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► To cite this version:

Sébastien Lefait. “ “As if a man were [director] of himself”: Performance Refusal as Cinematic Authorship in Ralph Fiennes’s Coriolanus (2011) ”. *Film Journal*, 2020, *Actors behind the Camera*”, coordonné par Nicole Cloarec et Delphine Letort., 6. hal-03140781

HAL Id: hal-03140781

<https://amu.hal.science/hal-03140781>

Submitted on 9 Apr 2021

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Authoring Oneself: The Refusal of Performance as Cinematic Authorship in Ralph Fiennes' *Coriolanus*

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Introduction: the Split Personality of the Actor/Director

It is not unusual for an actor to aim for a place behind the camera. It is probably even less surprising that Ralph Fiennes, a British actor of Royal Shakespeare Company fame, should want to direct an adaptation of a Shakespeare play. Adapting such a famously complex play as *Coriolanus*, however, is a choice that calls for exploration – especially as the work of a first-time director. Indeed, Fiennes' adaptation of *Coriolanus* was followed by *The Invisible Woman* (UK, 2013), in which he directed himself as Charles Dickens, and more recently by *The White Crow* (UK/Fr/Serb, 2018), in which he played the part of Pushkin, ballet master and the teacher of Nureyev. For Fiennes, it seems that a stage career peppered with parts in mainstream productions (he is mostly famous nowadays as Lord Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* franchise) is a springboard to becoming the director of adaptations, but also the author figure in films directed by himself.

It would nonetheless be simplistic to consider this evolution as just a stage in a clever career plan. First, because there is probably less fame attached to playing Pushkin than Lord Voldemort – at least from the point of view of his fans. Second, because his trajectory is from actor to film-maker and author figure – a reading which, as I argue in this article, justifies the choice of *Coriolanus* as a midway

point, a transition from acting to ‘authoring oneself’. The point is less to become a film-maker than to reach *auteur* status by adapting famous works. This perspective, that is less rare than may at first seem, may open up new avenues for adaptation studies. Yet as with all analyses of Shakespeare adaptations, the first thing to research is the play itself – all the more so since *Coriolanus* provides a reflection on the transition from being a mere actor to being able to direct oneself as an actor.

In Act 5 Scene 3 of *Coriolanus*, indeed, the titular character returns from exile to his mother city of Rome.¹ Although fighting for Rome has earned him his new name as the defeater of the Volsces at Corioles, he has at this stage joined his former Volscian enemy, Aufidius. Coriolanus is now determined to destroy his homeland in retaliation for his banishment. In a last-ditch attempt to make him change his mind, a delegation comprising among others his mother Volumnia, his wife Virgilia, and his son (described in the list of characters as “young” Martius – Coriolanus’s original name, before the battle of Corioles, being Caius Martius) – visits him outside the walls of the besieged city. Volumnia Virgilia and her son bow in silence before him as he comments on the scene that unfolds, describing its intended function (“*intercession*” [5.3.32]), the resulting emotion that is supposed to grow in him (natural mercy for his relatives), and reiterating his inflexible decision not to flinch before his family as its members show him, to make him change his mind, what consequences his grudge against Rome would undoubtedly have.

As if to ensure that he will not be overwhelmed by passion, he reasserts his intention to wreak revenge on those who banished him although he saved Rome. He does so in what is probably the most famous quotation derived from the play, before finally giving his wife and mother the chance to address him: “*Let the Volsces/Plow Rome and harrow Italy, I’ll never/Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand/As if a man were author of himself,/And knew no other kin.*” (5.3.33-37). Fewer than five lines later, however, he already seems to waver in his resolution, and no more than a few formalities are uttered by his wife Virgilia to account for the reversal. Coriolanus, admitting that he is on the verge of caving in, soon describes his sudden change of heart by resorting to another artistic metaphor, which directly echoes his mention of self-authorship just a few lines earlier: “*Like a dull actor now,/I have forgot my part, and I am out,/Even to a full disgrace*” (5.3.40-42).

It is not rare for Shakespeare’s characters to achieve such critical distance on themselves to make sense of their own motivations, in speeches that make it sound as if they have suddenly become ghostly presences watching their own performances from a place among the audience. *Coriolanus*, however, is one of the very few instances of Shakespeare addressing the question of authorship in so close a relationship with that of acting.² Many Shakespeare scholars have commented on this aspect.³ Some have even treated *Coriolanus* as a companion piece to *Hamlet*.⁴ This essential personality trait

¹ All quotations are taken from William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. R. B Parker, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

² James D. Mardock, *Our Scene Is London: Ben Jonson’s City and the Space of the Author*, New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 6.

³ Richard Hillman, ‘Tragedy as a Crying Shame in *Coriolanus* and Alexandre Hardy’s *Coriolan*: The ‘Boy of Tears’ and the Hardy Boys’, in *Coriolan de William Shakespeare: Langages, Interprétations, politique(s)*, Tours: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2013, pp. 175–94, <http://books.openedition.org/pufr/2848>.

⁴ Some brilliantly notice for instance, that Hamlet fails to take action until he considers stagecraft as a way out of his procrastination, where Coriolanus is an action man who proves unable to complete his bravery with the adequate theatrical skills. See Tetsuya Motohashi, ‘Body Politic and Political Body in *Coriolanus*’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. XXX, no. 2, 1994, pp. 97–112. Mentioned by Martha Kalnin Diede in her *Shakespeare’s Knowledgeable Body*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008, p. 155, note 35.

in *Coriolanus* makes the play the ideal repository for a study of the actor-turned-director, or, in Shakespeare’s terms, the actor who tries to be “*author of himself*”, i.e. of his own character. In the case of *Coriolanus*, the would-be author of himself fails to become such because he remains stuck in his status as a poor player who is barely able to “*strut and fret his hour upon the stage*” and perform the part dictated by his mother.

Because of this famously metaleptic streak running through *Coriolanus*, it is tempting to adapt the exact wording of Shakespeare’s line, making it better suited to the study of the actor-director in the context of film adaptation as a result. This may be achieved through a textual amendment of Shakespeare’s wording to “*as if a man were director of himself*”. The altered line may not immediately make sense, but this will hopefully no longer be the case by the end of the present article. Indeed, the substitution of “*director*” for “*author*” has the lure of an automatic, superficially logical modification that preserves the structure of Shakespeare’s reasoning on acting and authorship as described by *Coriolanus* in his famous lines. Caius Martius’s downfall starts when he receives the name and title *Coriolanus*, both of which come with a (political) part for him to perform.⁵ His persistent inability to do so is his tragic flaw, ultimately leading to his demise. The closest he gets to overcoming this flaw is in the passage quoted above. Nevertheless, immediately after realising that, since he cannot play a role given him by someone else, he might just as well write a part for himself, he changes his mind again. *Coriolanus* soon observes that even if he were able to do so, he would remain unable to act the part.

The tragedy of *Coriolanus*, however, is not just that of a character who fails to govern his destiny because he cannot act. His hubris is that he deems it below him to have to perform his new part in front of the common people. This is especially the case when he is asked to show off his battle scars in order to become consul of Rome.⁶ *Coriolanus* is stuck in parts he does not consider suited to his choices. The origin of the character’s tragic pride thus identified, the transposition from drama to film is mechanical. In the world of film, the reflection on acting seems to apply almost unchanged – the character refuses parts imposed on him in the hope of finding, and ultimately inventing, roles that are suited to what he thinks he is or just deserves. The authorship dimension of Shakespeare’s meditation, however, is less simplistically handled. One might think that the author of a film, at least in the literary sense of the term, is the scenarist as much as the director. And there are indeed cases in which the artistic intervention of actors consists in tampering with the script, even to the point of changing it completely.⁷

Yet with *Coriolanus*, tragic infeasibility actually comes from the impossibility of refusing a part, which then motivates the decision to choose another part for oneself (when *Coriolanus* joins Aufidius against Rome), and leads ultimately to the character contemplating authoring a part for himself. In cinematic terms, *Coriolanus* considers that there are some roles he should be allowed to refuse to play. Upon observing the impossibility of doing so, he decides to play the one role he is not allowed to play – that of the enemy of his own people, and traitor to his own city of Rome. The capacity of

⁵ Stuart Elden, ‘Bellies, Wounds, Infections, Animals, Territories: The Political Bodies of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*’, in Jenny Edkins and Adrian Kear, eds., *International Politics and Performance: Critical Aesthetics and Creative Practice*, New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2013, p. 195.

⁶ Jeffrey R. Wilson, ‘*Coriolanus*’s Wounds’, <https://wilson.fas.harvard.edu/stigma-in-shakespeare/coriolanus%E2%80%99s-wounds>, n.d; accessed 22 February 2019.

⁷ Mario Eugenio Beguiristain, *The Actors Studio and Hollywood in the 1950s: A History of Theatrical Realism* Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006, p. 211.

being in control of one's performance, therefore, translates in cinematic terms as the ability to choose parts for oneself, which technically becomes the transfictional equivalent of being "*author of oneself*". And in the world of film, the most effective way of doing so may be for an actor to direct himself by casting himself in his own film.

At the end of this lengthy preamble focused mainly on Shakespeare's play, it should not be surprising to learn that famous Shakespearean stage actor turned Hollywood star Ralph Fiennes decided to adapt *Coriolanus* and to play the titular part for his debut as a film-maker. As I have sought to demonstrate, the play is about the very same type of switchover. What remains problematic at this stage, however, is the choice of a tragedy where that very same strategy fails for the main character as a way for Fiennes to successfully operate a similar transition from film actor to director. As a case study, *Coriolanus* thus suggests at the outset that a Shakespeare play was no random starting-point for Fiennes' career as a film-maker. On the contrary, it may have proved instrumental in turning the general redeployment operation into a success – at least compared to the apparently easier decision to direct oneself in a film based on an original script. The purpose of the present article will be to determine the ways in which adapting *Coriolanus*, and more generally the choice of an adaptation as a first film, sets Ralph Fiennes on his way to a successful transition from actor to director.

Fiennes' (Tele)Visual Update

This approach, at least superficially, comes with a major problem. In his adaptation of Act 5 Scene 3, Fiennes' scriptwriter John Logan includes neither the reference to being "*author*" of oneself nor the mention of a "*dull actor*". This excision is one of the many carried out by Logan in order to turn Shakespeare's long lines into less complex film dialogue.⁸ The cut should not, however, seem to contradict the present article's main argument, according to which Fiennes uses *Coriolanus* as a transitional adaptation. Firstly, seeing a contradiction here would rest on a conception of adaptation as providing fidelity to the source text, something that scholars long ago dismissed.⁹ Academics have demonstrated, for instance, not that fidelity is of little use in understanding adaptation processes, but that the concept only remains operative at the cost of considering that there are multiple ways for the adaptation to be "*faithful*" to the source work.¹⁰ Finding visual equivalences for some of the elements found in the source text is one of them. It constitutes a semiotic strategy that is often at the core of theatrical stagecraft itself – given that some plays are too long not to be cut in production, performing them completely makes it necessary to compensate for absent lines with non-verbal ways of reconstructing meaning.¹¹

Naturally, a compensation strategy such as this is even better suited to the cinematic adaptation of a play, as the cinema is very commonly considered an artistic practice that relies more

⁸ Philippa Sheppard, *Devouring Time: Nostalgia in Contemporary Shakespearean Screen Adaptations*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, p. 273.

⁹ Kate Newell, "'We're off to See the Wizard' (Again): Oz Adaptations and the Matter of Fidelity", in Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis R. Cutchins, eds, *Adaptation Studies: New Approaches*, Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010, p. 78.

¹⁰ Paul Wells, 'Thou Art Translated: Analysing Animated Adaptation', in Deborah Cartmell and Imedla Whelehan, eds., *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2013, p. 145.

¹¹ I refer the reader to Anthony Davies's view that the camera brings "*dramatic compensation*" for whatever the source material may lack. See Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Peter Brook and Akira Kurosawa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 12–13.

heavily on visuals than does the theatre.¹² This is even more the case for adaptations that re-contextualise historic texts (or narratives that are set in the distant past)¹³. Within that adaptation subgroup, the best instances are films that seek to update the source work in all possible ways, including re-contextualisation. Fiennes' *Coriolanus* does both, drawing as it does from re-contextualising and updating strategies to ease the actor's transition to film directing. The film is set in contemporary Rome, although the city is barely recognisable. Many scenes involving everyday people take place in nondescript locations, the battle scenes take place in city streets that are more reminiscent of often seen images of modern warfare in the Balkans or in the Middle East than of Roman environments, and the political scenes take place in meeting halls or in TV studios. Accordingly, the ubiquitous presence of television in Fiennes' adaptation is at the core of its updating strategy. Not only are the time and location modernised, but so too are the instruments of information and communication, with direct consequences for the play's political dimension and, primarily, for its performance subtext.

In the play, indeed, one of Coriolanus's decisions both prevents him from climbing the greasy pole and triggers the mechanism that will result in his death at the end of the tragedy. In Act 2 Scene 2, Coriolanus is required by tradition to show his war wounds to the Roman people before he can be consul. He refuses to, however. This character trait, which is also Coriolanus's tragic flaw, defies explanation. Coriolanus does not seem to be the humble type, which might have accounted for his refusal to show off his scars. Nor does he seem to lack ambition. But when urged to sport his wounds in the context of a rite of passage, he uses excuses such as "*I had rather have my wounds to heal again/Than hear say how I got them*" (2.2.67-68) or "*I had rather have one scratch my head i' th' sun/When the alarum were struck than idly sit/To hear my nothings monstered*" (2.2.73-74). In the play, in fact, he even leaves the stage after uttering the latter three lines, forcing Cominius to tell his story and praise his deeds in his absence.

The passage is well known for the mythical proportions it confers upon Coriolanus, who is presented as a kind of invincible hero. After all, he won at Corioles all by himself: "*Alone he entered/The mortal gate o' th' city, which he painted/With shunless destiny; aidless came off/And with a sudden reinforcement struck/Corioles like a planet*" (2.2.108-112). The Roman people are supposed to believe Cominius's tale of heroic feats, without being allowed to witness the relics of the fight – the scars – let alone, of course, the legendary battle itself. Whether Coriolanus refuses to strip out of modesty – because he resents having to prove his deeds where the people should trust him as an elite member – or indeed because he has something to hide from the people, something that may concern the circumstances of his victory at Corioles, the play suggests that verbally compensating for what cannot be shown simply does not work.

In the play, the citizens of Rome will not tolerate it, ultimately leading Coriolanus to be banished. In the film, such behaviour on the part of Coriolanus is presented as even less acceptable owing to the additional importance of onscreen visibility in the modern era". If Coriolanus is too modest to show his wounds to a few dozen persons in the play, it makes sense that he should refuse

¹² See the discussion of André Bazin's seminal essays on the relationships between theatre and film in Christine Geraghty, *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, p. 75.

¹³ As in the case of adapted medieval narratives described in Julie Grossman and R. Barton Palmer, *Adaptation in Visual Culture: Images, Texts, and Their Multiple Worlds*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 81.

to show them to the whole world through TV. If he has nothing to show, which is suggested in the play when he says that he would not have his “*nothings monstered*”, it is natural for him to refuse the extra (negative) publicity TV has to offer. If there is something that has happened within the walls of Corioles that he does not want anyone to know about, he might refuse having to answer that on television. This possibility remains in the film, which does not follow the character as he fights alone in the besieged city. If he refuses to become a character type in a heroic narrative in the play, it is consistent that he should refuse to become a kind of superhero on television. He had rather, as he says, play the man he is.

In all cases, Coriolanus’s “*inability to perform*”¹⁴ inevitably seems more marked in the age of television than it could have been in ancient Rome or Jacobean England, and so too is the downfall that follows. But in the play, the only sensible alibi he expresses is that he wishes a man were able to be “*author of himself*”. Besides, television also impacts that central notion of self-authorship as featured in Shakespeare’s play. As a result, the consequences of Fiennes’ televisual update also need to be studied from that angle. And when it comes to preserving control over one’s destiny, mastering one’s image is also more important in the TV age than before. In the adaptation as in the play, however, this remains a dead end for *Coriolanus*. Playing “*the man he is*” will eventually earn him the contemptuous label “*boy of tears*” (5.6.103) before a Volscian mob kills him.

The main character’s first appearance, at a time when he is still Caius Martius, and has not yet been granted the name Coriolanus, is on a TV screen. His arch-enemy, Aufidius, is watching a news report about the famine in Rome, where the Senate has declared a state of emergency. Beneath close-ups of Martius’s face, the rolling newlines announce that he, a current Roman general, has suspended civil liberties. The embedded TV images are edited alternately with shots of people’s representatives walking towards a meeting venue, especially a woman who then appears to be a plebeian leader. At the meeting, a close-up draws attention to a notebook, the cover of which bears a black-and-white photocopy of a picture showing Martius’s face, crossed out in red, and beneath it is the caption “*Chief Enemy of the People*”. This new appearance of the character’s face, now embedded as a photograph shown on screen, announces his eventual refusal to appear on screen or to be a media-savvy political leader. In other words, the character’s presence in the film is initially presented as forcefully mediated. Such a construction of Coriolanus’s essence thus poses as a visual adaptation of his dominant character feature in the play – his reluctance to perform a part in the political arena. Or, to put it even more simply, the beginning of the film provides guidelines for the reading of *Coriolanus* as a Shakespearean adaptation by equating political/theatrical performance with on-screen/framed depiction of the self.

***Coriolanus*: Identity and the Look**

Throughout the film, this notion that Coriolanus is always perceived as if shot/framed by a camera likely to distort who he is – instead of allowing him to, as he demands, “play the man [he is]” – takes several forms. Among them are handheld shots that translate subjective perception, while recalling that Coriolanus’s image is constantly captured for the sake of being broadcast, be it on the news or

¹⁴ Delphine Lemonnier-Texier, “*‘Would You Have Me False to My Nature? Rather Say I Play the Man I Am’*: The Deconstruction of Masculinity in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*”, in Sophie Marret and Claude Le Fustec, eds., *La Fabrique du genre: (Dé)Constructions du féminin et du masculin dans les arts et la littérature anglophones*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016, p. 83, <http://books.openedition.org/pur/30701>.

for the purposes of private screenings. Coriolanus is not the only character to receive such treatment in the film. His enemy and Volscian equivalent, Aufidius, is often treated similarly. For instance, he sends a video to the Roman government in which he can be seen interrogating and then executing a prisoner of war in order to signify the threat of his impending attack. Contrary to Coriolanus, he exerts control over his visual representation by choosing a perspective on his character – that of a fearless warrior who even indulges in methods of terrorist fearmongering – that ultimately enables him to defeat his enemy. What Fiennes resorts to as a director, then, is less a documentary style than a shooting style that emphasises directorial mediation. And it often appears that no control of this directorial mediation is permitted to Coriolanus, suggesting both that his projected image – or, one might say, his televisual reputation – eludes him and that, consequently, he cannot be the “*author of himself*”.

This is particularly clear in Fiennes' treatment of the inauguration scene, during which Coriolanus is supposed to show his wounds before he can be consul of Rome. In the film, the scene partly takes place on a TV set, with direct consequences for notions of performance, visibility, publicity and reputation. This TV appearance is prepared in advance by the insertion of a televised debate about the character of Coriolanus, which emphasises his so-called arrogance. In his absence, pundits suggest that he will not abide by the rules of political TV shows – Coriolanus despises television appearances as vulgar. A little later, moments before Coriolanus is supposed to walk into the Senate stateroom to show his wounds, he stands in front of a TV set in the corridor outside, watching as his friend Menenius praises him in a speech he gives next door. Close-ups of his face allow viewers to read there a kind of contempt mingled with stage fright. This clashes with shots of his mother, wife and boy on the sofa at home in front of their own TV set, drinking champagne, raising their glasses, and cheering in the expectation of Coriolanus's ascent to the consulship. Another close-up of a TV set acts as a transition to a different location, a room where the people's representatives are also following the event. They have doubtful and disappointed looks on their faces that contrast with the smiles on those of Coriolanus's relatives.

There seems to be no end, then, to Coriolanus's to-be-looked-at-ness complex. All eyes turn to him, and TV makes him the target of centripetal gazes to a higher degree than the Elizabethan theatre could. The scene's construction not only suggests that every character in the fictional room depicted in the film follows Coriolanus's TV appearance. It also reminds the spectators of the film that they are watching the same events, albeit as extra-diegetic spectators rather than as fictional viewers in the narrative. A few moments later, Coriolanus eventually talks to the people, first gathering enough voices to be made consul, until plebeian politicians trigger a popular change of opinion by reminding the crowd that the hero has refused to show his wounds.

Riots ensue, and it is even proposed that Coriolanus be executed should he fail to make amends publicly and finally show his wounds to the Roman plebs. This atonement ceremony is to be broadcast live on TV, and Volumnia coaches her son before the programme starts. Volumnia gives him the kind of advice a spin doctor might give a politician, or the kinds of instructions a stage producer might give one of his actors about to go on stage for an improvisation session. She gives him basic cues to stick to, and general performance advice to stay calm and not to launch into wordy diatribes against the common people, most of whom will be following the event through TV. Coriolanus reluctantly agrees to play the “*harlot*” (3.2.114) in front of the debasing TV apparatus, which he seems to despise for being the people's medium above all.

In the next sequence, the people's representatives are also preparing for the programme, establishing a cunning plan to harness the power of the crowds against Coriolanus. The representatives of both sides then enter the fray, followed by handheld cameras as if they are boxers walking towards the ring. Regularly throughout the sequence, high-angle shots or close-ups of the cameras' viewfinders in which the various participants appear underline the extra importance given to the event by the overbearing presence of the TV apparatus. The debate then starts in an atmosphere of extreme tension, mainly conveyed by Fiennes' facial expressions – he looks like an animal at bay, trapped by the TV cameras all around, and the event itself thus becomes a form of bear-baiting for the media age.

A few seconds into the debate, it is clear that Coriolanus will not be able to muster his acting skills and win the consulship. First, he starts talking before his microphone is on, triggering static that offends the ear. This contrasts sharply with the people's representatives' ease with the handheld microphone, which they use to turn the whole crowd, and virtually all TV viewers at the same time, against Coriolanus. The latter is declared an enemy of the people and promptly banished, without being able to respond except by staring in amazement at his accusers, in low-angle shots that emphasise his inability to look directly at the cameras. Soon after, he completely loses his composure and launches into an abusive speech addressed to the audience and to TV viewers, whom he indistinctly calls "*curs*" whose breath is foul and whom he despises to the utmost. He then utters two of his most famous lines, "*I banish YOU*", and "*There is a world elsewhere*", before leaving the premises as the camera following him shows only his back. In the next shot, a plebeian representative is seen on TV declaring that the enemy of the people has gone.

The Meta-Theatrical Perspective of *Coriolanus*

For Coriolanus, then, remaining oneself can only be achieved thanks to a shift from the passive to the active – he banishes Rome instead of being banished from it. In Fiennes' adaptation, this reversal of perspective is the ultimate controlling gesture in more than diegetic terms. Indeed, one may consider that the various forms of screen mediation included in the film are threaded together into a network of visual lines, all of which lead to Fiennes, the film's director. While banished as Coriolanus (the actor poorly suited to his political environment), Fiennes, as director of the adaptation, is also the one who banishes Coriolanus – to a place that looks very different from Rome, and where Coriolanus himself is unrecognisable. The actor's directorial *alter ego*, Fiennes the director/adaptor, thus exerts total control over his own representation of *himself* – control over the character remains at least partly with Shakespeare. Fiennes thus puts the difference between playwright and adaptor to the best possible use, by showing what perspective he can add to Coriolanus – transporting him to a world elsewhere where he literally becomes someone else – while leaving the character intact.

For the actor Ralph Fiennes, then, leaving the scene of the profilmic to go behind the camera may be a way of controlling his future as an artist – with his adaptation, he, both like Coriolanus in the play and as Coriolanus in the film, metaphorically erases his persona, claiming he can move to a location where he can be more than just an actor. Admittedly, inferring this from the character's refusal to perform in the play may seem like a case of metaleptic fallacy. It is not, however, thanks to the play's meta-theatrical perspective that, as it needs to be adapted for the screen along with all the rest of the tragedy, authorises the crossing of diegetic and meta-dramatic perspectives. Indeed, according to James Lee Calderwood, "*If Coriolanus commits himself to a verbal style in which wheat*

and chaff are thrown indiscriminately together to satisfy his rigid conception of truth, what happens in consequence may be as suggestive for the politics of art as it is for the art of politics."¹⁵

In other words, the meta-dramatic theme encapsulates a division that applies on numerous levels: wheat and chaff, but also good acting and bad acting, an audience-driven actor and an individualistic, contemptuous one, etc.¹⁶ Additionally, in the words of Bill Angus, "'*Coriolanus*' gives Shakespeare an opportunity to deal with [...] issues surrounding authority and authenticity through a character who is hostile to the theatre of political power"¹⁷ (and, I would suggest, to many aspects of theatrical performance as a whole). My argument here is that Shakespeare's use of clear-cut oppositions generates another meta-artistic leap in the film adaptation, from mere (unwilling?) actor to (self-controlling, role-choosing, therefore happier) actor/director. Or, to put it very simply, Fiennes chooses *Coriolanus* as a metaphor for himself. Indeed, the character refuses to have a part imposed on him and suggests that he should be able to play himself, or to author himself by selecting and designing his own parts. Or, by adapting the character, Fiennes overcomes its (his?) main flaw: being "*unable to adapt himself to the real situation [and] condemned to exist in perpetual inadaptation; a consequence of the social roles he is compelled to play.*"¹⁸

This is very clear at the end of the banishment scene, set in a TV studio and broadcast live. Banishing the banishers, in order to perform control over his destiny, he addresses the people, viewers, and the whole mass media industry he deems responsible for his political failure, dismissing them from his personal universe. This results in his departure for "*a world elsewhere*" (3.3.136). Rather than just going to some other place, he denies existence to the one he is leaving, performatively declaring it a nonentity. And in the film, *Coriolanus*'s exit is meticulously matched by the concurrent withdrawal of his *persona* from the media world that the representatives of the people so easily exploited to expose him as the arrogant, contemptuous patrician he is. This exit is an escape from the camera's gaze in an attempt to "*play the man he is*" in an alternative universe.

To be himself, *Coriolanus* gets rid of having to play a political role and hopes for a place where (military) action does not demand (political) acting skills. This is the kind of place he seems to find in Antium, the Volscian capital. First, during his long walk there, he does not don a disguise as in the play. Covering his features does not seem necessary: the environment of this "*world elsewhere*" is very different from Rome, what with its apparent poverty and lack of technological equipment. Before *Coriolanus* reaches the headquarters of his enemy Aufidius, the Volscian leader is seen shaking hands with the local people who are outside drinking or just chatting. He then goes into a decrepit house

¹⁵ Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1971, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Coriolanus* was designed to be performed at Blackfriars, so that the main character's refusal to perform must have been an insult to audience members who had to pay a higher fee due to the indoor location. According to Harry Newman, accordingly, the play extends a "*metatheatrical self-reflection on the commoditized human transactions involved in commercial theatre, and the formative pressures exerted on dramatic characters by market forces*". See Newman, "'The Stamp of Martius': Commoditized Character and the Technology of Theatrical Impression in *Coriolanus*", *Renaissance Drama*, vol. 45 no. 1, March 2017, p. 53.

¹⁷ Bill Angus, *Metadrama and the Informer in Shakespeare and Jonson*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016, p. 136. See also Andrew Gurr, *Shakespeare's Workplace: Essays on Shakespearean Theatre*, ch. 9, 'Metatheatre and the Fear of Playing', Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 145-166.

¹⁸ José Manuel González Fernández de Sevilla, 'Existential Needs and Political Needs in *'Coriolanus'*', *Spanish Society of Early Renaissance Studies, Yearbook* no. 2, 1992, p. 148.

where he sits in a chair among his followers. The chair almost seems like the poor man's version of a throne.

Aufidius does not seem to need any technology, either to be protected or to ensure his own political stability. Compared to the Roman environment, this world elsewhere is devoid of cameras and screens. As many critics have noted, it is very reminiscent of places of conflict so often seen on TV screens in the decades before and after the film's release. Fiennes' adaptation evokes places such as Serbia or Syria, where, it seems, the only cameras are owned by TV news reporters. Consequently, it is no surprise that Coriolanus should not hide his face upon arriving into Antium on foot: while everyone in Rome knew him from his media appearances, there is neither camera nor TV set here to broadcast his entry. Nor does he risk being recognised, since the Volscians are unlikely to have seen his face on TV. At some point, he even hitches a ride with a truck driver, a plot element that indicates that although he is the Volscian nemesis, he remains invisible to Volscian eyes anyway.

Similarly, when he ventures down into Aufidius's den and meets him there, the latter asks his name, asserting he does not recognise Coriolanus who responds, in surprise, "*Know'st thou me yet?*". The headquarters are in the dark. They look like a cave lit by firelight, and the atmosphere thus created for the location is in such contrast with that of Rome as to make it barely imaginable to find a TV set there. Certainly, there is none to be seen here, which marks the difference with scenes shot back in Rome, where TV reports are ripe with news of Coriolanus's exile and potential defection to Rome's enemies. The character seems to have travelled back in time, to an age before omnipresent technology. In Antium, the only picture of Coriolanus to be seen is an old crumpled up magazine cover into which Aufidius looks as he questions his former enemy's recent allegiance.

In Rome, the rulers decide to send envoys to Coriolanus in the hope of talking him out of attacking his homeland. The result of the first meeting is reported rather than shown, to preserve the suspense surrounding Coriolanus's new attitude towards Rome and which consequently prevails at the end. As he will not budge, his old friend and counsellor Menenius decides to go and talk to him by himself. The meeting takes place at night around a campfire. Coriolanus's head is now clean-shaven, and he wears a tank top. This new style makes Fiennes look somewhat like Brando as Kurtz in Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (USA, 1979); indeed, like Kurtz, he almost seems to have fled civilisation and joined life in the jungle. Again, Coriolanus will not listen, and Menenius commits suicide as a result of his failure to save Rome. The final advocates of peace, Volumnia, Virgilia, and Young Coriolanus, meet the protagonist in an Antium street. Soldiers in arms surround them, but no photographs or TV reporters are there.

This last plea convinces Coriolanus to sign a peace treaty with Rome, for which Aufidius decides that he will have to be killed. The murder takes place on a road outside Rome, in the middle of nowhere with no journalists attending or other types of media presence to witness the protagonist's death at the hands of Aufidius's soldiers. The film's last shot shows, from a high angle, Coriolanus's dead body lying on a pickup truck, as if his corpse were briefly pinned down again against a flat surface and framed by a kind of screen within the screen – the rectangular shape of the open back of the truck. As the description above suggests, Coriolanus's "*world elsewhere*" may not be better than Rome, it is still very different for its lack of media presence and pressure. On the way to personal reconstruction, and despite his tragic failure, the character has left a place where his image was constantly taken from him by cameras and has found the place he hoped for – a place without any cameras or screens.

The remarkable absence of images of Coriolanus from the second part of the narrative prompts a reading of the radical change from media presence to media absence in meta-fictional terms. As the theory of the actor’s paradox has it, an actor has two identities, one of which controls the character while the other *is* or at least embodies the character. In the first part of the film, people in Coriolanus’s surroundings seek to match the former with the latter: Coriolanus must be an actor who controls his appearances as if they were his characters. In the second part, the image has vanished to a world elsewhere, leaving only the character trying to act for himself. The image attached to the character’s body goes away from the stage, leaving him to try to control his destiny. In so doing, Coriolanus fails and meets his tragic end, but Fiennes succeeds.

As the first step to becoming a successful film-maker, he leaves part of his acting *persona* behind. He then takes the other part, his image as an actor of villains¹⁹, to bring it to the only place from which it can be reconstructed from scratch. That place is behind the camera, where there will be no images of Ralph Fiennes the actor apart from those Fiennes the director decides on. Naturally, in the second part of the film, embedded images of Fiennes as Coriolanus disappear, as Fiennes emphasises that he will from now on exert control over his part from behind the camera.

Conclusion: Processes of Adaptation

In *Authorship in Film Adaptation*, Jack Boozer writes: “the closed fixation only on literary source and finished film both in journalistic reviews and scholarly study has often shown an indifference to the evolving intentions of producers, writers, and directors and their shifting levels of input and authority.”²⁰ As the case study of Ralph Fiennes’ *Coriolanus* shows, at least one form of intentionality that generates “input and authority” is missing from Boozer’s list: the actor’s. First, because there is no gainsaying that one specific actor’s style necessarily leaves its stamp on the adaptation²¹, even more so if said actor plays the lead part in a canonical work.²² With each new adaptation of *Hamlet*, to use a glaringly obvious example, authorial intention resides, at least partly, in the main actor’s performance. Indeed, the actor playing Hamlet for the umpteenth time bears the pressure of rejuvenating, by way of sheer play-acting talent, the character’s perception by the audience.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Greg Doran’s adaptation for the BBC (UK, 2009) of his 2008 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Hamlet* should be so often referred to as ‘David Tennant’s *Hamlet*’. In fact, part of the adaptation’s crowd-pulling appeal rests in the allure of what may, from the outside at least, seem to announce a crossover between *Hamlet* and *Doctor Who*. Such a reception pattern comes from Tennant’s fame as one of the actors to have impersonated the main character in the long-running BBC sci-fi series. In addition to Tennant, the production also features Patrick Stewart as the ghost and as Claudius, a star who is more famous as Captain Picard in the *Star Trek* TV series

¹⁹ Dirk Libbey, ‘Why Ralph Fiennes Doesn’t Want to Play Villains Anymore’, *Cinemablend*, 29 November 2016, <https://www.cinemablend.com/news/1590850/why-ralph-fiennes-doesnt-want-to-play-villains-anymore>.

²⁰ Jack Boozer, *Authorship in Film Adaptation*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008, p. 3.

²¹ A classic example is the stamp Brando’s ‘Method’ acting style left on Kazan’s adaptation of Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (USA, 1951). See Geraghty, *Now a Major Motion Picture*, p. 97.

²² See Samuel Crowl, *Screen Adaptations: Shakespeare’s Hamlet: The Relationship between Text and Film*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

and feature films, and *X-Men's* Professor Xavier. Consequently, it makes sense to assert that the adaptation is likely to seem to result from two of its actors' authorial intentions at least as much as the product of its lesser-known director's adaptive inventiveness.

This is no isolated case. In retrospect, the 1979 *Macbeth* adaptation for ITV, although directed by Philip Casson, is famous as the Ian McKellen/Judi Dench *Macbeth*. Both actors have since been elevated to the peerage, and Hollywood fame as well, McKellen has mostly become known as *The Lord of the Rings'* Gandalf and *X-Men's* Magneto, while Dench is mostly renowned for being the first female 'M' in several James Bond films, and for various performances as Queen Elizabeth I (in John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love*, 1998) and as Queen Victoria (in Madden's *Mrs. Brown*, UK/Ire/USA, 1997 and Stephen Frears' *Victoria & Abdul*, UK/USA, 2017). Likewise, Stuart Burge's 1965 adaptation of *Othello*, with Laurence Olivier's blackface performance as the Moor, is often called the 'Olivier' version. Like Fiennes, Olivier had directed himself in Shakespeare film adaptations before playing in *Othello*, being the famous director and main performer of *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, and *Richard III* (all UK, 1948, 1954, 1955).

Following in Olivier's footsteps is, of course, Kenneth Branagh. His personal identification with Olivier was so obtrusive and insistent as to have Olivier's family replace Branagh with Richard Attenborough as the Prince of Wales' appointed representative at Olivier's funeral service in 1985, lest Branagh should upstage the event. Like Olivier, Branagh's trademark consists of Shakespearean adaptations in which he steals the show by giving himself the lead part. The only two exceptions are his 1988 ITV adaptation of *Twelfth Night* and his film adaptation of *As You Like It* (UK/USA, 2006), which he directed but in which he did not perform. He did, however, direct and play in *Henry V* (UK, 1989), *Much Ado about Nothing* (UK/USA, 1993), *Hamlet* (UK/USA, 1996), and *Love's Labour's Lost* (UK/Fr/USA, 2000). Recently, he crowned his ascension from (stage) actor to film director/*auteur* by playing Shakespeare in *All Is True* (UK, 2018).

Fiennes has taken the same path, and his work has so far provided further evidence that the author-to-director adaptation centrally engages the notion of the scopic regime. In the case of film adaptations of plays, the first shift is not from text to film. It is, as I have suggested elsewhere, from the scopic regime of the theatrical experience to that of film. With this in mind, it is obvious that acting in one's own adaptation comes with many assets.²³ The scopic regime of drama operates by leading the audience to perceive the dramatic illusion instead of mere actors performing. Key to that metamorphosis are, of course, the actors, who are transformed into characters to the eyes of the audience. Knowledge of that process transfers easily to film adaptation. Behind the camera, the actor witnesses the metamorphosis of the real into an illusion, benefiting all the while from the extra knowledge of illusion-making. The scopic regime of film is different, in that it is characterised by the absence of what is seen – where the actors and props that are perceived are in the same room as the theatrical audience, film viewers only see a filmic trace of what was captured by the camera.²⁴ But in

²³ Sébastien Lefait, 'Prospera's Looks: Adapting Shakespearean Reflexivity in *The Tempest* (Julie Taymor, 2010)', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 43 no. 2, 2015, pp. 131–45.

²⁴ For Dallas G. Denery, Christian Metz "introduced the expression 'scopic regime' to name dominant and structuring relations between observer, image and object. The scopic regime of the cinema, for example, is defined by the absence of the seen object (which simply means when we see something on the silver screen, we really only see its projected image, not the thing itself)." Denery, *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World: Optics, Theology, and Religious Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 9; see Christian Metz, 'Le signifiant imaginaire', *Communications*, vol. 23 no. 1, 1975, p. 44.

the case of theatre adaptation, the presential dimension of the play and of the actors must remain. Acting in the film and being present behind the camera arguably combines two ways of doing so. Indeed, one might reasonably expect viewers of the film *Coriolanus* to have had access to the information that Fiennes directed the film himself, which was given pride of place in the film's trailer – not too far from Shakespeare's name.

This ensured Fiennes' spectral presence as director of the film in addition to his visibility as the film's lead actor – and incidentally preserved Shakespeare's aura. Such is exactly what Michel Serres describes in *Le Parasite*.²⁵ A third-party element that is often absent from the source work/target work pattern unexpectedly proves crucial to understanding their connection. This does of course not apply to all works. With *Coriolanus*, however, a play in which the lead character dies as a result of being unable to master his own performance, the director behind the actor is that indispensable parasitic element, without which the play barely makes any sense. Similarly, one may consider that a *Coriolanus* adaptation that did not show the potential director figure looming behind Caius Martius would at least partly miss the point of the play. By standing both in front of and behind the camera, Ralph Fiennes provides the exact opposite: an adaptation strategy which allows him, by directing himself as *Coriolanus*, to reveal the crucial potential for the character to become author/director of himself.

²⁵ Michel Serres, *Le Parasite*, Paris: B. Grasset, 1985. One may find a similar approach to intertextual parasitic interference in Monique Carcaud-Macaire, 'Morphogénèse et Phénomènes de Transtextualité', *Sociocriticism*, vol. VIII no. 2, 1992, pp. 58-9.