Searching for the Lubitsch touch: Hazanavicius Puts a twist on Shakespeare in *OSS 117*: *Lost in Rio* (2009) and *The Artist* (2011)

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1 In Ernst Lubitsch's T*o Be or Not To Be* (1942), Hamlet's most famous quote serves not only as the title of the film but also as a sort of secret code, first between lovers and then between spies. This *double entendre* accounts for the excessive — and revealing — reaction of Josef Tura (Jack Benny) upon hearing it in the mouth of Siletsky (Stanley Ridges), the Nazi spy he is trying to thwart:

> Siletsky: Colonel, it's nothing alarming. It's only Shakespeare.
> Tura (*masquerading as Colonel Ehrhardt*): That's what you think!

The suggestion that there is more to Shakespeare's words than what even Shakespeare himself intended is also at work in Michel Hazanavicius' *OSS 117: Lost in Rio* (2009) and *The Artist* (2011). Although Shakespearean references are used but sparingly by Hazanavicius, nevertheless they occur at key moments in the films: at the end of the manhunt in *Lost in Rio*, and with the intrusion of sound in *The Artist*. In the former, Hazanavicius does not hesitate to twist Shakespeare's words, altering Shylock's speech from Act III of *The Merchant of Venice*, so as to elicit the protagonist's compassion for Nazis instead of Jews. In the latter, he presents a truncated version of the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, without sound, obviously, but also without a Romeo — an unexpected turn of events — and transforms a love scene into a settling of scores. In each case, Hazanavicius combines the reference to Shakespeare with film allusions, adding yet another layer of meaning, the better to serve his own purposes in the storytelling. The result, therefore, is not "only Shakespeare," in Siletsky's words, but Shakespeare with a twist.

I. A "borrower […] be" [1]: allusion and diversion

2 The process of borrowing from other sources, and then shaping that material into something else, is typical of Hazanavicius' method, evident from his early work. He started his career on television (Canal+), first as a scriptwriter, then as a director with a series of short films co-directed with Denis Mézerette and comprised of borrowed excerpts (TV series, cartoons and films). The aim was to work on dubbing and editing in order to create a whole new plot. The dialogues emphasised the discrepancy with the original works since the two directors enjoyed putting rude and politically incorrect words in the mouths of renowned actors, with the contribution of their official French dubbers, in a quirky style of humour for which Canal+ has become famous. The first two short films (*Derrick contre Superman* and *Ça détourne*, 1992) gained the attention of the head of Warner France, who offered to make material from the Warner catalogue available to the two directors for a full-length feature film, which was at first intended for distribution in cinemas. The resulting film, entitled *Le Grand détournement* (alternately, *La Classe américaine*) was eventually broadcast only once, on Canal+, but

[1] *Hamlet*, I.3.75. All Shakespeare references come from *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Second Edition. Ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, *et al.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1986] 2005.

became such an instant hit that it was quickly circulated via clandestine copies and later shared online with a larger audience. In an interview for *Les Inrockuptibles*, Michel Hazanavicius explained the starting point of the project:

> For months, we watched tons of VHS tapes without the sound in order to find images that would be either amusing on their own or interesting from a technical point of view, for instance easily edited shot/reverse-shots. We collected a lot of material, until two main threads appeared: John Wayne on the one hand, *All the President's Men* on the other hand and the notion of connecting both in a parody of *Citizen Kane*. [2]

3 The use of excerpts from other films, the multiple sources of inspiration, the idea to combine several existing plots into a new one, as well as the interest in dubbing and the gap between what is seen and what is heard, are characteristics that appear in Hazanavicius' subsequent films.

Even after he left the small screen for the large, Hazanavicius kept exploring themes close to his heart: he remained in the world of TV series with *Mes amis* (1999) and delved into the genres and history of cinema with the two *OSS films* [3]and *The Artist*. Samuel Blumenfeld, a reviewer for *Le Monde*, highlighted this continuity:

> The process of twisting and diverting — at first the quirk of a budding director — became the driving force in *Cairo, Nest of Spies* and then in *Lost in Rio*. Jean Dujardin's enunciation emulates the tone of the French dubbing, with each syllable pronounced distinctly, while his highly allusive body movements mirror those of Dean Martin and Paul Newman in their 1960s impersonations of Matt Helm and Lew Harper, respectively. [4]

4 The former method, which consisted in diverting images of famous Hollywood actors through editing and dubbing, has been turned into another form of diversion, through allusion, which consists in evoking those actors and the characters they impersonated via the figure of a new character played by Jean Dujardin.

II. "Hath not a Nazi eyes?": who has it in for OSS 117?

5 In *Lost in Rio*, OSS 117 is in charge of getting back compromising microfilms containing the names of highly-placed officials in the French administration who collaborated with the Nazis during the German occupation of France. The man behind the blackmail, a former Nazi officer called Von Zimmel now living in Brazil, demands that OSS 117 come to Rio to negotiate the price of the microfilms. Once he gets there, OSS 117 teams up with a Mossad agent named Dolores Kuleshov who wants to capture Von Zimmel and have him tried in Israel. The hunt finally takes them to Mount Corcovado, at the feet of the statue of Cristo Redentor. Dolores urges Von Zimmel to surrender without further ado:

> Dolores: Be a man, Von Zimmel. Surrender quietly.
> Von Zimmel: I'd rather die first. […] By the way, in case you haven't noticed, behind the Nazi there's also a man. A man like any other. Hath not a Nazi eyes? Hath not a Nazi hands?
> OSS 117: You're right. I think he's sincere. He's desperate.
> Von Zimmel: If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? And if you poison us, do we not die? [5]
> OSS 117: Magnificent. Beautiful words. Beautiful and overwhelming. [6]

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[2] Jacky Goldberg. "Le grand détournement. 15 ans de buzz clandestin." *Les Inrockuptibles*, 678 (25 November 2008). Translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

[3] *OSS 117: Cairo, Nest of Spies* (2006) and *OSS 117: Lost in Rio* (2009).

[4] Samuel Blumenfeld. "L'homme qui veut la peau d'OSS 117." *Le Monde 2* (11 April 2009).

[5] "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands? […] If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?" (*The Merchant of Venice*, III.1.54-61).

[6] Translations come from the DVD's English subtitles (Gaumont vidéo, 2009).

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6 In an interview given to *Film français*, Michel Hazanavicius explained what inspired him to take OSS 117 to Brazil in order to track down a former Nazi: "The story presents both a perfect postcard picture of the sixties and all the clichés about Jews, the real topic of the film being precisely clichés and how to twist them." [7] Indeed, anti-Semitic slurs are spouted throughout the film by the protagonist himself and culminate in this final scene. For instance, when the Mossad ask him to work along with them, OSS 117 exclaims:

> OSS 117: Hunt down a Nazi with Jews? How strange!
> Colonel Kutner: Why?
> OSS 117: He'll recognize them.
> Colonel Kutner: How so?
> OSS 117: Their noses, obviously… Their ears, fingers, their eyes.

7 Later, when they explain to him the purpose of their mission:

> Colonel Kutner: Remember Eichmann? We'll capture Von Zimmel the same way. Judge him in Israel for his crimes.
> OSS 117: Which are…?
> Colonel Kutner: Which are…? Abetting genocide.
> OSS 117: Oh that! Yeah… That was some story.

8 They offer to keep the funds for the mission in a safe place:

> OSS 117: I can't. It belongs to France. I can't leave it with just anyone. Don't take "just anyone" personally. Don't think I believe what they say about… Jews and money.

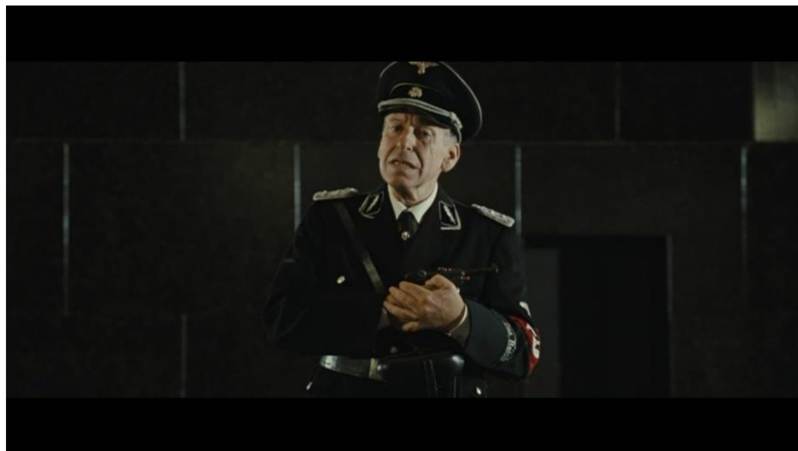
His remarks on the Nazis are a perfect match. He negotiates with Carlotta, Von Zimmel's second-in-command:

> OSS 117: If you help us, I'll serve as a mediator with the Prime Minister, Mr Pompidou. You'll be pardoned. An international coalition will be immediately organized to create a Nazi country. Like Israel.

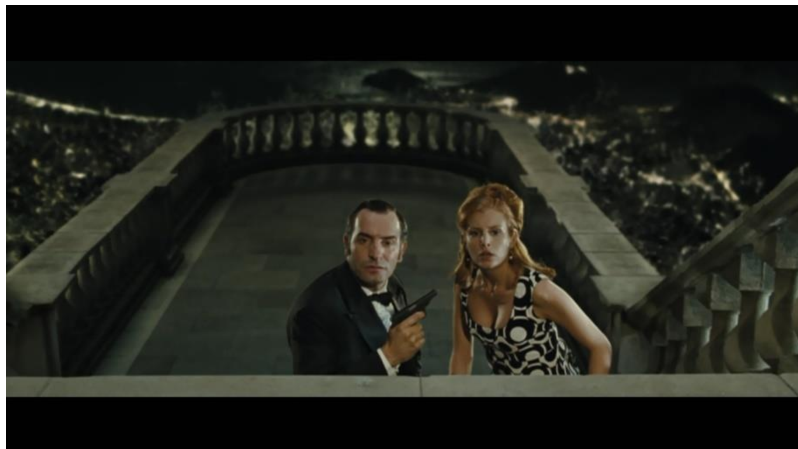
9 In response to Von Zimmel's speech advocating the fifth Reich, he addresses the assembly thus: "Of course, I see what you like about Nazism. Besides, who's to judge?" Finally, after he has captured Von Zimmel, he confides in Dolores: "I'm proud to help an Israeli save a Nazi. I see it as a sign. Why not hope for reconciliation between Jews and Nazis?" Even more than the previous instalment, *Lost in Rio* strongly emphasises its protagonist's stupidity and ignorance. OSS 117 specialises in inane remarks, which often leave his interlocutors speechless or dismayed and cause many moments of awkward and disbelieving silence. Over and over, he demonstrates his inability to read situations and grasp the stakes of the mission he is carrying out. In the same way, he completely misunderstands Von Zimmel's actions in this final scene. The substitution made in Shakespeare's text does not shock OSS 117 who is instead struck by Von Zimmel's sincerity and the beauty of his speech. He does not recognise the quotation and fails to see that he is in fact attending a performance. Indeed, several elements contribute to the theatricality of the scene. The setting, in particular, recalls a theatre stage, with the balustrades on each side of Von Zimmel and the monument behind him framing the acting space. The two spies crouch a few steps below him, in the position of spectators, and reveal their contrasting responses to the actor's performance. After delivering his speech, Von Zimmel takes flight by running into the monument behind him, quickly followed by OSS 117. We see the statue from inside, behind the scenes, as it were.

[7] "Entretien avec Michel Hazanavicius." *Le Film français*, n°3309 (3 April 2009).

OSS 117: Lost in Rio (Michel Hazanavicius, 2009)
The “stage” at the top of Mount Corcovado



The “actor”



The “spectators”

10 This finale in a monumental setting is directly inspired by Alfred Hitchcock’s films, in this instance more specifically *North by Northwest* (1959) and *Saboteur* (1942). Ludovic Bource’s score in this scene is a rewriting of Bernard Herrmann’s music for *North by Northwest*. The chase at the top of the monument and the succession of shots, where OSS 117 drags Von Zimmel upwards and then helps Dolores up in a continuous gesture, clearly refer to it as well, while the climb up the stairs inside the monument and the character hanging from the hand of the statue allude to *Saboteur*. In his

book about the architecture of Alfred Hitchcock, Steven Jacobs studied the way in which the latter used monumental settings in his spy films:

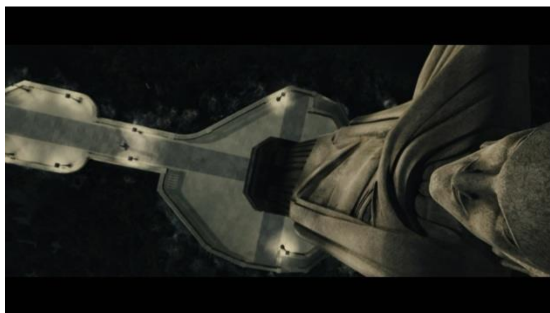
> […] rather than referring to specific patriotic or moral meanings of landmarks, Hitchcock, in the first place, exploits their dramatic potential. Monuments and famous places are turned into landscapes of terror. […] As his theatres, concert halls and cinemas, Hitchcock's landmarks are sites of crime and treason, and 'perfect places to die.'
>
> […] As master of the point-of-view shot, Hitchcock realizes that monuments are not merely passively subjected to the gaze, they also organize their own perception. By privileging certain viewpoints […] they structure our viewing habits. Hitchcock plays on this. He disorders the viewing patterns enforced by the monument. Monuments are often looked at from a 'wrong' position. The characters do not admire the monument. They find themselves in the middle or on top of it and, consequently, in the focus of the tourist gaze. […] The familiar and meanwhile ubiquitously reproduced image of the monument is disrupted. We watch the theatre, as it were, from behind the scenes. [8]

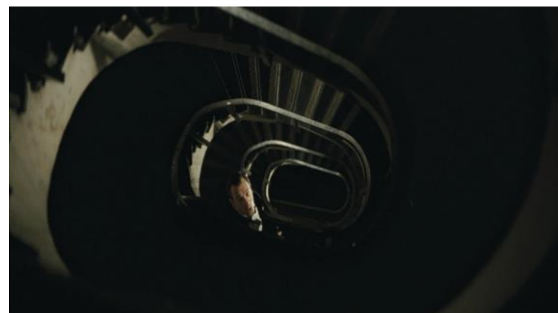
Saboteur (Alfred Hitchcock, 1942)

... Behind the scene at the statue of Liberty

North by Northwest (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959)

... Behind the scene at Mount Rushmore





[8] Steven Jacobs. *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2007, pp. 52-3.

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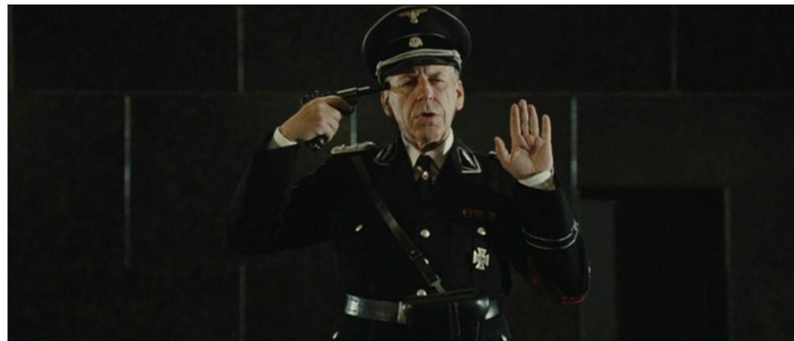
OSS 117: Lost in Rio (Michel Hazanavicius, 2009) ... Behind the scene at the Cristo Redentor

11 Hinging on this notion of watching the theatre from behind the scenes, the Hitchcock references combine with the allusion to another spy comedy in this scene. The theatricality of the scene, the speech about the Nazis' humanity, the character about to die on stage while performing the Hitler salute, Shylock's speech, and of course the process of twisting a Shakespearean quotation, all contribute to evoke Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be*. It is indeed possible to establish a parallel between Von Zimmel's speech and Siletsky's in *To Be or Not To Be* when he tries to seduce the actress Maria Tura by extolling the Nazis' humanity: "We're just like other people. We like to sing. We like to dance. We admire beautiful women. We're human, sometimes very human." Later, when Siletsky is trapped inside the theatre by the actors turned Resistance fighters, he is shot and dies onstage (in the setting of a production of *Hamlet*) giving the Nazi salute.



Von Zimmel (Rüdiger Vogler) — *OSS 117: Lost in Rio* (Hazanavicius, 2009)

Siletsky (Stanley Ridges) — *To Be or Not To Be* (Lubitsch, 1942)

12 In *To Be or Not To Be*, the dramatic text reaches beyond the stage to the whole city of Warsaw, which is turned into a theatre, while the theatre becomes the place where the future of the Resistance is to be decided. The main reason for this is that the actions against the occupying German forces are led by the actors themselves. In order to achieve their goal, they are led to disguise themselves as Nazis and act out the dialogues from the play *Gestapo*, forbidden by the authorities, for which *Hamlet* has been substituted. The resulting superimposition of the roles puts into relief the troubling resemblance between the "real" and the "fake" Nazis. Colonel Ehrhardt's lines turn out to be the same, word for word, as the ones attributed to Nazi characters in *Gestapo* and used by the actor Tura himself when he passes himself off as Ehrhardt in order to entrap Siletsky. Similarly, Shakespearean

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lines are also used on and off the stage, for different purposes. “To be or not to be” is first a code used by the lovers to fool the lady’s husband, then by Siletsky to unmask Tura. Shylock’s speech, which appears three times in the film, becomes part and parcel, like the dialogues from *Gestapo*, of the play prepared by the Resistance for the Nazis. It is even the keystone of their escape plan. Like the actors in Lubitsch’s film, who use Shakespeare to escape the Nazis, Von Zimmel uses Shylock’s speech to try and evade a trial in Israel. This speech by Shylock highlights the problematic nature of the Shakespearean character, as mentioned by Jacqueline Nacache:

> In the humanistic reading of the Shylock character, the speech from Act 3 is the one most often selected because it shows him as a man in pain, moved by a desire for a legitimate revenge. On the contrary, everything that precedes and follows that speech in the scene confirms the vilest aspects of the character. In the film, the decision to keep only extracts from the speech therefore pertains to a compassionate reading of Shylock. The meaning is clear, though the word ‘Jew’ is carefully removed, which is not surprising for a Hollywood production of that period. [9]

13 Shylock’s speech was thus already altered by Lubitsch, who removed the word “Jew,” no doubt for reasons of censorship, but also because, by substituting the pronoun “we,” he included all the oppressed Poles in Greenberg’s impassioned defence. Von Zimmel makes a different substitution by replacing the word “Jew” with the word “Nazi,” thus redirecting the “compassionate reading” of the passage for his own benefit. OSS 117’s reaction is proof enough that he is gulled by Von Zimmel’s manoeuvre, contrary to Dolores, and puts into relief the troubling affinities between the French spy and his antagonist. In his article about the references to Shylock in *To Be or Not To Be*, Joel Rosenberg evoked the proximity between the actors impersonating Nazis and the Nazis themselves in the film:

> Lubitsch’s elaborate comedy of disguise has slyly muddled the boundary of Nazi and non-Nazi, thus both liberating and unsettling audiences in the same stroke. The human fallibility of the middle-echelon Nazis and that of the Poles who have come forth to deceive them have become intimately intertwined. [10]

14 By twisting Shylock’s speech to serve his own devices, Von Zimmel appeals to OSS 117’s firmly established prejudices. The final scene of the film, with its distorted Shakespearean quotation, is thus Michel Hazanavicius’ way of dealing a finishing blow to his protagonist. In his review entitled “L’homme qui veut la peau d’OSS 117” (the man who has it in for OSS 117), Samuel Blumenfeld concludes: “The director designed his film as a declaration of hatred towards its main character.” [11] The man who has it in for OSS 117 is therefore Michel Hazanavicius himself.

15 In truth, in Michel Hazanavicius’ films, the main character is rarely a “hero” but rather someone who is set apart from the rest by his inability to clearly understand or deal with the situations he finds himself in. This is quite obvious in the two OSS 117 films. It is also true for the protagonist of *The Artist* and it is interesting to note that, in that picture as well, Hazanavicius combines film allusions with a Shakespearean reference to emphasise the protagonist’s isolation at a turning point of the story.

III. “Shall I hear more or shall I speak at this?”: silencing Romeo

16 The plot of *The Artist* spans the period between 1927 and 1932 in Hollywood and derives its inspiration from the fate of silent movie stars whose careers waned after the advent of the talkies. [12]

[9] Jacqueline Nacache. “Lubitsch et Shakespeare: être ou ne pas être à Varsovie.” In Pierre Beylot (ed.). *Emprunts et citations dans le champ artistique*. Paris: L’Harmattan, Champs Visuels, 2004, p. 133.

[10] Joel Rosenberg. “Shylock’s Revenge: The Doubly Vanished Jew in Ernst Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not To Be*.” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, 16.3 (1996): 230.

[11] Samuel Blumenfeld. “L’homme qui veut la peau d’OSS 117."

[12] “To begin with, I remembered a story told by the playwright Jean-Claude Grumberg who wanted to write about an actor whose career was ruined by the talkies. […] That story took my fancy.” *Cineuropa*, Interview

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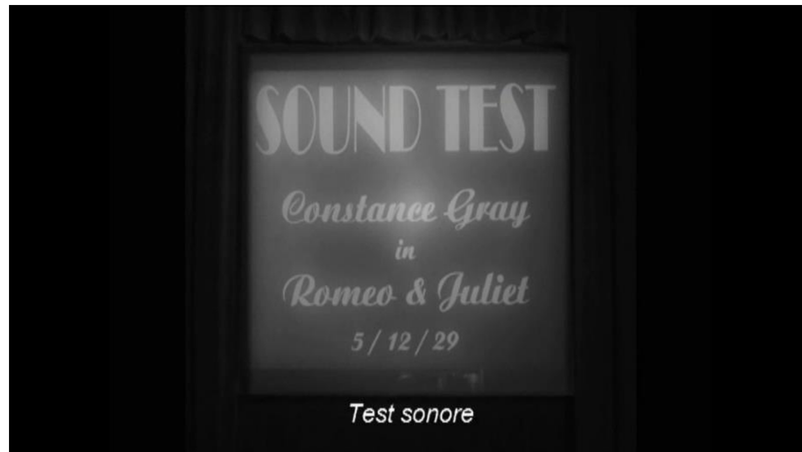
George Valentin (Jean Dujardin) is at the height of his fame when the arrival of the talkies threatens to change everything, but he does not pay attention to it, convinced that it is only a passing craze. By 1929, however, it becomes increasingly clear that silent films are destined to disappear. Valentin is shooting a scene from what appears to be *The Three Musketeers* when his producer (John Goodman) asks him to follow him into a projection room. There he shows him a sound test consisting of a short scene from Shakespeare starring his usual screen partner Constance Gray (Missy Pyle). Although there is no sound, Valentin's reaction to Gray's performance shows that he finds the whole thing ludicrous and he leaves the room after flatly refusing to take part in a talkie.

17 The chronology of events is clearly shown throughout the film, and the sequence in which the sound test is included is set precisely in 1929, as indicated first by an intertitle and then by the mention of it in the title of the projected scene.



Title of the sound test — *The Artist* (Hazanavicius, 2011)

18 The repetition highlights the importance of the date. It is truly a turning point since, in that year, the studios that had not already done so started producing talkies. It is also the year in which Shakespeare stopped being silent on the movie screen, which may account for Hazanavicius' choice of a Shakespearean scene in this passage. Indeed, the first talking adaptation of a Shakespeare play was released that year. It was *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by Sam Taylor and starring Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. It was a film of transition, released in two versions, as underlined by Kenneth Rothwell:

> During a transitional period when many provincial theaters were as yet unequipped for sound projection, Janus-like, the 1929 Douglas Fairbanks/Mary Pickford *The Taming of the Shrew* (#584) looked backward to the silents and forward to the talkies. Originally a silent, the dialogue and sound effects of this consummate farce were subsequently added. [13]

19 In the scene from *The Artist*, we are faced with the paradox of a sound test for which there is no sound, which propels us into the age of sound while keeping us trapped in the silent period. [14] Another element which connects *The Taming of the Shrew* with the passage from *The Artist* is the presence in

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of Michel Hazanavicius by Fabien Lemercier, 5 October 2011. Online: http://cineuropa.org/ff.aspx?t=ffocusinterview&l=fr&tid=2301&did=210256 (accessed 26 March 2014).

[13] Kenneth S. Rothwell. "Shakespeare on Screen: A Chronicle History." *Internet Shakespeare Editions*. University of Victoria, 2002. Online: http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/spotlight/2005-10/filmintro3.html (accessed 26 March 2014).

[14] "Although *The Artist* could be viewed as a recreation of a silent film that looks back nostalgically to a period of change and utilises a range of inter-images to articulate the transition, it consistently highlights a discrepancy between reality and representation. Essentially, it probes the tensions between the image and its referent, and alerts the spectator to such tensions" (Fran Pheasant-Kelly. "Beyond Simulation: Inter-Textuality, Inter-Imaging and Pastiche in *The Artist*." In Carla Taban (ed.). *Meta- and Inter-Images in Contemporary Visual Art and Culture*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013, p. 229).

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the cast of Douglas Fairbanks, who was one of the main inspirations for the character of George Valentin. There are several allusions to Fairbanks' career in *The Artist*, one of them being of course the scene from *The Three Musketeers* at the beginning of the sequence. It was a silent film Fairbanks starred in in 1921. The transition from silent films to the talkies could thus be suggested by allusions to the silent and talking periods of Fairbanks' career.

Douglas Fairbanks — *The Three Musketeers* (Fred Niblo, 1921)

Jean Dujardin — *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011)

20 Although this adaptation of the *Shrew* is not considered as particularly memorable, there is a scene at the end of the film which caused quite a stir at the time of release. When Kate swears obedience to Petruchio, she faces the camera, in close-up, and winks at Bianca rather emphatically in a way that reveals exactly how earnest her vow of obedience is, which is to say not at all. There is something very similar in Constance Gray's provocative way of fluttering her eyelashes at the end of the sound test.

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Mary Pickford as Kate — *The Taming of the Shrew* (Sam Taylor, 1929)

Missy Pyle as Constance Gray / Juliet — *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011)

21 Kenneth Rothwell interpreted Mary Pickford's provocation as a form of protest:

> [When] Mary Pickford faces the camera, looks directly at the audience, and winks toward Bianca to punctuate her controversial pledge of obedience to Petruchio, a statement of prime importance on the rights of American women was made. It may not have been what Shakespeare had in mind, but a beloved actress appropriated his work to her own ends. [15]

22 As for Constance Gray's provocation, it may be interpreted as a taunt directed at Valentin with whom there is an intense and ferocious rivalry. This situation is made clear from the beginning of the film, in the scene of the premiere, when he parades endlessly in front of a delighted audience while she is confined to waiting in the wings, silently seething and mouthing curses at him. The scene of the sound test is the point when she can finally have her revenge, as it were, for this time she gets to parade while he is relegated to the role of spectator. This reversal of roles is significant at this point in the film because it anticipates Valentin's impending decline.

23 The scene Constance Gray plays, however, is not an excerpt from *The Taming of the Shrew* but from *Romeo and Juliet*, as evidenced by the title and the setting, which evokes the balcony scene. The lines can also be easily recognised by reading the actress's lips, thus confirming the identification of the passage (II.2.75-86).

[15] Rothwell. "Shakespeare on Screen: A Chronicle History."

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On screen: Constance as Juliet — *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011)

In front of the screen: George, the spectator — *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011)

24 What is striking here is how Hazanavicius uses a mythical love scene — the balcony scene — as a way to settle scores between two rival actors. In *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, Judith Buchanan describes how iconic scenes from Shakespeare, such as the balcony scene, are engraved in the spectators' imagination and how reconfiguring them affects their reception:

> [It] is partly in […] pictorial form that the drama latently resides in our individual and collective imaginations. This culturally prevalent and yet only half-consciously acknowledged series of images emerges from a remembered composite elision of edition illustrations, Shakespearean paintings and well-known cameo moments from the play's performance history. […] Each of the plays has its own parallel life as a sequence of pictures from which iconic moments stand out: Romeo scaling the balcony, Portia addressing the court, Malvolio cross-gartered, Ophelia drowning in the brook, Othello murdering Desdemona, Macbeth reaching for an air-drawn dagger, Prospero conjuring a sea-tempest.
>
> A silent Shakespeare film can act, more or less consciously, as a conduit to this communally owned pictorial "version" of a play by trading upon, or even quoting, the series of images conventionally associated with each. Equally, it can diverge from established pictorial expectations by reconfiguring the play in terms that defy the conventionalized pattern of Shakespearean tableaux we have come to expect. Both when adhered to and when eschewed, the set of culturally prevalent images associated with each drama necessarily forms part of the interpretative lens through which we view the films. [16]

[16] Judith Buchanan. *Shakespeare on Silent Film. An Excellent Dumb Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. xx-xxi.

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25 Removing an essential element from an iconic scene can indeed be disturbing for the spectator. An example is in Baz Lurhmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996), when the balcony scene is turned into the swimming-pool scene. [17] In Hazanavicius' rendition, the element removed is no less than one of the two lovers. The title of the sound test makes no mention of another actor besides Gray and her usual screen partner is this time on the other side of the screen, sitting among the spectators. The logical consequence of removing Romeo from the scene is that he does not get to say his lines. In this particular passage of the balcony scene, Romeo has but one line, but it clearly echoes the situation of the protagonist of *The Artist*: "Shall I hear more or shall I speak at this?" (II.2.79). That, of course, is the crucial question facing George Valentin in this passage: shall he speak? In Shakespeare's play, Romeo is meant to speak this line as an aside because, in the first part of the balcony scene, he overhears Juliet's monologue and remains hidden from view. The dialogue is thus based on a paradoxical mode of communication whereby Juliet addresses Romeo without knowing he is there and can hear her, whereas Romeo replies to her while making sure she cannot hear him. In *The Artist*, this moment of flawed communication has an analogy in the conundrum of a sound test for which there is no sound, and where Constance Gray's Juliet issues a challenge across the screen to her silenced Romeo in the audience. [18] Speaking and not speaking, hearing and not hearing are central elements in this passage of the film. Although Romeo breaks his silence a few lines later in the play, George Valentin concludes the scene of the sound test by flatly refusing to speak, *i.e.* refusing to star in a talkie. To make sense of this scene, it is necessary to take into account the whole sequence, including the following nightmare scene where sound makes a belated and all the more unexpected intrusion. This is the real "sound test," as all the objects, animals and human beings on the screen are echoed by corresponding sounds, with the notable exception of course of George Valentin's voice. This mutism is not confined to the realm of the dream, however, for when he wakes up, he gets up and walks away into darkness and deep silence (with neither noise nor music) for thirty-seven very long seconds. This is a metaphor of what awaits him, that is to say the decline of his career, sparked by his refusal to speak. Romeo's absence in the balcony scene foreshadows George Valentin's disappearance from the movie screens. The sound test was indeed a test which Valentin failed. In the audio commentary available in the DVD supplements, [19] the director of *The Artist* analyses the scene of the sound test in the following manner:

> We've just seen the arrival of the antagonist. And the antagonist is sound. That's why, though the character of the producer almost became a villain during the writing of the script, I eventually decided I didn't want him to be. I thought, no, he's not the bad guy, sound is the bad guy and it is against sound that the battle will be waged.

26 George Valentin's story is inspired by the fate of silent stars who did not manage to make the transition into the talkies. It is particularly modelled on John Gilbert's story, whose career was supposedly ruined after his producer Louis B. Mayer slandered his voice and spread the rumour that it was high-pitched. [20] As it happens, John Gilbert played the part of Romeo opposite Norma Shearer's Juliet in an unconventional version of the balcony scene in *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*. The film was MGM's fifth talking picture in 1929 (the studio started producing them that very year) and was meant to showcase their greatest stars in talking and singing parts. The episode starring John Gilbert and Norma Shearer starts with them playing the balcony scene before they are unexpectedly

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[17] A light appears behind a sheer curtain at an upper window, prompting Romeo to climb up the trellis toward the balcony in the full belief that Juliet is up there. However, when the curtain is drawn abruptly to reveal the nurse, Romeo cringes at this unexpected and unwelcome appearance and climbs back down just as Juliet comes out of a lift opening onto the pool area. Baz Lurhmann thus plays on the spectator's expectations and rejects the balcony in favour of the pool to great comic effect.

[18] "A consideration of *The Artist* as a meta-referential work in its examination of the silent/sound changeover is accentuated by a tendency for its characters to display an awareness of their (intra- and extra-diegetic) audiences. Indeed, its visual elements, narrative trajectory and sound effects consistently alert (extra-diegetic) audiences to the fact that they are watching a film" (Pheasant-Kelly. "Beyond Simulation: Inter-Textuality, Inter-Imaging and Pastiche in *The Artist*," p. 228).

[19] Warner Home Video, 2011.

[20] Ariane Allard & Michel Hazanavicius. *The Artist, le livre*. Paris: Éditions de la Martinière, 2012, p. 47.

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interrupted by the voice of the director (Lionel Barrymore) who receives instructions to modernise the story by changing those "old-fashioned lines." The two actors then play the balcony scene again in flapper language, the slang of the 1920s.

John Gilbert and Norma Shearer — *The Hollywood Revue of 1929* (Charles Reisner, 1929)

27 Interestingly enough, in this episode, which is one of the first occurrences of Shakespeare in the talkies (with the *Taming of the Shrew* that same year), the subject is precisely the difficulty of using Shakespearean dialogue in a talking picture and the necessity of adapting Shakespeare's language to the taste of modern audiences by removing his words and replacing them with a contemporary idiom. No sooner has Shakespearean text appeared in a talkie than it has been deemed problematic. This view is confirmed by the caption accompanying a picture of Norma Shearer published in *Photoplay* in September 1929:

> John Gilbert's Juliet — on the screen. Norma Shearer appears in the Balcony Scene with Jack as her Romeo in *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*. […] Miss Shearer has the distinction of being the first woman to play a Shakespearean role in the talkies. And it is no small achievement to recite blank verse before the all-too-modern microphone. [21]

28 This talking interpretation of Juliet seems to have been a sort of "sound test" for Norma Shearer, as indeed *The Hollywood Revue* was for the MGM stars who had to prove they could be as successful in talking roles as they had been in silent ones. A few months later, following the rumours regarding his supposedly "squeaky" voice, [22] John Gilbert's career was on the decline, as evidenced by an article published in *Photoplay* in January 1930, entitled "Is John Gilbert Through?" with a catchy subheading: "Read to the end of this great story of a great star menaced by the talkies – and you'll find out!" [23] The episode of the balcony scene is indeed often cited as the moment which may have triggered his fall from grace, similarly to George Valentin in *The Artist*.

[21] *Photoplay*, 36.4 (1929): 20.

[22] Although George Valentin's reasons for rejecting sound films so vehemently remain somewhat obscure until the end of the film, the last scene, in which his voice is finally heard, reveals that he speaks with a very strong French accent, which may account for his initial reluctance.

[23] Katherine Albert. "Is Jack Gilbert Through?" *Photoplay*, 37.3 (1930): 29.

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Is JACK GILBERT Through?

Read to the end of this great story of a great star menaced by the talkies—and you'll find out!

By Katherine Albert

WHEN beautiful Ida Adair, second-rate actress in a traveling theatrical troupe, bore an unwanted, unloved man child in Logan, Utah, she didn't know that some day he would hold the fate of two enormous studios in the hollow of his hand.

She didn't know that the little boy, cradled in the top of a trunk, lulled to sleep by the clicking of wheels over rails, would grow up to be one of the most glamorous contemporary figures.

Lovely Ida, as profligate as a Winter wind, as vivid as a sunset, called her son John. It was a plain name for a plain little boy—a sullen child who resented life before he could talk and who looked upon the world into which he had been unfortunate enough to be born with a growing distaste.

Jack Gilbert, erstwhile soldier of fortune, erstwhile rubber salesman, extra boy, director, writer, itinerant actor, has become one of the most exciting personalities that ever flashed across a screen.

He holds one of the most unusual contracts ever given a star. And it's an iron-bound contract, without options!

In two years he will be paid, as salary, one million dollars! His studio bungalow is more elaborate than most of the homes in Hollywood. His fame has spread around the world. Thousands of women who have never seen him are in love with him.

AND now Hollywood says that the great Gilbert, the amazing lover of the screen, is through—has failed at the very height of his career.

It says that his enemies (and he has plenty) are glad. But that the studio officials who must pay him a million dollars in two years, whether his pictures play to vacant seats or not, are turning white-haired over night.

Is Jack Gilbert finished? Is his art but dust and ashes? Let us consider the facts in this amazing case.

The signing of the name John Gilbert to a little piece of paper was of utmost importance to a fifty million dollar deal. Jack was more or less of a pawn. He didn't realize how vital he was to the financial gods.

He had been discontented, miserable—as he usually is, except when he is radiant, enthusiastic—with his lot at the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios. He had argued with the producers about stories and characterizations. United Artists had made him an offer. He decided to accept.

But forces of which he knew nothing were working around him. The West Coast officials had heard only rumors of the Fox-M-G-M merger, or rather, the sale of the controlling interest of Loew's Inc. to the Fox organization.

But the New York powers knew of the deal and they also knew that if Gilbert, one of the most important stars, slipped through their fingers, the deal might not go through. Fox wanted M-G-M, but it needed all their stars.

GRETA GARBO was safely bound under a long-term contract. Lon Chaney, Marion Davies, Billy Haines, Ramon Novarro, Joan Crawford were all secure. Only Gilbert showed signs of leaving.

Gilbert and his manager went to New York and the executives there told him that he must remain with M-G-M. Gilbert refused. At last he was asked, "But what will make you stay?"

His manager answered. He outlined a contract so absurd, so preposterous that he expected only loud guffaws. But the executive didn't laugh. He knew that if Gilbert didn't sign, the tremendous deal might fall through.

"You will stay on those terms?" asked the executive. "Very well, I will draw up such a contract."

And such a contract! It is for two years, two pictures a year at $250,000 a picture or about $10,000 a week. Gilbert has the right to O.K. or N.G. all stories. He was given an enormous dressing room bungalow, second to

[PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 128]

Jack Gilbert in his first talking picture, "Redemption." He was nervous, too highly keyed, self-conscious. The studio says it is "temporarily shelved." Will it ever be shown?

29

Photoplay, January 1930

Is George Valentin through? *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011)

29 As in *The Artist*, the female lead passed the test of sound when her male partner failed. [24] As a matter of fact, a few years later, Norma Shearer starred as Juliet opposite Lesley Howard in George Cukor's adaptation of the play in 1936. In a strange coincidence of dates, John Gilbert died in 1936, at the age of 38, destroyed by alcohol, [25] which might have been George Valentin's fate without Peppy Miller's providential intervention.

30 Through the two examples found in *OSS 117: Lost in Rio* and *The Artist*, it is thus possible to see how Michel Hazanavicius puts a twist on Shakespeare and diverts the excerpted scenes for his own ends, not unlike Mary Pickford in *The Taming of the Shrew*. In each case, the Shakespearean reference has multiple layers since it is connected not only with Shakespeare but also with the way other directors have made use of Shakespeare in previous films. Hazanavicius combines several film allusions with the Shakespearean reference in order to give it new meaning and provide a specific outlook on the situation of the main character at a deciding moment of the plot. These layered allusions are both an expression of Hazanavicius' cinephilia and an example of the way he puts it to use in his own films. Only Hazanavicius? That's what you think!

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[24] Conversely, in *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen, 1952) which is set at the same period as *The Artist* and where a similar rivalry exists between the screen partners, it is the leading lady's voice which is problematic, causing a jarring discrepancy between her appearance as an eighteenth-century French aristocrat on screen and her screechy voice and American accent, to great comic effect.

[25] Allard & Hazanavicius. *The Artist, le livre*, p. 126.

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