Shakespeare’s plays are endlessly metatheatrical, commenting on the theater and its practices often and in many different ways. There are plays within plays, explicit comparisons of life to the stage, scenes in which playhouse audience and players onstage seem to merge, and perhaps thousands of more fleeting moments that refer directly or through metaphor or double meaning to stagecraft or performance. But if, as Michael Goldman once wrote, there is always a play within a play in Shakespeare (Goldman 1972), it is nonetheless true that some plays reflect on their medium in such a sustained way that they can be read as allegories of theater, exploring the paradoxes of performance and representation as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, calling attention to historical change in theater practices (as Hamlet does when he laments the success of the new all-boys companies), and even, as in *The Tempest*, imagining the end of all theater, when something called “the . . . globe,” at once playhouse and cosmos, will dissolve without a trace.

Shakespeare film adaptations are also often self-referential, either in the simple sense of alluding to performance simply by following the metatheatrical text of the play, or in ways that invoke the special properties of the cinematic medium. All of Welles’s Shakespeare films are rich in such metacinematic moments, as is Peter Brook’s *King Lear*, in which antirealist techniques such as anachronistic black and white and white and violations of the conventions of space-time continuity are used not only to portray
the king’s increasing isolation and madness, but also to create a cinematic equivalent to the play’s suggestion that we are watching “not Lear” but “Lear’s shadow” or simulacrum. Brook plays, too, on the difference between the simultaneous presence of audience and performers in the theater, and the numbing absences that cinema can invoke in the hands of a skilled director. Facing the camera in a poignant close-up, Brook’s Lear offers his hand to “us,” the film audience, as he does to the dead Cordelia, without the possibility of response.

While not unique in its metacinematic concerns, Laurence Olivier’s *Henry V* differs from these films in several respects that make it a significant precursor of a number of more recent Shakespeare films and a useful starting point for my interpretation of the 1996 Bazmark production, *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet*. First, Olivier’s film is concerned with a wide range of media, not only the stage (the film begins on a reconstructed model of the Globe) and the cinema, but with pictorial media, basing its scenes in the French court on *Les tres riches heures de Duc de Berri*, and with its own status as a kind of broadcast to the nation, alluding, in various ways, to its origins in the radio broadcasts of the Crispin’s Day speech that Olivier made for the War Ministry (Donaldson, 1999). Second, the film attempts a kind of historical media allegory, suggesting, quite intentionally on the evidence of Olivier’s published memoirs, that the techniques of modern epic cinema fulfill and perfect the representational ambitions of theater, making good the chorus’s wish for “a muse of fire” that could bring real horses and battles before the spectators. And, just as modern media fulfill the hopes of earlier techniques of representation, so, it is implied, the England of 1944, nearing triumph over despotism, inherits both the war-like spirit and the humane civilization of the era of Shakespeare.

A number of recent Shakespeare films also make media history and media transition a part of their message. Jean-Luc Godard’s *King Lear* (1987) takes place in a surreal future society in which Shakespeare’s text has been lost and is reconstructed as oral history, while a mad inventor (Godard himself) attempts to reinvent cinema by illuminating tiny toy dinosaurs in a darkened cardboard box using fairground sparklers. Peter Greenaway’s *Prospero’s Books* (1994) imagines Prospero writing the text of *The Tempest*, stages the destruction and recovery of the First Folio, and associates Prospero’s rejection of his magic books with the replacement of conventional cinema by digital multimedia. Richard Loncraine’s *Richard III* (1996) explores a range of media forms, including still photography, silent black-and-white film, and recorded as well as amplified live sound in its characterization of Richard as a modern, media-reliant, Hitler-like tyrant, urging upon us questions of media complicity in the creation of contemporary regimes of death. These films—to which one might add Michael Almereyda’s bleak, techno-