Tapping on the Screen: Spectation in Eyre's *King Lear*

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Imagine: A young, beautiful girl floats on stage, smiling and singing merrily. From the shadows, a hunched man trudges towards her, twirling his mustache and cackling. Which of these character is "good" and which is "evil"? From a young age, we can easily identify and categorize these mannerisms, which once dictated the production of all theatre. The use of "stock characters," as they were called, established without a doubt which characters were on the side of virtue. I believed this simplicity lingered in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, until Richard Eyre, director of the 2018 adapted film, changed my mind. As I was reading the play-- a rather unnatural phenomenon in and of itself-- I began to allow the characters' virtue and motives to mirror the black and white nature of the written word: Cordelia is good; Goneril and Regan are bad; Edgar is good; Edmund is bad. Yet, the apparently melodramatic quality of the play is a trap which Eyre circumvents with much tact.

Richard Eyre features a constant presence of spectators that changes both the arch of poetic justice in the traditional Shakespearean words and the audience's relationship to the story. He understands the functional distinction between spectators in film and spectators on stage. If a stage director adds ensemble members to a scene to serve as an onstage audience, he has added whole other stories to the world of the show. Because the audience has equal visual access to onstage spectators and the main characters alike, they will instinctively endow the ensemble characters not only the role of spectator, but with a distinct characterization existing

independently of the main character. (This was particularly true in Shakespeare's time, when complex lighting design was not available to direct the audience's focus.) In film, however, a director can use the "extra" people as a stylistic tool alone.

After several establishing shots of modern London, the camera focuses on a sleek black car and follows it over a moat and into the archway entrance of a castle. As the car enters the castle grounds, the camera pans overhead, passing by a group of men in army uniform running as a unit. It lingers on them for a moment before regaining momentum to complete the panarmonic shot of the castle grounds. The shot then cuts to show a man and a woman walking out of a building past an armed guard. The women, who we will soon learn is Regan, runs to catch up with her husband as the shot cuts to again show the black car. The car drives up to a door, and, just behind it, a group of soldiers-- as seen earlier in the panarmonic shot-- run up the steps and into the building. The camera cuts to show a presumably higher ranking army officer opening the door for an older, professionally dressed man. Another soldier stands stand at attention further back in the shot and two others stand guard at the base of the steps. As the officer and the older man begin their journey into the building, the shot cuts once more to a dark room with a low ceiling full of aged brick and columns. The camera is placed on the diagonal from a door as to catch the flow of soldiers running in to take their place among the columns. This group of men, who we have been following since the beginning, stand equidistant from each other against the wall. As they take their place, Regan and Albany enter, again with Regan lagging behind, followed by Gloucester, the old man, and Kent, the officer. The first line of dialogue begins in the midst of a wide shot in the room. Kent and Gloucester, the speakers, have barely entered and

the understood presence of the soldiers is strong. All this is established before a word of text is spoken.

Eyre creates a setting of ever-present spectators. Even with the vast castle setting there is a sense that no place on its grounds lends itself to private conversation. The idea of spectators as a part of the environment -- as the soldiers mirror the columns-- persists throughout the film, and it is used to justify and explain many of the actions that in the written word seem to be simply evil. Eyre established this before the play as we know it even begins, because he conceived his audience must first understand the habitat in which King Lear exists in order to comprehend how these reimagined characters are products of their environment.

Eyre suggests Edmund has felt the pressure of society his entire life by casting a person of color to play the son to a white man. The connotation of bastard in our society is not the same as it was for Shakespearean audiences. Children are born out of wedlock frequently in the 21st century, but our society does not look down upon premarital sex as Shakespeare's did. Eyre replaces this ostracizing connotation which a modern equivalent. I've talked with many children of interracial marriages who feel they fit nowhere in society because they are not a member of either group. Edmund has noble blood; he does not fit in with the commoners of society. At the same time, he cannot find a place in high society because he is a product of adultery. The actor playing Edmund looks straight forward, in his column position, while his father and Kent discuss the very thing that ostracizes him.

> Kent: Is this not your son, my lord?
>
> Gloucester: His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am brazed to it.

(Act 1, Scene 1)

This interaction is one of the earliest verbal interactions of show, preceded only by the two lines before it concerning the impending splitting of the kingdom. Gloucester discusses Edmund's illegitimacy as Edmund looks straightforward in his soldier position, until being asked "Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund?." Edmund hesitates and appears to be plagued by a sense of confusion. Thereafter, he respectively answers the question and is promptly left behind, as he likely has been so many times before.

When we meet him next, Goneril and Regan are exiting down a pathway lined by men in uniform standing at attention, the closest of whom to the doorway is, of course, Edmund. As the women pass him, finishing their private conversation as if he is not there, the camera cuts to a close up of his face, tense with a forced blankness. He glances to the side, and the shot reverses, with the camera position in the place where Edmund has just thrown his gaze. Edmund is now smirking, which he was not in the previous shot, and looking directly at the camera. First and foremost, this is extremely jarring to a viewer, especially considering this movie was developed for streaming, a private movie watching experience. By bringing the audience into the action of the film, Eyre equates the role of the audience to the previously established function of the onscreen spectators. This connection adds a modern, political relevance to the Shakespearean text. Now, the audience is aware of both their unity with the "extras," who represent society in the world of the film, and their relationship to the main characters of the plot.

Eyre only repeats this bold choice with one other character: Edgar, the intelligent, innocence, unsuspecting, legitimate brother of Edmund. Prompted by Edmund's convincing lies, Edgar runs away from court. When we, as viewers of the film, get a glimpse into his new

situation, he is in entirely new form. He. We find him in the woods as he resolves to take the alias of “poor Tom,”-- a homeless, possibly insane character he’s fabricated-- for his own safety. Helpless in the dark and huddled by a tree, he brings us into his world. He, like Edmund, looks directly at the camera, as he swears “Edgar, I nothing am.”

Eyre acknowledges our neglect of Edgar’s distress despite our involvement in his downfall, which he establishes by using the exact same stylistic tool as earlier in Edmund’s first monologue. With these moments, Eyre augments the function of the spectators by partnering their presence with this other directorial tool: the rare and distinct choice to have an actor speak directly to the camera. Breaking the fourth wall on stage is a distinct and effective choice, but it is not nearly as jarring because the possibility of audience and actor relation is constantly present. The word has been established as separate, but the audience is united with the imaginary world geographically, making it significantly easier for them to accept their active participation. A viewer of a movie has not prepared himself for such a possibility.

Though the film audience did not mentally consent to this type of active participation, Edmund involves the audience in the development of his plot, both establishing the audience as a member of the spectating party and making them accessories to his crimes. As we watch the characters be driven to madness by the pressure of power-- the pressure which is represented and enhanced by the presence of the spectators- we are reminded in a startling manner that we are not exempt from blame. The movie lifts the blame off of fate, discarding any notion of predestined good and evil at the core of the characters. A mob mentality persists throughout the plot and leads me to believe that these choices are Eyre’s way of arguing against the simplistic mentality of inherent evil. He instead developed a world where, much like reality, characters stray from

goodness not because they never had it, but because the pressure of power cracked their resolve and drove them to madness. The audiences, on screen and off, remain complicit to the madness they've prompted. They prompt this madness by casting judgment upon those who are subject to it, and they continue to point the blame toward the madman or the madwomen, driving him or her even deeper into the madness. The vicious cycle relies on the constant attention of the audience. Eyre features their gaze with frequency enough to remind the off-screen audience of their blame; furthermore, he ensures the shots are not lengthy enough for the onscreen spectators to be viewed as individuals, as it is imperative that the spectators remain a communal power.

In the film equivalent to Act One Scene One, when Lear is conversing with Kent, Eyre constantly interrupts the main action with shots featuring the active listening of the other characters. He establishes the importance of their presence despite their silence. Lear banishes Kent in his tantrum-like fury, but rather than having Lear immediately exit the scene, Eyre inserts yet another dynamic--a shot of the listening party, textured with various depths and spatial relationships. This final shot, displaying the judgement of the spectating party, further delays Lear's exit from the scene. On the page, this scene is an exhibit of Lear's impulsive and unjustify actions. In the film, Lear only *appears* to be in power, but he truly answers to the crowd. What had the potential to be portrayed as an abuse of power, Eyre portrayed as Lear's desperate attempt to disguise his dependence on popular opinion. The constant reminder of the spectator's presence allows the viewer to understand that the pressure Lear feels is always subject to the judgement of his audience .

Eyre disestablishes the predetermined notions of the characters by creating an environment that justifies their actions. He finds innovative ways to maintain the consistent

presence of crowds. We've previously discussed how he does this visually, but we mustn't neglect the moments of auditory representation Eyre creates to show the impact spectators have on the main characters. He enhances the empty shot of Goneril on the bare open steps of her home by layering it with the soundscape of the rambunctious "knights." Even when Goneril appears to be alone, her habitat is inherently and unequivocally impacted by a crowd of people. She is expected to please and care for this unruly group and, though they are at times not physically present, the pressure of her responsibility never leaves her. This responsibility drives her to what in the written play appears to be evil but in the movie might be construed as an understandable madness. Eyre augments the complexity of Goneril's character, as well as those of Regan and Edmund, by including the element of spectatation. The 'evil' characters, in Eyre's reimagination, do not have the strength to maintain power and goodness under the pressures of society, but they are not inherently evil. They've simply responded to their environment in a way which manifests itself in less than virtuous actions.

Lear reacts harshly to Cordelia in Scene One to maintain power in front of his audience. He is not evil, but he is embarrassed by the short response of his favorite daughter and goes to extreme lengths to save face. This interaction on the page seems to be a blanant representation of Lear's impulsive nature and unlimited ignorance. Yet, the omission of Cordelia's asides, the gradual build of Lear's anger, and the staring faces of his present audience, justifies his upset, though perhaps it does not do the same for the extremity of his actions. This scene also establishes a different kind of goodness in Goneril and Regan. The written play allows a knowing reader to project the evil nature of the girls on to their lines in scene one, motivating their speeches with a cunning trickery as they profess false love to their father. Eyre, on the other

hand, distances his characters from this evil. On the contrary, Goneril and Regan seem to be performing based on previous behavior lessons and a pressure to show obedience. Reading the play, I judged Lear for being too shallow to appreciate what was beyond the surface, but Eyre illuminates the true importance of appearances. One of the main themes that stood out for me reading the play was the importance and value of appearances over that of truth. I associated the value of appearance with ignorance and assumed those who valued appearance did not appreciate the great truth of reality. Eyre, however, elucidates on the role of appearance in King Lear and I found myself guilty of the very ignorance I cast upon Shakespeare's characters.

In a world so dictated by the view of society, appearance is everything. Goneril and Regan have been trained to respond this way because they are royalty. Their main function is appearance, in the modern day setting especially. Their relationship with appearance is a reflection of the importance of society's eye constantly keeping them in view. The movie illuminates what the written word alone cannot: appearance does not receive its value from the shallowness and ignorance of those in power, rather its significance comes from the spectators. Those in power are constantly being watched. They are being judged on how they appear, not how they are. The judging body is infinitely expanded by Eyre's choice to involve the audience. Film reaches a significantly larger audience than a play could ever hope to reach, and, more significantly, achieves a permanence which suggests the number of audience members has infinite growth potential. The movie viewers sits on his or her sofa with a computer as a window into Lear's world, somehow managing to cast judgements while maintaining the idea of their innocence to the tragedy before them.

Most characters lack the strength to maintain their goodness under the harsh spotlight, with the constant stream of judgement from those who both depend. When the crowd in the final scene sees death before them, they adapt a manner of stillness and silence. They step back from the violence they had just a moment before incited. They hold a sense of guilt and cause for blame in Eyre's film. By having him characters break the fourth wall, Eyre makes implicit claims about the audience's significance in the story and its share in this blame. Eyre's adaptation of *King Lear* is designed to mirror our society today The majority of speculation in our society is done through the screen, and by closing this distance between his characters and his audience, Eyre prohibits us from viewing them, and ourselves, as passive onlookers, and highlight their participation in the blame despite the separation of the screen.

As soldiers take on the task of pulling away the cart of corpses, a wide shot lingers to show the large group of soldiers watching the events unfold. Among them is Edgar, dressed in all black with dried blood still on his face from his fatal battle with his brother. The camera cuts to a zooming close up on Edgar. As he delivers his final monologue, the camera constantly zooms closer and closer to his face. Edgar delivers three penultimate lines of verse to the audience which we understand to be spectators within the realm of the film standing about and around the camera.

"The weight of this sad time we must obey.

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

The oldest hath borne most. We that are young

Shall never see so much, …"

He pauses in the middle of the last line to redirect his gaze to us, the audience offscreen and after a moment of silence, giving the audience a chance to be sure he has looked through the screen into our homes, he delivers the last line of text:

"or live so long."

Edgar points the last line not at the audience in his world but in ours, eliminating any possibility of using this movie as a sort of escapism. He highlights the false sense of distance the screen grants, exposing the complicity of their role in the film and parallels it with their complicity in modern day politics.

King Lear, Goneril, Regan. Cornwall, and many other characters throughout the film are impacted by their role at the center of spectation. Eyre plays into the relevance of this story by involving the audience despite the perceived comfort of the screen. Because modern technology makes the action of spectating accessible and simple, the political leaders of today are subject to constant spectation. Eyre exhibits how the response, or lack thereof, from an audience can prompt dramatic shifts in the mental state of leadership. In light of this, it is curious to consider what this might do to their psychological state, perhaps driving them to madness. Eyre's adaption mirrors reality and forces us to reflect upon the role we play on the political stage by engaging in everyday media. By taking Shakespeare's words and putting them on the screen, Eyre highlights the function of the screen and its place in our society. The depth and sincerity he adds to the story enhances a heightened realism and justifies the evils in the Shakespearean play by normalizing them. Evils are abundantly persistent in our society, and the majority of them become very public with news only a click away. Like King Lear, our current political leaders must endure the spotlight, but in new and challenging ways Shakespeare could not have even

imagined. Eyre found a place for *King Lear* in our society, and with 21st century technology married to today's democratic politics, that place is undoubtedly the screen.