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Shakespeare Meets The Godfather: The Postmodern Populism of Al Pacino’s Looking for Richard

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‘It has always been a dream of mine to communicate how I feel about Shakespeare to other people.’ So says Al Pacino at an early stage of Looking for Richard in a remark which clearly posits this film as the culmination of that dream. What is unusual is the way he has gone about it. Unlike traditionalists such as Laurence Olivier and, more recently, Kenneth Branagh, whose desire to communicate their love of Shakespeare on film has resulted in a handsomely mounted production of a selected play (in which they both direct and star), Pacino’s approach is altogether looser, more open, less grandiose. True, he directs and plays the leading role, but Looking for Richard is not simply an adaptation of Richard III but a meditation on what Shakespeare means at the end of the twentieth century.

To this end, Pacino employs a wide variety of styles. Filmed extracts from the play and from rehearsals are intercut with discussions with actors and academics and cinéma-vérité interviews with people on the street. In addition to the textual complications and ambiguities of the play itself, the topics raised through this method include the different traditions of performing Shakespeare in Britain and America, the contrast between an academic’s and an actor’s approach to a theatrical text, and the difference between acting Shakespeare on film and on stage. In the process, the title of the film takes on a new meaning. The ostensible subject of ‘King Richard’ is enlarged (in a neat visual conceit in the opening titles) to ‘Looking for Richard’. One concept/title becomes the other – one starts with King Richard but ends with Looking for Richard. As such, the visual conceit stands as a metaphor for the film as a whole. Pacino is documenting not so much his final, finished interpretation of the role as the stage-by-stage process by which an actor arrives at an interpretation through his quest for the core of the character.
The film’s quest for Richard is simultaneously a means of raising questions about the modern relevance of Shakespeare and suggesting ways of interpreting, and making accessible, Shakespeare for future generations. It is here, I think, that the method and the millennium merge, because it is hard to conceive of a film of Shakespeare being mounted in quite this way in an earlier decade. Quite simply, the method constitutes an alert attempt to deal with a late twentieth-century cultural situation, which is seeing the decline of the book and literacy against the competition of global media; which is experiencing an undermining of the literary canon, with its attendant cultural/ideological implications and assumptions; and which is witnessing an increasing hostility to what might be called aesthetic elitism, of which Shakespeare stands as a supremely significant example. How, then, can Shakespeare’s plays be made to seem exciting and attractive when the dramatist seems symptomatic of an intimidating, incomprehensible and even irrelevant tradition that many parts of society, academia and education are rejecting? Looking for Richard is an attempt to answer that question, and Pacino couches his response in a manner that is openly personal and implicitly postmodern.

How can the eclectic, elusive style of Looking for Richard be characterized? The adjective the film calls to mind is ‘Wellesian’. The film’s mesmerizing montage has something of the stylistic panache of that most audacious of screen adapters of Shakespeare, Orson Welles. Welles would undoubtedly have empathized with Pacino’s obsession in bringing this project to the screen. It is well known that Welles made his celebrated film of Othello in bits and pieces over a period of years when he could raise enough money from his screen performances to continue filming. Pacino, similarly, made Looking for Richard over a period of three-and-a-half years, shooting bits and pieces between his lucrative acting assignments on such Hollywood blockbusters as City Hall (1994) and Heat (1995), which were helping to finance the venture, and enticing his cast with the offer of 40 dollars a day and as many doughnuts as they could eat. However, the most important Wellesian connection is not so much the Shakespearean mania as the stylistic manner. What Pacino achieves in Looking for Richard is something that Welles had attempted twenty years before, though not in one of his Shakespeare films but in F for Fake (1976): namely, a new cinematic form of the filmed essay.

As Welles tried to elaborate it, the filmed essay takes a theme and then explores and embroiders it in cinematic terms, using whatever style or visual conceit that seems most appropriate at the time – documentary,