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Filming metatheater: the 'Dover cliff' scene on screen

Sarah Hatchuel

In *Shakespeare on Screen: King Lear*, dir. Sarah Hatchuel, Nathalie Vienne Guerrin and Victoria Bladen, Cambridge University Press, 2019

In Act 4 scene 5, Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, guides his blind father Gloucester toward Dover. Gloucester has asked to be conducted to the top of a cliff so that he can end his days. But the cliff is only an illusion created verbally by Edgar who wants to protect his father's life. Stanley Cavell has summed up the situation, which plays with our (and Gloucester's) expectations, as: 'up no hill to no cliff to no suicide'.<sup>1</sup> A three-minute amateur animated film entitled 'The Cliff Scene from King Lear', posted on YouTube on 12 December 2010, highlights how nonsensical this whole dramatic situation actually is.<sup>2</sup> The video shows the two men standing still in a modern kitchen. Edgar is young and dressed casually; Gloucester is bald with dark glasses. The computer graphics were generated using Xtranormal Movie Maker, a do-it-yourself animation software: the images are, therefore, minimalist, while the two synthetic voices remain very unemotional and matter-of-fact all through the sequence. Shakespeare's playtext has been modernized, simplified and slightly parodied to a point where the original scene's irrationality and cruelty are emphasized:

Edgar: Can't you tell we are walking a steep cliff?

Gloucester: It doesn't feel like it.

Edgar: That's because you're blind. [...]

Gloucester: But are you sure we are almost there?

Edgar: Yes. Can't you smell the ocean breeze?

Gloucester: No.

Edgar: Can't you hear the seagulls?

Gloucester: No.

Edgar: That's because you're blind. If you had eyes, you would be able to smell the ocean and hear the seagulls.

Gloucester: That makes no sense.

Edgar: Yes it does.

Gloucester: OK, I trust you, a person I know nothing about and have never met before today. [...]

Through the stern repetition of 'That's because you're blind', even when sight is not the sense that would be useful to Gloucester to smell the sea and hear the birds, the short animated film offers a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the suspension of disbelief that the Shakespeare scene asks of its audience and on the dark humor it is based upon. At the moment of the fall, the blind man continues to remain absolutely still. He is convinced he has taken the plunge only through Edgar's words. But the audience is never tricked and never encouraged to question the situation: we are only invited to laugh at the silliness of the script.

While the Shakespearean scene can be turned into dark comedy rather easily, it is much more difficult to address its aesthetic ambiguity and tragic tone. This scene, in fact, mobilizes and problematizes the conventions of the Elizabethan stage to become a moment of pure theater, calling for a bare stage to retain all its fluidity and ambiguity – since the signified elements

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<sup>1</sup> S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003 [1987]), 55.

<sup>2</sup> The video can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoFNwLjBkA> (accessed 15 December 2017).

are conjured only through words. While Jan Kott thought that the transposition of this scene to the screen was impossible, ‘unless one were to film a stage performance’,<sup>3</sup> the aim of this chapter will be to qualify this assertion by showing how cinema and television can sometimes maintain, and even facilitate, the scene’s paradoxes of a *non-space* and reflect on the film medium itself. After outlining the aesthetic complexity of this very peculiar moment, the chapter will interrogate the possibilities offered by the screen to reflect the scene’s dramatic and metadramatic tensions by exploring several film productions of *King Lear* that use Shakespeare’s play-text. These screen productions, emerging from different media and production contexts, all present different strategies to represent the ‘cliff’ scene: they can share Edgar’s point of view from the start, thus verging toward comic relief; or try to retain some spatial ambiguity and uncomfortable suspense. They can also go as far as making us believe in the reality of the abyss even after Gloucester has jumped, turning the scene into a very emotional and cathartic moment. From Richard Eyre’s 1998 film of the Royal National Theatre stage production, to films made for television and video release (Tony Davenall’s for Thames Television in 1976; Jonathan Miller’s for the BBC in 1982; Brian Blessed’s in 1999; Eyre’s for the BBC in 2018), to feature films (Peter Brook’s in 1971) – they all attempt, through textual cuts, framing and/or editing, to circumvent the problem posed by a scene that seems to encapsulate the very essence of the bare Elizabethan stage.

When Edgar reaches the top of the ‘cliff’, he draws from the techniques of linear perspective used in visual art to describe what he ‘sees’: ‘How fearful/ And dizzy ’tis to cast one’s eyes so low./ The crows and choughs that wing the midway air/ Show scarce so gross as beetles. Half-way down/ Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade!/ Methinks he seems no bigger than his head’ (4.5.11–16). The speech offers a *verbal* three-dimensional perspective: the viewer, who remains still, sees an image organized around a vanishing point in which the elements seem to shrink the farther they are from the observing eye, until they disappear (‘I’ll look no more’, 4.5.22).<sup>4</sup> As Jonathan Goldberg remarks, the illusion of a continuous space depends on the fact that we can no longer see when the vanishing point is reached. Paradoxically, vision depends on the absence of vision.<sup>5</sup> This paradox is reflected in the fact that Gloucester, now a blind man, finds himself in the position of the observer of a picture (‘Come on, sir, here’s the place. Stand still’, says Edgar to his father, 4.5.11), as if blindness could only lead to sight, awareness and discovery.

Below, birds look like insects; even lower down, a man is as small as his head; at the lowest, men are just mice and things become only parts of themselves in an infinite regression that reproduces Gloucester’s and Lear’s journeys from prosperity to animality.<sup>6</sup> The decrease in scale reaches the confines of vision (‘almost too small for sight’, 4.5.20) within a construct where the rule of appearance reigns (‘show’, ‘seems’, ‘appear’). In the speech, words create sounds of nature through assonance and alliteration (‘The murmuring surge,/ That on th’unnumbered idle pebble chafes’, 21) but immediately come to deny their very own existence (‘cannot be heard so high’, 22): sounds and images, be they real or not within the fiction, remain illusory and verbal creations.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen, 1964), 117.

<sup>4</sup> See M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1962), 15–17.

<sup>5</sup> J. Goldberg, ‘Dover Cliff and the Conditions of Representations: *King Lear* 4:6 in Perspective’, *Poetics Today* 5.3 (1984), 542.

<sup>6</sup> See A. B. Kernan, ‘Formalism and Realism in Elizabethan Drama: The Miracles in *King Lear*’, *Renaissance Drama* 9 (1966), 63.

This hyper-realism conjured by the extremely detailed description is ironically denied by the very absence of the cliff, not only from the bare Elizabethan stage (since no cliff was represented visually) but also within the story world (since the cliff is nothing more than a fiction created by Edgar). When Edgar describes the perspective, the spectators find themselves in an ambivalent position regarding what they hear. On the one hand, we know that, on the Elizabethan stage, a scene really taking place near a cliff would only show a bare and flat platform anyway: be it genuine or imaginary, a location will always be created verbally. On the other hand, we also know that Gloucester is now blind and cannot confirm Edgar's description. Hence, spectators must make their own decision whether the cliff is real or not in a scene that keeps encouraging uncertainty and doubt. Edgar may be describing something that actually exists in the story world – just as Shakespeare, in other scenes and plays, engenders castles, battlefields or Roman forums through the mere power of words.<sup>7</sup> The Elizabethan stage puts the sighted spectators in the same position as the blind character. The speech thus highlights both the power of words to conjure mental images in the spectators' minds, and the limits of this power. As Goldberg asserts, 'In *Lear*, nothing comes of nothing, and the very language which would seem (to us) solidly to locate the world slides into an abyss, an uncreating, annihilative nothingness'.<sup>8</sup> In the end, words may never materialize what they refer to; they only perpetuate illusion.

R. A. Foakes is convinced that spectators attending a stage performance of *King Lear* never believe at any point in the existence of the cliff: 'I think that from the opening lines onwards the scene makes the audience aware that Edgar is hoaxing his father with conscious deception'.<sup>9</sup> Like other critics such as Michael Mooney<sup>10</sup> or Derek Peat<sup>11</sup>, I am more inclined to think that the scene is meant to play with the spectators' beliefs, all the more so since the ambiguity is made possible by the very nature of the Elizabethan stage.

At first, as we listen to Edgar, we are invited to believe that the cliff is real indeed. Like blind Gloucester, we create the location in our minds: just as Edgar fools his father, Shakespeare tricks his audience. The very realistic high-angle depiction has had, in fact, tangible consequences on England's artistic memory and geographical representation. One of the cliffs at Dover actually bears the name 'Shakespeare Cliff'. With its impressive height (120 meters) and its pointy shape, it stands in the British imagination as the last stronghold against the continent. Jeremy Price suggests that 'Shakespeare Cliff has become an iconic site of memory, a beacon of Britishness'.<sup>12</sup> In the nineteenth century, the cliff was represented in paintings and engravings on a regular basis. Shakespeare's cliff scene thus prefigures implicitly the pictorial productions that came to replace, from the Restoration onwards, the performances on the bare stage, but it also reveals how both pictorialism and verbalism can hide the truth: the cliff described verbally in such a realistic way remains a mere fancy. The whole representation relies on *invisibility*, i.e. on the fact that neither Gloucester nor the spectator can be a witness to what Edgar is describing. In such a context, Gloucester stands as

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<sup>7</sup> See R. Meek, *Narrating the Visual in Shakespeare* (New York: Routledge, 2016 [2009]).

<sup>8</sup> Goldberg, 'Dover Cliff and the Conditions of Representations', 544.

<sup>9</sup> R. A. Foakes, ed., *King Lear*, The Arden Shakespeare, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1997), 329.

<sup>10</sup> M. Mooney, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Transactions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 142.

<sup>11</sup> D. Peat, "'And that's true too": *King Lear* and the Tension of Uncertainty', *Shakespeare Survey* 33 (1980), 47: 'it strikes me that the working of the scene depends on our remaining confused about the existence of cliff and sea'.

<sup>12</sup> My translation of 'Shakespeare Cliff est devenu un lieu de mémoire icône, phare de la britannité'. J. Price, 'Shakespeare Cliff, rempart symbolique aux portes du royaume', *Les Cahiers du MIMMOC* 1 (2006), <http://mimmoc.revues.org/101>, accessed 7 October 2017.

a spectator who is content with words to build the fiction and falls into the *trompe-l'oeil* abyss of the story.

The speech is so potent in its ability to create a 'real' location that some actors playing Edgar feel sometimes obliged to wink at the audience to warn them of the deception. This was, for instance, the case in a production at the Globe Theatre in London in 2001.<sup>13</sup> But if there is no clue given by the actor, at which stage are we supposed to understand that all this is a trick devised by Edgar? Simon Ryle believes that spectators encountering the play for the first time become aware of Edgar's hoax during his aside 'Why I do trifle thus with his despair/ Is done to cure it' (4.5.33–4)<sup>14</sup>. However, according to Harry Levin, the aside simply reveals that Edgar has thought of a stratagem to prevent his father from committing suicide: it does not imply necessarily that the cliff's existence is a fake.<sup>15</sup> Peat argues that the aside may actually point to other forms of craftiness and cunning: 'Does he intend to prevent Gloucester from jumping, or does he hope his father will change his mind if given enough time? An unfamiliar spectator may well think Edgar means to cast off his disguise at the last moment'.<sup>16</sup> The illusion of the cliff's existence can thus persist until Gloucester's fall – and even afterwards, when Edgar wonders if his father may have died from believing that he fell: 'And yet I know not how conceit may rob/ The treasury of life when life itself/ Yields to the theft' (4.5.42–4). Not a single character in the play actually succeeds in reaching the cliffs of Dover, which remain a site of unfulfilled desire. In Grigori Kozintsev's reading, Dover is where England – and civilization – stops.<sup>17</sup> It is, therefore, unsurprising that Dover embodies the very frontier of representation. Edgar's realistic description points to the 'failure' of the Elizabethan stage at making the signified tangible, while underlining its considerable power of conviction. When Gloucester takes the plunge into what he believes is a void, the moment of the fall places the spectators in intellectual and emotional limbo, between the presence and absence of an abyss that pushes the possibilities offered by the Elizabethan stage to its limits. As Jan Kott states, in this moment, 'Shakespeare shows the paradox of pure theatre'.<sup>18</sup>

What becomes of this dizziness when the conditions of performance change, when, for instance, the theater mobilizes realistic settings? According to Jan Kott<sup>19</sup> or Marvin Rosenberg<sup>20</sup>, the cliff scene should always be played on an even ground to preserve spatial ambiguity as long as possible, before revealing the scheme suddenly. However, when Gloucester takes a leap from his mere height and touches the stage floor almost immediately, this may elicit some smiles and sneers in the audience. It is therefore no wonder that Kott should have read the scene as verging on the grotesque and the absurd – hereby recalling George Wilson Knight's famous interpretation of Gloucester's fall:

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<sup>13</sup> Actor Paul Brennen, who played Edgar at the Globe in 2001, reported: 'Often the people at the side of the theatre can feel a bit isolated from the action, and so at one point of the play I share a moment with them so they feel a part of what is going on. It is when Gloucester is about to jump off the cliff, and I wink to the audience as I am 'helping' do this!'. GlobeLink – globe Education's Online Resource Centre, <http://www.globelink.org/resourcecentre/kinglear2001/edgar>, accessed 10 January 2008.

<sup>14</sup> S. J. Ryle, 'Filming Non-Space: The Vanishing Point and The Face in Brook's *King Lear*', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 35.2 (2007): 140–147.

<sup>15</sup> H. Levin, 'The Heights and the Depths: A Scene from *King Lear*', in J. Garrett (ed.), *More Talking of Shakespeare* (London: Longmans, 1959), 98.

<sup>16</sup> Peat, 'King Lear and the Tension of Uncertainty', 48.

<sup>17</sup> G. Kozintsev, *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 130.

<sup>18</sup> Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 117.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> M. Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1972), 264.

The old man falls from his kneeling posture a few inches, flat, face foremost. Instead of the dizzy circling to crash and spill his life on the rocks below – just this. The grotesque merged into the ridiculous reaches a consummation in this bathos of tragedy.<sup>21</sup>

To avoid such unfortunate effect, Winfried Schleiner advises that the actor playing Gloucester should fall from a certain height – even a symbolic one.<sup>22</sup> A slight extra height would preserve the ambiguity of the location while allowing the performance to be more credible and tragic. In Peter Brook's 1962 stage production for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Gloucester (played by Alan Webb) walked with a heavy stick; at the moment of his fall, he seemed to decide otherwise at the last second and caught hold of his cane, his feet hanging in the air. Before letting go, Gloucester engendered a literal cliffhanger during which the emotional and intellectual vertigo could take place. In 1993, Adrian Noble's RSC production showed Gloucester (David Bradley) and Edgar (Simon Russell Beal) sitting at the very edge of the stage. The idea of a dangerous height was thus created by using the elevation between the stage and the auditorium, turning the abyss into the metatheatrical gap separating actors from spectators. On a stage using realistic scenery, spatial ambiguity becomes impossible to uphold: either Gloucester is on top of a cliff or he is not. This is why, on the nineteenth-century stage, the Dover cliff scene was very often cut, or turned into a moment when, in front of a painted set showing the actual presence of cliffs, Gloucester fainted and fell down right in Edgar's arms, thus avoiding any injury. Sometimes, the setting signaled that the scene did not take place up a cliff but on the beach.<sup>23</sup> In these cases, the Dover cliff is no longer a non-space: through the choice of a particular setting, *either* the cliff does exist and we share Gloucester's point of view, fearing the fall to come; *or* the cliff does not exist and we share Edgar's point of view, following his scheme knowingly.

On screen, the scene becomes even more challenging. The idea of the non-space is all the more frustrating for a film director since the medium makes it possible to show the place in a visually realistic and credible way, but can only do so by sacrificing the dramatic effects and the tensions in the story. This dilemma may explain why Peter Brook, who adapted the play for a 1953 CBS broadcast with Orson Welles as Lear, chose not to include the passage. Kozintsev also decided to cut the scene in his 1971 *King Lear (Korol Lir)*. We can only find a silent scene in which, lost in a desert of stones, father (Karl Sebris) and son (Leonhard Merzin) become pathetic figures, made even more vulnerable by the camera's high-angle shot. A close-up shows Edgar's face, which Gloucester's hands slowly touch and progressively recognize. The old man's emotion is too intense, and, in another high-angle shot, Gloucester collapses and dies, thus anticipating the end of the play.

Yet, critics have been too inclined to suppose that the absence of the Dover cliff scene in Kozintsev's *Lear* is evidence of the limits of cinema as a medium. Richard Ashby argues that the cliff scene is not in Kozintsev's film because it would be redundant. Whereas Edgar's speech goes beyond the confines of theatrical space to offer a view of the ordinary lives of fishermen, sailors and samphire gatherers, Kozintsev makes use of the realist space of film to literally show working men who continue to lead precarious and difficult lives outside of the main narrative events of the play. Through its crowd scenes from beginning to end, the film

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<sup>21</sup> G. W. Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Methuen, 1949 [1930]), 171.

<sup>22</sup> In the play-text, the stage direction 'He falls' appears in the Quarto but not in the Folio. This is the only difference in this scene between Q and F.

<sup>23</sup> W. F. McNeir, 'The Staging of the Dover Cliff Scene in *King Lear*', in W. F. McNeir (ed.), *Studies in English Renaissance Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 91; Levin, 'The Heights and the Depths', 98.

gives us a glimpse of the ‘unnumbered’ (4.6.21) and usually unrepresented plebeians who try to survive away from the noble characters and the cataclysmic events they have triggered. The Dover cliff is therefore ‘at once absent from, and yet paradoxically dispersed throughout, the film’.<sup>24</sup> However, if the social themes present in Edgar’s description are still present through this visual diffraction, the reflexive questioning of the medium disappears.

In the 1976 production directed by Tony Davenall for Thames Television, the scene is not cut but is adapted using realistic scenery, reproducing the countryside inside the television studio. As Gloucester (Ronald Radd) and Edgar (Robert Coleby) walk on a grassy ground, the camera tracks back and reveals that there is no cliff in sight. When Edgar asks his father if he can hear the sea, we ironically hear chirping birds on the soundtrack: the characters are definitely not near the sea. Edgar’s scheme is disclosed straightaway, and TV spectators are invited to share his point of view entirely. The film does not preserve spatial ambiguity and tends to turn the scene into a comic one. Any tragic suspense disappears since we are sure that Gloucester does not risk anything if he ‘falls’ over.

In Richard Eyre’s 1998 version, which remediates for television a production staged at the Royal National Theatre in 1997, a long shot reveals Gloucester (Timothy West) and Edgar (Paul Rhys) in a misty environment. The oblique framing adds to the disorientation. Sounds of waves and seagulls are evocative of the seaside. When Gloucester takes the jump, he is lost in the white fog that hovers over the boards of the stage, casting doubt, for a while, over the outcome of his fall. Losing the character in the mist could have been a very effective idea to preserve the ambiguity of the scene but, as the touch of realism brought by the white haze is not supported by the impression that there *could be* some kind of dangerous vacuum somewhere, the suspense cannot be sustained long. Eyre recently came back to the play in 2018, this time directing a high-budget production designed specifically for high-definition television with a 16:9 image ratio<sup>25</sup>. Dizzying shots of a real cliff at Dover spectacularly open the scene, and Edgar (Andrew Scott) positions his father (Jim Broadbent) a few meters away from the abyss. The *mise-en-scène* thus recalls the nineteenth-century stage productions in which the cliff was undoubtedly there but its danger was contained. Although Eyre’s new take on the scene does not rely on, or create, spatial ambiguity, it nevertheless succeeds in generating fearful uncertainty: by bringing his father so close to the edge, Edgar is certainly taking a risk, and viewers may ask themselves if the distance is safe enough for Gloucester not to fall, even if inadvertently.

The production directed by Jonathan Miller in 1982 for the BBC aims to both sustain and discredit Edgar’s account for viewers. At the start of the sequence, on a flat and barren ground, Edgar (Anton Lesser) carries Gloucester (Norman Rodway) on his back. Since Gloucester’s feet do not touch the floor, the director offers a credible explanation for the fact that Gloucester cannot check if there is indeed a slope or not. The camera soon gets very close to the two characters. By hiding the environment, creating a mysterious ‘off-field’ and avoiding any long shots that could reveal the absence of a cliff, the BBC version thus creates an ambiguous non-space. When Gloucester falls over, he disappears from the camera field and, for a few seconds, produces doubt as to his fate. However, Edgar’s acting prevents the moment from becoming truly suspenseful. By describing the perspective with his eyes closed, Edgar puts himself in the position of Gloucester picturing the abyss in his mind, but he also makes us quickly understand that the cliff is just the product of his imagination. Moreover,

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<sup>24</sup> R. Ashby, ‘Crowding out Dover “Cliff” in *Korol Lir*’, *Adaptation* 10.2 (2017), 210–29, <https://academic.oup.com/adaptation/article/10/2/210/3782658/Crowding-out-Dover-Cliff-in-Korol-Lir?rss=1>, accessed 9 October 2017.

<sup>25</sup> For more on Eyre’s 2018 film, see Peter J. Smith’s review in the volume’s online resources

Edgar remains calm and facetious in his farewell to his father, never expressing any fear or attempting to prevent the old man from taking the plunge. The ambiguity generated by the medium is thus eventually denied by the actor's performance.

Michael Elliott's 1983 TV production benefits even more from the possibilities offered by the screen. Gloucester (Leo McKern) and Edgar (David Threlfall) are walking on a ground that remains unknown because they are framed down to their knees only. A few blades of grass and a grey sky are the only details we are allowed to see. The camera then frames the two faces in close-up, preserving the uncertainty of the location. Suspense is intensified through empathetic, extra-diegetic music with tragic overtones, which makes us feel that Gloucester's life will definitely be under threat if he takes the leap. When he falls, the music suddenly stops, signaling the change in mood and viewpoint: the camera shows Gloucester in low-angle shot from a distance, revealing that the old man has fainted face down in the sand. The tragedy turns into absurd and grotesque comedy. Only Edgar, who performs his goodbye as he pretends to go, gives away a clue about the scheme just a few seconds before the 'plunge'. If both TV versions directed by Jonathan Miller and by Michael Elliott take advantage of the tight framing offered by the camera, other productions use another filmic technique to create a misleading environment – editing. In his 1971 film, Peter Brook makes us move between different spaces through cinematic cuts and montage. The scene starts by losing both characters and viewers in an uncertain location through a blurry shot of the two men walking, a blinding shot of the sun and a close-up of feet on an indistinct ground. The camera moves back to eventually reveal a space that seems infinitely flat, a stony desert very similar to Kozintsev's sequence. However, in the background, the sea is visible – not a cliff but a beach. In Brook's version, Edgar (Robert Lloyd) is honest when he asks his father (Alan Webb) whether he hears the sounds of the sea, but the location is now disclosed and is far from threatening. However, an abrupt cut engenders indecision once more. Time seems to have elapsed and we cannot be sure any longer where the scene is now taking place. Edgar carries his father on his back, taking him on spins and turns to fool Gloucester's perceptions – as well as ours. From this moment on, action is only shown in close-ups, denying any sight of the geographical surroundings. The two men's faces and hands fill the screen, Gloucester's gouged-out eyes becoming the very symbol of human suffering, but also of the vision that is now impeded for the spectators. Are the characters still on the safe beach, or have they now reached the summit of an impressive cliff? Edgar's performance contributes, this time, to the suspense: the fear of heights may be perceived on his face while he tries to hold back his father. As in the other versions, Gloucester's leap takes him out of the camera field. A high-angle shot then reveals the irony of the fall: the old man is lying still in the desert, having only fallen from his own height. By offering the opportunity to create a space that oscillates between certainty and uncertainty, editing has allowed Brook to disorientate the viewers and create ambiguity as to what they are watching.

Brian Blessed's 1999 film fully realizes our belief in the existence of the cliff through both framing and editing. The scene, shot on location, is extremely realistic since what we see is a real cliff at Dover as in Eyre's 2018 production – however, the similarities between the two versions end here. Blessed's camera moves to a series of close-ups of faces, obliterating the space around the characters. However, because the previous shot has shown us a cliff, we are invited to think that the precipice is still there and we fully identify with Gloucester. To insist on the presence of a gulf, the camera films the faces in low-angle shots as if we were viewing Edgar (Mark Burgess) and Gloucester (Robert Whelan) from the bottom of the abyss. Edgar's face is filled with terror as he holds his father back and, when he turns his head away to say farewell, we wonder if he is trying to pretend he is leaving or avoiding the sight of the impending suicide. The camera follows Gloucester through his fall, only to reach immediately the sand of the beach. Between the shot of the cliff and the shot of the sand, film editing



constructed an ellipsis – a hidden moment in which Edgar eventually brought his father to the safe space of the beach. The viewers are thus led to question the construction of their expectations, to realize how the processes of editing and framing encouraged us to believe that Gloucester would find a void beneath his feet. By understanding the way we were deluded by the cinematic medium, we are invited to interrogate our perceptions in front of a screen and to analyze the other sequences in the film – and in other films. This most enlightening reflection on the medium may prompt us to be more vigilant concerning the aesthetic and ideological construction of visual discourse.

The sequence in Blessed's film is particularly adapted, so it seems, to viewers who are already familiar with the play – since, even though we know the outcome of the scene, we are surprised to find ourselves still believing in the presence of the abyss. The meaning and expectation created by both editing and framing directly contradict what we know is Edgar's scheme. That we should think there could be a different ending testifies to the strength of image manipulation, while reflecting Edgar's trickery itself: viewers who are generally the witnesses of Gloucester being fooled are themselves fooled.

The bare stage of a theater is the only environment where the Dover cliff scene can preserve its spatial uncertainty to play with the spectators' vacillating faith in what they see, casting doubt on both Edgar's account and Gloucester's perception, and forming the cliff in the viewers' minds before revealing it as a verbal and illusory creation. Through this highly metatheatrical scene, the bare stage discloses its very workings while asserting its power of suggestion. However, cinema has tools specific to its art that can remediate the scene in rich and ambiguous ways. Films such as Peter Brook's and Brian Blessed's certainly embrace the spatial complexity and fluid emotions raised by this 'dramedic' moment. By foregrounding explicitly that filmic space is constructed through framing and editing, they disclose the power of images and remind us, just as Shakespeare does, that the vertigo of fiction is always there, around us. It is up to us to deconstruct visual discourse to avoid falling into its abyss of illusion.

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