when British film production was galvanized by propaganda imperative. Britain's literary and theatrical heritage was an obvious source for scripts which communicated particular notions of nationhood: that which must be defended was articulated in high-cultural terms. (Street 1997, 116)

In other words, adaptations of British high cultural works did not have to compete with other films for box-office dollars; their cultural legacy differentiated them from common films and made them more eligible for prestige from the expert critics rather than collecting money from the masses. The ethos that guides Olivier's *Henry V* is the very same ethos that drives his

Richard III: in an attempt to recapture British cultural supremacy, Olivier cashes in on England's cultural cash crop—Shakespeare—by selling it on the high culture market.

In contrast to its predecessor, McKellen's film questions the notion of "tradition," perhaps even understanding the concept as a way of brainwashing the masses. Olivier's *Richard* is an art film, an attempt to extend British national culture's literary dominance onto the new genre of film. In its own way, Olivier's project is a form of manipulating mass culture—it takes solace in the fact that Shakespeare's artistic superiority translates into the film's artistic superiority. McKellen abandons this aestheticism, this "myth" of Shakespeare's timelessness. Instead, he assigns Shakespeare to a specific, though anachronistic, time period—setting the film in an imaginary Britain between the World Wars—and appropriates one of the play's major themes, Richard's manipulation of the masses, to fit with a twentieth-century recasting of the play.

Shakespeare's thematic use of mass manipulation occurs not only in *Richard III* but also in a number of his histories. We find this theme used for "good" in *Henry V* and for "evil" in *Richard III*. Precisely because in Shakespeare political manipulation can be used for either good or evil, the theme of politics as stagecraft—representing the inner-workings of politics as a stage in which players "act" to persuade others to contribute to their political ends—takes with it a certain ambiguity. McKellen seizes on this theme and incorporates modern elements of political stagecraft made possible by twentieth-century technology. McKellen's *Richard III* is not only a critique of mass media and mass persuasion in general, but it is also a commentary on film as a genre of mass media, implicating both Olivier's *Richard* and film itself.

In the original play, Shakespeare explores the theme of politics as stagecraft. One of the best illustrations of the theme occurs in 3.4 of the text in which Richard orchestrates Hastings's "betrayal" and uses it as a means to legitimize his execution. McKellen establishes the scene as a sort of board meeting involving England's key players—Hastings, Stanley, Buckingham, Catesby, the Archbishop, and Lord Protector Gloucester—to discuss the crowning of Prince Edward. Hastings is imagined here as the British Prime Minister, a man who "loves" the princes too well to participate in Richard's plan to seize the crown. Richard, who knows where Hastings's loyalty lies, purposely arrives late to the meeting, allowing the bumbling and oblivious prime minister to agree to speak on Richard's behalf, the first of his sins of naiveté. Richard takes his seat at the head of the boardroom. He then looks down at the table, playing distraught and preoccupied. Seconds that last an eternity pass as the others wait for Richard to begin the meeting. Richard begins solemnly, "I pray you all, tell me what they deserve / That do conspire

my death with devilish plots, and that have prevailed upon my body with their damned witchcraft?" (adapted from 3.4.59-62). Hastings takes Richard's bait and says, "I say, my lord, they have deserved death." Richard removes his deformed hand from his pocket, rolls up his sleeves, and proceeds to wave the "blasted sapling" in the face of all who are present and accuses Queen Elizabeth of bewitching him. Hastings defends the queen, "If she has done this deed, my noble lord"—to which Richard interrupts, "If? You protector of this damned Elizabeth, Talk you to me of 'ifs'? You are a traitor." Richard slaps Hastings's back with his mangled limb, "Off with his head" (adapted from 3.4.59-76). In this scene, we see how powerful Richard has become. Everyone present at the meeting fears Richard and refuses to speak up on Hastings's behalf. Further, Richard now can sanction an execution without a legitimate reason.¹¹

Shakespeare also presents the theme of politics as stagecraft in 3.7 in which Catesby and Buckingham entreat the citizens to make Richard their ruler. Buckingham failed to sway public opinion in favor of Richard, but he has persuaded the Mayor and the citizens to ask for Richard's consent to rule. Buckingham announces to the mayor and the citizens that Richard "is not an Edward! He is not lulling on a lewd love-bed" (3.7.71-72). Instead, Richard is in Christian meditation. When he finally comes on stage, the Mayor notes that Richard "stands . . . 'tween two clergymen!" Buckingham echoes, calling the bishops, "[t]wo props of virtue for a Christian prince" (3.7.95-96).

McKellen takes this scene a step further by imagining the scene as a modern stage for mass media; he converts the meeting at the castle to a press conference. While Richard is in a green room having make-up applied, Catesby and Buckingham stand in the pressroom awaiting the media. Once the citizens enter, the two men stage a conversation about Richard's piety. Richard comes out of the green room, Bible in hand, and reacts coyly to Catesby and Buckingham's requests. He mock-refuses once, and Buckingham storms off, taking the media with him. After Catesby and Richard have a staged exchange about Richard's "duty" to rule, he calls back the mayor and the citizens and agrees "to have patience to endure the load." He adds with false humility, "[f]or God knows, and you may partly see, how far I am from the desire of this" (adapted from 230, 3.7.234-35).

Immediately following the press conference, McKellen's film shows Richard's rise to power as he employs *mise-en-scène* to conjure parallels with Nazi Germany. George L. Geckle notes that the scene is patterned after Nazi rallies. He quotes from a program of the film that "[t]he barren, concrete lower levels [of Earls Court Exhibition Center] provided the behind-the-scenes area of the arena where Richard held a Nuremberg style rally"

(Geckle 1997, 56). Further, Geckle makes this observation of the 1990 play that applies equally to the film: “The London production’s depiction of Richard accepting the crown at the end of 3.7 included clear parallels to Hitler’s mass rallies, complete with armbands, Sieg Heil-type chants, microphones, and spotlights” (56). The scene begins with a shot of battle drums being played by Richard’s militia. Stanley and the Archbishop walk behind the drums, and the camera follows them as they walk to greet Buckingham who stands near a podium. Buckingham approaches the podium and announces, “Long live King Richard,” to which we hear cheering. Buckingham moves to his right. As Richard moves towards the podium, the camera slowly dollies back to reveal that the podium is an enormous structure that bears Richard’s symbol, the boar. A spotlight flashes and sustains its gaze on Richard, and a red banner bearing the boar symbol unfolds behind the platform. The scene culminates in an extreme long shot with Richard distantly waving at the crowd as armed guards surround the platform. The camera cuts to another extreme long shot, this time of the crowd—a mass of black uniforms surrounded by red banners.

These scenes—the board meeting, the press conference, and the rally—build on Shakespeare’s theme of politics as stagecraft and locate it within twentieth-century forms of mass persuasion. If Shakespeare was commenting on how easily the public could be duped, then McKellen reminds us of how twentieth-century audiences (particularly the citizens of Hitler’s Germany) were duped. McKellen’s relocation of the text in pseudo-historical Britain between the wars further warns that tyranny could happen to “Allied” nations as well. In all three staged scenes, McKellen demonstrates mass persuasion through different forms of political spectacle.

While McKellen uses the details from Shakespeare’s text to create political spectacle, he also incorporates twentieth-century tools of mass media to comment on how dangerous these tools can be when they are manipulated. Photography as a modern form of mass media recurs throughout the film. McKellen gives us visual cues that photography will play a part in the adaptation early as he captures before the Yorkist party a snapshot of the royal family. At the party, we see Clarence first in a darkroom developing pictures, and at the party, he busies himself with playing amateur photographer. In these two instances, photography serves as a harmless diversion. Only when the camera falls into the hands of Richard does photography become nefarious.

Richard uses photography with underhanded intentions. After he has sentenced Hastings to be hanged, Richard and Buckingham meet with the Mayor and explain to him that Hastings “forced [them] to this execution” (adapted from 3.5.46). While Richard and Buckingham stand and deliver their case, Catesby sits on the couch with the mayor and passes him images

of Hastings's noosed head. The mayor concludes that Hastings "deserved his death" (adapted from 3.5.47), shakes hands with Richard, and exits. Buckingham and Catesby follow, leaving Richard alone in the room. He puts on a record, lies down on the couch and taps his jackbooted foot to the tune of the muted jazzy trumpet while he flips through the same images that the Mayor perused. Photography serves a dual role in this scene. First, it is used as "verification" of Hastings's supposed treachery, verification that has the potential to become amplified through mass media such as partisan newspapers or other forms of propaganda. Second, photography is harnessed by Richard to satisfy his need for morbid entertainment, a need that closely resembles a craving for pornography.¹² Later in the film, we see photography as a more explicit manipulation of mass media. Before the press conference, Richard and Buckingham pose by shaking hands for a member of the paparazzi, both assuming false smiles and then taking them off once the shot is taken so that they can discuss, ironically, Buckingham's failure to manipulate the masses.

By elucidating modern manipulations of mass media, McKellen's *Richard III* challenges Olivier's method of approaching Shakespeare. Olivier sold his film as an intellectually and culturally superior art form extending from Britain's rich literary tradition. McKellen attacks this very notion of "culturally superior" art forms, claiming that all popular art becomes part of the state's tradition. In other words, Olivier's "aestheticism" of Shakespeare could be nothing more than British nationalistic propaganda. McKellen's film offers a visual example that art can serve as nationalistic propaganda, namely the enormous painting that hangs behind the desk in his war-room. The painting frames Richard's whole body, dressed in Fascist military attire complete with three-quarter-length jacket, as he stands rigidly braced for battle while a storm brews in the background. McKellen's film implicitly attempts to validate the cultural materialist notion that what is considered "high art" depends on what the dominant ideology sanctions. In this film, the art that is produced within the world of the film validates and reinforces the massified values of the imaginary Fascist British state: male virility manifested by militaristic nationalism.

While McKellen's *Richard III* offers a critique of the dangers of mass media and their effect on mass culture, it is also an active participant in that realm of mass media. As we have already observed, one of McKellen's aims for the film was to make money, essentially to persuade a mass audience to buy tickets. McKellen appeals to a popular audience in his film by weaving images and suggestions of sex and violence into a relatively sexless text.

McKellen adds images of illicit and legitimate sexuality to stimulate and manipulate the viewer. From the opening montage showing the Yorkists

readying themselves for the party, we see King Edward's nurse giving him a pill. After popping it in his mouth, his hand wanders underneath her skirt, visually portraying Edward's lasciviousness underlined in the text. Also, McKellen has Richmond marry young Elizabeth before the Battle of Bosworth Field. The filmmaker gives us a scene between the two young lovers presumably after they have consummated their wedding vows.¹³ The scene pictures both Richmond and Elizabeth naked but selectively hidden by white sheets.¹⁴

Violence, too, pervades the film, satisfying viewers' collective bloodlust. The film opens with Richard shooting Prince Edward in the middle of his forehead and then moving to kill King Henry at point blank range. Next, we observe the murder of Clarence in a bathtub. Tyrrel splashes water in his victim's face, puts Clarence in a headlock, slits his throat, and pushes his struggling body underneath the water. A high angle shot captures the bathtub's water turning red with blood. Then, we witness Hastings's execution as it is recorded from a low angle shot of a trap door that drops open. The body swings loosely down towards the camera and snaps into rigidity in synchronization with Hastings's neck. Later, McKellen shows us Tyrrel strangling a bloody Buckingham with a thin wire in the back of a military truck while Richard sits in the front, calmly puffing on a cigarette. Finally, at the Battle of Bosworth Field, filmed like a ground battle in Operation Desert Storm complete with tanks, jeeps, and horses, Richard's jeep gets stuck in a ditch. After screaming his famous line—"A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!" (adapted from 5.6.7)—while pressing futilely on the gas pedal, Richard turns around in the vehicle and shoots Tyrrel in the head. Contradicting McKellen's own explanation of Richard's character—"Richard III is not a mass murderer. Richard III doesn't actually kill anybody in this movie, nor in the play. He orders other people to kill and they agree to do it. He's a tyrant. That's the difference"¹⁵—in this scene, Richard becomes a cold-blooded killer of his ally throughout.

Most tellingly of McKellen's appeals to the visual tropes of sex and violence is his fusion of the two in a scene involving the queen's brother, Rivers. We see a maid delivering towels to the outside of a hotel room from which she hears sexual noises. Embarrassed, she smiles and walks away. Tyrrel urgently marches past her and past the camera. The camera cuts from outside the hotel room's door to inside the room where we observe a shirtless Rivers handcuffed to a bed in his hotel room while a stewardess aggressively kisses his chest. Rivers and the stewardess grunt with passion as the stewardess crawls out of the camera's view to perform fellatio on him. Suddenly, Rivers stops panting. He looks down and sees a blade emerge from his stomach. The camera cuts to a high angle shot of Rivers with the stewardess at his lap. The

two lovers watch in horror as the blade thrusts up through his stomach from under the bed. The two scream in synchronization as the scream becomes a train whistle in a morbidly orgasmic audio match. The scene cuts from the bedroom to a tunnel through which we see a train rushing to deliver Prince Edward to be crowned.¹⁶ The scene manipulates the viewer as it first commands visual and aural attention with its near-pornographic depiction of Rivers's and the stewardess's lovemaking. However, Rivers's nervous pause as he looks down at his torso signals an abrupt change in action. Instead of the cries that we heard earlier as Rivers was anticipating his orgasm, McKellen shifts dramatically from sex to violence as the later cry signals both shock and pain. Further, without giving the viewer time to absorb the action, McKellen's cut to the tunnel suggests the oral or vaginal pleasure that Rivers had been enjoying. The train rushes through, doubling the action of the phallic knife that interrupted Rivers's pleasure.

I suggest that the two opposing stances on mass media—an admonition of their abuses on one hand and a vile use or exploitation of "them" on the other—combine and culminate to communicate an essentially ambiguous message on the nature of mass media and mass culture. The message mirrors McKellen's own ambiguous twist on the film's ending. The film ends in a shootout between Richard and Richmond. Richard is on the run, where he comes to the top of an uncompleted building. Seeing nowhere to run, Richard tightrope walks to the middle of one of the beams. Richmond finally catches up to him. Richard, aware that he is caught, extends a hand to Richmond and delivers this part of his battle speech: "Let's to it pell-mell; / If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell" (adapted from 5.3.312-13). He then jumps into a pit of flames. Richmond shoots his gun at the grinning Joker Richard as Al Jolsen's "I'm Sittin' On Top of the World" plays in the background.¹⁷ Richmond turns to the camera—the only character to address the camera besides Richard—to deliver a subtle smirk. This smirk symbolizes the ambiguity of the film's stance on the Shakespearean/Tudor paradigm. This paradigm posits that during the War of the Roses, power shifted, from legitimate ruler (Richard II), to illegitimate rulers (Henry Bolingbroke to Richard III, with the possible exception of Henry V), to legitimate ruler once again. Richmond's smirk suggests that Richmond might have learned the lesson of politics as stagecraft from Richard and that he might repeat the Machiavellian pattern.

McKellen's *Richard III* has a sense of self-awareness about it. The film makes the audience aware that film itself is a form of mass media in the scene of Richard's coronation. We see Richard being crowned in color to regal music playing in the background. The film then shifts to black and white, a few seconds back, as we watch the scene again. The camera dollies back to

reveal that the film is a projected image that Richard, Buckingham, Catesby, and Anne are all watching. Anne stares blankly at the screen, a cigarette dangling from her lips as now she has become a pacified member of “mass culture.” The use of the film-within-the-film communicates the message that if McKellen’s *Richard III* delivers an ambiguous message on the nature of mass media, then it does so knowingly.

McKellen undermines the very reverence for Shakespeare that guides Olivier’s project. He uses the play to comment on mass media’s influence on contemporary culture.¹⁸ At the same time that McKellen issues a warning about the dangers of mass media in the hands of a tyrant, he subtly manipulates the viewer by taking advantage of the very media forms that he admonishes, creating witty yet biting irony. McKellen, like the character he plays, tells us exactly what evil deeds he is up to: “It’s very exciting. It’s very funny. It’s very sexy. It’s very violent.” McKellen, in touch with his own ideology, predicts that because of his manipulation of these media tropes, “[t]he audience I know will love it.”

Notes

¹ In other words, McKellen abandoned the high-cultural reverence that Olivier used as criterion for his adaptation and presented his *Richard* as a sex-saturated action film.

² In talking about films as both media forms and cultural products, it is useful to incorporate ideas from film formalism, which offers a user-friendly language to discuss individual components that make up films, and cultural materialist literary criticism, which attempts to set texts within a larger cultural context. Through the use of formalist film criticism, McKellen’s film can be understood in terms of narrative elements (the story and how it differs from Shakespeare’s story with regard to specific lines, events, characters, and chronology) and stylistic elements (the use of *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, and sound techniques). In other words, film formalism becomes valuable as a way to understand film as text. However, the intellectual weight of this analysis of the film rests in cultural materialism, a school of literary thought that takes its name from the “analytic sense of ‘culture’”—meaning that it does not privilege “high” culture over “low” culture—and “‘materialism’ as opposed to ‘idealism’”—assuming “that culture does not (cannot) transcend the material forces and relations of production” (Dollimore and Sinfield vii–viii).

³ Althusser posits two contrasting theories of ideology and synthesizes these theories by demonstrating how they interrelate. Althusser’s first thesis on ideology is: “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” According to Althusser, ideology functions in the abstract; it consists of the ideas that guide “world outlooks.” The second, opposing thesis that Althusser proposes is: “Ideology has a material existence.” Even though ideology exists as an abstract concept, it realizes itself through material representation. Althusser notes that “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or

practices. This existence is material" (Althusser 1986, 242). In other words, ideology becomes real as it evidences itself through institutionalized structures. Further, Althusser demonstrates the "subject's" relation to the dominant ideology: "Throughout this schema we observe that the ideological representation of ideology is itself forced to recognize that every 'subject' endowed with a 'consciousness' and believing in the 'ideas' that his 'consciousness' inspires in him and freely accepts, must 'act according to his ideas', must therefore inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice. If he does not do so, 'that is wicked'" (243). Here, Althusser illustrates the ideological process of naturalization; ideology is what is obvious, the status quo. However, because of the very "obviousness" that ideology forces through the "free" minds of subjects upon the material world, the subject becomes all too aware when s/he opposes the dominant ideology. This last point leads Althusser into his third thesis, a synthesis of his two theories.

⁴ According to Halpern, Habermas understood "culture-debating public" as "the bourgeoisie of the coffeehouses and salons who wrest from a court-based aristocracy the right to dispute literary and aesthetic matters" (1997, 70).

⁵ For this part of his discussion, Halpern draws from Sloterdijk's book (1987).

⁶ Margaret Morley notes that in a 1946 poll conducted by the Motion Picture Herald, Olivier ranked fifth in "Money-Making Stars" (1997, 98).

⁷ In his textual preface to the film, Olivier makes it clear in his summary of the events leading up to the crowning of Edward IV in 1471 that the film is about England's past; it in no way reflects contemporary events. Further, Olivier reminds us that even the "history" that influenced Shakespeare's play did not accurately represent the past; instead, he tells us, "The story of England / like that of many another land / is an interwoven pattern of history and legend." "Legend" implies a story that fictionalizes history. Olivier then tries his hand at writing Shakespearean poetry as he, in a Shakespearean vein, writes three different metaphors to communicate a single point: "The history of the world like / Letters without poetry, flowers without perfume / Or thought without imagination, / would be a dry matter indeed / without its legend." He then emphasizes that although legends may be "scorned by proof a hundred times," they are "worth preserving." In an NBC radio broadcast interview with Alexander Clark, Olivier takes credit for the preface, saying that *Richard III* is a "beautiful bit of work" that stands independently from history: "As I've tried to say in the preface to *Richard III*, it's a legend, and what a pity all legends should die, merely because they're disproven" (Falkenberg, 1955).

⁸ Halpern notes that the canonicity given to Shakespeare began during the Victorian period and influenced scholars during the modern period: "What began as a relatively minor tradition within Victorian scholarship came to exert a disproportionate and belated influence on the modernists, whose reading of Shakespeare both built upon and critiqued it." According to Halpern, "the Victorians . . . [were concerned with] establishing [Shakespeare's] radial pedigree within the European family" (1997, 17). He writes that in 1864, phrenologist J. W. Jackson, "read" Shakespeare's skull and discovered that Shakespeare's "was doubtless by descent of that well mingled and thoroughly amalgamated Celto-Teutonic race, familiarly known as the Anglo-Saxon, but in reality consisting of elements from nearly every

Caucasian stock in Europe, with possibly a remote tinge even from the Mongolic . . . Shakespeare's presumed cultural "universality" is implicitly grounded in his racial variety" (qtd. Halpern 18). Further, Jackson suggests that his "evidence" demonstrates "the entire predominance of the higher over the lower elements in his being, which was, indeed, cast in an essentially spiritual, and, if we may so express ourselves, transcendental mould" (qtd. Halpern 18). Halpern concludes that in light of Jackson's observations, Shakespeare's head "represents the world as fantasized by British imperialism, with the higher and lighter races at once ruling over, and bringing enlightenment to, the lower and darker ones" (18-19). Halpern quotes Jackson from his 1864 essay, "Ethnology and Phrenology as an Aid to the Biographer," which appeared in *Anthropological Review and Journal* 2:126-40.

⁹ Britain's loss of empire was further punctuated by its forced withdrawal of troops from occupied Egypt in 1954. On October 31, 1956, Britain (along with France) tried unsuccessfully to take back the Suez Canal from Egypt. Britain's failed attempt to reclaim its territory stood as a symbol of the nation's waning status as a political power player.

¹⁰ The idea that Britain was once again a powerful political force that permeated *Henry V* can be demonstrated in Britain's political involvement in the early 1950s. Britain was a key player in the occupation of Germany. Further, Britain was a founding member of both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 and the Southeast Arms Treaty Organization in 1954. Britain aided the U.S. in the Korean War (1950-1953), and it set in motion a project to build an atom bomb.

¹¹ In the play, Richard capitalizes on Hastings's romantic affair with Edward's former mistress, Jane Shore, as a reason to execute him. Richard accuses not just Elizabeth, but Elizabeth and mistress Shore, of conspiring against him: "Edward's wife . . . [c]onsorted with that harlot, strumpet Shore, /That by their witchcraft have marked me" (3.4.70-72).

¹² The inference that Richard is pornographically fascinated with pictures of Hastings's dead corpse is especially true when viewed in light of Richard's pattern of attraction to and companionship with men in McKellen's film. Richard's preference of men over women is best understood in light of the scene after Clarence's murder where Richard is shown in ecstasy receiving an arm massage from Ratcliff. A knock on the door summons Ratcliff from performing "hand-job" on Richard. He returns to his master with Clarence's glasses. Satisfied, Richard dismisses his male servant. Lady Anne enters and remains at the foot of the steps, scantily clad in lingerie falling gently off her shoulders. Richard notices her, walks over in what we expect to be a sexual embrace, but instead, he switches off the light and turns to resume his spot in his chair. Sexually rejected, Anne skulks back up the steps.

¹³ The scene between Richmond and Elizabeth seems to echo Zeffirelli's employment of this same visual tactic in his *Romeo and Juliet*.

¹⁴ It should be noted that some discretion was taken in making the film less sexual than it could have been. From the published screenplay, this scene was cut from the film:

Sir William Catesby, the King's private secretary, is on the phone to Lord Hastings, the Prime Minister.

CATESBY

The King's physicians fear him mightily.

Prime Minister, the King doth call for you.

27 INT. HASTINGS' PRIVATE APARTMENT AT 10, DOWNING STREET

Hastings, 60 years old, is answering the phone, as his teenage mistress massages his fat body towards orgasm.

HASTINGS

Catesby, I come! (www.mckellen.com/cinema/richard/screenplay/intro2.htm)

¹⁵ This quote comes from the McKellen interview provided by the Richard III Society homepage: www.r3.org/mckellen/film/mckella.html, p. 5.

¹⁶ This sequence of scenes also seems to allude to two films by Alfred Hitchcock. In *The 39 Steps*, Hitchcock makes an auditory echo as he makes the sound of a scream match that of a train whistle. Also, in *North by Northwest*, we see the same train and tunnel imagery.

¹⁷ McKellen's use of this image alludes to the gangster film, *White Heat*, in which Jimmy Cagney says "Top of the World, Ma" before he is gunned down.

¹⁸ McKellen argues that Shakespeare used history in the same vein: "Shakespeare himself was perhaps only interested in historical fact insofar as it might illuminate the present. He was much more concerned with politics generally than the accuracy of historical events, which he happily reconstructed to suit his story-telling" (www.r3.org/mckellen/film/mckella.html 1).

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