

The “Degenerate Son” of *Julius Caesar*: Shakespeare as a Medium of Self-Discovery in *Caesar Must Die*

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How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,
In states unborn, and accents yet unknown!¹
(III. 1. 37-39)

Many directors have already adapted Shakespeare’s renowned Roman plays both on film and on television. In the same way as Shakespeare was deeply interested in Ancient Rome, the various film directors of the modern age have also been interested in Shakespeare’s Roman plays, of which one of the most famous is undoubtedly *Julius Caesar*. This interest has resulted in various adaptations of the drama—as Samuel Crowl defines it, in the case of *Julius Caesar* there have been three major productions on film: David Bradley’s experimentalist film (1949), Mankiewicz’s formalist film (1953), and Stuart Burge’s *Julius Caesar* (1970).² In this essay, however, I will not endeavour either to compare these adaptations or to rely on them. Instead, I would like to engage in the examination of a recently produced, Golden Bear-winning film production of *Julius Caesar* by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, entitled *Caesar Must Die* (2012), because it raises important questions related to the process of adaptation. While the films of Burge, Bradley and Mankiewicz are clearly the adaptations of Shakespeare’s drama, in the case of *Caesar Must Die*, it seems to be problematic to classify it either as an adaptation or as an appropriation. Therefore, this essay is going to be a meditation over the problem of adaptation, namely over the question what the film adapts exactly; whether it

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, Dortmund: Verlag Lambert Lensing, 1958, p.29.

² Cf.: Samuel Crowl, “A World Elsewhere: The Roman Plays on Film and Television,” in: *Shakespeare and the Moving Image*, ed. Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 146-147.

adapts Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, a real event when a theatrical performance was held in the prison of Rebibbia, or the life and feelings of the inmates. Thus, I am going to provide examples for and against these ideas and propose some sort of answer or solution to these adaptive problems which the film raises, or at least delineate the reasons why the film proves to be so intriguing and extraordinary. I intend to illustrate my point that *Caesar Must Die* is mainly a documentary on the lives of the inmates of Rebibbia, and it only seems to be the literary adaptation of Shakespeare's drama in a secondary sense. In order to verify this assumption, I will shed light on the various film techniques, the significance of the setting, the choice of characters and language by the Taviani brothers, all of which help us realize that this film mingles adaptive aspects with appropriative ones and that in this case the strong, undeniable echo of Shakespeare's play serves only as a medium for the 'actors' and—to some extent—also the modern audiences to achieve self-discovery.

For a start, adaptations and appropriations are, on the one hand, very much related to each other but, on the other hand, there are many relevant differences between them. As Julie Sanders explains it in her book, the basic difference is that “an adaptation signals a relationship with an informative sourcetext or original;”³ while “appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain.”⁴ This film, however, proves that we cannot differentiate between these two terms without problems, and thus, in the case of *Caesar Must Die* Julie Sanders' definitions do not provide a helpful approach. Yet in this paper I will occasionally refer to her book and conjure up some of the basic categories of adaptation, namely transposition, commentary, and analogue⁵ proposed by Deborah Cartmell, and those of appropriation, namely embedded text and sustained appropriation⁶ (this division was provided by Julie

³ Julie Sanders, “What is adaptation?,” in: *Adaptation and Appropriation*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 17.

⁴ Sanders, p. 17.

⁵ Cf: Cartmell qtd. in: Sanders, p. 20.

⁶ Cf: Sanders, p. 26.

Sanders), to show which of them can be applied to *Caesar Must Die* and to help decide the question what the film adapts.

Among the above mentioned three divisions of adaptations, I found that *Caesar Must Die* is a transposition (or intersection⁷, as Dudley Andrew calls it), which contributes to the film's being an adaptation of *Julius Caesar*. If we compare Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* with *Caesar Must Die*, it becomes clear that it is a stage drama converted into a film that we are concerned with, and therefore it can be considered as a transposition. Reference to Sanders reveals that the characteristics of transpositions are that "they take a text from one genre and deliver it to new audiences by means of the aesthetic conventions of an entirely different generic process"⁸, that is, in this particular case, play into film, though retaining some theatrical aspects by the fusion of film and theatre.

However, not only generically does the film relocate its source text, but also culturally and geographically. As a result, though mainly adhering to the Shakespearean text and plot, the film presents the audience with a considerable number of radical innovations, which might suggest that this production is more than a literary adaptation. First, it is set in the prison of Rebibbia—on the outskirts of Rome—in the high security section. None of its characters are ordinary actors, they are all prisoners, some of them serving life sentences, and most of them belonged to various kinds of mobs such as the Camorra or mafia. However, twenty or so inmates are given a chance to partake in a stage performance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* directed by Fabio Cavalli, which completely alters their attitude to life, to their deeds, and to the cell they live in. The directors make it clear that "[they] felt the need to discover through a film how the beauty of their performances was born from those prison cells, from those

⁷ Cf.: Phyllis Zatlin, "On and Off the Screen: The Many Faces of Adaptation," in: *Theatrical Translation and Film Adaptation: A Practitioner's View*, Multilingual Matters, 2005, p.153.

⁸ Sanders, 20.

outcasts that live so far from culture.”⁹ It might seem that what this film does is to update the source text. It must be noted, however, that here the motive behind updating is not to reinterpret Shakespeare’s text but rather to bring it closer to the modern age’s audience by setting the film in a well-known prison and choosing convicts as actors. The choice of the unusual setting and cast serves to elucidate the impact of art on the darkness of the lives of the inmates. The Taviani brothers’ intention was not to reinterpret Shakespeare, since in the film it is the prisoners that are in the forefront and their inner struggles, thoughts and experiences. As the Taviani brothers state it, “[they] tried to contrast the darkness of their life as convicts with the poetic force of the emotions Shakespeare evokes -- friendship and betrayal, murder and the torment of difficult choices, the price of power and truth.”¹⁰ Sanders calls this a layer of transposition, a ‘movement of proximation’¹¹, and in my own view, this phenomenon is present here, since the film embeds Shakespeare’s scenes from a well-known moment of Roman history within a prison in order to transmit a new message to a new audience, although, still adhering to the original Shakespearean text.

As a result of the film’s insisting upon Shakespeare’s words, we cannot eliminate the memory of the play at all despite the innovations and changes in terms of the setting, and the intention of the directors to express new messages to the audience through Shakespeare. One just cannot ignore the textual similarities and the chronology of actions in *Julius Caesar* recognized in the film, since it bravely assumes and downright declares its strong adherence to the play with its title and with the task given to the prisoners at the very beginning. Thus, even those who do not know the play become aware of the fact that the film has constant recourse to it. As Philip Cox rightly points out, it is the instant recognition of the similarities

⁹ Richard Lormand, “Directors’ Statement,” in: *Caesar Must Die: a Film by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani*, Film Press Plus, 2012, p. 5. Web. 21. Nov. 2013. PDF file.

¹⁰ The Taviani brothers, qtd. in Lormand, 5.

¹¹ Sanders, 21.

that causes pleasure to an audience alert to intertextual relationships.¹² Apart from the acknowledgement of analogies, however, in this case, the audience can take notice of various modifications of the original text as well, which is achieved partly because of the fusion of theatre and film, partly due to the inmates' gradual involvement in the drama and their understanding of the meaning and significance of Shakespeare's words. This mixture of analogies and discrepancies can be nicely explained by evoking the words of the Taviani brothers who declared that

[w]e have certainly kept the spirit of the original tragedy as well as the narrative but at the same time we simplified it taking it a bit far from the traditional stage work tempos. We have tried to construct that audiovisual organism that we call film, and that is the degenerate son of all the arts that have preceded cinema. A degenerate son that Shakespeare would have certainly loved!¹³

The words of the Taviani brothers might suggest that what they produced is in some way the "degenerate son" of the Bard's *Julius Caesar*. This term indicates the strong connection between the source text and the film due to the word "son", but the fact that it is "degenerate" accentuates that the film is at the same time distancing itself from the source text, which, again, brings it closer to a documentary on the changes and experiences of the inmates of Rebibbia, even though the film, at first glance, seems to be a literary adaptation.

The most relevant factor which contributes to the idea that the film puts in the forefront the prisoners instead of adapting Shakespeare's play, is that it screens a real event that occurred in the theatre of Rome's Rebibbia Prison. As the directors report it, they first met these prisoners when they were reciting part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, each in their own dialects "occasionally addressing parallels between the poetic story evoked by the cantos and

¹² Cox, quoted in Sanders, 22.

¹³ Lormand, 7.

their own lives.”¹⁴ It was then that they decided to work with the inmates and the stage director, Fabio Cavalli, and made them perform Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. However, as the end of the film nicely suggests, Shakespeare’s words serve only as a medium here, for after the performance the inmates return to their cells and the prisoner who played Cassius phrases the gist of the whole film. He declares that “[s]ince I have known art, this cell has turned into a prison.”¹⁵ Consequently, Shakespeare was a medium for their self-discovery, it is only by rehearsing Shakespeare’s play, relishing his words and performing the play that they realized what they had missed before getting into prison.

The second category of adaptation, that is, commentary can also be mentioned in relation to *Caesar Must Die*, which might also reinforce the assumption that the film is first of all a documentary showing an extraordinary theatrical performance in Rebibbia. Sanders refers to this category as an adaptation “that comment[s] on the politics of the source text, or those of the new *mise-en scène*, or both, usually by means of alteration or addition.”¹⁶ In the case of the Taviani-film, what we are concerned with is not a comment on politics either of the source text or that of the film, but rather a reflection on the general condition of the inmate-actors, on their inner struggles and emotions. Thus this production comments on the circumstances of the characters of the new *mise-en-scène*, and it is achieved by the means of alteration. Even though the film presents a significant number of alterations, the one which is relevant here is the absence of certain characters—the *dramatis personae* lacks female characters, and it is, though obvious in this context, not by accident at all. A closer examination of the film will alert us to a seemingly irrelevant scene, namely the one in which one of the inmates is helping out at the theatre reconstruction, and when sitting down begins

¹⁴ Lormand, 5.

¹⁵ Lormand, 4.

¹⁶ Sanders, 21.

to strike the surface of one of the seats wishing that a woman was sitting there.¹⁷ The absence of women in a prison context might be regarded as obvious, but I feel this scene indicates that it is not to be taken for granted because it does have a meaning. And this meaning can be explained by the Taviani brothers' intention to emphasize the contrast between the barren, grey life of these inmates in their prison cells and the outside where there are those factors which they are longing for now, after tasting the pleasure of acting, in the empty cells: mainly women, but also art and culture.

This permanent wish for the outside by the inmates is also accentuated by the change in the order of scenes in the plot, on the one hand, and also by the three coloured scenes intersected in the black-and-white scenes, which indicate a conspicuous separation between outside and inside, between their wish and the reality. As far as the plot is concerned, it is radically altered at one point of the film, that is, at its very beginning which immediately focuses on the battle of Philippi followed by a eulogy to Brutus's noble nature. This scene is repeated at the end of the film as well, thus providing a perfect frame to the production. And to emphasise the significance of the frame, the Taviani brothers filmed it in Technicolor, thus separating the beginning and the end of the production from the rest of the scenes filmed in black-and-white. Bound up with the use of colour, there is another very brief scene at the middle of the film which is also shot in Technicolor, and this is Lucius's staring at a colourful wallpaper which features an island. As I see it, this might stand for their constant yearning for life outside the gates of Rebibbia. Moreover, the fact that the picture depicts an island may also have a certain significance, for these inmates in Rebibbia are perfectly isolated from everything, from women, from society and from culture as well. Despite being excluded from everything that is outside the prison, they receive the chance to taste culture, which touches them to the extent of realizing that their cell really has become a prison for them. All this

¹⁷ Cf.: *Cesare Deve Morire*, dir. Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, perf. Giovanni Arcuri, Salvatore Striano, Cosimo Rega, Antonio Frasca, KAOS Cinematografica, 2012, 20min. 20sec.
All references to the film are my translations from Italian.

leads me to conclude that the intentional alternation of the coloured and black-and-white scenes together with the alteration of the beginning scene of the source text, help us understand how film and theatre are integrated in this film production by the means of adaptive techniques.

Still bound up with the choice of black-and-white, there was another *Julius Caesar* film production which chose to film the play in black-and-white, and it was Joe Mankiewicz's film, which used this technique due to its dramatic tones.¹⁸ Similarly, the Taviani brothers also deliberately utilized it. In an interview Paolo Taviani clearly explains that one time, the cinema was black-and-white but today it is not so, today it means something abnormal. Moreover, the public have to see clearly the passage of time and it can be achieved through the use of black and white. He further explains that the reason why they chose this technique was that otherwise the interior of the prison would have fallen into TV naturalism. What is more, black-and-white, along with the choice of setting and characters, gave them the opportunity to portray real locations and at the same time create an absurd cinema, since for them black-and-white is unrealistic, while colour is realistic.¹⁹ And they did intend the film to be entirely unrealistic, which was thus achieved by this technique. In an interview the directors also make it clear that they "opted for strong and violent black-and-white images that in the end take on the magic colours of stage work, extolling the furious joy of the inmates overwhelmed by their success."²⁰ It follows that the use of black and white—along with the dialects and the unusual setting and cast—highly contributed to an outcome which enables us to propose that this film production is mainly a documentary on the prisoners' lives and secondly, an adaptation of Shakespeare's drama through the way it fuses film with theatre.

¹⁸ Cf.: John Houseman, "Filming Julius Caesar," in: *Shakespeare: Julius Caesar: a casebook*, ed. Peter Ure, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1969. p. 66.

¹⁹ Cf.: Jdylan131, "Paolo Taviani – CESARE DEVE MORIRE," in: *Youtube*, Online video clip, 2 Oct. 2012, Web. 22 Nov. 2013.

²⁰ Lormand, 10.

The fusion of film and theatre in this film is the most visible characteristic for which I consider that Shakespeare's drama is used only as a medium here. Julie Sanders calls this integration "embedded text", which is one of the categories of appropriation besides sustained appropriation. Of these two types the film, in my opinion, can be regarded as an embedded text due to the fact that here we have an embedded stage performance and a framework story. The embedded *Julius Caesar* performance is a straightforward stage adaptation of the play, but it is the frame which distinguishes it from the original story and text. We have a group of inmates who are offered the possibility to partake in a stage performance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and we are also introduced to the process of casting. Consequently, this frame includes a whole story in itself; the Shakespearean play is only a means of supplementing the story of this framework. What is more, it is through the embedded performance that we understand the intention of the Taviani brothers, that is, to give insight into the soul of these prisoners and make them realize through Shakespeare "the darkness of their life" and the fact that they wasted their life which had no sense without art. Thus, the inmates discover themselves; discover their personality, their defects and their so far hidden wish for the pleasures given to them by art. As the Taviani brothers have made it clear,

[w]e tried to contrast the darkness of their life as convicts with the poetic force of the emotions Shakespeare evokes—friendship and betrayal, murder and the torment of difficult choices, the price of power and truth. Reaching deep into a work like this means also looking at yourself, especially when one must leave the stage and return to the confinement of a cell.²¹

This statement leads us to the concrete message of the film which is provided by the framework, that is, "to remind all the people living outside that they were leading their lives in the silence of the prison."²²

²¹ Lormand, 5.

²² Lormand, 7.

The use of *Julius Caesar* as a medium can also be seen in the prisoners' behaviour: the way the actors behave offstage reflect their onstage performances, and here by 'onstage' I mean during their rehearsals in their cells and in the prison yard, when their inner struggles come to the surface. In the film we can find a great many examples of this phenomenon, and some of these examples I will make reference to below.

It is clear that the fusion of theatre and film was intentional by the Taviani brothers to achieve their intentions mentioned above, and what gave the possibility to them to perform a trick of this kind was that the theatre was under reconstruction, and as a result the inmates were compelled to rehearse within the gates and blockades of the prison, in their cells, all of which contributed to converting Shakespeare's text into their own experiences. They are learning their roles while washing up or walking the corridors; they recite it to themselves or to each other, and when two prisoners practise their roles separately in their own cells, the film uses a montage thus creating the impression of a dialogue, as if they were facing each other, though they are just rehearsing their roles alone. As an example of this montage we may take the dialogue between Brutus and Cassius when the latter endeavours to convince Brutus to rebel against the ambitious Caesar. Both are rehearsing in their own cells reciting Shakespeare's words to themselves, but by the technique of montage the directors indicate that it is originally a dialogue. The two convicts, Sasá and Cosimo Rega, could have rehearsed the dialogue facing each other, but it seems that the directors divided the scene into two monologues, since, unlike in a dialogue, both Sasá and Cosimo Rega are reciting their roles concentrating on their own thoughts, and they seem to communicate with their own selves. I feel that reducing a dialogue into two monologues serves to draw the attention to the inmates, their feelings while reciting Shakespeare's words, the changing of their faces, and the process whereby the Bard's words enliven in their mind, memories and experiences.

Another fine example of the fusion of film and theatre and of the presumption that the film is only secondarily a literary adaptation, is that at times they interrupt the rehearsals with emotions or thoughts related to their past. For instance, Salvatore (Sasá) Striano (the prisoner who plays Brutus), has many such moments. The first takes place while reciting Brutus's famous soliloquy 'Caesar must die', when he declares that he understands what Shakespeare wanted to say but he asks himself how he will make it be understood by the audience.²³ Moreover, there is another relevant scene of this kind when they are practising the oath-scene, and Sasá suddenly stops. At this point of the film, it is Enzo Gallo (Lucius) who phrases the clue of the whole scene and—to some extent—that of the film as well in saying that Sasá has Brutus's personality in him.²⁴ It is revealed that a certain phrase of the Shakespearean text reminded him of one of his former experiences with his friend, who said almost the same sentence as Brutus did as far as the meaning is concerned. The words were different but equal²⁵, as Sasá phrases it.

It is not only Sasá to whom such moments happen, but also Giovanni Arcuri (Caesar) and Juan Bonetti (Decius) who, while practising their dialogue (Act II, Scene II) have a serious quarrel and fight. This fight is initiated by Arcuri, who knows Bonetti very well, and is taken aback by the extent to which Bonetti fits Decius's intriguing character. At this point, Arcuri suddenly alters the Shakespearean text and turns the scene into his own scene. The relevance of this scene is emphasized by close-ups—the camera closes in on their faces capturing the moment when Caesar becomes Arcuri and addresses his words directly to Bonetti. Thus, from the foregoing examples we can clearly see how Shakespeare's text is changed into the words, thoughts and emotions of these inmate-actors through the fusion of theatre and film, since their personal experiences can be perfectly applied to the experience of Shakespeare's characters, as the Taviani brothers brought to the screen "the great and the

²³ Cf.: *Cesare Deve Morire*, 24min. 15-22sec.

²⁴ Cf.: *Cesare Deve Morire*, 28min. 38sec.

²⁵ Cf.: *Cesare Deve Morire*, 29min. 40sec.

pitiable relationships among human beings that include friendship, betrayal, power, freedom and doubt. And murder, too.”²⁶ In addition, it is also important here that each of these inmate-actors was once a “man of honour” as well as Brutus and Cassius, and these inmates were all inspired by similar motives as Brutus and Cassius were. Consequently, this is why they can completely identify with Shakespeare’s protagonists—the types of men are all the same, only the era changed.

Another means of converting Shakespeare’s words into the prisoners’ own experiences and emotions is the use of dialects. Fabio Cavalli, the stage director of this production, at the beginning of the film, gives instructions to the prisoners, including one that they have to use the dialect of the region they come from. It is also mentioned that it must not be a vulgar version of it but rather, an elevated, noble one. Thus Sasá (Brutus) speaks in Apulian, while Cassius and Decius use the Neapolitan dialect, and it is interesting that it is only Arcuri (Caesar) who speaks the noble Roman dialect—he from whom Brutus and Cassius wanted to save Rome. It must be noted, however, that it was not the directors who opted for the use of dialects, but the inmate-actors who were caught by Paolo and Vittorio while trying to translate Shakespeare’s lines into their mother-tongues. As the directors recall, “those men were our actors who were translating their lines into their respective dialects, that is Neapolitan, Sicilian, Apulian with the help of other compatriots”.²⁷ More importantly, the importance of these dialects is also expressed by the prisoners themselves. For instance, in an interview Cosimo Rega (Cassius) declares that they are not professional actors, thus what they can give is given through their souls and thoughts.²⁸ And he further explains that “if [his] thought is in Neapolitan, then it is easier to express it because [he] thinks in Neapolitan.”²⁹ In a similar way, Enzo Gallo (Lucius) declares that when he speaks in dialect, he expresses himself, thus

²⁶ Lormand, 8.

²⁷ Lormand, 9.

²⁸ Cf.: “Interviste con i Protagonisti,” in: *Cesare Deve Morire*, 11.min. 5.sec. Film.

²⁹ Cf.: Interviste, 11min. 30sec.

acting comes more easily to him because it gives him that internal peace which makes him feel stable on stage.³⁰ Consequently, there is no doubt that the use of dialects contributes to the success of the fusion of theatre and film, and also to the film's half adaptive, half appropriative nature. Thus, through the use of dialects, as Fabio Cavalli explains it, "those words written by great authors are invigorated in their experience, in the drama they live, and they are reborn every time on the stage like magic."³¹

In conclusion, we have seen that *Caesar Must Die* can be regarded as an outstanding mixture of a literary adaptation, a documentary on a real event, and a production based on the experiences of prisoners and their changes through art. It would be extremely difficult to take sides as it cannot easily be declared if it is a literary adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, or a documentary. In fact, these two genres are complementary in the case of *Caesar Must Die*, and, I strongly believe, this is why the film proves to be so interesting and elusive in terms of the question what it adapts exactly. We have also examined that this production cannot be properly interpreted without Shakespeare, nor can it be analysed without bearing in mind the inmates' past, present and future, and thus their lives, feelings and emotions. This is why I argued that *Caesar Must Die* is primarily a documentary on the lives of the prisoners of Rebibbia, and secondarily a literary adaptation of Shakespeare's drama, but others might interpret it in another way, and this is the main reason why the film is intriguing and peculiar. One thing, however, is undeniable, that is, Shakespeare's words are necessary for the inmates to manifest themselves and for the audience to get to know the prisoners' inner struggles, and maybe, their own as well. Therefore, from the above analysis we can reach the conclusion that *Caesar Must Die* both interprets Shakespeare's play but at the same time exploits it as a conduit to transmit a new message to the audience through the words of Shakespeare. The film could stand alone as a separate, valuable production, a "degenerate son" of *Julius Caesar*

³⁰ Cf.: Interviste, 11min. 50-58sec.

³¹ Cf.: Interviste, 10min. 50-57sec.

“that Shakespeare would have certainly loved.”³² This mixture of genres does not take from the value of the film; what is more, in the words of Linda Costanzo Cahir, “the most successful films based on literary works translate the words into images by both interpreting and exploiting the source text.”³³

³² Lormand, 7.

³³ Linda Costanzo Cahir, “Novels and Novellas into Film and an Aesthetic Rubric for Film Translations of Literature,” in: *Literature into Film: The Theory and Practical Approaches*, Jefferson: McFarland Company, 2006, p. 97.

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