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# Shakespeare in the Media: Old and New

Edited by Anna Maria Cimitile and Katherine Rowe

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Introduction  
Shakespeare: Overlapping Mediascapes in the Mind

<sup>1</sup> Peter Brook and Geoffrey Reeves, "Finding Shakespeare on Film. From an Interview with Peter Brook", *The Tulane Drama Review*, 11.1 (1966), 117-121.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>3</sup> See Barbara Hodgdon, "Two *King Lear*s: Uncovering the Filmtext", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 11.3 (July 1983), 143-151.

<sup>4</sup> Having "define[d] the problem" of Shakespeare on film, however, Brook gives examples of a cinema that has in itself the potential to 'solve' it, and his reflections and ideas can aptly be projected into our multimedia present.

<sup>5</sup> Digital archives and tools for research and pedagogical purposes have had an increasing impact on Shakespeare studies. Among recent essays, see Peter S. Donaldson, "The Shakespeare Electronic Archive: Collections and Multimedia Tools for Teaching and Research, 1992-2008", *Shakespeare*, 4.3 (2008), 250-260. See also Alexander Huang, "Global Shakespeare 2.0 and the Task of the Performance Archive", *Shakespeare Survey*, 64, (2011), 38-51.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 2.

If you could extract the mental impression made by the Shakespearean strategy of images, you would get a piece of pop collage. The effect is like a word whose letters are written across three overlapping pictures in the mind.

Peter Brook

In a 1966 interview on the topic of Shakespeare on film, Peter Brook offered a contradictory account of adaptation across media.<sup>1</sup> An influential English theatre director, Brook is also a film director and the author of *The Empty Space* (1968) on the art of theatre. In positing once more the complex question of the relation between words and images it is not surprising, then, to hear him declare (in a positive sense) the excessive visual character of Shakespeare's poetry. What is surprising is the media exceptionalism that underpins the arguments of this gifted multimedia artist, as he asserts the necessary priority of one medium (verbal but carrying image-power) over another (visual and lacking the essential plasticity of words), asking "How can the screen free itself of its own consistencies so as to reflect the mobility of thought that blank verse demands?"<sup>2</sup> Describing the relation between cinema and Shakespeare, Brook frames the two oppositionally, the former characterized by constraint and the latter by liberty (in both its senses of liberality and freedom of motion). What Barbara Hodgdon usefully termed an "expectational text"<sup>3</sup> may be lurking here: the notion that Shakespeare's words embody a generative "mobility" and *varietas* that all other art forms may draw on inexhaustibly, even as they fall short of its copia.<sup>4</sup>

For a long time Shakespeareans working on film rehearsed its semiotic poverty in comparison to literature and live performance; that premise was sustained in part because few of us ventured beyond the increasingly well-defined purview of cinema as a medium. In recent decades, scholars have sought a more agnostic vocabulary for addressing media translation across multiple delivery platforms and in a global context – a turn accelerated by the advent of accessible video archives, the proliferation of new screen formats, and the convergence of screen, print, and performance media at the end of the 20th century.<sup>5</sup> That our vocabulary for thinking about the global traffic in Shakespeare, in multiple media and venues, is still evolving should be taken as a sign of the intellectual richness of this field of study. That said, two recent coinages seem especially apt to the transmedia Shakespeares explored in this issue. Margaret Litvin's characterization of a "global kaleidoscope" of "performances, texts, and criticism traveling from many directions" captures the commitment to multiple Shakespearean sources these essays subscribe to.<sup>6</sup> They share with Alexander Huang's recent work an interest in the unpredictability of

performance and in what Anston Bosman calls the “filtering” of the “global flow of Shakespeare ... through local environments”.<sup>7</sup>

The globalization of culture, as many acknowledge and as Bosman writes again, “is now unthinkable without the media of mass communication”, and Shakespeare today circulates mainly through a disembodied, “spacious and volatile medium – a kind of aether”.<sup>8</sup> Astride writing and electronic media, Shakespeare’s corpus, multi-mediated from the beginning, becomes apt matter for the late age of print and the early era of Web 2.0. Alternatively reduced, magnified, translated, curated, mashed up or hybridized, the corpus is consumed with Baconian voracity or registers its indigestibility to our times. From the elision of the Shakespearean language in Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957) to the enhancing and updating of its “riot of images” (Virginia Woolf’s definition of the Elizabethan theatre) to our present, as envisioned in, for instance, Toneelgroep Amsterdam’s *Roman Tragedies* theatre project (dir. Ivo van Hove, 2008-2010); from the YouTube hybrid, multimedia Hulk as Hamlet<sup>9</sup> to the use of Shakespeare as ‘matter’ for the personal investigation of cinema and its genres in Liz Tabish’s *A Cinematic Translation of Shakespearean Tragedies* (2008), the complexity of Shakespeare uncannily emerges in and as the ‘conjuncture’ of media as well as of past and present.

The title of this special issue of *Anglistica* emphasizes the always polychronic nature of media practices – including those of which our own scholarship is necessarily a part. How do we as critic-audiences acknowledge our necessary embeddedness in a mediascape as varied as the one in which we now operate? How do the bookish, deconstructivist, close and “deep attention” readers, the readers in ‘slow motion’, relate to/engage with hyperreading and the modes of attention required by new media textualities? Although hyperattention is generally understood as a phenomenon of online reading, it is not exclusive to digital formats. It is better understood as a longstanding form of attention intensified by new media practices.<sup>10</sup> There is a middle ground between deep attention and hyperattention, where reading resides and where not only deep reading but also hyperreading is redefined. Shakespeare is a privileged site for literary scholars who want their reading to be continuously challenged, defied even, by the object of investigation and who prefer to engage complex writing: unpredictable, multifarious and ‘living’. When Shakespeare is reinvented in other media, from classic cinema to social networks, it meets other complex textualities and forms. The encounter produces what we should learn to treat no longer as an ‘adapted’ Shakespeare but Shakespeare in/as the present-past of new media.<sup>11</sup>

The essays in this special issue attend with care to the long and uneven *durée* of specific performance idioms that define and constitute ‘Shakespeare’ as a polychronic corpus in this way. Sarah Sheplock, for example, explains the way the *benshi* of Japanese silent film provides a dominant performance vocabulary for Kurosawa’s late-century films *Throne of Blood* and *Ran*. Maurizio Calbi’s introduction to and interview of Ashish Avikunthak explore the reciprocal hybridisation of “Shakespeare” and “Kathakali” in the artist’s film *Dancing Othello* (2002). In the

<sup>7</sup> Alexander C. Y. Huang, *Chinese Shakespeare: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Anston Bosman, “Shakespeare and Globalization”, in Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells, eds., *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 290.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCmcCtB1Wco>>

<sup>10</sup> N. Katherine Hayles probes the differences between “deep reading” and “hyperreading” both in conventional print and online. She sees advantages in both and argues for a reciprocal transfer of abilities from one mode to the other. See, among other essays, “How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine”, *ADE Bulletin*, 150 (2010), 62-79.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent discussion of the complex space opened up by the encounter between old texts and digital media see Richard Burt, *Medieval and Early Modern Film and Media* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

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film, the encounter of both artistic forms with street theatre produces an “entanglement” or “discordance” that is nevertheless “*asserted* as an ethico-political and artistic force” and that owes its power to what Avikunthak defines, in the interview, as a “disjunctural narrative” prevailing in the film. Spanning cinema, television, recorded performance and the internet, the essays explore the ways Shakespeare in and as media provokes the search for a vocabulary adequate to the sense of ‘excess’ and loss generated by its restless trajectory across platforms. Thus Alessandra Marino’s cultural analysis of two TV series – respectively Italian and British, dealing with intercultural relations – adopts the concept of “brand” to enhance the “understanding of the phenomenon of quotations of Shakespeare’s plays and plots”. In exploring very different conjunctions of old and new media, these essays skirt their way around the attractions of media exceptionalism of the kind all of us may be prone to, while still finding ways to value the specificities of different platforms and modes of performance.

As a group, the essays broach an important array of questions about the comparative media history of Shakespeare. What new methodological approaches are required by the traverse of Shakespeare across media, from silent film to TV series, to YouTube and video archives of performance? Should we insist on a sense of continuity between the new and the old, or rather on difference and discontinuity? Are there ‘things’ (matter, contingency, the material world) that can be analysed in or via new media Shakespeare and that are specific to it? In his article, Stephen O’Neill offers a reading of self-generated Shakespeare on YouTube as producing forms of agency that re-form notions of subjectivity and the ‘I’ in the new medium. Li Lan Yong investigates two non-English performances of Shakespeare’s plays (Korean and Kelantanese Malay) as reproduced in the A | S | I | A digital archive; her cultural analysis relies on the uploaded versions of the productions, which, by circulating in the internet, and because of the added English translation script, become autonomous texts, new media performance editions of local stagings. Here are some specimens of Shakespeare from the global mediascape; the opportunity to engage with and reflect on such new platforms for performance, reception, and scholarship is the most urgent and compelling in Shakespeare studies today.



“Contending with fretful elements”:  
Shakespeare, Kurosawa and the *Benshi*.  
On Film Adaptation

In contemporary discussions of film adaptation, perhaps the one thing agreed-upon is that fidelity to the literary source material is not a valid criterion for criticizing a film. Some critics posit this as a recent development, while others point to a long legacy of agreement since the advent of cinema. What emerges from both sides is that authors begin scholarly work by acknowledging and disavowing this ‘myth’ of fidelity: “the book was better than the movie” is not a valid statement for serious criticism. Yet the anxious dismissal which introduces countless essays and books on film adaptation reveals that the idea of fidelity is still prevalent – and even dangerous – enough to warrant a dismissal. Even if the notion of fidelity of an adaptation to its source novel does not contain a grain of truth or fidelity is the “most frequent and tiresome,”<sup>1</sup> and “basic and banal focus”<sup>2</sup> of adaptation studies, the term ‘fidelity’ arises again and again. It looks as if more than an easy dismissal is needed to banish the specter of fidelity which “hovers in the background”<sup>3</sup> once and for all.

Films that call on Shakespeare for source material for inspiration can present an ideal medium through which to examine the ways an adaptation is ‘allowed’ to relate to and engage with its source material. Analyses of Shakespeare films are continually concerned with the relation of the new work to Shakespeare’s original text. Shakespeare’s work has come to stand in many ways for Western Literature, and the use of his works in film continues that very complicated legacy. Shakespeare’s importance as Western cultural icon in cinema is problematical, however, when Shakespeare scholars such as Frank Kermode argue: “Many would agree with the general proposition that the best Shakespeare movies are not in English but in Japanese or Russian”.<sup>4</sup> Western cinema seems to be faced with both the universality of Shakespeare’s words and a paradox of translating those words: a predicament that mirrors the one many adaptation films face.

Akira Kurosawa’s films *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985) are considered by Western critics to be some of the best film adaptations of Shakespeare (related to *Macbeth* and *King Lear* respectively). Neither film has a word of Shakespeare’s dialogue in them; both take place in feudal Japan and introduce characters, histories and themes not found in Shakespeare – changes by no means unheard of within film adaptations. Kurosawa’s films are often relegated to ‘transgressive’ or ‘foreign’ Shakespeare-film classifications, meaning that deviations from Shakespeare are viewed as culturally-tinged deviations, something unavoidable in the act of translation. It is precisely this perception of foreignness that makes Kurosawa’s films exemplary for a study in terms of adaptations. What critics label as ‘otherness’ in his films separates that which is not distinctly Shakespeare and labels it as Japanese,

<sup>1</sup> Dudley Andrew, “Adaptation”, in James Naremore, ed., *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 32.

<sup>2</sup> James M. Welsh, “Introduction: Issues of Screen Adaptation. What Is the Truth?”, in James M. Welsh and Peter Lev, eds., *The Literature/Film Reader* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Welsh, *Issues of Screen Adaptation*, xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Kermode, “Our Muddy Vesture”, *London Review of Books*, 27.1 (6 January 2005), 17.



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thus exposing just how often analysis of adaptation films is still limited by claims of fidelity, though now under different terminology.

To examine how it is that Kurosawa's films refute such buried assumptions about adaptations, we can look to a figure of Japanese film heritage. The *benshi*, a lecturer who explained and interpreted early Japanese silent film, can give critics today a model with which to examine adaptation as a process. Through the *benshi*, an original film-text was re-imagined through the subjective voice of the presenter, and freely deviated from the original story. Through Kurosawa's films' challenge to and engagement with their Shakespearean sources, Kurosawa becomes like a *benshi* in rejecting the infallibility of the original. Through scene analyses of Kurosawa's two Shakespeare-related films, I will argue that in the position of a *benshi* Kurosawa breaks a pervasive binary of Western adaptation theory not only by interpreting but also by countering and criticizing the 'original'. The form, style, and content of the film are Kurosawa's vehicles for mounting this challenge.

## Early Japanese Film and the *Benshi*

Early models of the *benshi* can be seen in nearly all early silent film contexts; those were the lecturers in the theater who translated or extended the on-screen images. In the United States and most Western countries, such lecturers had faded from use by about 1910.<sup>5</sup> However, in Japan the lecturer's role transformed into the art of the *benshi*, which remained a popular aspect of a film well into the 1930s. The *benshi* originated in attempts to translate Western culture or extend a film clip. Yet as films became more narratively complex, the *benshi* evolved with them. As Donald Richie explains, the *benshi* narrated, performed dialogue, and "assumed responsibility for interpreting and analyzing the film as well".<sup>6</sup> The origins of the *benshi* in traditional Japanese theatre have been often noted in examinations of Japanese film.<sup>7</sup> From the chorus in Noh drama, the chanter in puppet theater (*bunraku*) and the narrator in *kabuki*, informing voices are often present and serve to create a Japanese theater which is "a pictorial expansion of verbal storytelling".<sup>8</sup> Richie's assessment of the narrative voice points out the split between the verbal and the picture that exists in Japanese theater, and which migrated to film in the popularity of the *benshi*, where the film on-screen was blended with a 'live' performance. The separation between verbal storytelling and the film picture becomes a space negotiated by the *benshi*'s translation of cinema. The *benshi* themselves were not unaware of their task as adapters as well as translators. A famous *benshi*, Musobei, once wrote: "Translation must be faithful to each word and line of the original work, but a word-for-word translation will just not express the artistic taste permeating the original. The only thing that will bring that to the surface is originality as a translation".<sup>9</sup> While Musobei's ideas may seem to be restricted by being "faithful to the original" in spirit, his "originality as a translation" and "artistic taste" suggest not one single meaning, but a more dynamic approach to transforming the original. The purpose of originality was

<sup>5</sup> Donald Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film: A Concise History* (New York: Kodansha America, 2005), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Joanne Bernardi, *Writing in Light: The Silent Scenario and the Japanese Pure Film Movement* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 36.

<sup>7</sup> See Donald Richie's, Jeffrey Dym's, and Joanne Bernardi's work on the *benshi*.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film: A Concise History* (New York: Kodansha America, 2005), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Abé M. Nornes, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 117.

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to act as an extra-cinematic voice, to intercede and negotiate the original into a meaning the *benshi* thought best to communicate to the audience.

The separation between verbal storytelling and the film picture becomes a space negotiated by the *benshi*'s translation of cinema. The ubiquitous classification of Kurosawa's work as a translation of "Shakespeare's words into Japanese images"<sup>10</sup> puts him in the same position as the *benshi*, negotiating that separation. Yet those who point to Kurosawa's mediation between text and film often gloss over the mark of the translator on the final product. Unavoidably, translation entails creative interpretation. While this idea may seem self-evident, it is so often forgotten that it is worth spelling out. Kurosawa's allusions to Japanese theatrical modes and traditions are apparent and much lauded in his Shakespeare-related films, as is their use alongside mainstream Western (Hollywood) traditions of film. What some might overlook is the precursor for this blending in the form of the *benshi*, whose informing voice gave the audience not only a Japanese cultural lens but a subjective one: a dynamic and personal interaction with the pre-translated work in which the *benshi* could add, delete, criticize, counterpoint – essentially, talk back to the work he translated. So, when a character steps out of the action to comment on the story (as will be seen in *Ran*) or the film is bookended by a chanting chorus (*Kumonosu-jo* / *Throne of Blood*), it is not only within a theatrical tradition these techniques are operating, but in a film adaptation tradition.

## Shakespeare in a Strange Land

The *benshi* stands as a historical model that runs counter to the way in which most adaptations are tackled today: not as a binary, but an exchange. As I outlined earlier, fidelity-obsession continues to haunt adaptation studies, and I am by no means the first to point this out. The field today, Thomas Leitch explains, operates on a "severe economy" of principles "which have ossified into a series of unvoiced and fallacious bromides most often taking the form of 'binary oppositions that poststructuralist theory has taught us to deconstruct: literature versus cinema, high culture versus mass culture, original versus copy'".<sup>11</sup> At the heart of this divide is the last binary: original versus copy. Even when denying fidelity as a useful assessment, unspoken in criticism of film adaptation is the infallibility of the original. The adapted signifier is nearly always inferior, seen only as an echo of the 'true' meaning of the original. In this mode of thought, the adaptation cannot criticize, interpret or otherwise touch the original. As it stands, adaptations are trapped: acknowledging a debt to the original means an adaptation cannot escape its shadow, and denying a relationship all together eliminates any exchange of meaning and interpretation between the two.

Few sources cast quite as long a shadow as Shakespeare's works do. The long history of Shakespeare as representative of Western literature has imbued his work with almost mythical authorial intention, meaning that adaptations of his plays are an ideal case study of the spectre of fidelity. His enormous cultural importance means that the problems all adaptations face are amplified, and deviations are at

<sup>10</sup> See Erin Suzuki, "Lost in Translation: Reconsidering Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 34 (2006), 93-104, and J. Blumenthal, "Macbeth Into *Throne of Blood*", *Sight and Sound*, 34.4 (1965), 190-195.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas M. Leitch, "Twelve Fallacies of Adaptation Theory", *Criticism*, 45.2 (Spring 2003), 150.

times tantamount to heresy. Shakespeare films also illustrate well the two modes of relation to the original in which fidelity is typically viewed. The first is the text of an author: the absence or presence of Shakespeare's original language is distinctive, perhaps more than that of any other author in Western culture. Since so much weight is placed on the historical fame and poetry of the original text (as well as its distinction from modern colloquial language), deviating is both obvious and a kind of betrayal, but so is cutting or tossing aside the language. As Kenneth Rothwell explains, even those Shakespeare adaptations without any Shakespearean language still bear a relation to the original the films – and critics – cannot ignore: “Like unwanted illegitimate children, no matter how emphatic the protests that they are ‘not Shakespeare’ they have the impudence to lurk on the fringe of the family circle.”<sup>12</sup> In an attempt to study Shakespeare adaptations, then, it might seem counterintuitive to look at films which cast off not only the Shakespearean language but the English language as well. However, global Shakespeare is a rapidly expanding genre, and critics like Alex Huang work to form digital archives of the wide variety of Shakespeare performances from around the world. It is therefore difficult to continue to view foreign Shakespeare films as ‘avoiding’ the problem English language films have in casting off the Bard's poetry (as they have long been said to do). For example, in his examination of Shakespeare films, Peter Brook writes: “The great masterpiece, of course, is the Kurosawa film, *Throne of Blood*, which doesn't really come into the Shakespeare question at all because it doesn't have the text”.<sup>13</sup> In this way, analysis of adaptations such as Kurosawa's are dismissed to the fringes in order to keep the original/adaptation binary stable. In Brook's assessment, foreign Shakespeare isn't ‘real’, or at least it can't be discussed in the same way as English-language Shakespeare films. To classify these films as ‘transgressive Shakespeare’, films that deviate so far from the text as to be considered only vaguely adaptations or otherwise marginal, is to reveal how deeply troubling to the foundations of adaptation foreign Shakespeares can be – and just how vital a role they can play in adaptation studies.

If an adaptation is divorced from the original language, the other commonly cited relation critics choose is to its ‘spirit’: the inferred authorial intent of the original work. While often perceived as a looser principle of adaptation, under its surface we find again fidelity to a supposed authorial intention. The idea that there is only one true message inherent in the original maintains the binary opposition between adaptation and original. Shakespeare criticism often lauds the ability of cinema to expand upon what Shakespeare wrote. While this expansion might seem initially to provide some freedom, in fact the films are still shackled by the thought of ‘what Shakespeare would have wanted’. Therefore, through text or through spirit, fidelity creates a one-way street of meaning progressing from the original to the adaptation, the adaptation passively observing or reflecting the original as an audience (purportedly) views a film. And as Andrew defines it, if the film is not reproducing “something essential” from the original, its relation to that original is irrevocably split. In this mode, the original exists in a kind of isolation, unaffected by

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 219.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Brook, “Shakespeare on the Screens”, *Sight and Sound*, 34.2 (Spring 1965), 68.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew, *Film Adaptation*, 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 192.

<sup>16</sup> Rothwell, *History of Shakespeare on screen*, 197.

<sup>17</sup> Rothwell, *History of Shakespeare on screen*, 197.

adaptations that do not hold that ‘essential’ aspect: “the uniqueness of the original text is preserved ... it is intentionally left unassimilated in adaptation”.<sup>14</sup> It is in the ‘assimilation,’ however, that foreign-language Shakespeare reveals the binary under which adaptation studies currently labor. The particular case of Kurosawa’s ‘Japaneseness’ is my way to examine how that revelation works.

In his book on Kurosawa’s work, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto argues that “Japanese adaptations of Western texts are often regarded as mere imitations; it is only when some uniquely Japanese codes of traditional culture are mixed with great Western originals that adaptations become worthy of praise and appreciation”.<sup>15</sup> Examinations of ‘Japaneseness’ in Kurosawa’s work haunt criticism in the same way that fidelity haunts the assessment of Shakespeare adaptations. In comparing *Throne of Blood* to *Macbeth*, Rothwell claims that “[t]he multiple alternations in plot and character mainly stem from a desire to blend Japanese with Western cultural codes”.<sup>16</sup> Rothwell’s assessment takes the meaning out of the filmmakers’ control and into the hands of ‘culture’, denying a real analysis of the change to the source as independent or source-challenging decisions. Fears about changing Shakespeare are subsumed into the idea of cultural difference. The way Rothwell describes Kurosawa’s incorporation of multicultural sources and techniques as “ransack[ing] Western and Japanese culture”<sup>17</sup> maintains the same sort of highly-charged, emotional language as does ‘betrayal’ to fidelity. Casting Kurosawa as a distinctly Japanese filmmaker and assigning the deviation from Shakespeare to the imaginary influence of some incomprehensible ‘other’ culture is an easy trap for critics to fall into, labeling a lack of fidelity of the source as an unavoidable cultural translation. One can see this often in Kurosawa’s case, as critics are so deeply engaged in examinations of ‘Japaneseness’ in his films that the engagement with Shakespeare is often overlooked. The model of the *benshi* can be useful to avoid such ‘lost-in-translation’ assumptions because its extra-cinematic voice foregrounds the work of translation, interpretation, and criticism in film. In *Throne of Blood* and *Ran*, the *benshi*-like voice emerges in two separate ways. Both ultimately can be seen as far more than just ‘transgressive’ Shakespeare.

### ‘Japanization’ and *Throne of Blood*

<sup>18</sup> *Kumonosu-jo*, the movie’s title in Japan, means “Spider’s Web Castle”. For release in the United States and Europe it was renamed *Throne of Blood*, which I will use to avoid confusion.

<sup>19</sup> Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa*, 268.

Criticism of *Throne of Blood* <sup>18</sup> has long been concerned with mapping the film’s connections to *Macbeth* and investigating its aesthetics through a Japanese theatrical lens. In line with this focus, “critics almost unanimously agree that Shakespeare’s poetry is replaced by visual imagery in *Throne of Blood*”.<sup>19</sup> The idea of replacing poetry with visual imagery is a potentially problematic assertion about the transition between mediums that, as described above, serves to maintain the language of the Bard unchanged. Yet examining where and how Shakespeare’s language emerges within the film can also reveal the ways in which it is transformed and interpreted by Kurosawa – the ways the film talks back to the original.

What has prevented many critics from this sort of assessment – Kurosawa’s themes rather than an imaginary ‘Japanese’ cultural theme – has been outlined



by Yoshimoto as the tendency of critics to analyze *Throne of Blood* as either a Shakespeare film or as a Noh-influenced Japanese film – not both simultaneously. In his chapter on *Throne of Blood* he argues that the typical reading of the Noh aesthetic assumes a Buddhist or Japanese world view, but that in fact “[a]nybody can use formal features of Noh for a variety of purposes, so that the presence of Noh conventions in film ... by itself does not – in most cases cannot – simply reproduce the specific world of Noh”.<sup>20</sup> The limitations of this reading, as reported by Yoshimoto, emerge repeatedly in criticism that tends to either privilege the retention of imagery found in *Macbeth* or outline the Noh or Buddhist implications of the film. In this case, the relation between the original and the signifier overwhelms interpretation of the film itself, and as Yoshimoto says, analysis must not “stop short of analyzing how these conventions function in the specific context of the film’s textual system”.<sup>21</sup> While he does not provide a concrete example of what this approach would look like practically, the model of the *benshi* may supply it: the film provides extra-cinematic voices that mark how it comments on the Shakespearean text.

A brief example of how *Throne of Blood* addresses Act Five of *Macbeth* illustrates this dynamic. As Macbeth delivers his famous “To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow” soliloquy, he despairs over the cycle of life and death that seems to be “full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing”, and in which man is nothing more than “a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more”.<sup>22</sup> His contemplation of life, however, begins with a comment on the recent news of Lady Macbeth’s death: “She should have died hereafter: / There would have been a time for such a word”.<sup>23</sup> Yet for Washizu, the Macbeth character-function in *Throne of Blood*, there is not a moment to even acknowledge the lack of time. The last few scenes of *Macbeth* (Lady Macbeth’s death, the slaying of Macduff’s family, Macduff’s confrontation with Macbeth, and the crowning of Malcolm as king) are condensed and accelerated in *Throne of Blood*. The film eliminates Macduff’s role and we are not told that Washizu’s wife has died – we leave her at the moment when she has almost broken down; this keeps the audience’s focus solely on Washizu. The final four minutes of the film portray his men’s mutiny and the murder of Washizu, after he has rushed from Asaji’s side.

Yet the chant-like despair of Macbeth’s “to-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow” can be found in *Throne of Blood*. One looking for the bleak march of time that is evoked in Macbeth’s speech will find it in the slow chanting of the chorus, bookending the film in identical sequences: a pillar surrounded by fog, reading “Here stood Spider’s Web Castle” is shown while male voices chant: “Look upon the ruins of the castle of delusion, haunted only now by the spirits of those who perished, a scene of carnage born of consuming desire, never changing now and throughout eternity”.<sup>24</sup> The authoritative voice makes explicit the themes of the film: time is cyclical and men are bound to commit the same errors. Kurosawa uses this tradition to open and close the film not because *Macbeth* is a play and he is linking Elizabethan stage techniques to Noh (Japanese) stage techniques, but

<sup>20</sup> Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa*, 254.

<sup>21</sup> Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa*, 262.

<sup>22</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (New York: Washington Square Press, The Folger Library, 1992), V.v.19-25.

<sup>23</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.v.18-19.

<sup>24</sup> Akira Kurosawa, *Throne of Blood*, Criterion Collection, 2003, DVD.



Fig. 1: Still from Akira Kurosawa, *Throne of Blood*, 1957, DVD, 2003, Criterion Collection.

in order to ground his meaning at the beginning and the end of the film, moving more into the realm of the *benshi* model than theatrical ones.

The mood and emotion of Macbeth's soliloquy are further dispersed into the film as the Shakespearean "Life's but a walking shadow",<sup>25</sup> becomes the motif for the setting of *Throne of Blood*. The film landscape is sparse, both in the castle and out – the only deviation comes from the surrounding woods, a confusing maze of trees and paths. The castle Washizu comes to rule is built on a volcanic slope, a bleak landscape of dark rock and not much else. The dark castle and ground are contrasted with pervasive fog and a blank, white sky. The characters of this world are the "poor player[s]" on a barren stage.

<sup>25</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.v.25.

The structure of the narrative also echoes the themes set forth in the chanting choruses. In the first scene of action, messengers deliver the news of Washizu's battle victory to the Great Lord. In one of the final scenes, Washizu, now the Great Lord, receives in the same way the news of his impending loss. The repetition points to Washizu's incomprehension of his place within a larger cycle: he is killed by his own men just as he killed the previous Great Lord, and realization comes too late (if at all). The hopelessness of cyclical actions, emphasized by its verbal repetition in the chorus, echoes Macbeth's "to-morrow ... creeps in this petty place from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time", and Washizu's ignorance of the cycle makes him equally ignorant of Macbeth's knowledge that "all our yesterdays have lighted fools / the way to dusty death".<sup>26</sup> Kurosawa's repetition in both the opening chorus and in Washizu's downfall indicates that the cyclical nature of the film mirrors Washizu's failure to learn from the yesterdays of his predecessors.

<sup>26</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.v.20-24.

*Throne of Blood* visualizes the ideas expressed in Macbeth's soliloquy, as opposed to *Macbeth*, in which the speech is the subjective expression of one character in a cast of many. Macbeth contemplates the cycles of life, but Washizu is too busy *being* the fool on the way to dusty death to stop and think about how he got there. He is shown questioning his actions, perhaps feeling guilt, but his character generally does not express as much indecision as Macbeth. Perhaps most importantly, he is ultimately unaware of his own role within a larger narrative. Kurosawa's choice to keep Washizu largely silent on his feelings does not mean he is giving the audience a flat character. Rather, he uses Washizu to illuminate the vision of a fool alluded to within the soliloquy.

The Noh theatrical traditions seen in *Throne of Blood*, therefore, are used to further express the cycle of violence inhabited by unaware players. Noh makeup and costuming – as has been often noted in criticism – takes away personal markers and expressions, transforming the actor into a symbol of actions rather than an individual. Throughout *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa presents highly stylized acting and costumes as well as limited facial and body movements – in line with Noh drama aesthetics. There are few close-ups; the camera prevalently stays stationary, and at a distance, so that the spectator sees the film from the point of view of theatre audience. Through his use of Noh aesthetics, Kurosawa works to move his characters from individual psychological portraits into character-types, giving the audience the anthropomorphized form of Shakespeare’s metaphors.

Yet in the final scenes of the movie, Kurosawa breaks with his established camera style and closely follows Washizu’s face, and for the first time the chaos and confusion of the battle is represented in close-up. As his enemies disguise themselves as the forest to attack his castle and Washizu faces his downfall, the camera is placed as if among the soldiers: Washizu’s stricken face is visible through the flashes of men running past. The camera follows Washizu’s movements through the upper levels of his castle as his men gather below to overthrow their lord. Kurosawa keeps the camera centered closely on Washizu for the four-minute-long scene of his death, as he is pinned by innumerable arrows, throws himself around the stairs of the castle’s courtyard, then dies in front of his own army. The view of the amassed army firing the arrows is kept off-screen until Washizu dies. He screams and shouts throughout, the only other sound the thud of arrows hitting wood. His death scene can certainly be described as “sound and fury”, and is a stark contrast to the stifled movement and flashes of violence the audience has seen before.

Within the film, then, what does all this sound and fury signify? At the end of *Macbeth*, it is implied that the ‘just’ political forces have triumphed. In the bleak picture of mankind and a cycle of violence in *Macbeth* there is at least a glimpse of hope in the future. Malcolm implies that those who fled from the “watchful tyranny” of Macbeth will return, the country will “be planted newly”.<sup>27</sup> Critic Ana Laura Zambrano claims that, for Shakespeare’s audience, the guarantee of monarchs after Macbeth, leading to the Elizabethan age and beyond is the bright future after Macbeth’s tyranny, ensuring “tragedy is thereby contained”.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, *Throne of*

<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.iii.54,75.

<sup>28</sup> Ana Laura Zambrano, “Throne of Blood: Kurosawa’s *Macbeth*”, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 2 (Summer 1974), 274.

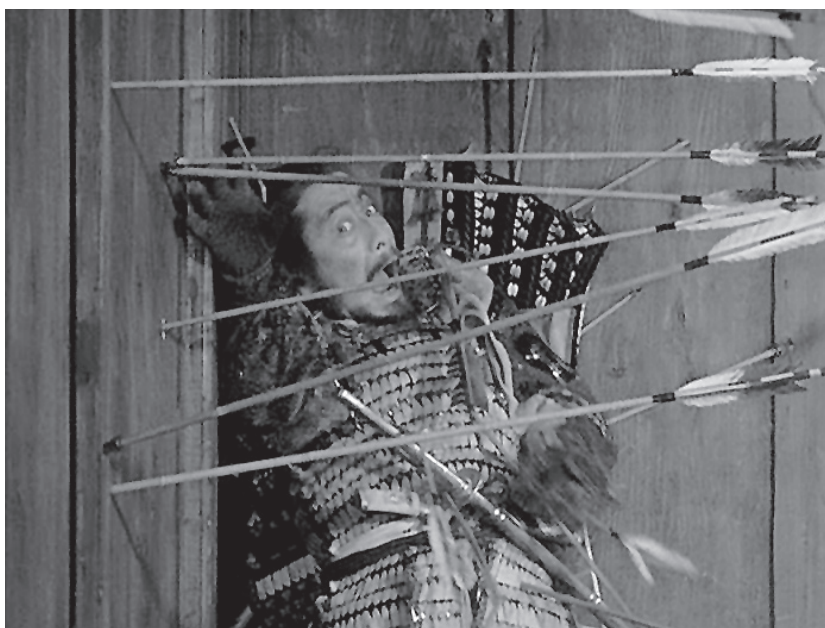


Fig. 2: Still from Akira Kurosawa, *Throne of Blood*, 1957, DVD, 2003, Criterion Collection.



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<sup>29</sup> Other film adaptations of the play have interpreted it in this way; consider the appearance of the witches at the very end of Orson Welles' *Macbeth* (1948).

*Blood* does not circumscribe the cycle of violence and ends the way it starts, “never changing, now and throughout eternity”.<sup>29</sup> The bookend-message of the film comes much closer to the attitude assumed by the “to-morrow” speech than by *Macbeth* as a whole. The place for a new leader to step in is taken away and replaced by the chanting and pole marking the location of Spider’s Web castle, “A scene of carnage born of consuming desire / Never changing, now and throughout eternity”. The Noh aesthetic is contextualized into the structure of the film that makes characters into stereotypes rather than psychologized individuals. Washizu is not one man who has gone wrong, he is all men who lust after power and he shows no sign of slowing down. His death, full of sound and fury, signifies “nothing” in a way that *Macbeth*’s does not.

By invoking the model of the *benshi* and looking not for deviations but rather to where the film chooses to direct the audience’s gaze and attention, we can see Kurosawa’s film as allowing the audience to inhabit the world of *Macbeth*, rather than just listen to his speech. The “To-morrow” speech is excised but the film itself explores its themes. Kurosawa may take Shakespeare’s imagery from the soliloquy, but as with a *benshi* who translates and interprets the silent film (though in the opposite direction of ‘translating’ words into images), the audience is informed of his focus. Kurosawa implements an authoritative chorus and casts out the sections of the Shakespearean tragedy that might interfere with his meaning, thus presenting a far bleaker tale.

### ***Ran*: The Splintered Arrow**

In *Throne of Blood*, the extra-cinematic voice of the chorus bookends the film, clearly pointing to the overriding themes. In the much later *Ran* (1985), Kurosawa returns to this authoritative voice, this time subsumed in the voices of the characters, but in ways that explicitly invoke the model of *benshi* again. In *Ran*, Kurosawa makes even more drastic changes to the characters and narrative of *King Lear* than those seen in *Throne of Blood*, and adds Japanese folklore and Hollywood-epic style staging to Shakespeare’s text. Even their titles differ in clarity: Kurosawa’s *Kumoso-jo* becomes *Throne of Blood* for English audiences, while the Japanese *Ran* is unchanged, its translation of chaos (and connotations of fury, revolt, and madness)<sup>30</sup> remaining largely inaccessible to any monolingual Western audience.

The story of *Ran* resembles Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: an aging monarch decides to divide his kingdom among his children and lives as their guest, but their greed and disrespect eventually lead to his downfall and madness. Hidetora of the Ichimonji clan, the *Lear* character-function, splits his kingdom between his three sons. The youngest, Saburo (closest to the truthful and faithful Cordelia in *Lear*), criticizes his brothers’ flattering words and his father’s plan, citing his father’s bloody accession to power. Other character-functions from *Lear* are spread throughout the film, as Hidetora, like *Lear*, goes mad and is driven into the wilderness, seeking the loyal Saburo whom he banished.

<sup>30</sup> For further explications of these connotations, see Jan Kott, “*Ran*”, in James Goodwin, ed., *Perspectives on Akira Kurosawa* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994), 201-207.

The banishment scene exemplifies the type of derivation and addition to Shakespearean material that can be seen in *Ran*. Saburo's refusal to his father begins much as Cordelia's to Lear, but Hidetora counters his rejection with a lesson to his sons. Hidetora uses a well-known folktale with Japanese origins, in which a king gives each of his sons an arrow to snap, which they do easily. But when the king puts the arrows together in a bundle, the sons cannot break it; this, for the king of the folktale, illustrates their strength in unity. Hidetora performs the same demonstration, and he and his advisors sit back appreciatively, believing the lesson complete. But unlike the son in the folktale, Saburo breaks the three arrows over his knee and calls his father foolish for believing the sons will help one another. The story is broken just as the arrows are: Saburo's disrespect and mockery is not just for his father's lesson, but also for the folklore connected to the metaphor.

Critics have noted the replacement of the love-test in *Lear* with the arrow-tale in *Ran*,<sup>31</sup> but, as illustrated by Yoshimoto, few critics get beyond pointing out the 'Japaneseness' of this tale, or classify it as a desire to blend Japanese and Western cultural codes.<sup>32</sup> The symbol of the broken arrows can stand for Kurosawa's method of adaptation in *Ran* as a whole: he shows a vision of chaos and discord in which characters are bound to question the gods (if any) who control the world. To achieve this, sources are fractured and dissonant. Pinpointing these moments of fracture reveals Kurosawa's subjective translation and the themes he wishes to focus on within the film.

### "Fretful Elements": Hidetora's Madness

Also commonly noted concerning *Ran*'s derivations from Shakespeare is the addition of a past to the Lear-like character. Saburo reveals Hidetora's destructive ascent to power, which include killing the family of his son's wife and blinding her brother (alluding to the blinded Gloucester in *Lear*). Kurosawa said in an interview not long after he made *Ran*: "As much as I love Shakespeare, *Lear* has always been a play that I have found extremely dissatisfying ... from the Japanese point of view, *Lear* doesn't seem to have any reflection on his past".<sup>33</sup> Kurosawa locates his break from Shakespeare in Hidetora's past, where he finds the lack of an explicit history to leave the character incomplete, unfinished in a way. He redresses that lack at a moment that explicitly invokes the *benshi*'s ability to incorporate new details into a story, the scenes of Hidetora's madness.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare signals that Lear has been driven mad by his children's scorn, which makes him run out into a terrible storm. Kurosawa has a similar scene of storm-backed madness. Though both scenes represent an externalization of character, the characters shown differ significantly. In *Ran*, the storm follows the battle sequence in which Hidetora's sons turn on him, attacking his last stronghold and slaughtering Hidetora's remaining samurai and concubines. An empty scabbard preventing him from an honorable suicide, Hidetora walks down the stairs of his burning castle flanked on either side by his sons' armies, his face a blank mask.

<sup>31</sup> For example, see Christopher Hoile, "'King Lear' and Kurosawa's 'Ran': Splitting, Doubling, Distancing", *Pacific Coast Philology*, 22.5 (Nov 1987), 29-34.

<sup>32</sup> Rothwell, *History of Shakespeare on Screen*, 197.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Hoile, "'King Lear' and Kurosawa's 'Ran'", 30.



Fig. 3: Still from Akira Kurosawa, *Ran*, 1985, DVD, Criterion Collection, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Stephen Prince, *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1999), 288.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley Wells, "Reunion and Death: Review of *Ran*", *Times Literary Supplement* (14 March 1986), 296.

<sup>36</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (New York: Washington Square Press, The Folger Library, 1993), III.i.4-12.

In the script of *Ran*, Kurosawa described the scene as one in which "Hidetora, his strength drained from his body, slips and tumbles like a dead man falling into Hell".<sup>34</sup>

Hidetora's Noh-like blank face, particularly in this sequence, has been often described as mask-like or "deliberately alienating".<sup>35</sup> The Noh-like makeup distances the audience from his emotions at the moment of his downfall.

One of the effects of this

makeup is to delay understanding of Hidetora's madness. During the battle, the viewer can only assume that his madness is due to his children's betrayal and his loss of power. In the scene following the battle, however, Kurosawa reveals Hidetora's reasons as the masked, blank face is replaced with true madness and pain. After the battle, Hidetora wanders out of the castle and the camera cuts to a distant view of him onto a stormy, grassy plain. This scene is set in a theatrical manner: approaching Hidetora in the distance are Kyoami, Hidetora's fool, and an advisor he disowned for defending Saburo. As the two men reach Hidetora, the camera cuts to a medium close-up of the three, a shot that is static for the rest of the scene, placing the viewer in the position of the theatre audience watching a stage performance. The grass creates a sense of perpetual motion and bewilderment, as each man seems barely able to stand in its swirling mass. Suddenly disconnected from the historically accurate set pieces of the rest of the film, this place becomes like the storm in *Lear*, an atemporal location for the revelation of character.

In *King Lear*, a man brings back word of Lear in the storm, and describes the sight: "Contending with the fretful elements / Bids the wind blow into the sea / Or swell the curled water 'bove the main / That things might change or cease; tears his white hair / ... Strives in his little world of man to outscorn / The to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain".<sup>36</sup> There is no sea in *Ran*, and Kurosawa is no more interested in matching sets than he is in translating the gentleman's speech into Japanese. Yet the "wind blow into the sea" is communicated through the wave-like motions of the grass, and the "to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain" surround the characters. The idea of Lear's madness, anger, and betrayal reflected in nature's elements is preserved here, though transported to a different setting. One might be tempted, with such similarities, to read the scene as an analogic translation from an English storm to a Japanese typhoon, but the translation effects are more complex. The film explicitly illustrates Hidetora's mindset through the character's physical location in the battle scene, during which Hidetora physically moves down the



stairs, down the “terrible scroll of Hell”, in a manifestation of his hierarchical and mental downfalls. As the scene shifts to the ethereal grassy plain, the storm scene reflects Hidetora’s inner turmoil, which is exactly what the audience was excluded from in the battle scene.

Lear calls for the external world to reflect and overwhelm his inner turmoil: “Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow! / You cataracts and hurricanes spout / Till you have

drenched our steeples ... / Crack nature’s molds, all germens spill at once / That make ungrateful man”.<sup>37</sup> In sharp contrast to this verbal explication of character, the only words Hidetora speaks during the scene are “Forgive me”. Since the audience already knows that Hidetora gained his power with a bloody trail behind him and by unwisely banishing his son, one might be tempted to speculate on Hidetora’s question of forgiveness, or interpret a general regret. Far from being speculative on such matters, this moment turns out to be remarkable. The film presents Kyoami, Hidetora’s jester, who assumes the authoritative voice seen in Japanese theater to explicate Hidetora’s internal state. The music, which has been until this point a dramatic and high-pitched violin, falls to an undertone and the sound of the howling wind increases. Kyoami comments, “Oh, excellent. The failed mind sees the heart’s failings”, and then begins to chant: “the wonder of it! I see on this withered plain, all those I destroyed, a phantom army, one by one they come floating, rising before me”.<sup>38</sup> As he chants, he moves in theatrical, dance-like motions, which in their formality contrast his earlier jester antics. Kyoami co-opts the theatrical voice in order to directly communicate the thoughts of the characters and their importance to the story.

In *Throne of Blood*, the chorus performed the same informative role. In *Ran* Kurosawa positions this function diegetically, making the theatrical voice unmistakably like the *benshi* in its direct interaction with the ongoing narrative. Kyoami illuminates the emotions behind Hidetora’s mask, adding the context of Hidetora’s past to the turmoil of the battle and his downfall. Lear is almost consumed with his regret in banishing Cordelia, but Hidetora is portrayed as much more culpable in his downfall, which comes after a lifetime of misdeeds and cruelty. The addition of a back-story for Hidetora, as many critics have agreed, fills a place Kurosawa felt was missing in Shakespeare. But what many critics fail to recognize is that in Kurosawa’s creation of a past, Hidetora becomes his own separate character, casting off the Lear-function’s restrictions. Hidetora is imbued



Fig. 4: Still from Akira Kurosawa, *Ran*, 1985, DVD, Criterion Collection, 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, III. ii.1-2; 10-11.

<sup>38</sup> Akira Kurosawa, *Ran*, Criterion Collection, 2005. DVD.

<sup>39</sup> Brian Parker, “*Ran* and the Tragedy of History”, in James Goodwin, ed., *Perspectives on Akira Kurosawa* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994), 209.

with a guilt externalized in Kyoami’s chanting, becoming a character who can criticize Shakespeare’s *Lear* – and have a life and story of his own.

Such fracturing of the *Lear* character-function is hard to register in a ‘Japanizing’ critical approach to the film. For example, Brian Parker claims that characters in *Ran* are “less concerned with intrinsic identity than with positions of society”<sup>39</sup> in his assessment of Hidetora’s downfall. Parker exhibits a common critical pitfall of cross-cultural reading; in assuming a perception of ‘Japanese culture’ in which social hierarchy is more important than in the West, he automatically classifies Kurosawa’s characters by their position in society rather than their psychologized selves. Yet the camera-distancing effects in *Ran* hold the audience back and sharpen focus on the storm scene, in a way that is both deeply psychological and external to character. Hidetora’s inner turmoil is revealed by the setting and by Kyoami’s *benshi*-like performance.

A final series of connections that can be gleaned from the storm scene: the position of the men crouched in the high, green grass mirrors the scene near the beginning of the film when Hidetora first gives up his power and Saburo mocks his arrow-lesson. The place of the first fracture from both the Japanese folktale and the Shakespearean text has returned as a twisted version of itself: the sun has turned to typhoon, the ruler to madman.

In the storm scene, Kurosawa combines Shakespeare’s imagery, Japanese traditions in film and theatre, to create Hidetora’s necessary past. To unite all of these into a single scene (and express the fractured mind of the character) Kurosawa, in the model of *benshi*, unites influences and makes explicit the meaning of the scene for the audience.

### What is Shakespeare?

A discussion of Kurosawa’s cultural impact would be incomplete without an acknowledgement that Kurosawa as a filmmaker has become something of a polarizing icon, at times considered a representative of Japanese cinema and at others categorized as the most Western of Japanese directors. Many of the difficulties in categorizing Kurosawa as ‘Japanese’ or ‘Western’ resemble the anxiety surrounding original and adaptation. Both seem to be based on the disintegration of cultural signposts and the challenge of binary



Fig. 5: Still from Akira Kurosawa, *Ran*, 1985, DVD, Criterion Collection, 2005.

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divisions. As the globalization of cinema – and the work of theorists like Yoshimoto and many others – problematizes a compartmentalization of Kurosawa or other directors as ‘national’ artists, so too the idea of the ‘Shakespeare film’ seems to be crumbling. With the proliferation of Hollywood-blockbuster Shakespeare movies (whose relation to Shakespeare seems ever more tenuous), new media,<sup>40</sup> and non-English Shakespeare, critics have struggled to classify films and other media under the heading ‘Shakespeare’. If relation to Shakespeare no longer requires his text, and plot and characters can be twisted to new uses, what happens to the great symbol of Western literature?

A model of adaptation inspired by the *benshi* offers adaptation studies an alternative to classifications of either ‘faithful’ or ‘deviant’. As *Throne of Blood* and *Ran* illustrate, adaptations make arguments, actively countering and interacting with their sources. By considering films and criticism which cross cultural boundaries, we can reveal symptoms of ‘foreign’ adaptations that reverberate across all modes of adaptation. In addressing assumptions of adaptation, we can free both the original and the adaptation from the limiting binary in which only the original can influence the adaptation, and not vice versa. New productions of Shakespeare and older films like Kurosawa’s reveal a method of countering and engaging the source material *through* the film adaptation itself. Therefore, in answering the ever-renewing question of “what is Shakespeare?” there is no better place to turn than to the films themselves. Innovative adaptations will define what legacy Shakespeare will carry in the future, and thus far that legacy continues to be as lively and influential as it ever was.

<sup>40</sup> With ever-increasing ease of access through the internet, we can truly share, catalogue, and explore the many variations on Shakespeare. Peter S. Donaldson’s Global Shakespeares Video & Performance Archive (<http://globalshakespeares.org>) is one of many projects that seek to gather together the diverse approaches to Shakespeare. One of the portals of the project, Shakespeare Performance in Asia (<http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/>) illustrates the increased attention to Asian Shakespeare performances that has emerged in the past few years.



## Multicultural Shakespeare: Italian and British TV Series of the 9-11 pm Slot. 'Brand' Shakespeare and TV Adaptations

During the last twenty years, much of the critical debate on Shakespeare has revolved around how appropriations and adaptations of his plays have crossed different media and created new languages to 'contemporise' their content. With *Shakespeare and the Moving Image* (1994), edited by Antony Davies and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare on Film* (1998), edited by Robert Shaughnessy, the two volumes of *Shakespeare the Movie* (1997 and 2003), edited by Richard Burt and Lynda Boose, and Tom Cartelli and Katherine Rowe's *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (2007), among other works, screen adaptations have been widely analysed with the intent to take account of the new forms of Shakespeare's 'survival' around the world.

Richard Burt's summary of this complex situation is particularly effective: "Shakespeare film adaptations significantly blur if not fully deconstruct distinctions between local and global, original and copy, pure and hybrid, indigenous and foreign, high and low, authentic and inauthentic, hermeneutic and post-hermeneutic".<sup>1</sup> In his writing on the production and circulation of Shakespeare-related cultural goods, Burt affirms that, in the two-scalar frame of 'glocalization', the process of re-localization inevitably triggers a productive differentiation.

In *Shakespeare after Mass Media* (2002), Burt uses the expression "mass culture" to refer to the enormous proliferation of Shakespearean quotations in every-day life and to the transformation of textual works into ordinary consumer goods.<sup>2</sup> Preferring "mass" to "popular" culture, Burt's reading distinguishes itself from works in the field of cultural studies, as the latter underline the relevance of antagonistic cultural forces shaping itinerant images of the playwright. Burt focuses on describing a hard-to-track archive of Shakespeare-related products and objects.<sup>3</sup> Mainly, he insists on Shakespeare's heterogeneous and hardly retrievable presence in texts and cultural objects, stressing that the massification of marketable bards on the global scene did not lead to an increased accessibility to Shakespeare. On the contrary, the use of Shakespearean references in brands, commercials and journalistic headlines, and its consequences remain largely unexplored.

I am stimulated by Burt's stress on mass culture to look at multiform reified Shakespeares travelling in a world environment. At the same time, I do not like the fact that the binary global/local is still so central to his argument: Burt zooms in and out of culturally specific contexts to insert the examined objects into a wider frame. Moreover, the passage from one dimension to the other seems to produce the dissemination of Shakespeare in various forms and places. When the process of appropriation and quotation is portrayed as the localisation of a global product, the theoretical standpoint does not let go of a linear logic that explains

<sup>1</sup> Richard Burt, "Shakespeare, 'Glo-Cali-Zation', Race, and the Small Screens of Popular Culture", in Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose, eds., *Shakespeare the Movie II* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Burt, *Shakespeare after Mass Media* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> He implicitly takes a distance from Douglas Lanier's explorations of Shakespop in *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), where the mythification and iconisation of Shakespeare appear as the ground both for affirming the playwright's cultural authority and for challenging it.



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Shakespeare's process of becoming other. The model never completely uproots the idea of cultural change as a descent from a single and external source – even though it is as extended and porous as the global framework.

In his interesting critical work *Filming Shakespeare in the Global Marketplace*, Mark Burnett underlines the inappropriateness of simply stating the mutual sustenance of local and global Shakespeares for understanding the complex phenomenon of their circulation in the marketplace.<sup>4</sup> Taking a cue from his argument and referring to the dissemination of Shakespeare on television, I want to further complicate the dichotomy of global and local haunting the latest Shakesperean criticism; to this end, I shall employ the concept of 'brand' identified by Scott Lash and Celia Lury in *Global Culture Industry* (2007), where the brand appears as a source of production for consumable commodities. Defining a topological theory of continuous movement, Lury and Lash examine the case of *Trainspotting*, in its transition from book to film and soundtrack, to explain the transformation of cultural products into various marketable objects.<sup>5</sup> They look at the brand as a virtual entity constantly redefined by the range of products generated in relation to its name.<sup>6</sup>

Shakespeare may be regarded as a 'brand', whose expansion takes place in the form of academic discourses, cultural events and objects such as posters, gadgets, CD or DVD. All these products, by becoming inextricably connected to the name of the English dramatist, remoulded his image as a polymorphic character. The innovation brought forward by a topological frame to Shakespeare's studies is that the poet's expansion beyond the text appears to be non-linear and generative: every new commodity produced under the name of the brand becomes a source of new, autonomous production. The close interrelation among these 'objects' destroys the linearity of creative passages and replaces it with a more complex model that destroys the very idea of 'origin'.

Why does thinking about Shakespeare as a 'brand' help an understanding of the phenomenon of quotations of Shakespeare's plays and plots in contemporary TV series? Referring to the series *Butta la luna* (Italy, 2007-9) and *Second Generation* (UK, 2003) as case studies, I ask why and how two public channels – *Rai Uno* in Italy and *Channel Four* in Britain – have produced TV series, designated for the wide audience of the early night slot, using Shakespeare, both implicitly and explicitly, to talk about intercultural relations.

To answer the question, one should start by considering how the idea of 'branding' has recently gained relevance in critical theory and media studies: it refers to the transformation of TV channels into networks and at the same time it does not overlook the specificities of programs production. As John Caldwell explains in his recent essay "Convergence Television: Aggregating Form and Repurposing Content in the Culture of Conglomeration", drawing on Henry Jenkins' work on "convergence culture", the phenomenon of branding accounts for the status of contemporary TV: there is a production of diversity within a single main brand that derives from the strategy of media corporations to stamp their logos on a range of media related products. Lynn Spigel summarizes the idea of branding as

<sup>4</sup> One of the chapters of Burnett's book is entitled "The Local and the Global" and it explores the tensions between these two dimensions (New York: Palgrave, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Topology is an area of mathematics dealing with how objects retain certain properties even when subjected to change and deformations. In network theory, it describes the interconnections between nodes and links. The notion was taken up and investigated by an interdisciplinary project based at Goldsmiths College (London) called *ATCD: A Topological approach to cultural dynamics* (2009).

<sup>6</sup> Scott Lash and Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007), 6. *Trainspotting* is a novel written by the Scottish author Irvine Welsh (1993), whose famous film adaptation was directed by Danny Boyle in 1996. After the movie, two soundtrack albums were released in 1996 and 1997, including hits by Iggy Pop, David Bowie, Blondie and Underworld.

<sup>7</sup> Lynn Spiegel, "Introduction", in Lynn Spiegel and Jan Olsson, eds., *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>8</sup> See Michel Foucault, "The Confessions of the Flesh", *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. by Colin Gordon (London: Harvester, 1980), 194-228.

<sup>9</sup> See Franco Berardi, "The Image Dispositif" (2004), <http://www.uibk.ac.at/peacestudies/downloads/peaceclibrary/imagedispositif.pdf>, 8 December 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Sara Ahmed works on gender, queer theory and cultural studies. Interested in the racialization of sexuality and nationalism, amongst other things, she is author of *Strange Encounters* (2000), *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) and *The Promise of Happiness* (2010).

the "increasing attempt of networks, program producers, and advertisers to stamp their corporate image across a related group of media products, thereby creating a franchise akin (if not as yet legally the same as) trademark and trade dress in the fast food industry".<sup>7</sup> As TV expands beyond the limits of linguistic communication and accesses the market with a range of consumables, channels become sources of material culture.

Rather than taking part in a merely linguistic hegemonic system, Shakespeare on TV is involved in the (re)production of cultural objects, whereby his global presence becomes concrete and tangible. The diffusion of TV products, and the status they gain in terms of visibility and presence, bears witness to the existence of differential channels of transmission and routes of propagation. Being among the productions labelled under Shakespeare's name, TV series can imprint a cultural change on the image of the brand as a whole and reshape his worldwide fame.

In a Foucauldian sense, TV is a "dispositif" acting on different levels, including cultural representation and corporeal affects, aiming at capturing a wide audience.<sup>8</sup> Foucault uses the term 'dispositif' to refer to an apparatus binding together heterogeneous elements, such as discourses, institutions, regulatory decisions, laws, statements and propositions. The analysis of the dispositif or apparatus helps exploring the changing relations between power, knowledge and processes of subjectivation. Here, however, I refer to Franco Berardi's use of the term "dispositif" in relation to the image in "The Image Dispositif", where he states: "We must be aware that images are today the basic political dispositive. By the word dispositive I refer to a semiotic engine able to act as the paradigm of a series of events, behaviors, narrations, and projections modeling social reality".<sup>9</sup> Since the Sixties, British critics in media and cultural studies have used different models to address the issue of power on TV and on the big screen. Stuart Hall studied media as hegemonic institutions securing social consent through the assimilation of dissent and conflict, while for Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart media are used by people as material sources of communication and for the creation of communities. Feminist critic Sara Ahmed has recently used the theory of affects, where the affective transmission of passions emerges as a means of possible control, to highlight how images on screen can capture the audience through stimulating positive passions.<sup>10</sup>

My approach focuses on the dispersion of origin resulting from the brandization of Shakespeare, viewed through the lens of media cultural studies dealing with affect. Through this combination, I argue that some TV series funded by public channels, based on Shakespeare's plays and dealing with multiculturalism and migration, are significant examples of how Shakespeare is recreated in relation to identity struggles and, on the other side, to the crystallization of identity through the use of affective politics. The conversion of tragedies into TV comedies taking place in the cases of *Butta la luna* and *Second Generation*, respectively reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet* and *King Lear*, raises an interesting question: to which objective does this transformation of genre respond?

Questioning the use of Shakespeare in TV series in this way does not entail deciding whether it is dominant or anti-hegemonic, as Burt polarizes the Bard's position in his study on the quotations in Black American culture. Instead, the intention is to decide which meanings, affects and social bonds are propagated through the dissemination of 'Shakespeare'.<sup>11</sup> This question underpins the development of my article. Approaching Shakespeare from the point of view of material culture makes it possible to trace the formation of a network of Shakespearean uses, references and quotations actualizing forms of politics.

<sup>11</sup> Burt, *Shakespeare after Mass Media*.

## Like a Football Match: Shakespeare and Postcolonial Italy

The first series I want to analyze is *Butta la luna* ("Throw the moon away"), directed by Vittorio Sindoni and aired on *Rai Uno* from 2007 to 2009 at 9 p.m.; the two seasons comprised eight and thirteen episodes respectively. Migration and interculturalism are the main themes that the series engaged with: 'hot' issues in postcolonial Italy, where after the Bossi-Fini law approved in 2002 by the first Berlusconi government, increased restrictions were placed on migrants and asylum seekers.<sup>12</sup>

Starring the athlete Fiona May as main character, *Butta la luna* tells the story of Alyssa, a black, single mother giving birth to a white and blond baby-girl named Cosima. Once grown-up, Cosima becomes a social worker and fights for the rights of children and migrants, while her mother opens a shelter for immigrant women. The interweaving of the main plot with subplots presents Alyssa as a leading figure, facing her personal problems of integration and supporting the rehabilitation of other immigrants in Rome. The Italian capital and its 'multicultural' environment, full of conflicts and tensions, is the set for a number of personal stories opening onto key social themes like adoption, intercultural relations and prostitution.

The episode I am going to analyse is the eleventh of the second series, on air on 14 May 2009; it deals with the story of a young couple, Kamila and Davide, who escape their disapproving families in order to be together. Aged fifteen and sixteen, the two lovers decide to run away when their fathers prohibit their relationship on the basis of religious hostility: the boy is a Roman Jew, while the girl is a Muslim of Arab origins, and their families run two competing food shops on the same street in the lively, popular area of San Lorenzo.

The episode opens with Alyssa reading a newspaper article entitled: "Romeo e Giulietta di San Lorenzo" ("Romeo and Juliet in San Lorenzo"), which renders explicit the reference to Shakespeare's quintessential love tragedy (fig.1).

<sup>12</sup> The management of migration has been a contentious issue on the agenda of recent Italian governments, due to the increased flows of people from of Eastern Europe and Africa. The Bossi-Fini law restricted the access to work visas and decided the expulsion of illegal migrants or the detention in temporary centers of those found without documents.



Fig.1: Still from Vittorio Sindoni, *Butta la luna* 2, episode 11, 2009, Rai Fiction and LDM Comunicazione S.p.A.



The Roman(ce) drama of the run-away couple, hiding in streets and parks, is depicted against the backdrop of their families' antagonism. Cesare and Nagib, their fathers, face each other in a scene that reminds one of spaghetti westerns and gangster movies; the implicit references to Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* and Wise's *West Side Story* exemplify how multiple quotations and the remediation of films on TV cause the dispersal of a textual origin. Having received a strongly worded letter from their children, the two men run out of their shops and meet in the street. After entering from two opposed parts of the screen, they stop by an invisible central line, a close-up on their profiles increases the tension. Instead of showing their guns, though, they start running after each other to reach the closest police station and create an inevitable comic effect. The exposed proximity between films and TV results in parody and irreverently underlines the 'law of honour' that triggers religious clashes. The alienating effect of laughter differentiates the TV series from big screen Shakespearean appropriations but also highlights the existing link among them.

The language of transmediality opens a window onto some of the key formal aspects of contemporary series. Hybridity is one of them: TV quotes films borrowing from their aesthetics and, on the other side, the interweaving of a complicated net of plots and subplots, recalling Elizabethan plays, produces a "soapization" of the television series.<sup>13</sup> *Butta la luna* presents both these characteristics; in the episode under discussion there is also a reflection on the specificity of TV and its viral power of communication. After having seen the couple during a walk downtown, Alyssa decides to help them by talking to their families. She approaches the teenagers' mothers and persuades them to participate in *Chi l'ha visto?* ("Missing") – an Italian TV show on mysteriously missing persons – to send them a message of mutual reconciliation (fig.2).

<sup>13</sup> For more information on the narrative techniques of contemporary TV series, see Cinzia Scarpino, "Introduzione. L'America in serie (Tv)", *Acoma*, 36 (Summer 2008), 5-13.

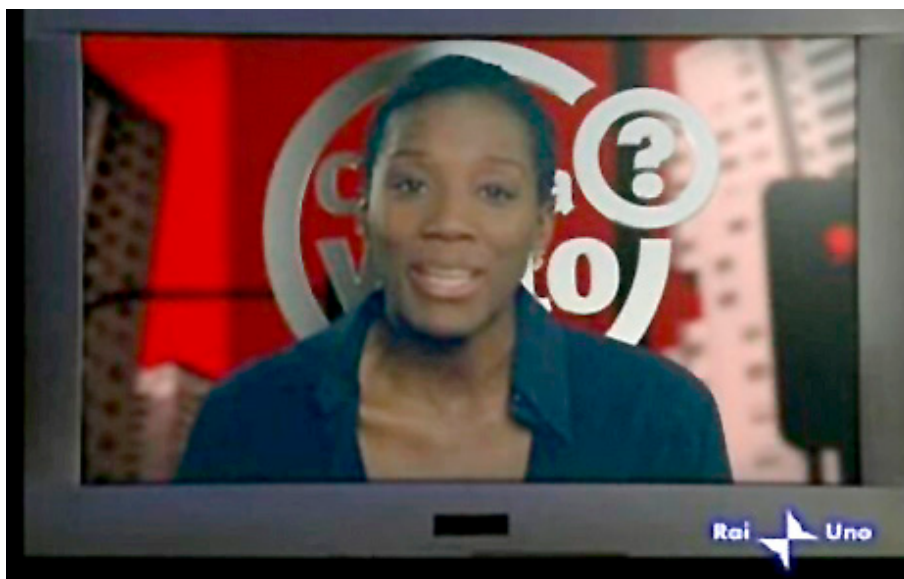


Fig 2: Still from Vittorio Sindoni, *Butta la luna 2*, episode 11, 2009, Rai Fiction and LDM Comunicazione S.p.A.

The scenes depicting Alyssa speaking from several TV screens located in people's houses, bars and restaurants show again a transition between cinema and television. They almost faithfully quote the aesthetics of Luhrmann's film's prologue, where a news presenter, who plays the part of the chorus, introduces the plot. This remediation of a cinematic work also introduces a meta-narrative reflection on the status of contemporary TV, where talk shows and news are preferred channels of transmission of affects.

In *Butta la Luna*, while the two lovers write letters declaring that they will not go back home until their relationship is accepted, the fathers stop their wives from appearing in the talk show side by side. Patriarchy and religion cooperate to reinforce social division. On the other hand, Alyssa decides to intervene and invite the two families and the young couple to meet again and discuss on the ground of 'love'. She decides to take action after reflecting on the 'intimate democracy' of television, which "accesses any house at the same time" (quote from the episode) and spreads a contagion of feelings. The focus on missing persons stimulates fear but also positive feelings, such as love and solidarity, and it paves the way for a happy ending.

The plan is successful, all the hearts mellow and the controversy is set to be resolved after the teenagers play the balcony scene in front of their parents. A bridge is the setting for this climactic moment: Kamila jumps on the parapet, but, instead of imploring the boy to repudiate his name, she threatens her parents to reject her own religion for love (fig.3).

Davide jumps on the other edge of the bridge and swears the same in front of the rival families. Their parents come to fear at one and the same time the threat of the children's conversion and their drowning into the river. The tragic ending of Shakespeare's story seems to be present in the collective memory and reminds the characters that the greatest possible danger is the children's death. A menace implicit in the repetition of the iconic lovers' destiny eventually facilitates the happy ending: the families decide to step back and accept the teenagers' love.

The iconic bridge joins everybody together on the basis of human affection. Ideological choices fall in the background, while what emerges is an emotional sphere that pre-exists culture and religious indoctrination and is now targeted by the viral power of TV. In this teen story, predictably Romeo and Juliet live happily ever after.

The happy ending takes place in a police station, where a Catholic priest, Alyssa's friend, quotes Shakespeare, again. He replicates Shylock's monologue on discrimination and human embodiment:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. (III, 1, vv. 58-68)<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, The Arden Shakespeare 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, ed. by John Russell-Brown (London: Methuen, 1964).



Fig 3: Still from Vittorio Sindoni, *Butta la luna 2*, episode 11, 2009, Rai Fiction and LDM Comunicazione S.p.A.

The Jew's position in *The Merchant of Venice* is actualized and imbued with new humanism, when the priest says: "Tutti gli esseri umani hanno due occhi, un cuore; se ti pungo con uno spillo non esce il sangue?... che differenza c'è tra te e me? Che differenza c'è?" ("All the human beings have two eyes, a heart; if I prick you, don't you bleed? What's the difference between me and you? What's the difference?"). Despite the fact that the quotation closely follows the original lines, the whole idea of "revenge" animating the tension in *The Merchant of Venice* is cut out of the scene. With the cultural conflicts being smoothened, the comedic nature of the serial can be preserved.

The stereotypical images of the Jewish restaurant owner struggling against the Arab kebab seller, introduced in the first part of the episode, parodying popular mafia and gangsters movies, seem to be temporally deconstructed by the textual quotations from Shakespeare. Nonetheless, a quite banal ending refocuses on flat representations of difference: the Muslim and the Jew, quarrelling until the final scene, and the Catholic priest as well, eventually discover that they are all football fans, supporting the same team, Rome (fig.4).



Fig 4: Still from Vittorio Sindoni, *Butta la luna 2*, episode 11, 2009, Rai Fiction and LDM Comunicazione S.p.A.

The reference to football here plays a double role: on one level, the introduction of a lighter subject releases the tensions introduced with the obstructed love story; on a second level, it is a way to subtly introduce the issue of national belonging while avoiding any overt exploration of cultural and social problems connected to it. It refers to the popular opinion that the performance of patriotism is nowadays confined to football matches during the World Cup and puts forward a parallel between national identification and the association with a football team.

Presenting flat characters, like the patriarchal Arab and Jewish men, and depriving intercultural communication of its complexities, *Butta la luna* reasserts cultural stereotypes and uncritically equates the image of postcolonial Italy with 'mixed' football teams or fan communities. The image of a fictitiously undifferentiated and 'convivial' football community diminishes the political and critical impact of the story and reverberates with a hardly credible positive ideal of multiculturalism.

In "Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness" (2007), Sara Ahmed notes that this kind of transformation of the national body into a football team takes place in Gurinder Chadha's famous movie *Bend it Like Beckham* (UK, 2002; starring Praminder Nagra, who is also the main actress in *Second Generation*), where the



final joyful image of the heterosexual woman of colour, able to achieve her dream of playing professional football, orients the audience towards multiculturalism, promising happiness as a final result.<sup>15</sup>

In the Italian TV series the happy resolution largely fails to resolve the issues of generational difference, the persistence of inter-religious struggles and cultural prejudices, which are core questions to address in multiculturalist societies. Since the tragic epilogue is controlled, the characters' plural belonging – living between linguistic, cultural and religious dimensions – is not appropriately questioned. The sense of 'community in difference' brought forward through Shakespeare's verses becomes a way to reassure a generalist audience of the early night slot, supposedly white and catholic, that integration is possible and multiculturalism can be the subject of a family comedy.

The language of the series uses textual quotes from different plays, references to other cinematic appropriations; the creation of hybrid aesthetics highlights the links among many works constructing the multifaceted brand 'Shakespeare'. On the other hand, the association between Shakespeare and football, allied in knitting together different cultures and ethnic groups, and the genre transformation, from tragedy to comedy, affectively propagate a positive image of Shakespeare as a bridge between cultures, facilitating dialogue and knowledge. With its happy story, *Butta la luna* dissipates any active transformative potential in order to reassure its white audience on the persistence of the 'essential' values characterizing their old, conservative country. If a Catholic priest is willing to let Muslims pray in 'his' church, why should they build a mosque in the centre of Rome?

<sup>15</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness", *New Formations*, 63.1 (2007), 121-137.

## Asian-British Identities and Cut' n' Mix

The Italian multicultural happiness finds a counterpart in a British TV serial whose apparent joyful ending does not annihilate the tragic impulse underlying the actualization of Shakespeare's play. I refer here to *Second Generation*, a 2003 TV mini-serial in two episodes, a remake of *King Lear* produced by Channel 4. This was the first original work written by Neil Biswas (co-writer of *In a Land of Plenty*). Directed by Jon Sen, it featured an exceptional cast of actors, including Parminder Nagra, Christopher Simpson, Danny Dyer and Om Puri (fig.5).

The story revolves around the character of Mr. Sharma (King Lear), an immigrant of Indian origin who owns a food factory in South East London. His family tale recalls the plot of *King Lear*: in



Fig 5: Still from Jon Sen, *Second Generation*, 2003, Channel 4.



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a nuclear family with a dying father, three daughters struggle to decide about their parent's life and the destiny of the 'empire', in this case an Indian food factory. Even though the series was openly advertised as a remake of *King Lear* by the scriptwriter himself, the references to Shakespeare are never explicit quotations, instead they are subtle resemblances in the plot.

Mr. Sharma is in a coma and Heere, his youngest daughter, challenges her sisters' choice to turn off the machine and take control of the family business. Once Mr. Sharma recovers, he rejects Heere and her English boyfriend, while Priya and Reena, the Goneril-like and Regan-like sisters, secretly try to sell the factory. Heere suddenly falls in love with an old flame, the DJ and music producer Sam, son of Mr. Kahn, a Muslim family friend. After Khan commits suicide, Sharma starts suffering with hallucinations and is forced to face the return of ghosts from his past; his surfacing madness awakes nostalgic feelings for a mythic origin. Mr. Sharma/King Lear joins Sam/Edgar and Heere/Cordelia to start a new life in Calcutta, while in the UK the other daughters witness the destruction of their marriages and family life.

Suggesting an exploration of the conflicts faced by second generation immigrants, the name of the TV serial has a double meaning: on the one hand, *Second Generation* refers to the controversial relation of British-Asian citizens with their ethnic origins; on the other, the work is a 'second-generation tape' dismissing the purity of the original *King Lear* to promote its circulation as a work of popular culture. As Biswas explains:

*Second Generation* not only describes the children of immigrants, but also a copy of a videotape. Looked at positively, a second-generation tape is a useful way of promoting and spreading culture, making it available to a wider and more varied cross-section of people. Yet its quality is usually poorer, and some would say that the purity of the original master tape has been eroded.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Sukhdev Sandhu, "It's Asian life but not as we know it", *The Telegraph*, 13 September 2003, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/3602568/Its-Asian-life-but-not-as-we-know-it.html>>, 10 August 2010.

With the dissemination of a tape in a wider environment, its regeneration and dispersion cause the erosion of the master tape. *King Lear* undergoes a similar process: in different forms and media, works are continuously reproduced under its name, but, instead of being faithful representations of the original, they have the effect of modifying it. This act of transformation disrupts the very conception of origin as pure and immutable, while the arising interconnectedness among (re)produced works and objects exposes the contingent status of the network constituting the brand Shakespeare.

Biswas's work puts forward an example of the possible link between forms of Lear's existence. His choice of a Lear-like pattern, where the tragedy is reduced to the essential core of a family conflict, may be reconnected to the existence of a similar Shakespearean story in the Indian imaginary, where it is a well known fairy-tale.

In establishing a link between Shakespeare and the Eastern cultural tradition, Amitava Roy summarizes the Indian story as follows: "In the Eastern version the two evil daughters tell the foolish king that they love him as or like the sky and the Himalayas, while the youngest daughter tells him that she loves him like, and as much as, salt. The stupid old king does not realize that it is salt that gives a

taste to all food, and allows us to relish all that we eat, and foolishly kicks out the good daughter”.<sup>17</sup> If we look at *King Lear* through the lens of South-Asian popular culture, the play seems to expose a relation between East and West. The accent on parent-child relationships paves the way for an exploration of the conflicting communication between two generations of migrants and the reconfiguration of authority in a new social environment.

But the situation is more complex and the very division between East and West in the reproduction of Shakespeare is eroded once the focus is not on the dramatist’s identity but on his movement. The recourse to *Lear* to express the tensions and the tragedy of family relations resonates with works of criticism and popular appropriations of the play produced under Shakespeare’s name, as Srinivasa’s *Shakespeare His World His Art* or Roy’s *Colonial and Postcolonial Shakespeares*.<sup>18</sup> These recent texts recalling the colonial relation that brought into being the proximity between *King Lear* and the Indian families, though presenting numerous contradictions, do not merely celebrate the Bard’s universality but expose the antagonism inherent in the process of appropriation.<sup>19</sup> Biswas’ production itself focuses on new articulations of Shakespeare in its journey from the multicultural, urban set of London to postcolonial Calcutta, overlooking the issues of the playwright’s belonging. Shakespeare’s emerging image is of a multiform construct in the process of being rewritten, with hybridity becoming one of its key features. This element is subsumed by the work of the brand.

*Second Generation* engages with *King Lear* in its global hybrid form, equally Eastern and Western in its historical and colonial legacies, showing conflicts and contradictions arising from this position. Through *King Lear*, the serial exposes the bankruptcy of the concept of assimilation, as the Asian community in London has weak relations with other groups and preserves its traditions and distinctive culture; all the characters portray themselves as a mix of tastes and sounds: Pryia and Reena, the rapper Uzi and the others that keep on living in South East London claim to inhabit a hybrid world.

The aim of *Second Generation*, in Biswas’ words, is to create a mini-serial recalling his own experience as a second generation immigrant in the English capital, starting with the stories of his parents travelling to England; this way of mingling autobiography with Shakespearean references modifies the figure of the playwright, his belonging to England and the image of England itself. As the scriptwriter underlines: “With *Second Generation* I wanted to write something truthful – not something representative. My reason for making this distinction is that as second-generation Asians we have gone past representation”.<sup>20</sup> This British-Indian version of *King Lear*, where first and second generations get together in an exploration of post-diasporic settling in the UK, responds to Biswas’ desire for storytelling and gives up the idea of representing the Indian community as a whole. One of the tools employed to challenge the danger of monolithism implicit in the representation of peripheral identities is music and its affective quality.

Music in *Second Generation* is a battlefield where identity is questioned. Through music, defined by Paul Gilroy as “a non-representational, non-conceptual form”,<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Amitava Roy, “Here to Stay: Shakespeare, the Bengali Stage and Bengali Culture”, in *Colonial and Postcolonial Shakespeares* (Kolkata: Avantgarde, 2001), 24.

<sup>18</sup> K. R. Srinivasa, *Shakespeare His World His Art* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1994); Roy, “Here to Stay”.

<sup>19</sup> Even when assessing the privileged relation of India with Shakespeare, Roy’s essentialist view of culture results in discrediting the playwright for not being able to speak anymore to the English public.

<sup>20</sup> Neil Biswas, “Conflict between cultures can be positive”, *The Guardian*, 8 September 2003, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2003/sep/08/racineintheuk.broadcasting>>, 16 August 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 76.

<sup>22</sup> In *Cut 'n' mix: Culture, Identity, and Caribbean Music*, Dick Hebdige presents cut'n'mix as an Afro-Caribbean style of the 80s: "Cut'n'mix is the music and the style of the 1980s just as rock'n'roll and rhythm'n'blues formed the bedrock for the musics and the styles that have made such an impact on our culture since the 1950s" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 10.

<sup>23</sup> Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities", in Ali Rattansi and James Donald, eds., *Race, Culture and Difference* (London: Sage Publications, 1992. Reprinted in *Anglistica*, 1.1 (1997), 22.

<sup>24</sup> The hit is available on the website: [http://www.reverbnation.com/tunepak/song\\_587758](http://www.reverbnation.com/tunepak/song_587758), 10 August 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Bhangra is a "style of music which has singing and the beat of the dhol drum... Its raw traditional sound is often supplemented with contemporary musical styles". See Rupa Huq, "Asian Kool? Bhangra and Beyond", in Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk and Anshwani Sharma, eds., *Disorienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music* (London: Zed, 1996), 61.

<sup>26</sup> Biswas remarks: "The truth is that there are many Asian communities, all of which have thousands of stories. None of them on their own can explain or encapsulate what it is to be Asian in Britain. There is no one answer. The definition, like us, is constantly evolving". Biswas, "Conflict between cultures can be positive".

Asian-British identity emerges as prismatic and multifaceted. A famous expression coined by Stuart Hall to refer to the process of hybridization is taken from music: the never-ending differentiation of identity, central in Biswas' work, is labeled by the Anglo-Caribbean scholar as "cut-and-mix", a DJ technique and editing procedure of cutting and fusing tracks together.<sup>22</sup> Using Hall's words, one could say that music in *Second Generation* brings forward the Asian-British "process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization and 'cut-and-mix' – in short, the process of cultural diaspora-ization (to coin an ugly term) which it implies".<sup>23</sup>

The serial's soundtrack was created by underground artist Nitin Sawhney, whose hit "Uzi's rap", featured in the serial, was created in collaboration with UK Apache.<sup>24</sup> Mixing rap with the rhythms of bhangra, Sawhney's track reacts to the fetishization of the Asian culture and to the Bollywood-ization of cinematographic products and promotes a fusion between Eastern and Western sounds. In the heart of London the sound of bhangra, with its hybrid nature fusing a Punjabi origin with the trends of underground British music, shapes and modifies Shakespeare's England.<sup>25</sup> In the reconstruction of a set for a family drama, Sawhney's soundtrack fluctuates between genres in the same way people's existence escapes crystallization.<sup>26</sup>

In this 'hyphenated' *King Lear*, music provides a new key for understanding identity and becomes the basis for constructing hybrid cultural codes. Affective aural contaminations tell the stories of the characters' multiple belonging and avoid any stable definition for their being. Music propagates the experience of hybridity, but its fusions and contaminations also replicate the language of the brand, as different worlds and textual echoes get together in what can be considered as 'cut'n'mix *King Lear*'.

Considering the complexity of cultural belonging as exposed by Biswas and the music in the serial, a question arises on the sense of the final scenes where Sharma reconstructs his family with Heere and Sam in India. The apparent happy ending portrays the triumph of love and genuine family bonds, together with the punishment of the evil actors. Given the political meaning of the transmission of happiness underlined in the preceding section, I do not want to overshadow the significance of the final nostalgic scenes in which Heere, Sam and Mr. Sharma find new vitality migrating back to the country left fifty years earlier or never seen at all. The joy that this travel provides is not of any consolation to the audience; on the contrary, the ultimate escape to the aestheticized and anaesthetized city of Calcutta casts a dark shadow on the unattained and perhaps impossible happiness of British multiculturalism.

*Second Generation* materializes the dissemination of *King Lear*'s story in time and space, juxtaposing colonial and postcolonial contexts; it exposes the difficulties of family relations, and deals with issues of identity and community building. The remediation of the play into a television product, and later a DVD, further enhances the transmission of these themes complying with the logic of the brand's dissemination. If Shakespeare's authority is reconfirmed with every new use of his name, its appearance gets modified by the emergence of specific meanings

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increasingly connected to it. Such is the case of the appropriations that transform multiculturalism into an attribute for Shakespeare.

To summarize, *Butta la luna* and *Second Generation* present enormous differences in terms of genre, use of stereotypes and preferred modes of communication, with music playing a prominent role in the second case. However, both the TV shows affirm an explicit connection to the 'brand Shakespeare'. Because of their common reference to conviviality and identity struggles in a multicultural environment, these works show that TV adaptations addressing urgent contemporary issues place the 'postcolonial' question at the core of Shakespeare's texts, thus contributing to the emergence of a 'multicultural Shakespeare'. On the one hand, the Italian series fails to investigate the complex forces in play when cultural communication and inter-generational interaction occur; it imports quotations from Shakespeare with the effect of (re)proposing a homogenizing humanism, using the deceitful touch of happiness. On the other hand, exploiting the affective power of Asian British music, *Second Generation* opens a battlefield where the crisis of British familial and political normativity, addressed through *King Lear*, is echoed and amplified. To the fictitious image of a 'happy', coloured Italy, *Second Generation* opposes a much deeper family drama. Its refusal of any simplistic image of British conviviality calls for a radical reconsideration of multiculturalism.



## Postcolonial Entanglements: Performing Shakespeare and Kathakali in Ashish Avikunthak's *Dancing Othello*

<sup>1</sup> Ania Loomba, "Shakespeare and the Possibilities of Postcolonial Performance", in Barbara Hodgdon and W. B. Worthen, eds., *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance* (London: Blackwell, 2005), 124. Hereafter cited as *SP*.

<sup>2</sup> "Brihnnlala was the name Arjun, one of the five Pandava brothers of Mahabharata, took in the thirteenth year of their exile. In this year they were supposed to be in disguise as part of their agreement with Kauravas. Arjun turned himself into a eunuch who was royal dancing teacher at the court of Virat." (Personal communication from the director, 5 January 2010.)

<sup>3</sup> I'm using 'experimental' in inverted commas because of Avikunthak's interest in re-defining 'experimental cinema' – a Western category – as Cinema of Prayoga. This expression was coined by film critic Amrit Gangar. See <<http://www.vertigomagazine.co.uk/showarticle.php?sel=bac&size=1&id=605>>, 20 January 2011. Ashish Avikunthak divides his time between India and the United States. For his variegated filmography, and reviews of his work, see Avikunthak's personal website: <[www.avikunthak.com](http://www.avikunthak.com)>, 20 January 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Arjun Raina's website describes *The Magic Hour* as "a play about the effects of colonization, about the duality of self in the colonized, about the brokenness that results from the duality, both of the actor as well as the story telling aesthetic" (<<http://www.arjunraina.com/Magichour.htm>>, 20 January 2011).

In a recent, polemical article on the vogue for intercultural Shakespeare in contemporary Western theatre, Ania Loomba adopts Rustom Bharucha's well-known theses on interculturalism to argue that "Shakespeare has become the means of marketing an exoticized Third World, Orient, or Africa, to the West".<sup>1</sup> Focusing on Shakespearean productions which appropriate what they see as 'authentic' Indian performance traditions such as Kathakali, she shows how often in these productions interculturalism becomes synonymous with Orientalism (in its globalized form). However, she maintains that "we must remain open to the possibilities of truly intercultural work" (*SP*, 135), by which she means "work" by non-Western artists in which "Shakespeare remains 'in' Indian theatre and culture, and continues to be a medium for facilitating new kinds of Indian performances" (*SP*, 136).

One of the examples of "truly intercultural work" which Loomba mentions, Arjun Raina's *The Magic Hour*, is also the show which inspired the making of *Dancing Othello* (*Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali*) (2002),<sup>2</sup> a short 'experimental' film by Indian director and archeologist/anthropologist Ashish Avikunthak.<sup>3</sup> As Avikunthak explains in the following "Interview", the film centres around Raina's performance, and borrows the innovative mix of Shakespeare, Kathakali and street/folk theatre – what Raina dubs "khelkali" – which characterizes *The Magic Hour* (fig.1).



Fig.1: Arjun Raina as Kathakali dancer in Ashish Avikunthak's *Dancing Othello* (*Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali*), 2002, photo, courtesy of the director.

The film also incorporates the political agenda that informs this hybrid juxtaposition of artistic styles. In *Dancing Othello*, like in *The Magic Hour*, Shakespearean theatre and Kathakali dance (two cultural artefacts which date back to approximately the same historical period) continually interact with each other. Yet they do so not only as artistic forms but also, and perhaps mainly, as powerful emblems of cultural authority which inscribe themselves on, and deeply affect, the body and psyche of the (post) colonial subject.<sup>4</sup> This interaction is inseparable from displacement: through the medium of the body of the actor each of these forms is drawn into the orbit of the other, which puts under erasure notions of 'purity' and authenticity, which concern them both in different ways: Kathakali as the expression of authentic India;

Shakespeare as the essence of the West and the embodiment of universal values, and so on. But this process of politically-motivated hybridisation goes one step further, since both Shakespeare and Kathakali are subsequently brought into contact with a form of street theatre which is 'alien' to them. Alien, of course, because they have both been construed, as Avikunthak specifies in the "Interview", as "classical"/canonical and thus in opposition to 'lower' forms of performance.

It is worth exploring a little the section of the film when street theatre emerges most forcefully. It is shot in black and white, as if to mark the shift to a 'bare' modality of performance. In this section of the film, Arjun Raina re-appears without the elaborate costumes of a Kathakali dancer which he wears, at least in part,<sup>5</sup> in other scenes of the film. He re-presents himself as the 'comedic', 'ex-centric' Peter Pillai, who simulates the immediacy of street theatre by speaking directly to the camera/audience (fig. 2).

He passes ironic comments on the (post)colonial predicament: "Everywhere I'm going... in America, Australia, Britain..., everybody's asking me 'Mr Pillai, how come you speak such good English?' 'Sir, British ruling over India two hundred years... setting up very fine English institutions.'" <sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he enacts his own brand of postcolonial mimicry – his *partial* presence as half British half Indian storyteller<sup>7</sup> – by elaborating on a well-known English nursery rhyme and tongue twister. Peter Pillai doubles his double (i.e., Peter Piper) as follows: "Peter Piper picks a peck of pickled peppercorn; / If Peter picks a peck of pickled peppercorn, / Where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picks?" Significantly, the "Prologue" to this highly ironic street act is yet another act of mimicry. It corresponds almost *verbatim* to the "Prologue" to the mechanicals' play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Sir, if we offend, sir, it is with our good will, sir.  
That we come not to offend,  
But with good will. To show our simple skill, sir  
That is the true beginning of our end.  
We come not in despite  
As minding to content you,  
Our true intent is all for your delight  
Sir, Madam, we are not here that you should here repent you,  
We are not here that you should here repent you,

<sup>5</sup> See the "Interview": "The classical Kathakali performance consists of stylised costumes, intricate make-up and usage of elaborate masks, whereas Arjun just wears a kurta, jeans and trousers with perfunctory make up".

<sup>6</sup> On these political comments, see Loomba, "Shakespeare and the Possibilities", 134-5. She also comments on the changes to the show Raina introduces when he performs in different parts of the world.



Fig. 2: Arjun Raina as Peter Pillai speaking to the camera in Ashish Avikunthak's *Dancing Othello* (*Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali*), 2002, photo, courtesy of the director.

<sup>7</sup> On partial presence and mimicry, see especially Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 85-92.

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The actors are at hand and by their show, sir,  
You are like to know whatever you're like to know.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> I'm transcribing the original:  
"If we offend, it is with our  
good will. / That you should  
think, we come not to offend,  
/ But with good will. To show  
our simple skill, / That is the  
true beginning of our end.  
/ Consider then we come  
but in despite. / We do not  
come, as minding to contest  
you, / Our true intent is. All  
for your delight / We are not  
here. That you should here  
repent you, / The actors are  
at hand; and by their show, /  
You shall know all, that you  
are like to know" (5.1.108-17).  
All citations from the play are  
from the Alexander edition  
of *The Complete Works of*  
Shakespeare, and are included  
parenthetically in the text.

<sup>9</sup> "Shakespeare-centric",  
which indicates a centripetal  
movement toward the  
Shakespearean textual corpus,  
is Richard Burt's coin. See  
Richard Burt, "Introduction:  
Shakespeare, More or Less?  
From Shakespearecentricity  
to Shakespearecentricity and  
Back", in Richard Burt, ed.,  
*Shakespeares after Shakespeare*.  
*An Encyclopedia of the Bard in*  
*Mass Media and Popular Culture*,  
vol.1 (Westport and London:  
Greenwood Press, 2007), 1-9.

<sup>10</sup> The repeated sequences with  
the street market were shot for  
another film, as Avikunthak  
explains in the "Interview", so  
also in this sense they bear the  
mark of a different temporality  
which combines with the  
simulation of 'present' live  
performance and the odd  
temporality of fast-motion  
sequences.

One can therefore argue, from a somewhat "Shakespeare-centric" perspective,<sup>9</sup> that not only is Shakespeare made to interact with street theatre; Shakespeare is made to approximate the language of street theatre so closely as to become almost indistinguishable from it. In other words, Shakespeare is *not quite* Shakespeare. The Shakespearean corpus is not quite the classical/canonical corpus one may think it is. The act of postcolonial mimicry touches on the internal dissident margin of Shakespeare's language. It (re)marks the inassimilable trace of alterity within the Shakespearean corpus, the spectral remainder which haunts classical/canonical versions of Shakespeare. Moreover, Peter Pillai's ir/reverent, repeated, mode of address ("Sir"; and, occasionally, "Madam") ironically evokes what his act of mimicry puts into question. It implicitly but powerfully reminds the viewer of the position of authority which in the original play is occupied by Theseus, Lysander, Hippolita and again Theseus, as they in turn react to the "Prologue" to the mechanicals' play. For these characters, Quince, who speaks the "Prologue", "doth not stand upon points"; he "knows not the stop"; his speech is out of tune, "a sound, but not in government"; it is, for the Duke, "like a tangled chain: nothing impaired, but all disordered" (5.1.123-5).

I want to argue that in *Dancing Othello* these positions of authority (and especially the Duke's) allegorise the elitist, dominant construction of Shakespeare – and Kathakali – as classical/canonical, and that what is enunciated from these positions undergoes a 'radical' transformation, and even a reversal, which makes negatively connoted terms speak differently. In other words, in the film what is out of joint, 'tangled', or discordant is *asserted* as an ethico-political and artistic force. It is *affirmed* as a force, the film seems to be saying, without which one cannot adequately respond to the complexities of the (post)colonial present. This comes close to what Avikunthak argues in the "Interview" concerning the lack of linear narrative in *Dancing Othello*. He points out that he is interested in "disjunctural narrative", a narrative that is "at the verge of non-narrative – it is halting, interrupted, digressive and the meaning is located in parenthesis within parenthesis".

"Disjunctural narrative" prevails in the film. It is a mode of narration which draws attention to the film's distinctive cinematic logic, a logic which re-marks and transforms the hybrid logic of *The Magic Hour*: *Dancing Othello* is *not* merely a documentary film about Arjun Raina's show. For instance, within the first three minutes of the film, we move from the facial and hand gestures of Arjun Raina performing 'live' a Kathakali-style *Othello* (or an *Othello*-style Kathakali), to the faces and daily gestures of ordinary people in a crowded street market, while still hearing lines from act five of *Othello*. This back and forth movement is in turn interspersed with a dizzying speeded-up sequence in which a mysterious character with a gas mask – a disjunction within the disjunction – helps Raina with his elaborate Kathakali headdress.<sup>10</sup> This is followed by the Peter Pillai street act I have already commented



on. Before the re-appearance of Peter Pillai as a semi-serious Kathakali instructor, we witness another fragment of Kathakali Shakespeare, with Raina singing Oberon's lines from act 3 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a performance which is preceded and followed by the actor's extensive exploration of a space which is none other than *the director's* own home in Kolkata. We are also intermittently made privy to Raina putting on his Kathakali costumes and/or applying make up for a performance we have already seen or are about to see (fig.3).

In the meanwhile, scenes from the street market keep re-appearing.

Disjunctural narrative – with its conspicuous juxtaposition of spaces and temporalities – is of course part of the 'deconstruction' of Shakespeare and Kathakali as cultural icons which I stressed earlier. In the "Interview" Avikunthak also mentions the "optical methods" he used in *Dancing Othello* to create a superimposition of images – what he calls "disjunctural imagery". He probably refers to two sequences in the film in which a close-up of Raina performing Kathakali Shakespeare is superimposed upon images from the street market. This experiment produces a sense of disorientation in the viewer. It is an experiment in "haptic visibility".<sup>11</sup> It makes visible the *body* of the film – its texture, its skin – and imbues the images with a spectral quality (fig.4).

It is a superimposition, moreover, which somehow *touches* the viewer and makes him/her alert to the fact that images are not simply a matter of visibility. It eludes and frustrates the viewer's attempt to *fully* grasp the image and make it his/her own. In a sense, it *literalises* the film's broader logic of juxtaposition. It registers in the realm of *affect* the cultural/aesthetic/political/work the film performs at the level of meaning (e.g., its 'deconstruction' of Kathakali and Shakespeare through a number of uncanny juxtapositions).

The realm of affect *matters* also because of the director's decision to shoot the film in his own home in Kolkata, a place which is clearly saturated with personal memories and which will

<sup>11</sup> On "haptic visibility", from a perspective which is influenced by both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, see especially Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999) and Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).



Fig.3: Arjun Raina applying make-up in in Ashish Avikunthak's *Dancing Othello* (*Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali*), 2002, photo, courtesy of the director.



Fig.4: Spectral superimposition in Ashish Avikunthak's *Dancing Othello* (*Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali*), 2002, photo, courtesy of the director.

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also be the location for another short film, *Antaral/Endnote* (2005), a strikingly beautiful adaptation of Beckett's "dramaticule" *Come and Go* (1965). Shakespeare and Kathakali are thus allowed to 'invade' this most intimate of places but they are in turn inevitably 'contaminated' by this encounter: they begin to speak the language of what is quotidian. This fits in with Avikunthak's wider artistic/cinematic project – from his early tetralogy *Et Cetera* (1997) through *Kalighat Fetish* (1999) to his stunning *Vakratunda Swaha* (2010) – of letting the ritual quasi-mythical quality of everyday life emerge; of letting the 'ordinary' continually re-mark itself in its singularity as 'extra-ordinary'. This project has far-reaching implications for the inscription of the religious aspects of Kathakali in *Dancing Othello*. In the "Interview" Avikunthak underlines, as other critics have done (Loomba, *SP*, 126-7), that in pre-modern times Kathakali was exclusively performed in religious contexts, and that it was forced to break away from this context to become a form of classical *secular* theatre. (One may want to add to this that it has increasingly become an 'object' of cultural consumption and tourism.) One could argue, with Avikunthak, that here in the film the religious aspect which was integral to Kathakali re-presents itself as the religiosity which permeates the seemingly banal gestures of everyday life, and that this 'ordinary' religiosity is at odds with the religious rhetoric of the Hindu right and other prevailing forms of religion in the postcolony. As Avikunthak points out, "today public discourse about religion [in India] is either in the hands of the political right, the priestly class or the television evangelists". This 'reconstruction' of Kathakali (whose counterpart is the re-emergence of the Shakespearean corpus as *other* than it predominantly is) can also be seen as part of the director's own search for "the meaning of being religious in a secular, postcolonial nation" ("Interview").

I want to end with the film's ending, a highly ironic finale which poses a challenge to the political/aesthetic project the film itself articulates and, one might argue, to interpretations of the film such as the one I have been developing here as a Shakespearean/postcolonial critic. In the final sequence Arjun Raina, with the make-up which recalls his performance as a Kathakali dancer but with clothes which identify him as Peter Pillai, steps out of both these roles to directly address the director and ask him to stop filming. He says that he does not understand what the film is about. He claims that the film has no storyline: "You are making no story, sir". He reminds the director that "Kathakali is about story". He objects to the lack of any clear political/social message in the film. To Raina, this is some kind of "un-Indian" behaviour on the part of an Indian filmmaker ("What is this, sir? Is it not important? India [is an] important country, sir. We have to do some important social message thing"). The director, he continues, seems to be oblivious to the many problems that afflict contemporary India: "Everywhere, sir, there is so much hunger, sir, pain, poverty". In this sequence Raina no longer mockingly addresses the viewer, as he does in the Peter Pillai street act; he is *himself* the viewer, perhaps a simulation of the paradigmatic viewer, who offers a gut reaction to the film from inside the film. He claims for himself a position of authority, and this position of authority in relation to the film is not unlike the one the Athenian court occupies

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vis-à-vis Quince's "Prologue"; a position of authority, of course, which his act of postcolonial mimicry has already inexorably put under erasure.

How to make sense of this 'performance'? To what extent is Raina still a character in the film? How does one draw the line between improvisation and simulation? Does he really step out of his roles, and in particular out his (self-)mocking role as Peter Pillai? (To Avikunthak, "in the last section of the film, Arjun Raina the actor and Peter Pillai the character in the film become one". "Interview"). There are no easy definite answers to these and other questions this section of the film raises. The final sequence is undoubtedly a highly self-reflexive moment, and even a self-deconstructive move on the director's part. But as with many other instances of 'deconstruction' in the film, this is not simply an iconoclastic negative moment. Avikunthak goes as far as to argue that "the film is simultaneously lost and resuscitated in this sequence.... In its collapse is its redemption" ("Interview"). *Dancing Othello* may not be, to return to and paraphrase Loomba's interpretation of what constitutes "truly intercultural work", a film whereby "Shakespeare remains 'in' Indian theatre and culture"; it may not be, because of its self-undermining gestures, "a medium for facilitating new kinds of Indian performances" (*SP*, 136). It is a film which articulates its own political/aesthetic project while raising questions about it, and at the very moment when it articulates it. It continually raises questions and boldly stays with them. Avikunthak's short movie is a visceral, highly rigorous and idiosyncratic engagement with the entanglements of contemporary intercultural performance which refuses to escape the intricacies of the present (post)colonial moment and its ghosts. It finally suggests that aesthetic and political problematisations *matter* more, and may be in the long run infinitely more rewarding than ready-made solutions.

*Dancing Othello (Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali)*  
An Interview with Ashish Avikunthak<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This interview took place in  
New York in May 2010.

MC: First of all, thanks Ashish for agreeing to this interview. My first question would be about the background to *Dancing Othello*. Why did you decide to make this film? How much of it was planned?

AA: *Dancing Othello* began serendipitously. I was studying in Stanford University when Arjun Raina, the only actor in the film, was touring the US and came to the University with his show in the spring of 2001. He was staging *The Magic Hour* – an experimental mix of Kathakali, Shakespeare and Khelkali (a form of street and folk theater act). The show juxtaposed Shakespeare narrativity with the complex stylization and esoteric theatricality of Kathakali. It was an improvisational performance which created an idiosyncratic theatrical idiom – a hybrid between the East and the West, the classical and the profane, the profound and the frivolous. I was completely blown away by the performance. I knew of him because he had acted in a cult English language film in India (probably the first ‘postcolonial’ film) written by Arundhati Roy – *In Which Annie Gives It Those One* (1989). This is a delicate black comedy made by Pradip Krishen that recounts Roy’s own autobiographical experiences while studying at the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi. I saw the film as a teenager on the state run television and remembered Arjun from those days. During my interaction with Arjun soon after the show, I instinctively asked him if he was interested in collaborating on a film on his performance. I wanted to make a film that centred on pieces that he formed at Stanford – scenes from *Othello* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the eccentricity of Peter Pillai. I explained that we’d shoot the film in Calcutta on 16mm, however I’d not be able to pay him anything. He generously agreed. He came to Calcutta in the summer of 2001 and we shot the film in three days. I shot mostly at my house in Calcutta where I was raised. At these locations I asked Arjun to perform whatever he preferred and we let the energy of the location determine the chemistry of the performance. The film did not have a script and we worked intuitively. Almost all my films are made in this way – it is an intuitive form of practice of scriptlessness. I think of film more like an artist with his art. There are some ideas but there is no definite script, and then you start painting with film – letting the idea, the location, the actor’s energy, the crew’s mood effect your next strategy. So it’s a very spontaneous film practice – it’s not planned in any sense. *Dancing Othello* you can say just happened – a series of coincidences, some ideas, a bit of collaboration and a lot of intuition.

MC: The film starts with Arjun Raina dressed as a Kathakali dancer, and performing lines from Act 5 of *Othello* (“It is the cause, my soul, it is the cause”, in English



with English subtitles). Therefore two sixteenth-/seventeenth-century traditions, 'Shakespeare' and 'Kathakali', are juxtaposed, and each is seen through the eyes of the other. Does this represent the re-vitalisation of both, or the breakdown of both?

AA: It is both – the deconstruction and the reconstruction – or, as you say, re-vitalisation. In this experiment between the East and West, the gestural effervescences of Kathakali, heightened by its vigorous body movement and complex footwork, enrich the theatricality of Shakespearean drama.

This gives birth to a hybrid performance, merging the epitome of English literature and the quintessence of Indian art. The actor shatters the traditional and conventional practice of Kathakali, by introducing Shakespeare as the narrative focus of the dance form. Here Shakespearean narrative is de/reconstructed by the classical dexterity of Kathakali and simultaneously the classical traditionalism of Kathakali is also de/reconstructed by Shakespearean dramatics.

MC: This is an essential aspect of the film but it is of course just one of its complex narrative/cinematic strategies. We are also shown Arjun Raina playing Peter Pillai, an 'eccentric' character, as you put it earlier – 'ex-centric' indeed, in relation to both Kathakali and Shakespeare (or at least to canonical and/or 'imperial' versions of Shakespeare). We are introduced to a form of street/political theatre, with Peter Pillai directly addressing the spectator, making fun of his/her ignorance of the history of colonialism, and so on. Arjun Raina as Peter Pillai says he is doing *Khelkali* – "khel" meaning "to play" in Hindi – and refers to this as his "little creature". So both 'Shakespeare' and 'Kathakali' are drawn into the orbit of another artistic form, a street theatre with political connotations. Does this constitute some kind of hybridisation of an already hybridised 'Kathakali Shakespeare'?

AA: Yes, or, as Arjun would say, bastardization. You must have noticed the particular intonation, the way he is talking, the way he is gesturing and the improvisational nature, which is very typical of street theatre where one's performance is almost a response to the audience. In a sense, Shakespearean



Fig. 1: "It is the cause, my soul, it is the cause", scan from the 16mm film print, Ashish Avikunthak, *Dancing Othello (Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali)*, 2002, courtesy of the director.

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theatricality meets the subtlety of Kathakali, as mentioned earlier, and they are both 'subverted' in the dramatic space of street theatre. This gives birth to a performative 'caliban' – *Kbelkali* – a hybrid act of articulating the post-colonial irony of contemporary India.

MC: I love the expression "performative 'caliban'". But I'd like you to expand on these terms – "Kathakali", "Shakespeare", "Khelkali". Can you also talk a little bit more about how the film incorporates these artistic practices? And perhaps also about how the film re-articulates them; how it rephrases the ways in which they relate to one another?

AA: There are three elements in the film – Kathakali, Shakespeare and Khelkali. Kathakali – it is one of the most esoteric dance forms in India and is part of the national classical canon. The idea of the 'classical' is a modernist idea. It is a product of a colonial and subsequently nationalistic re-imagination of Indian tradition. There are two intrinsic problems with this idea of the classical. First, it creates a distinction between classical and folk. Here classical is higher, superior and elevated. Classical is elite and folk is subaltern. This creates a false dichotomy between art forms that have emerged from the same heterogeneous matrix of ancient Indian culture and society. An artificial chasm is produced in a continuous, overlapping, diverse tradition. In the process some forms are considered eminent and given state patronage, while others that are equally complex, elaborate and esoteric are neglected and marginalized. Secondly, it creates a canon that never existed. The classical is a product of a distorted schema of the Indian tradition, which emerged from a colonial epistemology and was reified by the postcolonial nationalistic ideology. Kathakali is a product of a religious and ritualistic substratum of Indian culture, similar to most classical Indian dance and music forms. These were not mere forms of entertainment but were part of a complex religious, ritualistic and dramatic tradition. For instance Kathakali, like other classical dance forms, enacted narratives from the Indian epic traditions of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* – intrinsic part of religious life of India. These forms were part of a cultural system in which distinction between dance, ritual and religion merged into one performative experience – sacred and divine. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century there was a felt need by nationalist intellectuals and artists to construct an idea of a canon in response to the European Enlightenment-driven categorization of the art forms. We needed our own classical art, dance and musical forms. The history of Kathakali is imbricated in this genealogy. Kathakali is decontextualized from its ritualistic milieu and reconfigured as a classical art form. This is when the division between religion and art occurs. This separation, which the film plays upon, is important to recognize. There's a rupture between religion and performance. And dance becomes a secular practice that becomes part of the national classical canon. This film is questioning this idea of the classical, of the national, of the secular – divorced from the religious context. The divorce between the religion and the secular is both a product of modernity and also indirect result



of the trauma of partition. Religion in early years of the postcolony (1950-60s) was frowned upon. It was important for the Indian nation to rupture classical art forms from their religious core. Religion was an anathema that the nation wanted to avoid. This film points to that rupture. The film is a critique of this rupture and distinction. This critique in the film is brought about by making Kathakali into a form of folk, street theatre devoid of its full costume regalia and performing it in a banal location. In this way it becomes *khelkali*.

MC: If I understood you correctly, your critical intervention in this ‘rupture’ is not an attempt to reconstruct some kind of spurious, pre-lapsarian, or ‘mystical’ moment of unity. The film shows awareness of this ‘wound’, as it were – a colonial and nationalistic ‘wound’. But it is also, and perhaps mainly, a re-contextualisation of Kathakali, perhaps a reiteration of the ‘wound’ *as critique*, a re-contextualisation which is both ‘political’ and ‘religious’, so that, for instance, the religious element re-emerges in a different ‘uncanny’ form, perhaps as the religiosity which permeates the ‘everyday’, as well as intimate, almost autobiographical spaces.

AA: Yes, over the years, like the other classical forms, Kathakali has gained a reputation as an orthodox dance form, which is steeped in established theatrical norms and averse to outside influence. *Dancing Othello* is about the breaking of this classical orthodoxy of Kathakali and about freeing it from its classical limitations. The classical Kathakali performance consists of stylised costumes, intricate make-up and usage of elaborate masks whereas Arjun just wears a kurta, jeans and trousers with perfunctory make up. In the film I remove Kathakali from its classical spatiality of the stage and locate it in an ordinary apartment complex. These small gestures of incompleteness are a critique of the rupture. Like most dance forms in premodern times, Kathakali was only performed in the religious context of the sacred space – the temple complex. It could not be performed if it was not sacred. But then the rupture happens and Kathakali becomes postcolonial, nationalistic and



Fig. 2: The “intimate location” of Shakespeare and Kathakali, scan from the 16mm film print, Ashish Avikunthak, *Dancing Othello* (*Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali*), 2002, courtesy of the director.



Fig. 3: “Fashion Street” in Bombay, scan from the 16mm film print, Ashish Avikunthak, *Dancing Othello (Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali)*, 2002, courtesy of the director.

secular. It is relocated on the modern stage. In the film I deliberately remove the stage and put it in my own intimate location – in a commonplace space.

It’s a normal space, it’s a banal space, and it’s a daily space. This transformation of the location is also the metamorphosis of Kathakali from the classical into the folk.

MC: In the film there is also an intriguing juxtaposition between this intimate location and the repeated appearance of faces in a street market...

AA: That street market is a very popular market in Bombay called “Fashion Street”.

I had shot that footage few years ago in 1996 as part of the single shot *Etcetera* series of films. However, I did not use this portion in that film. That street points out to the banal, to the daily, to the local. I’m not getting the right word but banal comes pretty close to what I mean.

MC: Matter of fact?

AA: Yes, matter of fact. But this is a new form of banal. Because it’s not ritualistic, it’s not ‘religious’ – it is daily. It’s the postcolonial Calcutta, or Bombay where I have lived. The ploy in the film is to convert something iconic and bring it within my own subjectivity – a hybrid urban, middleclass India. Kathakali is from South India but the film relocates it in the north. Arjun Raina is not a South Indian. He is a Kashmiri Pandit from Lahore. After partition his family moved to Delhi. He was raised there, studied there, and went to England to study Shakespearean theatre. He came back and taught in the National School of Drama, New Delhi. There he learnt Kathakali for ten years. Whereas I belong to a Punjabi family uprooted by partition and raised in Calcutta in a neighbourhood that was full of refugees from the East Bengal partition and the Bangladesh war of 1971. I spent my youth working as a political activist in Bombay and western India and then went to US to study. There I met Arjun and we made a film about Kathakali located in Calcutta. So it’s a hybrid over hybrid over hybrid.



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MC: So these different forms of displacement must be taken into account in order to make sense of this film.

AA: Absolutely – because Kathakali in postcolonial India has mutated into a secular dramatic form and not a religious ritual of a sacred space. It can be learned by anyone. I then take this displaced form of Kathakali to Calcutta to further dislodge it. This multiple displacement is my critique of the classical.

MC: There is a tendency in Shakespeare-on-film criticism, especially when it deals with ‘foreign’ films (i.e., films not produced in Britain or the US) to privilege what is done *to* Shakespeare. In *Dancing Othello*, it seems to me, what is done *to* Shakespeare (e.g., fragments of *Othello* in Kathakali, Peter Pillai’s appropriation of the “Prologue” to the mechanics’ play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, etc.) is inseparable from what is done *with* Shakespeare, in terms of political statements, irony on the postcolony, re-articulations of what is ‘extra-ordinary’ in the ‘ordinary’, etc.

AA: Ah, Shakespeare! That is the metanarrative of the film. Shakespeare works in opposition to Kathakali. The film shatters the traditional and conventional practice of Kathakali, by introducing Shakespeare as the narrative focus of the dance form, in the process subverting it simultaneously. They are part of the same postcolonial canon. History of Shakespearean performances in India goes back to as early as 1753, when it was first performed at the Old Playhouse Theatre in Calcutta. This theatrical representation was only confined to English audience and actors in order to maintain racial refinement. It was in 1848 that a native Bengali actor for the first time performed Shakespeare – not surprisingly in the role of Othello. However, Shakespeare became the centre of the English pedagogy in colonial India when, in 1835, Lord Macaulay in his famous “Minute on Indian Education” announced the need for a “class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”. With this declaration Shakespeare was firmly inserted into the psyche of India. By the time I went to school in the 1980s, Shakespeare was the universal epitome of the English literary canon. I painfully remember learning by rote Marcus Brutus’s and Mark Anthony’s speeches from *Julius Caesar*. It was a dreadful way of learning Shakespeare. I was traumatised by the way Shakespeare was stuffed down our throats as school kids. I must admit, I am not a great fan of Shakespeare; I like the Beckettian theatre of absurd more. By this time Shakespeare, like Kathakali, had become part of the classical, nationalistic, secular, postcolonial canon.

MC: You have often insisted on the ‘dangerous liaison’ between Shakespeare and Kathakali in the course of this interview.

AA: In today’s postcolonial India they are both an embodiment of the classical – Kathakali represents traditional postcolonial classical and Shakespeare a legacy of

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<sup>2</sup> The reference is to Sadanam Balakrishnan's 1996 production of *Othello* in Kathakali, in which Arjun Raina played the Duke. See Loomba in *Postcolonial Shakespeare* (1998).

the colonial classical. In India, Shakespeare is no longer considered as imported from the West, it has been domesticated within the Indian cultural consciousness. The history of the combination in the film goes at least as far back to when Arjun was learning Kathakali at the *International Centre for Kathakali* in Delhi. There he collaborated with his guru Sadanam Balakrishnan to work on the adaptation of *Othello* in Kathakali.<sup>2</sup> This amalgamation is important to understand. As I have explained earlier, Kathakali in postcolonial India is secular and devoid of its religious core and therefore its merger with Shakespeare is celebrated. This admixture is the essence of the postcolony. The combination of Kathakali and Shakespeare is symbolically important in postcolonial India, for it marks the moment when the imperial status of Shakespeare is finally domesticated by the 'savage' art form of the Orient. Politically, this becomes a significant act. This exemplifies Homi Bhabha's idea of the hybrid. In this process both Shakespeare and Kathakali are transformed. My film signals this merger but subverts in two ways. The first is to dislocate the performance from the stage into a domestic banal location. For me banality is significant and important. I have dealt in intricate details in my earlier films like *Etcetera*. I'm very interested in the daily, the local, and the everyday. I'm not interested in the spectacle. I believe that the everyday is epic. The banal is the spectacular. In my film I locate the displaced Shakespeare and Kathakali in a banal space and transform them into spectacular epic. The second subversion is *Khelkali*. This hybrid is the third form (along with Shakespeare and Kathakali) that the film depicts. This is the most ironical form in the film. *Khelkali* subverts the dual classicality of Kathakali and Shakespeare by reducing it to a folk theatre with its characteristic didactic form. It dislodges Kathakali and Shakespeare from the classical pedestal to a street performance in a political act. *Khelkali* was born in a mountain village in Arjun's friend's home. Because the ceiling of the house was not high enough, he performed without the elaborate headdress and without make up. This minimalist ethos signals to the robust tradition of political street theatre in India that emerged with the IPTA, Indian People's Theatre Association – the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India – formed in 1942. In India the street theatre is completely a political theatre, it is neither sacred nor classical. The minimalist costumes, the performance in a banal, daily spatiality, the didactic lecture-demonstration, the improvisational nature of the act, transforms the classical into the political theatre. Arjun as the eccentric Peter Pillai – the Kathakali instructor with his heavy accent – becomes the interlocutor who acts out the postcolonial irony.

MC: An essential part of the de/reconstruction of spatiality – to use your own terms – is the fact that, as you mentioned earlier, the film was shot in your own house.

AA: Yes – the film was shot in my home. It is a rented apartment in a palatial building in south Calcutta made in 1950s. My parents moved into this house as a young couple from north India in 1973, when my father got a job in an Indo-French pharmaceutical company as a factory manager. I was not born there but lived in that

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house till I was nineteen. We shot in our apartment, in the courtyard, in the veranda and on the terrace of the building for about three days in June of 2001. Along with *Dancing Othello*, I have shot *Kalighat Fetish* and *End Note* in the same house. The last scene in the film was shot on the last day of the shoot. I told Arjun that we have five minutes of footage and he can say and do whatever comes to him spontaneously. The camera started rolling and he started talking instinctively – it was not scripted, discussed or even thought. That was intuitive, unprompted and a visceral reaction by Arjun to the film and me. He rebukes me and disparages the film, in the process giving birth to a powerful self-reflexive pivot to the film – he is critical of Kathakali and Shakespeare. He is critical of the film and therefore he is critical of himself.

MC: In effect I perceived multiple layers of irony in the film, including, toward the end of the film, a far-reaching critique of experimental, politically-concerned and truth-seeking filmmaking. And Arjun as Peter Pillai is also critical of the spectatorial position of Western audiences in search of the “exotic”, like Shakespeare in Kathakali, and even of the spectatorial position of the critic, perhaps especially of the postcolonial Shakespearean critic. Is this about the futility of post-colonial critique?

AA: He is critical of the critic. The critic as audience seeing the film is the final irony. The postcolonial critic himself is the most ironical figure. In the last section of the film, Arjun Raina the actor and Peter Pillai the character in the film become one. And their diatribe against the film and the director of the film is the critique of the filmmaking process. I think it is the most important part of the film – this self-reflexive moment. The film is simultaneously lost and resuscitated in this sequence. Here the film collapses within its hypercritical reflection. But in its collapse is its redemption. During the shooting of this shot the negative ran out, the film got over, but Arjun kept on talking. I told my cameraman not to stop. We knew that nothing was been recorded except the sound. Arjun did not know that the negative had run out, so he kept going on. I was looking at my watch and he retorted to my actions impulsively. It's a very visceral response to the act of filmmaking therefore it becomes very self-reflexive. That's how the film ends. We shot a total of eighty minutes in three days. In the evening after the shoot we had a delicious dinner cooked by my mother at my home and Arjun flew back to Delhi. I went to Bombay to process the film. Then to Pune to edit the film at the Film and Television Institute of India, to work on Steenbeck flatbed mechanical editing machine. There we found that there was a very big problem – the sound was not in sync.

MC: This must have been quite a shock.

AA: I was distraught. But we figured out a way. We first edited the non-sync portion and then we started mechanically syncing the out-of-sync portion. These were pre-digital and Final Cut Pro days. My editor and I worked for five days

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physically cutting and joining to make everything in sync. And to an extent what you see in the film is a product of this practice of dealing with a failure, a loss in a certain sense. That's how the film emerges. The narrative of the film happens at the editing table. This is the way I edit all my films. For me editing is almost like a ritual meditation where you cut off from the world and sit in a room with a collaborator and work. You're fixed on the image and just meditating over it and then intuitively start cutting. Letting that particular moment of the action of editing, its problems, its chaos effect the emergence of the narrative. From beginning to end this is the fastest film I have ever made. It was done in two months. I don't think I'm ever going to do it again so fast. It was a film that was never planned. It just happened, but it is a meticulously constructed film. It is not flippant. It is careful because at the moment decisions are taken; they are taken in a painstaking, thoughtful and thorough manner. There's chance involved but it is not an accident.

MC: I love this idea of unpredictability which is not mere chance... You said that this was "pre-digital". But I know you are reluctant to use digital technology? I mean there's no "ritual meditation" in it, in your own terms.

AA: I have problems with video and there are reasons. Cinema has a distinct theory of practice that is starkly different to video. It is not just about its meditative possibilities but its theory of practice. Let me explain. Firstly, digital is very immediate; it lacks the tension and the mystery of the image production process. In its immediacy lies its predictability. Secondly, its process is very easy and non-complex. In its simplicity lies its opulence. It is this combination of predictable and opulence – the lack of mystery and constraints makes digital fundamentally a theory of practice of excess. You can shoot as much as you like. You can edit as many times as you like. It is indiscipline. This excess I feel disturbs the artistic process. Here I am not fetishizing but attributing preference to a particular theory of image practice. I am a Gandhian. I am romantic. I like mysteries. I like constraints. I'm very interested in chance, in accidents, in problems, in restrictions. They make me think beyond the box. Cinema has that possibility. Digital's invention was to kill that possibility. Cinema is chemical and digital is algorithmic. Cinema is effervescent and digital is tepid. Cinema for me is like the chaos of Banaras, Calcutta or even Naples. Digital is the rectilinearity of grided Los Angeles and Manhattan. You cannot get lost in New York or Los Angeles. I like cities where I can get lost. Where there are no maps or signs to help me navigate the city – because in that loss I discover things I have never imagined. That is what cinema gives me. Finally, I am not yet sold by the digital image quality. I just don't like the video quality. It's digital, it's not cinema. It's pixels, it's not grains. For me the image does not seem real. The chemical image is closest to the real. Almost all cinematographers agree about that. If any technological apparatus can create real image, then it is cinema, not digital. The digital image doesn't give you the depth. It doesn't give you that infinite possibility of colour. Digital's practice of excess along with the aesthetic



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quality of its image has dissuaded me against it. I think the only reason I will go digital is because it is inexpensive. Digital choice will be a financial choice – not a theoretical choice or an aesthetic choice.

MC: What you're saying is intriguing. Are you saying that there is direct correlation between a system of constraints and creativity in filmmaking?

AA: It's a very weird theory, but let me articulate it. I think any work of art requires certain constraints – restrictions that the society, state, politics, religion, finances throw in. The digital technology is able to rupture through these constraints – because of its ease, its simplicity, its portability, and its economics. For some, this is God sent, especially for professional storytellers – who make living telling stories – any stories. Digital technology provides them an apparatus, which is fast, swift, easy, cheap, accessible and instantaneous. Digital produces moving images efficaciously. For television, advertisement commercials, Hollywood, Bollywood, digital is a boon. It increases their productivity considerably. The professionals don't care about meditative practice of the making or the philosophical underpinning of image aesthetics – they just want the product. I care about these things. I don't think I'm professional. I don't want to be professional. I can't tell your story. It has to be my story. It has to be a product of my own formation, my own ideas, and my own thoughts. Therefore I consider myself a film artist. I don't even think I'm a filmmaker because if I was a maker then I could make any films. I can't make any films. I can only create films that come from my own epistemology, my own ontology. Digital technology is useful for professionals not for me. I have very few stories to tell. Therefore, I don't want to pick up an apparatus that compromises on the practice and the image quality. Why not employ something really challenging, difficult, that requires discipline and produces constraints, is disciplined, mysterious and meditative. Cinema gives me that.

MC: How do you see the political element in your work? Is it separable from other aspects of your work?

AA: I am not a political filmmaker. My films go beyond politics. This means going beyond modernity and into the religious. I am attentive of religiosity – the premodern form of comprehension that is in constant tension with modernity. Religiosity is about a theory of practice – about the process of ritual, doctrinal exegesis, theological deliberation and metaphysical contemplation. I want to know the meaning of being religious in a secular, postcolonial nation. In India, today public discourse about religion is either in the hands of the political right, the priestly class or the television evangelists. Representation of religion in India fluctuates between the anthropological and political grotesque. For me it is a political project to make cinema about religiosity. For me, this move is to make cinema theological and metaphysical. I am intrigued by the possibility to explore cinema as a vehicle for spiritual practice.

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MC: This is typical of your latest work...

AA: Yes but this has been my focus since I began making films. I think of my work with *Kalighat Fetish* as a process through which I explore my own religiosity. It starts with *Etcetera*. The films are essential explorations of existence through a contemplation of the ritual. *Etcetera* was a philosophical response to this need of mine. Here rituals are secular. They are devoid of any religious connotation. It is with *Kalighat Fetish* that I find ritual in religious context to be a metaphysical exploration of life. It was an intuitive process. With *Vakratunda Swaha* it is a more conscious process. *Vakratunda Swaha* began as requiem to a dead friend, it ended as a theology on death. From an elegy it was transformed into a ritual. It took me twelve years to make it. The stylistic device that I employ to explore this cinema of religiosity is an aesthetic and political idiom that I call *mythic realism*. This form of cinema is a filmic intersection of the mythological genre and the neo-realistic aesthetic. Analogous to magical realism, mythical realism is a world where mythological times inhabit the everyday, and simultaneously where daily actions become mythical ritual. I come from a middle class, religious Hindu family, where divine figures, sacred symbols and mythic objects infused my urban everyday world in Calcutta. It is this seamless interplay of realism, ritual and myth that I evoke in my work. My films displace the mythic from the domains of the heavenly to the everyday banality and mundaneness of the quotidian.

MC: You said you can't tell stories, except your own. To me, one of the most striking aspects of your work is its emphasis on temporal discontinuity. (In *Dancing Othello*, for instance, there is a constant interruption of narrative linearity.) Perhaps related to this is the emergence of elements that would be difficult to locate, if one were to interpret your films as a linear narrative. Here I'm thinking of the character with the gas mask in *Dancing Othello*, the one who helps Arjuna Raina get ready for the performance.

AA: For me discontinuity is a form of continuity. I am not excited by linear or cyclic narrative, I am interested in disjunctural narrative. A narrative that is at the verge of non-narrative – it is halting, interrupted, digressive and the meaning is located in parenthesis within parenthesis. It is not a cinema that requires decoding; rather it is a cinema that requires the audience to create its own codes of comprehension. It is not an easy cinema, but neither it is impossible cinema. It's very interesting that you pick out the character with the gas mask. He has been my obsession in my latest film – *Vakratunda Swaha*. The gas mask character in that *Dancing Othello* is gesturing to a moment of modernity, I think.

It's the modern moment that threatens the classical. However, in *Vakratunda Swaha*, I delve deeply into the iconography of the gas mask – it becomes a metaphysical character of the ambiguity of death. On the one hand iconographically gas mask is the symbol of death and on the other hand ontologically it is the

technological apparatus that protects from the death. In the film I emphasize this ambivalent, contradictory duality of the gas mask – of the death that protects life.

MC: What about the use of black and white and the use of colour in *Dancing Othello*?

AA: Formally, I am interested in producing a *haptic affect* through my films. This is an effect of somato-sensory perception produced by the filmic image, through the careful manipulation of its texture. I exploit both the chemical and the structural nature of the filmic image to produce a visual effect that creates an affective textural impact. Usage of a multiple kind of film stocks having different gradation, granularity, quality and age, chemically alerting the images to produce various effects, swiftly and suddenly moving between color and black and white images within a diegetic moment, variation of the frame rate, the modification of the exposure and the sharpness of the image – these are some of the strategies that I employ to bring about a haptic affect. I do this because I want the cinematic experience to move beyond the visual to the visceral. I seek to invoke a primordial effervescence through the moving image that is phenomenologically not just about seeing, but is also about feeling.

MC: This is kind of Deleuzian...

AA: Yes, completely Deleuzian. It does gesture to Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between the optic and the haptic, the smooth and the striated. I am interested in a visceral affect through manipulation of the visual. The history of filmmaking has been a process of bringing uniformity of the image experience. For the first early decades film chemistry was concerned about producing film stocks with the most diverse grey scale. Then, with the coming of the colour chemistry it was about the possibility of getting the most elaborate colour palette. Each of these attempts was to bring about homogeneity



Fig. 4: "The gas mask", scan from the 16mm film print, Ashish Avikunthak, *Dancing Othello (Brihnnlala Ki Khelkali)*, 2002, courtesy of the director.



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of the image. Or, to put it in Deleuze's terms, a smooth image, the visual image. In my cinematic practice I am interested in breaking this and producing striated imagery – which, like my narrative, is halting, disjunctural and hesitant. I began experimenting with haptic narrative with *Kalighat Fetish*, when I used sound stock (b/w film of very slow speed used to record sound) to produce the high contrast imagery in the film. In *Dancing Othello* I use optical methods to produce the distinct superimposition to create the disjunctural imagery.

MC: Roysten Abel's film *In Othello*, based on his successful theatrical production *Othello. A Play in Black and White*, was released in 2003. Adil, the Othello character, is a Kathakali trainer, and the film includes fragments of 'Kathakali Shakespeare', so there are similarities between *In Othello* and *Dancing Othello*, at least at a superficial level. How would you situate your work in relation to Roysten Abel's?

AA: I think *Dancing Othello* and Roysten Abel's film are vastly different. Abel's film attempts to narrate *Othello* by referring to the practice of contemporary theatre culture in India and places the erotic tension of Othello in the sexual intimacies of a contemporary performative culture. My film on the other hand articulates the politics of postcoloniality masquerading as a documentary on culture. There are similarities in the sense that both the filmic texts are interpreting Shakespeare and locating in contemporary postcolonial India, where modernity and premodernity merge in a seamless rupture. So 'Kathakali Shakespeare' in my film intermeshes with contemporary theatre and emerges as 'postcolonial caliban', whereas in Abel's film it becomes a kind of erotic play.

MC: With Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2003) and *Omkaara* (2006), adaptations of *Macbeth* and *Othello*, 'Shakespeare' has consolidated its position in mainstream Bollywood cinema. At a recent Shakespearean conference the category of 'auteur' was evoked to define some of the characteristics of Bhardwaj's cinema. How far would you agree with this? Any opinions about these films?

AA: I do not see Vishal Bhardwaj as an auteur. He is a filmmaker seeped in the commercial logic of Bollywood capitalism. He makes films that within the context of mainstream Bollywood seem radical but are fundamentally located within the dominant financial logic of entertainment. Here the decision-making power of the filmmaker is greatly compromised with producers, financiers and distributors. Significant creative decision of the director is jettisoned by their interjections, in the process making a consumable cinema product. The cultural, political and economical logic of Bollywood does not allow the formidable agency that is critical in the making of an auteur. Although it would be correct to locate his Shakespearean intervention as an important moment in the history of narrativity in Bollywood. I would credit Bhardwaj for bringing Shakespearean narrative into the mainstream of Indian cinematic imagination in a powerful way. Both *Maqbool* and *Omkaara* are



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masterful narratives that very dexterously re-locate Shakespearean tales within the complexities of Indian popular culture. However, in these films Shakespeare is subsumed within the cultural logic of Bollywood entertainment.

MC: What are you working on at the moment? How does it relate to your previous work?

AA: At the moment I am working on a couple of films that explore deeply the idea of cinema of religiosity. The first is an interpretation of a sixth-century BCE later Vedic philosophical treatise, *Katha Upanishad*, which for the first time articulates the mystical experience that is central to Hindu theology. It is the quintessential ancient Indian philosophical narrative. A disciple goes in search of a guru, in this case the Hindu God of death himself – Yama. This is followed by the deliverance of the lesson about enlightenment – the practice to go beyond the cycles of life and death. The other film is an exploration of folk deities, religion and modernity, and pushes the ideas that I have been exploring with *Kalighat Fetish*, *End Note* and *Vakratunda Swaha*.

MC: Thank you Ashish. I'm very grateful for this exciting account of your work, and *Dancing Othello* in particular.

## Of Spirits and Sundry Other Phenomena in Intercultural Shakespeare: Text and Performance

The theatrical performance of Shakespeare has been conceived primarily as a live event where a production and its audiences share more or less the same horizon of expectations. This conception of Shakespeare in performance owes much to the global purchase of the notion of Shakespeare's universality for practitioners and audiences alike. So even as non-English productions from different parts of the globe are now increasingly seen in international venues, overlapping horizons, or even a shared core horizon, of expectations may be assumed by their audiences abroad. Parallel to this fast-growing mobility of productions, a different but related expansion of audiences is created by video-recordings of performances that are disseminated on DVD and the internet. Unlike the occasion of international arts festivals that offer a smorgasbord of cultural performance over a relatively short period of time, the video capture of performance brings with it the potential for detailed, repeated watching. This watching practice can span an undefined range of positionalities, which apply variable frames of reference to a production's reception, into the indefinite future. Realising such an extended audience itself constitutes a secondary production of the stage performance (where the prior production at live venues is primary). This secondary production that makes the video and other performance materials available is most visible when its agency and purpose are not co-extensive with that of the theatre company. For instance, in a web-based digital archive intended for research use, performance events that occurred at different times and places and in disparate contexts are re-presented as videos whose context is a database of information. Here a performance video is identified by its metadata that allow a viewer to both locate it and connect it to other videos that have keywords in common. These keywords would match (at least to begin with) the quick labels that identify a show for live audiences, such as 'Hamlet', or 'Korean'. But in the economy of the search mode, and especially if the data is more detailed, the video-recording's network of relationships may be only indirectly that of the communities who had an interest in the stage production, and more immediately a matrix of key terms, names and topics of interest that prompt a viewer to delve into the spectrum of diverse materials held together by any one of them.

<sup>1</sup> Doug Reside proposes provocatively that "theatre scholarship, and indeed theatre history research in general, can be accurately described as a subset of media studies" ("Last Modified January 1996: The Digital History of *Rent*", *Theatre Survey*, 52.2 (November 2011), 335).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 10-60.

Embodied participation in a live event is not merely opposed to retrieval or replication of it in a recording.<sup>1</sup> As Philip Auslander reminds us, the phenomenon of 'liveness' is itself a condition that came into being with mediatization, and is valued *by* being part of the economy of media.<sup>2</sup> So one might say that performance events acquire the additional state of media objects, receding into the past while remaining embedded within and circulating in another form in the present. Correlatively, the reading of a performance *video* is not a part of the event captured

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in the video, whereas a live audience member's responses would be. Even where a reader recollects or is able to mentally re-create the theatre experience, 'as if' s/he had been part of its event, watching the video would rarely follow the linear time of the stage action. The practice of reading a recording interacts with interruptions to watching: to replay and isolate a particular detail, to search for additional information or to watch a similar scene in another production. Hyperlinks and navigation design that interconnect related materials in online video resources invite such interruptions, which re-contextualise the video, more than DVDs. So a reading of a video is shaped by its technological environment and capability. Depending on the user interface design, and the functions and resources that are accessible, particular aspects of the performance may be foregrounded or backgrounded. If a viewer does not follow the performance language and lacks an adequate pre-existing horizon of expectation within which to adopt the approach of 'as if one were there', the intersection of watching with background and comparative resources naturally grows in significance. These intersections can strengthen the definition and depth of an intercultural engagement with the performance, by routing that engagement through the intermedial one, both interculturality and mediatization being aspects of the globalization of performance. This paper is an exercise in the reading of two non-English Shakespeare performances through their video-recordings published in the online Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive (A|S|I|A) at a-s-i-a-web.org.<sup>3</sup> My reading focuses on the roles of speech and language in the use of spirits, gods, and goddesses to adapt Shakespeare's plays. In relating the performance video to the translated script that is presented alongside it in the A|S|I|A video interface, this reading approaches the topic from an intercultural position of dual translations, at once back into the source language of English and into the digital medium.

The 2009 production of Street Theatre Troupe's *Hamlet* does not open with the appearance of the Ghost of King Hamlet to the guards; instead the actors in modern western suits and gowns pass through the auditorium in King Hamlet's funeral procession onto a stage set modelled after the interior of the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century giant tomb called the Cheonma-Chong (Tomb of the Heavenly Horse). The tomb takes its name from the drawing of a horse on a saddle-cloth that was recovered from it, and which is closely reproduced but many times magnified as the central image projected onto the backdrop. The actors lower the body into a grave inset downstage before cutting abruptly to Act 1 scene 2. This grave functions as an exit and entrance for the Ghost, Polonius, Ophelia, Hamlet, and finally all the characters except Horatio. Not only the Ghost, but Hamlet too emerges from it to speak his 'To be or not to be' soliloquy. So while the script remains ninety per cent a close translation of Shakespeare's play (with some re-ordering and cutting) and is acted with the intense style of naturalism that the Street Theatre is known for, its human action is contextualised and set at the edge of the world after death.

In productions such as this that adapt Shakespeare's plays by drawing upon non-naturalistic performance forms, the treatment of the other-worldly can be considered a metonymy for the intercultural meeting with another world – from

<sup>3</sup> The Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive (A|S|I|A) and this paper are supported by research funding from the Singapore Ministry of Education under the project Relocating Intercultural Theatre (MOE2008-T2-1-110).

both sides. The interruption of ordinary human reality by a spectre, spirits, gods or goddesses forms a break or join where the systems of belief, cultural practices and performance conventions of a non-Christian culture interact with the dramatic purpose of these appearances in Shakespeare's play. This is not to say of course that a culture, or even the performance resources of that culture, can be equated with its means of staging the dead or the divine. As we know it, a 'culture' is a nebulous, heterogenous, constantly fluctuating collocation of practices and attitudes that is loosely gathered under an ethnic, regional or national name. The kind of metonymy I propose to outline is not of specific performance conventions and aesthetics representing a culture as a noun, but a metonymy of the intercultural as a verb. This distinction is important for re-thinking intercultural theatre practices, which have been open to critique for appropriating elements from Asian traditional performance, resulting in a merely 'aesthetic' or 'formal' interculturalism.<sup>4</sup> Yet Asian performance practices not only present but also effect non-Christian understandings of how the human and non-human worlds relate; such encounters between the two worlds allow the vocabularies and aesthetics of these traditions to engage western/westernised principles of mimesis as the standard Shakespeare performance. In naturalistic performance, staging the 'supernatural' presents a question to be solved, since its codes do not encompass how ghosts, gods or spirits 'naturally' appear or behave. A developed performance system for presenting the other world – after death or in the skies – can alter the familiar modes of meaning in realistically conceived characters and action. These visitations thus constitute a key node of the intercultural performability of Shakespeare.

### I Three Scenes in between Life and the World after Death in the Street Theatre Troupe's *Hamlet*

The account I gave above of the set and image of the horse in the Street Theatre Troupe's *Hamlet* raises the question of how to decode this usage of the Cheonma-Chong in relation to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. But this question must be preceded by asking who would recognise the citation. The popular production of national culture and national heritage reinforces notions of intercultural performance in which nominal cultural zones such as 'Korean' and 'Shakespeare' are assumed to come together. Yet the fact that the monument is Korean does not therefore mean that it would be accessible in a standard way, if at all, to any Korean spectator of this production. My Korean colleague was surprised to discover, after watching the video recording carefully, that the set was designed to resemble the monument she had visited on a school excursion. On the other hand, this information on the stage design is documented in an essay published in English and Korean by Kim Dong-Wook, who worked closely with the director Lee Youn-Taek.<sup>5</sup> These contrasting routes to recognising the referent are not simply related hierarchically, that is, as higher or lower levels of privileged access to the interpretive choices of a production, which may ironically offer a shorter route to understanding for a foreign

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Dennis Kennedy, *Foreign Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 290-303; Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Dong-Wook Kim, "Globalizing *Hamlet*: A Study of Yun-Taek Lee's Intercultural Productions of *Hamlet* from 1996 to 2005", *Shakespeare Review*, 44.4 (2008), 717-51. [In Korean.] In English in Hyon-u Lee *et al.*, eds., *Globalizing Shakespeare in Korea and Beyond* (Seoul: Dongin Publishing, 2009), 91-123.



spectator. They also indicate different orders of local knowledge of the Cheonma-Chong that obtain for spectators of this production at different positions. From the standpoint of education in heritage, direct experience of an historic site within one's own national geography has no logical connection with a Korean production of *Hamlet*, and may have other narratives attached to it that are inhospitable to *Hamlet*. From the perspective of artistic usage of that heritage, first-hand documentation of the production made available internationally enables scholars to identify which, and perhaps why, specific elements were used to stage an originally foreign text. National heritage education and production documentation both provide forms of local knowledge about the Cheonma-Chong; but they orientate the spectator differently towards the replacement of Elsinore's court with the Cheonma-Chong. From the point of view of national heritage, using the mythical-historical past in the Silla dynasty – as it merges with the ideal, paradisaical after-life evoked by the horse that appears to be galloping in the skies – to set the action of *Hamlet*, ridden with Christian sin, could seem a forced juxtaposition. From the viewpoint of interpretation of Shakespeare performance, a spectator may see that the framing perspective of this after-world comments ironically on the corruption in the play. Or, turning the view around to Shakespeare's local relevance, this setting from a golden age in Korea can be seen to present *Hamlet* as a critical analogy to the crises in political leadership in modern-day South Korea.

Between the first staging of Street Theatre Troupe's *Hamlet* in 1996 and its most recent one in 2010, the production went through several incarnations, toured to international capitals as well as playing repeatedly in its home country.<sup>6</sup> Along the way, these among other possible routes to interpreting local reference would have criss-crossed with one another, and with the producers' own interpretation as it is embodied on-stage. The long arc travelled by a production, consisting of different iterations over many years, foregrounds the temporal dimension of intercultural performance that has largely been neglected in spatial conceptions of interculturality. Seen synchronically and diachronically, the mesh of production and reception positionalities that a particular performance chronotope actualizes as relative cultural locations is open to change within one production, and also determined by the moment of this whole production arc in the intercultural history of which it is a part. For example, an individuated approach to naturalistic acting such as the Street Theatre Troupe's training methods<sup>7</sup> has arisen after a long practice of naturalism, which was introduced as modern drama into Korea in the early twentieth century by way of Japanese colonisation.<sup>8</sup> So the contemporary use of naturalism in Shakespeare productions grows from and refers to the particular histories of Korea/South Korea's relationship to the West and Japan, of its modernisation and of its own changing international conception of its cultural identity in cosmopolitan arenas.<sup>9</sup> This *Hamlet* interrupts and modifies naturalism by adapting the indigenous pre-modern performance of *Gut* (shamanism). The interactions it presents between naturalistic conventions and *Gut* can be understood as a conjoined intra-/inter-cultural negotiation with these trajectories from the past, and with the naturalised

<sup>6</sup> The differences are detailed in D. W. Kim, "Glocalizing *Hamlet*". The Street Theatre Troupe's *Hamlet* last played in Seoul in September 2010.

<sup>7</sup> According to Kim Bang Ock, "[s]ince the early 1990s, Lee Youn-Taek has systematized the Korean way of teaching acting by embracing Korean sound and bodily techniques and also by returning to the way of breathing that can be found in Korean folk performances". [In Korean, author's translation.] (B.O. Kim, "The Search for and the Incorporation of the Indigenous Theatrical Elements of Acting in Modern Korean Theatre: From Mask Dance to 'Korean Way of Acting'", *Korean Drama*, 28 [2006], 53.)

<sup>8</sup> Shingeki (i.e. 'new theatre') in Japan directly influenced the inception of modern Korean drama, also termed 'new drama', as well as the inception of Hua Ju (spoken drama) in China.

<sup>9</sup> B. O. Kim assesses the new theatre movements that began in South Korea in the 1970s as "a paradigm shift that tried to make a break with westernized theatre styles, in general, and western realist acting techniques, in particular" (B.O. Kim, "Indigenous Theatrical Elements", 53).

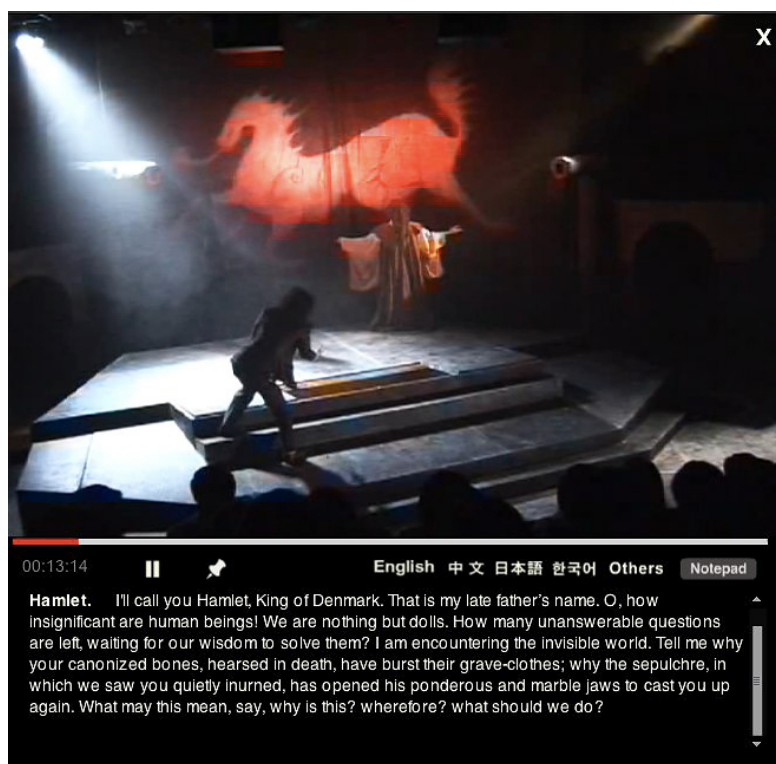


Fig. 1: "Hamlet's meeting with the Ghost of his father". Street Theatre Troupe, *Hamlet*, Seoul, 2009.<sup>10</sup> Click on the image to watch video.

<sup>10</sup> All video clips used in this paper are drawn from the performance videos kindly donated to the Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive (A|S|I|A) by the theatre companies Street Theatre Troupe and The Actors Studio, and are hosted by A|S|I|A, <<http://a-s-i-a-web.org/>>. This performance played at the Nunbit Theatre in Seoul from 5 to 22 May 2009.

notions of Shakespeare performance that accrue from them.

This dynamic can be seen in Hamlet's meeting with the Ghost in the part to which the following image refers, from the 2009 production recording of Street Theatre Troupe's *Hamlet*.

In most performances of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* the verbal action of this scene dominates the physical; what the Ghost tells Hamlet in words is the impetus for Hamlet's subsequent emotions and actions. By contrast, in this performance the Ghost does not speak aloud (his speeches are in parenthesis in the script), and only Hamlet's responses are voiced. Instead the bodily communication between them is the scene's primary focus. Without speech, the knowledge that the Ghost transmits to Hamlet excludes the audience, who witness it as a bodily affect. Whereas Shakespeare describes Hamlet's physical reactions subjunctively (*if* he heard

the lightest word about the Ghost's prison house), here we follow how his body reacts to the introjection of wordless knowing. Hamlet's reply to this silent communication becomes a verbal spill-over of the experience, allowing us to infer, one step behind him, what he has understood. The radical staging of this encounter suggests much greater porosity in the boundary between life and the after-life than in Shakespeare's play. Because Hamlet's discovery of what occurred in the realm of the living is communicated from the different realm after death, the knowledge carries with it or is carried by an experience of that other realm, and for this reason cannot be expressed in language.

At another level the translation that is at once necessary and incomplete between the two realms presents itself as an intercultural relationship of text and performance, where language and body repeatedly unite and separate with the rhythm of the exchange between Hamlet and the Ghost. The alternation presents a metonymy for a mutually translating relationship between Shakespeare's text and *Gut* ritual performances, where on each side the original has passed through usage by another purpose, and returned in an altered form.

In the online medium of the Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive (A|S|I|A), this relationship is made more visible by the presentation of the script alongside the video-recording. The viewer can thereby match the Ghost's lines to his silent actions. By contrast, in the theatre these lines were not provided in sur-titles, and could only be inferred. With the provision of a Notepad in the A|S|I|A video

format, the viewer in the digital medium can pause the recording to make notes attached to a specific time-code. This detailed reading of the script in parallel with watching the video-recording enables new insight into not only the text-performance relationship, but also the relations between several scripts at work at once. The most common combination of multiple scripts in East Asian productions is a translation of Shakespeare's text in the dialogue, and an edited version of the original that is presented in sur-titles when the production tours (and increasingly at home as well). This can be seen in the multilingual text-box accompanying the video of this *Hamlet*: an edited version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that was translated into Korean appears as a back-translation, producing a double text of bilingual surtitles in Korean and Shakespeare's English (mostly).<sup>11</sup>

On seeing the Ghost, Hamlet says:

I'll call you Hamlet, King of Denmark. That was my late father's name. *O, how insignificant are human beings! We are nothing but dolls. How many unanswerable questions are left, waiting for our wisdom to solve them? I am encountering the invisible world.* Tell me why your canonized bones, hearsed in death ... [italics mine]

The Korean lines (italicised above) introduced into Shakespeare's can be read from dual directions. As Hamlet's words, their key tenor is self-reflexive; simultaneously, they depict the first impersonal awareness of the other world by the incipient shaman who has been chosen by the *naerim* ("to come down into") of the spirits. Correlatively, *Gut* practices are figuratively translated into the plot purpose of this scene in *Hamlet*, by depicting the dream appearance of the god or spirit. This is considered a very private, strange experience, and the *Naerim-gut* ritual to induct a shaman thus chosen<sup>12</sup> takes place after such an occurrence, sometimes many years later. Unlike *Gut* rituals, this encounter is not noisy with music and chanting, nor communal, but choreographed in carefully staged images.

Three stages can be distinguished in the *naerim* encounter performed here. (a) The reaching of the Ghost and Hamlet to touch each other's hands, as over an intangible separation, ends in a 'miss' and blackout that may be read as a second break in Hamlet's consciousness (the first being sleep and dream). (b) The central sequence of possession parallels Shakespeare's lines on the Ghost's prison house. Hamlet's trembling dramatises the start of the illness known as *shinbyeong* ('spirit sickness'), also called 'self-loss', that is caused by the spirit or god's possession of the destined shaman. And (c) a mime of the murder is only shown after Hamlet has been prepared to receive it, and anticipates the dumb show. Hamlet's actual or pretended madness that begins in this scene in Shakespeare is displaced from being his subjective condition, and objectified as his possession by his father's spirit for whom he is the shaman. His anticipation before the Ghost's narration, "Alas, why should I endure such pain to hear your story?" applies simultaneously to Hamlet's fate, the re-playing of *Hamlet* and the incipient shaman who often experiences a period of struggle and resistance to becoming a shaman. This self-reflexive resistance thus brings together Hamlet's two impending roles of revenger and shaman.

<sup>11</sup> The Korean and English scripts are original scripts by Lee Youn-Taek, with supplementary transcription and translation of the dialogue in the video-recording by Lee Kangsun for A|S|I|A, <<http://a-s-i-a-web.org/>>, 27 September 2011. For a discussion of the sur-titling of non-Anglophone Shakespeare performance, see Li Lan Yong, "After Translation", *Shakespeare Survey*, 62 (2009), 283-95.

<sup>12</sup> As opposed to the shaman who becomes one by lineage and apprenticeship.



The merging of first and third person positions introduced by the shaman's intermediary role ambiguates and disrupts notions of subjectivity that intertwine humanist conceptions of individual consciousness with the naturalistic acting of character. Hamlet's dissociation from his role as revenger is intensified, but not as a character trait particular to him. Rather, that dissociation results from the absorption or displacement of his character by its functions as a communication channel with the spirit world, and vice versa. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet's identification or sympathy with the Ghost ("Alas, poor Ghost"; "Rest, rest, perturbed spirit") preserves a stable distinction between first and third person roles and pronouns. In the Street Theatre Troupe production, however, the shaman's position displaces this distinction in the surrogacy of mediumship, where Hamlet speaks and acts as a mediator. Likewise, the Ghost's figure is at once the father's spirit and the shaman who mediates the spirit; or, the father as shaman. Standing in the shaman's position behind Hamlet, he touches Hamlet's aura, raising him like a puppet; facing Hamlet, he shows him the murder. Hamlet's two roles co-present an uneasy duality in which one cannot fulfil the other: the revenger executes violent vengeance in a personal cause; the shaman harmonizes the worlds of the living and the after-life by shifting feelings of resentment towards forgiveness and acceptance, and practices healing rituals aimed at solving problems impersonally in a communal, not individual, capacity.<sup>13</sup> Hamlet's subsequent behaviour then, that in naturalistic acting dramatises his emotional instability, is re-configured in this production as the volatility with

<sup>13</sup> Although Hamlet briefly articulates a more detached view of his actions in "Heaven has pleased to punish me with this and this with me", this role as the scourge of God can be compared with one of the most cited axioms of the foremost Korean shaman, Kim Keum Hwa: "Revenge only results in further revenge".

which the incommensurable first and third person roles he occupies disrupt one another.

The reconfiguration of a naturalistic representation of the individual by *Gut* comes to the fore in the Mousetrap. In this scene the emotional expressiveness of the acting progresses from artificial gestures, through masked dance, to naturalistic behaviour. The progression suggests an increasing truthfulness being enacted by the performers, paradoxically, in direct proportion to the growing non-naturalistic representation of character as it splits into several speaking and acting parts. The complex third-person dynamic of *Gut* emerges when the Ghost's words are heard for the first time in this production. They are the "dozen or sixteen lines" written by Hamlet, and inserted after rather than into the Murder of Gonzago.

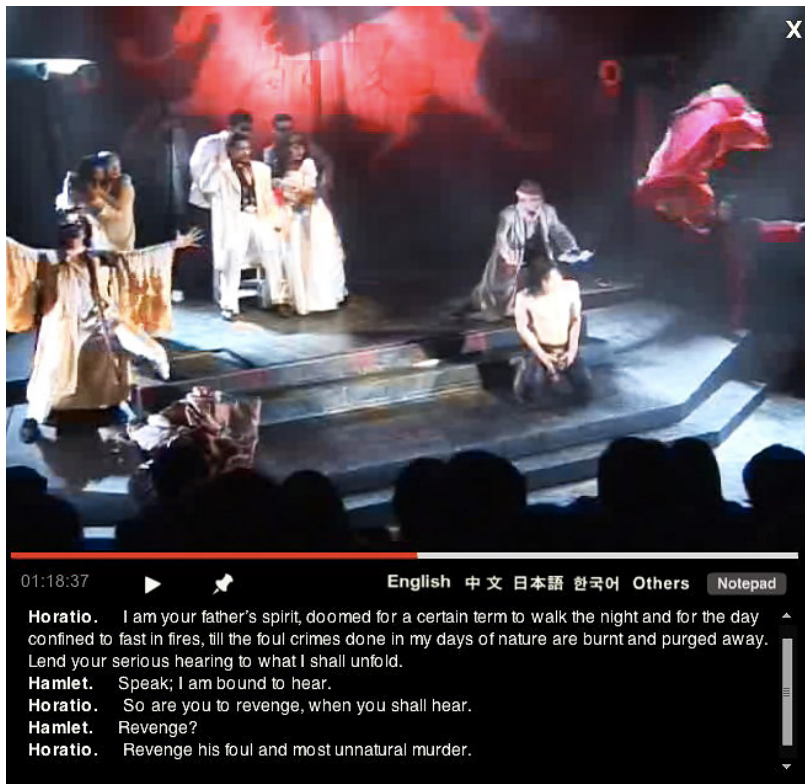


Fig. 2: "The extended Mousetrap", Street Theatre Troupe, *Hamlet*, Seoul, 2009. Click on the image to watch video.



The scene begins like a play and shifts into a *Naerim-gut* ritual by peeling off layers of formulaic presentation to expose more spontaneous reactions and greater emotional involvement by Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Ophelia. Based on the loose, ambiguous relationship between role and character set up by this point, the production treats the originally mirroring function of the Mousetrap more like a prism with multiple refractions that reflect upon one another. It is often noted<sup>14</sup> that making Lucianus the nephew of the Player King incorporates Hamlet's own threat to Claudius within a replay of Claudius' crime, thus pointing to a parallel between the past and future murders by Claudius and Hamlet respectively. However, the distinction between the mirror and the reality it reflects is dissolved when Hamlet himself plays Lucianus, and engages in a highly sexual dance with the Player Queen (whose red cloth links her directly to Gertrude's red handkerchief), before killing the Player King. Here he embodies Claudius' role, which includes staging his own Oedipal relation to his mother; while Claudius, holding his hand against his ear in the same gesture as the Ghost had used to mime his murder, is instinctively prompted to feel the physical sensations of his brother. At this moment, when Hamlet/Lucianus poisons the Player King, the Mousetrap breaks into a *Naerim-gut*. The Ghost's words are employed to repeat at once Hamlet's meeting with the Ghost and the content of the Mousetrap itself, in a double climax: the exposure of and testimony against Claudius; and the ritual initiation of Hamlet as a shaman. Horatio is the shaman conducting the rite, and his reading of the Ghost's words is suggestive of Shakespeare's script, while it also delivers Hamlet's script of his encounter. The dead Player King performs the Ghost physically (we recognise the same gestures and stance), and Hamlet plays himself meeting the Ghost, again. In this climax, the immorality of individual actions is subsumed in the performativity of violent impulses. Their mesmerising force leaves no observer positions in the collectively heightened feeling (the character who screams is not captured in the video but the script identifies her as Ophelia), and creates a dual focus on Claudius and Hamlet, closely associating their emotions as both hear the voice from the other world.

The earlier *naerim* scene implies an intercultural encounter between naturalism and *Gut* performance that is defined by the reciprocal resistance of text and performance to scripting or embodying the other. Here the full disengagement of dramatic text from the condition of embodiment in naturalistic character allows it to surface out of first-person silence, as a voice in the third person, and to act on the characters in a displaced third-party relation – even in what would *naturally* be a first to second person relation, such as the Ghost's to Hamlet or to Claudius. Shakespeare's words act as the script of a *Gut* performance, or the utterance of a shaman. In an earlier version of the production, Hamlet speaks the Ghost's words "But that I am forbid to tell the secrets of my prison house" to Ophelia when he visits her closet. Conversely, the physical naturalism of characters goes beyond the limit of *Gut* performance, which does not contain appearances of the dead, spirits or gods, in two further scenes after death.

<sup>14</sup> For instance by Nigel Alexander, *Poison, Play, and Duel: A Study in Hamlet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 112-115; John Russell, *Hamlet and Narcissus* (Cranbury, NJ and London: Associated University Presses, 1995), 128-130.

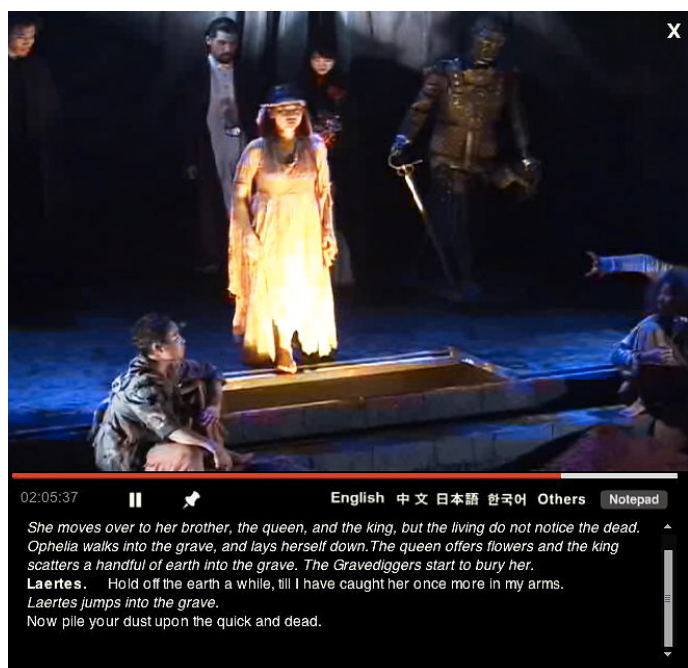


Fig. 3: “Ophelia at her burial”, Street Theatre Troupe, *Hamlet*, Seoul, 2009. Click on the image to watch video.

<sup>15</sup> Lee Hyon-u points out that, in the programme notes for the first performance of his *Hamlet* (1996), Lee Youn-Taek explains: “I interpret Ophelia’s madness as *shinbyeong*, which she acquires as she loses her ego in the chaotic reality. Ophelia is not just a psychotic. She reveals everything of the secret world. This is why Ophelia’s song is expressed not by a mad woman’s mumblings, but in the rhythms of a shamanic chant” (Hyon-u Lee, “Shamanism in Korean *Hamlets* since 1990: Exorcising *Han*”, *Asian Theatre Journal*, 28.1 (Spring 2011), 113).

<sup>16</sup> The original English translation by Alyssa Kim of the Korean script by Yang Jung-Ung was kindly donated to A|S|I|A by Yohangza Theatre Company. The production first played at the Myeongdong Theater in Seoul from 30 October to 8 November 2009. Both video and scripts are forthcoming in A|S|I|A.

In between Hamlet’s conversation with the Gravedigger and Laertes’ protest (“Hold off the earth a while”), this startling scene of Ophelia’s funeral inserts a silent space in which Ophelia’s subjective consciousness and emotions are dramatised as she gradually realises that she is dead, and has to walk into her grave. This dream-like scene asks the audience to relate to a character who is ‘dead/not dead’, in a strange extension of the standard spectatorial practice of identifying with naturalistically acted characters. Through most of the play Ophelia is compliant with her domination by the men. Then in her mad state, her disordered mind and feelings were put on display.<sup>15</sup> This scene gives Ophelia a third state that contains shades of both but is neither. The impression is that we see her more directly because she is out of context, in an interstitial moment. Her realistic depiction in the context of a non-realist situation – how she feels as she recognises her own death – shifts her from an

object who represents the loss felt by the other characters to the subject of her own pathos.

Two aspects of the potential interaction between *Gut* and naturalism are illuminated by comparing this treatment of Ophelia’s burial scene with another production of *Hamlet*. Directed by Yang Jung-Ung in 2010 for the Yohangza Theatre Company, that production adapts the play more extensively to *Gut* practices, and re-formulates this scene as a *Sumang-gut* ritual (for redeeming the spirit of a drowned person from the water) performed for Ophelia. In this ritual she speaks through the shaman to her brother:

Why didn’t you stop me? I was so alone and lonely. The water was cold, dark, and scary. I couldn’t breathe. What kept you? Why didn’t you stop me?<sup>16</sup>

First, speech is used in Yohangza’s *Hamlet* as opposed to the silent body in Street Theatre’s production to depict the transition of Ophelia’s consciousness during the passage from life to death differently. In the Street Theatre Troupe’s production, the linear temporality of naturalism is scrambled by this passage. Our previous sight of Ophelia, distributing flowers, is conflated with this moment, as if her consciousness were continuous, between that moment and the moment when she falls into the stream and drowns. By contrast, while Ophelia does not physically appear in Yohangza’s *Hamlet*, her speech recollects and returns the audience to that past point of her “muddy death”: her feelings as she drowns, and the grief that needs to be addressed to her brother, who did not avert what is now irreversible. While Yohangza’s production of the scene preserves the sequentiality of realism

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through the speech of Ophelia, as the logic of cause and effect by which we construct character in the world, Street Theatre Troupe's dissolution of historical time into mythical time collapses realism with the unreal in her physical behaviour. At the interstice between life and the afterlife, Ophelia kisses Hamlet when he leaps into the grave, while he remains oblivious of her embrace.

Second, the closure for Ophelia that Shakespeare leaves out is primarily accomplished as an awareness of the audience, who are represented by the Gravediggers, rather than an interaction between the characters, Ophelia and Laertes. Here in the Street Theatre Troupe's *Hamlet* as well as through the repetitions and divisions of roles in the extended Mousetrap, the scenes approach a fundamental component of *Gut* performance that differentiates it from tragedy: the distribution or dispersal of emotions from the individual to the community. In a performative context where *Gut* rites are regular social practice (they are in fact experiencing a revival in contemporary South Korea), their usage in stage performance blurs the distinction between staged fiction and real life for the audience. Extending from the characters and their on-stage audiences, the devolution of first person positions into the third person constitutes the audience's role as at once the involved community and detached observer. As the closing sequence places us in the participatory position of a *Ssitjim-gut* (to cleanse the spirit of the dead), the communal nature of the *Gut* rite expands to include the audience. Reviewing the performance in Craiova in May 2010 at the Shakespeare International Festival, which was titled "The Hamlet Constellation", Ludmila Patlanjoglu recounts:

... in the surprising end – a liturgy having as its actors the priests – [the characters] get out of the tombs, hangmen and victims alike, out of the earth into full light in order to be judged. Hamlet takes off his tattered clothes of sins, and, stark naked, follows the suit of the resurrected. "The rest is silence" denotes the peace of some divine order. Lee presented a therapeutic vision for the crisis that troubles our society.<sup>17</sup>

This description of the performance affect of the last scene suggests the collective emotional experience of *Gut* rites. According to another personal account,<sup>18</sup> the audience joined in the prayer for Hamlet's spirit to pass in peace.

## II Shakespeare/Malaysia from the Viewpoint of the Gods

Whereas the spirits interrupt the human world in the Street Theatre Troupe's *Hamlet*, human beings intrude into a kind of performance traditionally peopled by gods and goddesses in *Mak Yong Titis Sakti* ("Mak Yong Drops of Magic", hereafter *Titis Sakti*), an adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This production by The Actors Studio in Kuala Lumpur in 2009 was the first to adapt a Shakespeare play to the ancient form of *Mak Yong*, which has been performed for at least 800 years in the Malay archipelago. In 1991 public performances of *Mak Yong* plays were banned as anti-Islamic in one of its two homes, the northeastern state of Kelantan in Malaysia, by the Pan Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, the ruling party in

<sup>17</sup> Ludmila Patlanjoglu, "The Hamlet Constellation Cuts to the Bone", *Critical Stages*, 3 (Autumn 2010), <<http://www.criticalstages.org/criticalstages3/entry/The-Hamlet-Constellation-Cuts-to-the-Bone?category=5>>, 30 September 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Conversation with Manabu Noda, May 2010.

Kelantan), because of its animist rituals to invoke the spirits of nature for spiritual purposes as well as entertainment. Opposing the ban, arts activists and scholars champion *Mak Yong* as a national heritage art-form. This movement has gathered momentum since its successful submission to UNESCO in 2005 to classify *Mak Yong* as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The locus of this opposition in the metropolitan capital of Kuala Lumpur has shifted some *Mak Yong* troupes there; when I was growing up in Kuala Lumpur there were no *Mak Yong* performances. The ban in Kelantan against public performances of anti-Islamic forms also included *Wayang Kulit* (shadow puppetry), which is less localized in Kelantan and more widespread (in Java and Bali as well), and led to a parallel reaction in a *Wayang Kulit* production of *Macbeth* titled *Macbeth in the Shadows*.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> This production by Pusaka in association with The British Council was planned by the Malaysian poet-translator Eddin Khoo with modern shadow puppets by the English novelist, playwright and illustrator, Edward Carey. It was to be staged in August 2005 at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, but was stopped short by the untimely passing of the Dalang (puppeteer), Pak Dollah Baju Merah (Dalang Abdullah Ibrahim).

An intercultural usage of Shakespeare arises from these intracultural tensions between fundamentalist religious beliefs and deeply rooted performance practices. Adapting Shakespeare at this time is an inoculation of *Mak Yong* by a western text against fears of its magic – “Mak Yong bukan khurafat” (“*Mak Yong* is not superstition”) is the title of an interview with one of the performers, who defends the beneficial release of emotions in *Mak Yong*.<sup>20</sup> Also, using Shakespeare underlines the transformation of local ritual performance into proscenium stage entertainment for a cosmopolitan audience. And, at the same time, the broader intercultural contrast between Shakespeare’s play and the indigenous Malay form both effects and masks the national appropriation of a regional practice (its UNESCO accreditation serving to enhance its national value).

<sup>20</sup> Faizal Saharuni, *Kosmol*, 26 May 2009, <[http://www.kosmo.com.my/kosmo/content.asp?y=2009&dt=0526&pub=Kosmo&sec=Hiburan&pg=hi\\_02.htm](http://www.kosmo.com.my/kosmo/content.asp?y=2009&dt=0526&pub=Kosmo&sec=Hiburan&pg=hi_02.htm)>, 30 September 2011.

The performance of *Titis Sakti* opens with the prescribed sequence of rituals to purify the stage. These include making offerings to the spirits and the “Salutation of the Rebab”, which is a song and slow dance. The opening scenes also follow the prescribed structure of *Mak Yong*. The Pak Yong (structurally the lead role) bids farewell to his wives for the day and summons the elder clown (Peran Tua), who prevaricates at length before appearing. The Pak Yong tells him to fetch the younger clown (Peran Muda) to help accomplish the task that the Pak Yong has for them, and the clown in turn has to circumvent his junior’s excuses for not being available. Only when both clowns present themselves before the Pak Yong does the story proper open, this point being termed *pecah cerita*, meaning ‘to break open the story’. At this point the Pak Yong assumes his fictional identity in the story by making a self-introduction, here as the Raja Dewa Kayangan (“God-King of Heaven”). *Titis Sakti* modifies this preparatory structure by inserting into it the quarrel of Seri Laksana (Helena) and Indera Putra (Demetrius) as the Pak Yong arrives in the forest; overhearing it, like Oberon in Shakespeare, he is prompted to summon the elder clown. In this way the script extends Shakespeare’s story far ahead of its normal boundary in *Mak Yong*. Shakespeare’s lovers offer the audience a fictional pretext for the fixed sequence, always enacted by the Pak Yong and the clowns – every night if the tale spans several nights – before the story begins. The intrusion of their problems into the non-fictional realm foreshadows a plot with human beings’ concerns, thus reducing the discomfort of a modern or superstitious spectator with the divine realm before them.



Similarly, *Titis Sakti* uses Shakespeare to filter the religious censorship of its rituals in the first utterance of a *Bangkitan* (an invocation addressed to the spirit of a sacred object or place) to bring on the magical Bunga (Flower).

The younger clown's impromptu joke – “So Your Highness wants me to squeeze the Flower, and then” – makes comic capital of animist personification.<sup>21</sup> Further remarks on the pretty Bunga's gender prompt the Pak Yong to offer to make her a boy instead,<sup>22</sup> or a transexual. In treating the personification rather literally, and playing in an irreverent fashion with its malleability, this first instance of raising the spirits gives the audience the natural outlet of uneasiness in laughter, defusing their potential anxieties about participating in magic.

Traditionally the dialogue of a *Mak Yong* performance has no script, but rather two types of language: the fixed text like the song lyrics, that are set in an idiom by now so archaic that some words and phrases are ambiguous, or the *Bangkitan*, which follow a prescribed formula.<sup>23</sup> The reverse of the fixed text is improvisation, mostly by the two divine clowns, which is expected and prized in *Mak Yong* performance. Idiomatically as well as by their references and topics, the clowns' spontaneous dialogue in *pasar* (market) Malay contrasts intentionally with the traditional formal Kelantanese of the Raja's fixed text, and serves to locate the performance in the audience's day-to-day reality. In *Titis Sakti* the reactions, objections and jokes of the younger clown in particular punctuate the flow of the narrative to expose and bring into play details of contemporary life in Kuala Lumpur. This contextualisation through comic exchange has an effect quite different from setting the staged scenes in Kuala Lumpur. When the two clowns meet, the younger proffers an elaborate and funny hand gesture by way of greeting the elder who asks, “What is that?” The younger clown explains, “This is Mak Yong Titis Sakti. A more modern Mak Yong”. But the elder clown is dubious: “I have not seen anything like that in a Mak Yong from Kelantan ... So this is Mak Yong Kuala Lumpur?”

In this moment the production acknowledges the current religious controversy in which it takes part by underlining its creation of “a more modern *Mak Yong* in Kuala Lumpur” as a comedic practice. At the same time, it employs the very sign of its difference from the tradition as part of the standard improvisatory humour of the form. The self-reflexivity of the laughter it provokes from the audience is thus persuasive. It not only appeases fears of the performance of magic by reminding the audience of their modernity, but also co-opts the Kuala Lumpur audience community's self-recognition into the humour, as an integral part of the performance and of their own enjoyment. In effect, this comic persuasion is

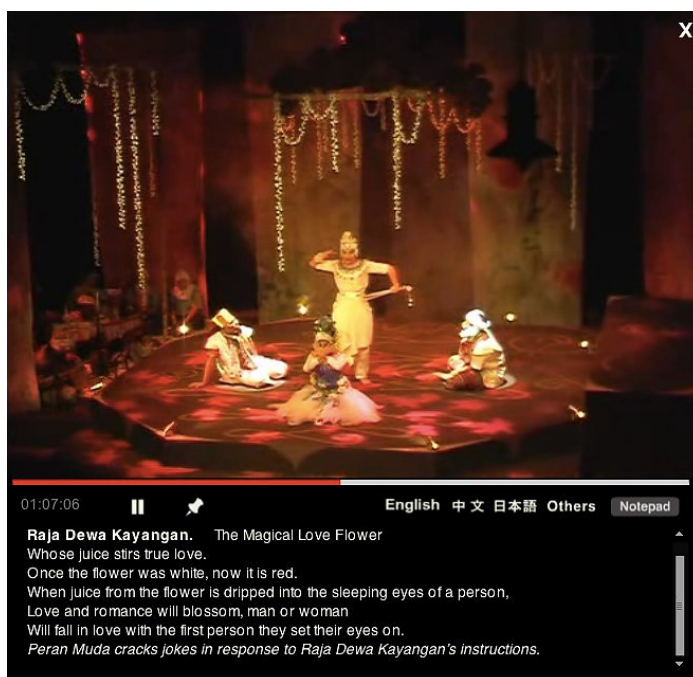


Fig. 4: “The raising of Bunga”, The Actors' Studio, *Titis Sakti*, Kuala Lumpur, 2009. Click on the image to watch video.

<sup>21</sup> Transcript of the performance video-recording kindly donated to A|S|I|A by The Actors Studio, translated by Roselina Johari Binti Md Khir.

<sup>22</sup> This could recall Sonnet 20 for a few in the audience.

<sup>23</sup> Ghulam Sarwar Yousoff, “The Kelantan Mak Yong Dance Theater: A Study of Performance Structure”, PhD thesis, University of Hawai'i, 1976.

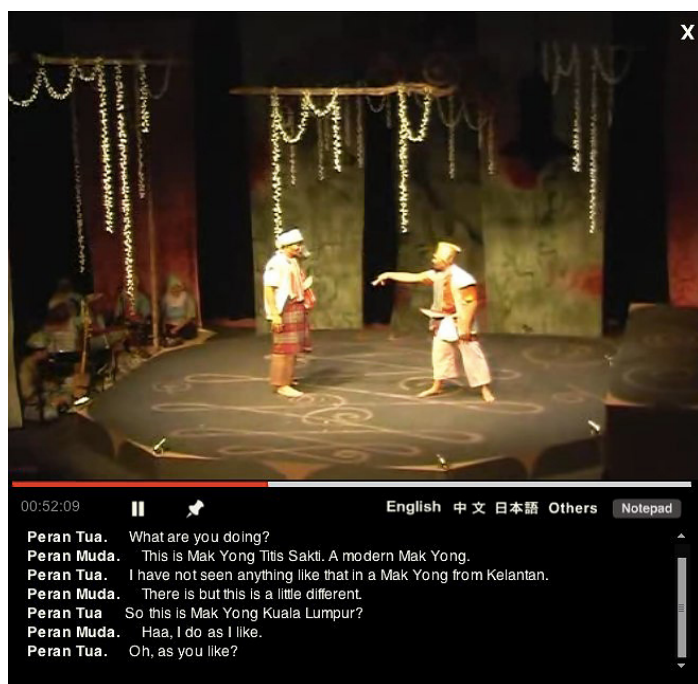


Fig. 5: “The two clowns”. The Actors’ Studio, *Titis Sakti*, Kuala Lumpur, 2009. Click on the image to watch video.

aimed at generating a new community for *Mak Yong* performance.

The self-recognition invoked, however, is not of a cohesive national or local identity, but of the in-between-ness that the audience recognizes as its own make-up: a matrix of differences between the cultural cradle (Kelantan) of Malaysia and the cosmopolitan capital (Kuala Lumpur); between Islamic identity and beliefs and an older Malay mythos embodied in ritual performance; between the aesthetic of *Mak Yong* and the international culture to which Shakespeare belongs. The younger clown’s occasional interjections in Malaysian English succinctly capture the scope of these intra-/inter-cultural negotiations brought into play. Questioned by the elder clown, “You’re not from Kelantan?” the younger replies, switching easily from Malay to English, “Aku orang Kuala Lumpur tapi campur-campur ... that’s why I speak English, you know” (“I am from Kuala Lumpur but I’m a mixture ...

that’s why I speak English”). English as the global language indexes the regional distinctions and political tensions within Malaysia; while the Malaysian idiom and intonation pattern of that English asserts the domestication of the colonial language. Later the clowns and Bunga discover Cempaka Sari (Hermia) at the point when she is struggling with the snake in her dream. She speaks Shakespeare’s lines translated into formal Malay, “Tolong Iskandar, tolong. Ular itu ingin membelitku” (“Help me Iskandar, help me! The snake is coiling up me”). And the younger clown comments in local English, “Snake, snake ... she bite the snake, the snake died”. We might say that one is a literary snake, the other a live snake in the tropics.

The two clowns’ centrality in *Titis Sakti* can be viewed in terms of both Shakespeare’s play and *Mak Yong*. Together they fuse the magical and comic functions of Shakespeare’s fairies and mechanicals as divine clowns. This radical alteration of the structure of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is enabled by the linguistic conventions of *Mak Yong*, where high and low registers are not strictly a function of social status and are determined by the speech event. By contrast, the actions of the nobility, fairies and commoners in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are distinguished and contrasted by their kinds of language. The elder clown especially shifts register depending on whether he is raising a spirit or joking with the younger clown. Reversing the social hierarchy of Shakespeare’s dramatic structure, where the mechanicals provide wedding entertainment for the court, the lovers’ complications are inset as a play-within-a-play for the amusement of the clowns and Bunga. At the same time, the clowns’ mismanagement of the lovers’ affairs displaces the conventional *Mak Yong* story about the gods, replacing the pre-Islamic mythology, to

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which the form owes its traditional subject matter, with Shakespeare's mismatched lovers. The lovers' worldliness is marked by making Indera Putra (Demetrius) wealthy and Iskandar Muda (Lysander) relatively impoverished. In the absence of the god-king who has left them in charge, the clowns' comic action represents the effects of animist magic on human actions. It is then not the lovers' performance in the style of Malay melodrama, but the clowns' commentary upon the lovers and their own humorous interruptions while they are casting Bunga's spells that is the primary comedic focus and force in the latter half of the performance. (Incidentally, clowns play a crucial intercultural function in localising foreign myths in various forms of Wayang in Java and Bali. The five Panakawan, Semar and his four sons, introduced into local renditions of the *Mahabharata*, are part of the action, comment on it, and create comic action alongside the mythical characters. Descended from the gods, they represent the local people who, through the Panakawan, identify the originally Indian myth as a Javanese or Balinese one.)

So, while the motivation and production of *Titis Sakti* are located in the historical time of the controversy surrounding *Mak Yong*, the performance absorbs Shakespeare's play by centralising the role of the divine clowns who represent the interaction of spirits with human beings as neither fearful nor mysterious, but funny and *down-to-earth*. The fixed text and extemporisation together constitute an a-historical dialogue: at one pole timeless – the speech of the gods – and, at the other pole, extempore and topical – in the moment and place of performance. Eternity and the impromptu are two sides of non-linear temporality, and their incongruence is the basis for much humour throughout. When the elder clown tells the younger that he is wanted at court, the younger answers, "I'll see you in court then". Queried by the elder clown, "I said the King is calling for you, why do you want to see me in court?" the younger explains, "Nowadays people always sue the King ... There's a lot about it in *Malaysia Today*". The elder clown, always the more traditional one, replies stiffly, "Let people sue the King if they want. We live in a country that obeys the King's command". That country is Malaysia today from the viewpoint of the gods, as it were. Jokes like this on buzz topics ground the mythical realm in the audience's time and place during the prescribed introductory structure that occupies half the performance, in leisurely preparation for one of the well-known stories. Until the story opens, the roles are structural to *Mak Yong*, not yet fictional, and space is a kingdom whose time is only and always now.

The force of a metonymy is that it is evocative and incomplete. Several important dimensions of intercultural performance become more apparent in the approach I have taken to these two productions as metonymic of cultural interaction, rather than metaphoric of cultures. First, interactions such as those of *Gut* with a naturalistic performance of *Hamlet*, and *Mak Yong* with the structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, may be read in terms of their formal order. An analysis of the relationships between components drawn from disparate sources prioritises their performative logic, which is internal to a production, over their meta-theatrical referentiality.

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Second, recognising the dynamic interactivity of these components draws attention to the intracultural negotiation at work that is inextricable from the intercultural, and which is necessarily selective, relational, interpretive and of its time. And third, the significance of the interaction need not be solely or even primarily defined as one between cultures. In the Street Theatre Troupe's *Hamlet, Gut* performance refracts the individual's consciousness in a collective experience of the story, suggesting at once that that story flows past the bound of the individual, and the necessity to transcend tragedy through the intersection of historical with mythic time. *Titis Sakti*, on the other hand, subsumes and disarms the religious controversy of its own moment in time, as the clowns' improvisation, the songs, and the prescribed structure place that controversy within the long view of the performative moment.

These readings emphasize the vital roles of speech and translation in the performative interaction. The separation between speech and body in the Street Theatre Troupe's *Hamlet* is a fundamental premise of *Gut*. Setting this *Hamlet* alongside the code-switching and use of multilinguality in *Titis Sakti* indicates the range and diversity with which the treatment of Shakespeare in translation combines with the more spectacular aspects of performance. Close study of the scripts in conjunction with the video, that is now possible in an intermedial and multilingual interface like that of A|S|I|A, creates new discursive potential in intercultural productions. The realisation of this potential will be shaped by the interaction between the viewer's specific horizon of expectations and the historical as well as digital contexts of the production – as it was originally performed and as it is re-contextualised by the online medium. Thus an understanding of worlds beyond human life in these two productions runs parallel to the after-life they acquire in the virtual time-space of the internet.



## Uploading *Hamlet*: Agency, Convergence and YouTube Shakespeare

<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzHlj3fpR8>>, 6 November 2011. I have provided the links to the uploads referred to in this essay and, where possible, have sought the permission of the various users through YouTube itself.

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (New York: Anchor, 2009), xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube* (Cambridge, Ms.: MIT Press, 2011), <<http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/#>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>4</sup> See <<http://mashable.com/2010/10/05/lady-gaga-justin-bieber-youtube/>>. On what constitutes a view on YouTube, see the report by Tubemogul available at <<http://www.tubemogul.com/research/report/35-What-Counts-as-a-View-Updated->>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See Christy Desmet, "Paying Attention in Shakespeare Parody: From Tom Stoppard to YouTube", *Shakespeare Survey*, 61 (2008), 227-238; Lauren Shohet, "YouTube, Use, and the Idea of the Archive", *Shakespeare Studies*, 38 (2010), 68-76; Ayanna Thompson, "Unmooring the Moor: Researching and Teaching on YouTube", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 61.3 (2010), 337-356, and the updated version of this essay in the same author's *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145-167; and Barbara Hogdon, "(You) Tube Travel: The 9:59 to Dover Beach, Stopping at Fair Verona and Elsinore", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 28.3 (2010), 313-330.

"To Tube or not to Tube, that is the question?", or so asks YouTube user Xelanderthomas in his upload, modifying that most instantly recognizable of Shakespearean lines to address and defend online expression and vlog (video blog) especially. "Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of asinine comments | Or to take arms against a sea of idiots | And, by posting, end them".<sup>1</sup> There is a long history to the expropriation of Hamlet's words. "Shakespeare sampled, Shakespeare quoted without quotation marks", as Marjorie Garber reminds us, "has become the lingua franca of modern cultural exchange".<sup>2</sup> But our exchange with Shakespeare is increasingly experienced in and through a fluid mediascape, a mediascape that includes YouTube, the most popular video-sharing platform on the web. Most students or teachers of Shakespeare will be familiar with the Shakespeare film or theatre production reappearing in clip form on YouTube. Accessing Shakespeare through such a platform might be construed as "Shakespeare-lite", with the plays condensed to short clips, quite literally minimized by the YouTube screen, or set alongside humorous, often-ridiculous content. "What would *Hamlet* look like if it were performed by cats?" Cue *Hamlet* performed by animated talking cat-heads. This is typical of the YouTube video: "easy to get, in both senses of the word: simple-to-understand – an idea reduced to an icon or gag – while also effortless to get to: one click! ... Understandable in a heartbeat, knowable without thinking, this is media already encrusted with social meaning or feeling".<sup>3</sup> This upload has over 2.9 million views, relatively small in comparison to the 1 billion view counts for pop stars like Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber, but a significant view count nonetheless.<sup>4</sup>

With such numbers alone, Shakespeare studies is entering a brave new world as it begins to explore the implications of YouTube.<sup>5</sup> That we can move from a YouTube user's re-working of *Hamlet* to cats to the latest stars of Pop's circuit is to get a sense of that new world, the potential matrix of connections that it enables, and the layers of meaning in play. A search under 'Shakespeare' produces 73,700 results or, in the lexicon of YouTube and its networked economy of video tags, the equivalent of 39,600 items tagged with the keyword 'Shakespeare'. "Dr Seuss vs Shakespeare: Epic Rap Battles of History #12" currently ranks the highest Shakespeare view count, with over 15 million views.<sup>6</sup> On YouTube, users access and interact with a living repository of Shakespeare material and, perhaps more interestingly, produce new forms of do-it-yourself Shakespeare. The platform is fast becoming one of the dominant media through which Shakespeare is iterated, produced and received in the twenty-first century. Thus far, however, scholarly forays into the world of YouTube Shakespeare have not paid sufficient attention to

questions of medium: what does it mean to access Shakespeare through an online video-sharing and participatory platform like YouTube? Furthermore, if YouTube is a space to “Broadcast Yourself”, to what extent are Shakespearean materials being creatively redacted and deployed by YouTubers and to what ends? And, through these processes, what might be happening to Shakespeare’s cultural authority?

In order to pursue these questions, I want to examine the sampling of *Hamlet* on YouTube and in particular the remediation of “To be or not to be” by analyzing a selection of uploads by YouTube users. My project might be regarded as a companion piece to work already undertaken by Alan R. Young on pop culture responses to Ophelia.<sup>7</sup> I have chosen to focus on *Hamlet* and its signature soliloquy because I am interested in exploring the extent to which the play’s well-documented iconic status and considerable cultural afterlife is recycled on YouTube. In numerical terms alone, the cultural reach of *Hamlet* seems assured: for instance, there are 6,500 videos tagged under ‘Shakespeare Hamlet’ compared to 1,500 for ‘King Lear’.<sup>8</sup> However, I am less concerned with quantitative evaluations than with how Hamlet’s questions might signify in uploads by YouTube users. In what follows, I want to explore to what extent the medium of the soliloquy, a medium that enables Hamlet’s ontology, offers a template for creative expression via YouTube.

### “To be or not to be remixed”: *Hamlet* and the Medium of YouTube

The numbers outlined above indicate the extent to which the individual viewer or interpreter is faced with a copia of Shakespeare content from which to make their selections. The unbounded nature of YouTube can be daunting. But there are already websites such as Luke McKernan’s Bardbox that seek to do the job of selection for us, archiving “the best examples” of Shakespeare online videos.<sup>9</sup> Further, dedicated YouTube channels offer a way of curating material and of constructing categories of Shakespeare content through playlists.<sup>10</sup> My principle of selection here is based on what I have noticed as an individual YouTube user and on the *Hamlet* content that I have found particularly interesting. There are, then, subjective value judgments in play. But it is also important to acknowledge that the specific features of the YouTube interface – including the Suggested videos feature, video tagging, and users comment – may have shaped my selection and implicitly determined the analytical categories in what follows. At stake here is the wider issue as to how YouTube works as a video-sharing technology and also the relationship between such media platforms and individual users. YouTube functions, like the internet more generally, as a networked information economy, where digital objects can be easily distributed and manipulated. Users tag content, which allows for fast indexing and, as an organization, YouTube relies heavily on user ratings. In “An Anthropology of YouTube”, Michael Wesch demonstrates how view counts for uploads can be manipulated by individual users. For Wesch, this is just one instance of a negotiation between the individual media or YouTube user and a seemingly externalized network. Wesch captures this relation in the phrase

<sup>6</sup> <[http://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=shakespeare&aq=f](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=shakespeare&aq=f)>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>7</sup> <<https://sites.google.com/site/opheliaandpopularculture/home>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>8</sup> <[http://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=hamlet&search=tag](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=hamlet&search=tag)> 7 November 2011.

<sup>9</sup> <<http://bardbox.wordpress.com/>>.

<sup>10</sup> See my YouTube channel <<http://www.youtube.com/user/Shakespeareonutube?feature=mhee>>.

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“the machine is us/ing us”. Media platforms like YouTube are, he convincingly suggests, about “mediating human relations”; we are all individuals but we are also now networked individuals.<sup>11</sup>

Wesch’s suggestion of a less dichotomous conceptualization of relations between users and mass media is supported by Henry Jenkins’s influential concept of convergence. Jenkins proposes convergence as a paradigm for understanding our use of and relation to media and as such it is important to any analysis of YouTube as a medium. It is also a formulation that might be useful to Shakespeare studies as we seek to explore the flow of Shakespearean texts across new media. According to Jenkins, we live in “convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways”.<sup>12</sup> In this paradigm, there is no Samson and Goliath battle between a disenfranchised media user or impassive spectator and established big-media players. For Jenkins, the media consumer is an active participant that seeks out new content, re-purposes ‘old’, and forges new connections with other media users. “Convergence occurs within the brains of individual users and through their social interactions with others”.<sup>13</sup> Crucially, then, convergence culture is also a “participatory culture”, signaling the connections between an increasingly accessible digital media, user-generated content and media industries.<sup>14</sup> It is less about a top-down or bottom up understanding of media than an attempt to frame the complex interactions between multiple media agents.

It is in this context that YouTube can be usefully described as a “convergence superconductor” (Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube*). On the platform, old or existing content in the form of television and film can be shared among users, be they individuals or commercial media players. Such content can be creatively redacted or combined with other media content, processes that simultaneously result in something recognizable as new but that also comments back on its originating media. Search on YouTube for “Hamlet” and you will experience convergence culture at first hand. There are uploads featuring clips from *Hamlet* films shared and favoured by YouTube users. Cue a ready-made archive of performances by Richard Burton, Laurence Olivier, Kenneth Branagh, Ethan Hawke, and David Tennant, just one of the ways in which YouTube can function as a pedagogical resource for Shakespeareans. But freeze frame the YouTube interface on the Hamlet search and, alongside these materials, the user encounters uploads such as a Klingon “To be or not to be” as a fan homage to *Star Trek VI*, a clip from the cult film *Whitnail and I*, with Richard E. Grant’s Hamlet monologue, and *Second Life or Mabinogi Hamlet*. This is a Shakespeare in mixed company. What emerges is a web of connections that might enable a user to apprehend the complex hermeneutic field that is *Hamlet* and its cultural afterlife. Yet rather than a productive dialogue between intertexts, we might be dealing with a case of saturation and the displacement of a grounding textual authority.

A comparison with films such as Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet* and *Hamlet* films by Michael Almereyda (2000) and Alexander Fodor (2006) is available here. Critics have

<sup>11</sup> Michael Wesch, “An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube”, <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-lZ4\\_hU&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-lZ4_hU&feature=player_embedded)>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> The phrase is from Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Digital Media and Society Series (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

noted how these films exhibit a consciousness of media forms and seem especially concerned with emphasizing that their own relation to a putative original is heavily filtered through a set of intertexts or the processes in culture through which a Shakespearean play is received and interpreted.<sup>15</sup> The use of ‘old’ technologies in Almereyda’s *Hamlet* has been amply discussed by critics;<sup>16</sup> and an excellent analysis of Fodor’s *Hamlet* has been provided by Maurizio Calbi.<sup>17</sup> These films provide one type of encounter with intertextuality and complicate any singular notion of a stable Shakespearean original. But with YouTube, a much more interactive and participant encounter with the intertexts that constitute ‘Shakespeare’, including the movies mentioned above, is available. As media theorist John Hartley argues, writing more generally of user-generated technologies, YouTube “allows everyone to perform their own Bardic function”.<sup>18</sup> Suggesting the possibilities of individual agency within the culture industry, the “Bardic function” as applied to Shakespeare can denote the appropriation of a cultural token that is perceived as powerful precisely because its high culture associations coalesce so readily with its increasingly popular culture manifestations. Through YouTube, a variety of roles variously associated with the cultural reception of Shakespeare – performer, producer, auteur, editor, translator – are available everyday. If recent *Hamlet* films position us as spectators of Shakespeare’s modern and postmodern manifestations, YouTube positions us as active users, free to navigate pathways through these multiple Shakespeares and even to create our own Shakespeare content. However, it is important to note here that such navigation and creation occurs through the medium-specific features of the YouTube interface and its protocols, such as content rating, favouriting, and commenting. Moreover, since content, however disparate, always appears “YouTube branded”, a supra-consciousness in the experience of the site is also at work.<sup>19</sup>

YouTube users exercise the “bardic function” in a number of ways that are indicative to established practices on the platform and among the YouTube community. For instance, Mrx2848 gives us “To be or not to be remixed”, which splices together or converges performances by Lawrence Olivier, Kenneth Branagh, Mel Gibson and Ethan Hawke from successive *Hamlet* films.<sup>20</sup> This is an instance of mash-up, a practice that is associated with the use of audio-editing software to splice and merge pop songs.<sup>21</sup> However, the term can be applied more generally to describe the mixing of materials from different media sources that is such a feature of content on YouTube. Mash-up culture is also evident in slittle’s “hamlet: bad romance”.<sup>22</sup> In this upload, the track of Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance” is combined with edits from the RSC/BBC *Hamlet* starring David Tennant. The upload can also be understood more specifically as an example of the YouTube phenomenon of the fan-video, where users take a pop song and converge it with their own content, or modify the ‘official’ video itself, which in the first instance may have been posted by the artist or record company.

Hamlet mashed-up, Hamlet remixed as a “Bad Romance” video: we might well ask what there is of interest or of value for Shakespeareans, beyond noticing how such material evidences how Shakespeare is, to recall Garber’s phrase, the

<sup>15</sup> See Peter Donaldson, “‘All Which It Inherit’: Shakespeare, Globes and Global Media”, *Shakespeare Survey*, 52 (1999), 183-200; Rowe and Cartelli, *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 55-68.

<sup>16</sup> See Mark Thornton Burnett, “‘To Hear and See the Matter’: Communicating Technology in Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet*”, *Cinema Journal*, 42.3 (2003), 48-69; and Katherine Rowe, “Remember me: Technologies of Memory in Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet*”, in *Shakespeare: The Movie II*, ed. by Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose (London: Routledge, 2003), 37-55.

<sup>17</sup> See Maurizio Calbi’s discussion of the film’s auto-reflections on the processes of recycling and adapting Shakespeare in his essay, “Shakespeare in the Extreme: Addiction, Ghosts and (Re) Mediation in Alexander Fodor’s *Hamlet*”, *Literature Film Quarterly*, 39.2 (2011), 85-98.

<sup>18</sup> John Hartley, “Uses of YouTube: Digital Literacy and the Growth of Knowledge”, in Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 133.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Lister et al., *New Media: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2009), 228.

<sup>20</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8Hdhrd-dPI>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>21</sup> See John Shiga, “Copy-and-Persist: the Logic of Mash-Up Culture”, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 24.2 (2007), 93-114. See also discussions of the practice in terms of its corporate uses at <<http://www.deitel.com/ResourceCenters/Web20/Mashups/MashupsArticles/tabid/980/Default.aspx>>, 7 November 2011.



<sup>22</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tlw6dCfk0Wo>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>23</sup> The field of Shakespeare studies has recently proved accommodating to what might be broadly described as popular culture forms and appropriations of the Bard. See Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Stephen Purcell, *Popular Shakespeare: Simulation and Subversion on the Modern Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> See Courtney Lehmann, *Shakespeare Remains: Theatre to Film, Early Modern to Postmodern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 89-129.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Kidnie, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2009), 1-2.

<sup>27</sup> <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7gvq2cGA7E&feature=mfu\\_in\\_order&list=UL](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7gvq2cGA7E&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL)>, 7 November 2011

“lingua franca of modern exchange” or a recurring, if ultimately empty, cultural signifier. However, I would argue that YouTube content is of value to the field of Shakespeare studies because it provides a point of connection between new media forms and Shakespeare, a connection that, for the so called Generation M, may well render Shakespearean texts more accessible and relevant.<sup>23</sup> This connection need not be reductive nor superficial. The world of mash-up and convergence culture can be used as a segue into complex questions regarding the spectral quality of the Shakespearean ‘original’ and the circulation of authority, questions that have been of significant interest within the field.<sup>24</sup> Derrida’s discussion of the “signature of the Thing ‘Shakespeare’” as that which renders adaptations, translations and interpretations “possible and intelligible without ever being reducible to them” comes to mind.<sup>25</sup> And, more recently, Margaret Kidnie has addressed the specter of the ‘original’ *Hamlet* that seems to ghost its cultural afterlife: she interestingly notes that in writing about productions or adaptations of the play, critics and reviewers often turn to a “discourse of survival”, as if the ‘thing itself’ survives the transforming capacities of a given performance or adaptation. “The idea that *Hamlet* ‘survives’ performance”, Kidnie remarks, “seems enabled by the unspoken belief that the play exists somewhere – or rather, somewhere *else* – apart from its (or perhaps just this) production”.<sup>26</sup> But within the logic of mash-up, a logic of media smash and grab, questions about a Shakespearean original and the implicit nostalgia for a lost aura that they carry, seem redundant. In “To be or Not to be” by Gr8bigtreehugger, CGI and artificial voice software – enabled by software programmes iclone and CrazyTalk – are combined to produce Hamlet as automaton.<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 1: gr8bigtreehugger, *To Be Or Not To Be*, YouTube upload.

The same user's "Shakespeare Superheroes" operates along similar lines.<sup>28</sup> This upload features a CGI of the Marvel comic book and movie figure The Incredible Hulk. The by-line declares how The Hulk "gives up the tawdry world of superheroes and returns to his roots on the stage" and the ironic hyperbole continues through to the title sequence, movie-style voice over indicating "Shakespeare superheroes", and the revelation of "Hulk Hamlet". With mash-up, we encounter Hamlet as media, as data to be shared, redacted, converged, a Hamletmachine if you will.<sup>29</sup>

There is playfulness to this content that, like the feline *Hamlet* mentioned earlier, reminds us that YouTube is largely an entertainment platform. Content, as Alexander Juhasz points out, can be less about the meaningful, more about the immediate, and immediate laughs.<sup>30</sup> But from the perspective of a Shakespearean looking at these uploads, I cannot help but locate meaning in the (knowing) reduction of some of the most famous words in literature to the automated, robotic soundings of a computer-generated talking head. The upload lends itself to interpretation as postmodern parody, using the culture of mash-up to comment on Hamlet's words as endlessly recycled and clichéd. But other *Hamlet* uploads seem to use mash-up culture in ways that suggest that those words can still have a resonance. JeffMaus's "Shakespeare's Hamlet – 'To be or not to be...'"<sup>31</sup> combines a series of images from film and TV with a voiceover, which is the audio of Kenneth Branagh's performance from his 1996 film. The images variously suggest drug addiction, alcohol dependency and psychic disturbance. Other non-diegetic elements include Lou Reed's "Heroin" and a quote from Kurt Vonnegut on smoking as a form of delayed self-annihilation, which are cited in the detailed version of the by-line accompanying the upload. The combination of these elements is indicative of mash-up culture and user-generated content on YouTube, where existing media content is cited in a process of creative redaction. The montage of filmic images visualize rather than compete with Hamlet's words and, in the process, suggest or even assert an interpretation of them. Further, I think the effect of the images, especially the opening shot of a man injecting himself and the close-up of a needle superimposed over other images of people drinking and in states of distress, is to imbue Branagh's somewhat dispassionate performance with pathos as the viewer is prompted to reflect on suffering and psychological torment.

*Hamlet* thus functions here as one of the intertexts – along with the remediated films and the Reed and

<sup>28</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCmcCtB1Wco>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Heiner Mueller, *Hamletmachine*, in Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, eds., *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2000.)

<sup>30</sup> Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube*.

<sup>31</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecqpCnJyhbc>>.

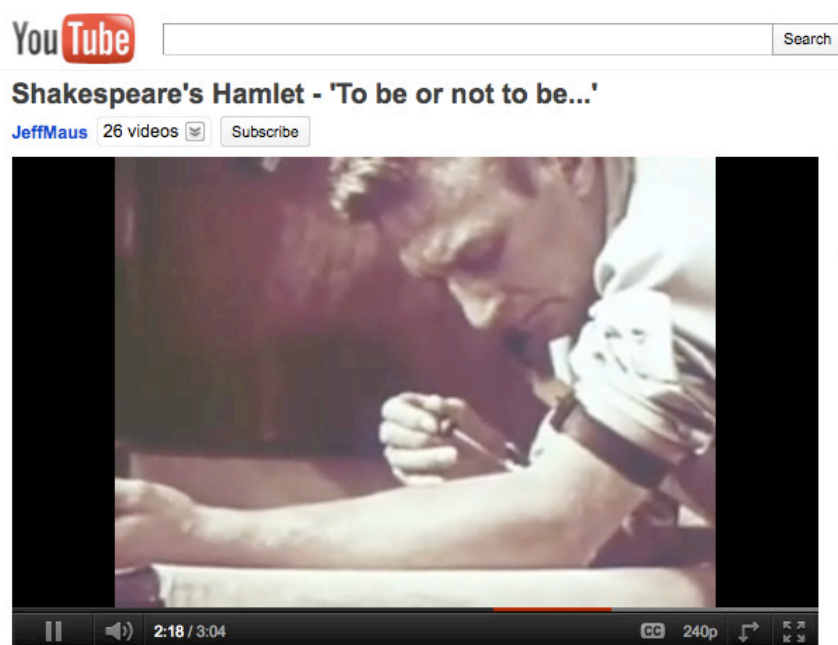


Fig. 2: JeffMaus, *Shakespeare's Hamlet – 'To be or not to be...'*, YouTube upload.

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Vonnegut quotes – that enable a reflection on the human death-drive. Viewer comments, which are a key feature of YouTube as an interactive platform and online community, afford us some insight into reactions to the upload:

A superb take on the famous soliloquy. It works perfectly; it has to be remembered just what was made when first written. Thanx for this...another view of genius. Surreal, spine-tingling and very well made. A masterpiece. X.

PennyTraition 3 years ago

My friend, the hurt seems like it will never go, life is tragically all the more beautiful & seemingly fragile for this. I've heard time is a great healer yet, so much of it is needed to heal a life of such ills. A moment of peace & quiet, we beg that may it last a little longer, sadly it doesn't. For too long I was heart sick broken & weary that I in anguish opened my soul to the universe & implored, pleaded "heal me" I was answered beyond the constraints of words. (Amsterdam, Ibogaine Oct 08) BlueEyedCelt 2 years ago

Thank you! I appreciate your sharing your vision with the world. I feel more enriched by having experienced your work. In the info you state this being somewhat out of context; I feel the context is taken to a whole, different level.

Five Stars and Favorite!

forloveoffilm 2 years ago

With these comments, it is apparent that YouTube material can be meaningful for some viewers or users. But equally, the comments reveal how we have moved from Hamlet's soliloquy and the ontology that it expresses into the realm of user posts, online identities, and a sense of YouTube as an online community. The Hamletmachine can also be about mediating relations between humans.

### Hamlet, Prince of Vloggers

<sup>32</sup> Rowe, "'Remember me': Technologies of Memory in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*", 46. See also Peter Donaldson, "Hamlet among the Pixelvisionaries: Video Art, Authenticity and 'Wisdom' in Almereyda's *Hamlet*", in Diana E. Henderson, ed., *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2006), 216-237.

<sup>33</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Thompson, 2006), 1.2.85.

<sup>34</sup> Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Ms.: MIT Press, 2000), 46.

JeffMaus's upload could be interpreted as the video diary Hamlet might have made, if such technology was available to him. In this way, the upload recalls some of the recent *Hamlet* films already mentioned, among them Almereyda's starring Ethan Hawke, where the personal video is, as Katherine Rowe notes, "the technology of interiority among a variety of modern media, including telephones, television, photography, film, and so on".<sup>32</sup> The technology available to Shakespeare was of course the soliloquy, the supreme device of the early modern stage that gave audiences access to a character's motivations or thoughts and that, in the process, gave the suggestion of a deeper self, of "that within".<sup>33</sup> What Almereyda does is to update or overlay this earlier, Shakespearean medium with the newer medium of video, just as Shakespeare might be regarded as having updated or re-configured the direct address of medieval pageant and morality plays. This is the process of remediation, where a new form of representation authenticates itself in relation to "earlier technologies of representation", or re-purposes those technologies and their cultural functions.<sup>34</sup> The vlog, an established practice on YouTube but with antecedents in the 1990s such as the video diaries of Sadie Benning, might be regarded as a remediation of the soliloquy, silently harnessing the properties of

the dramatic monologue for online performance.<sup>35</sup> Enabling various forms of self-expression, self-referentiality, and performance, the vlog captures much of what YouTube is about as “a platform for nonprofessional, democratic media making”.<sup>36</sup> Typically, the video creator speaks directly into a web-cam or hand-held camera, a device that can be seen as empowering: as Michael Wesch argues, “anyone with a webcam now has a stronger voice and presence”.<sup>37</sup> Users might also perform to a pop song and, as in the cases of “Numa Numa” or Beyonce’s “All the Single Ladies”, such performances can end up being emulated across the YouTube community.<sup>38</sup>

*Hamlet* and more specifically the form of soliloquy might be functioning in the same way as these pop songs, providing a language or template for users to fill or deploy for their own purposes. “Hamlet the video blogger” is an upload from YouTube user livingpassion. The vlog opens with titles that address the YouTube community: “*Hamlet – The Video Blogger. I’m sorry guys, I HAD to go nerdy for a minute*”. And viewers respond in the language of vlogging: “What a piece of work is vlogging, how uploaded and how true? To comment, or not to comment, that is the question. To vlog, to post, perchance to be featured; there’s the rub! Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished... Great job! (Kenrg 4 years ago)”.<sup>39</sup> In Xelanderthomas’s upload “To Tube or not to tube”, with which I began, the metaphysical and ontological dilemmas of Hamlet’s soliloquy are recast in the service of vlogging.

The video is described by its creator as “a hopefully witty and humorous nod of support and encouragement to the courage it sometimes takes for some to upload a video” and as a defence of a “barely surviving right we have ... free speech”.<sup>40</sup> In the video itself, Xelanderthomas does not deliver the monologue direct to camera but rather adopts a sideways pose that is reminiscent of Rodin’s *The Thinker*, perhaps an appropriate gesture in the context of the video’s concerns.

For other users, YouTube is a platform to engage their own performance of *Hamlet* and Shakespeare more generally and can thus be seen as the latest phase of an established history of performances of Shakespeare’s plays by people that are not theatrical professionals but have nonetheless “committed themselves to incorporating these plays into their own lives and those of their own immediate societies”.<sup>41</sup> Non-professional Shakespeare performance can take different forms on YouTube, such as the “classroom-inspired

<sup>35</sup> On the vlog as a specific example of “vernacular creativity”, see Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 25-26; on Sadie Benning, see Donaldson, “Hamlet among the Pixelvisionaries”, 219-221.

<sup>36</sup> Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube*.

<sup>37</sup> Wesch, “An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube”.

<sup>38</sup> See Douglas Wolk, “The Complete and Utter History of Numa Numa”, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRUy0It0wJ4>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>39</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVYR5ktkXA8>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>40</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzHjIj3fpR8>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.



Fig. 3: Xelanderthomas, *Hamlet Prince of YouTube*, YouTube upload.



<sup>42</sup> Thompson, *Passing Strange*, 167.

<sup>43</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYXFFhP7aq8>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>44</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oa-cfEncd6Y>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>45</sup> See Adam Hansen, *Shakespeare and Popular Music* (London: Continuum, 2010), 66-74.

<sup>46</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjMKBCyf2pQ>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>47</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDJK-4N0aFE>>, 7 November 2011.

performance video”, which Ayanna Thompson discusses as “a genre in and of itself”.<sup>42</sup> For others again, there are less defined or institutionalised motivations but they do seem to combine the user’s interest in Shakespeare with a desire to display or publicize the performance as a means of self-publication and presentation. “This is something I was compelled to do”, explains YouTube user Navajo Poet Rutherford Ashley in the by-line to his performance of “To be”. “It is a creepy monologue, but I find the drama of it a real challenge”.<sup>43</sup> In “Hamlet on the Street”, Craig Bazan’s performs the Hecuba speech against some derelict buildings in Camden, New Jersey.<sup>44</sup> Alongside these instances of what might be described as naturalistic presentations, there are uploads that consciously draw on other forms of expression, such as rap and Hip-hop, both well established practices in remediating Shakespeare, to perform the soliloquy.<sup>45</sup> In “‘To be or Not to be’ Hamlet Rap”, the text of the soliloquy is retained and the style of rap converges with Shakespearean verse.<sup>46</sup> But in “Robbie Hamlet rap”, by dmcm720, the soliloquy is performed solely through the idiom of hip-hop and translated: “Is it better to be alive or dead? ‘To be or not to be’ is how it was said”.<sup>47</sup>

A consciousness of the Shakespeare form of soliloquy is present even as it is overwritten by the comparatively new medium of the rap. And, in the process, the user loses nothing of the dilemma that is expressed in that soliloquy: “What choice do I have but to keep going on | I’ll do nothing about it and keep being the pawn”.

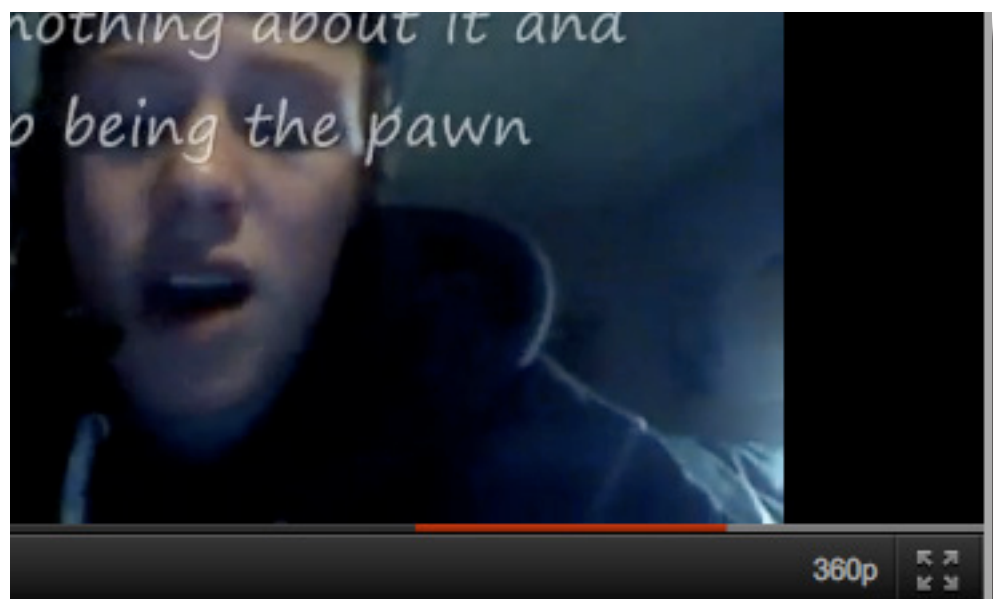


Fig. 4: dmcm720, *Robbie Hamlet rap*, YouTube upload.

For the creator of these video performances, it as if they are operating within a private space, yet it is an extraordinarily public one. For the viewer, looking at the vlog on a small-screen within the YouTube interface, the effect can be one of immediacy and liveness: it is as if the person within the screen has opened a window on to their life or allowed us to eavesdrop on their performance. But as the

reference to the YouTube interface reminds us, the vlog is shared and experienced through a medium, with its specific features and busy, disparate, commercial and non-commercial content; it is a mediated event even though it appears to suggest immediacy. What is occurring here might be usefully framed in terms of what Philip Auslander describes more generally as a blurring of distinctions between the live and the mediatized, which he regards as a feature of contemporary cultural production.<sup>48</sup> YouTube vloggers have been especially adept at negotiating and blurring such boundaries as well as those between public and private selves, the authentic and inauthentic. The case of LonelyGirl15, whose emotive vlogs turned out to be a project by two independent film makers, is an extreme example of this.<sup>49</sup>

Watching *Hamlet* uploads, I think we also encounter a blurring of categories, and our notions of the amateur and professional actor begin to shift. For some users, such as Shaktim, the self-styled “Hamlet of YouTube”, YouTube is a platform to display and archive their skills as an actor.<sup>50</sup> Shaktim or actor Tim Maloney has uploaded 365 takes of “To be”, conveying what he describes elsewhere as the “agonies and the ecstasies of playing the Bard”. In “Hamlet 285 – The Only Living Boy”, a reference to the Simon and Garfunkel track used in the upload, we are given insight into how an actor prepares for a role. But the performance itself is preceded by a disclosure of the processes of filming as, web cam on, our actor tries to find his frame. The sense of an authentic, immersive performance is thus unsettled. YouTube is also a platform of mixed content and, as we have already seen, it is also used by non-professional actors or by users who, like Rutherford, want to meet the challenge of iterating the soliloquy. But performances within the vlog culture of YouTube can also be playful and ironic: where Hamlet’s dilemma has him speak of a “pause” (III.1.67), in uploads such as “One Minute To be or not to be” by Dionfly<sup>51</sup> or DaveMcDevitt’s “Fast Hamlet”,<sup>52</sup> YouTube users speed up the thought process to the point of parody. We are in the company of a Reduced Shakespeare. Irony and playfulness are also at work in “Hamlets vlog” by vasilnitere, where “To be” is delivered direct to camera in what the user admits was a state of inebriation.<sup>53</sup> This is “one of my spurts of random creativity”, the user states in the description but I think the upload works as a parody of Received Pronunciation and the Standard English associated with an older style of Shakespeare performance.

These latter examples are a reminder that YouTube is primarily an entertainment platform and leisure activity. But this need not suggest that such performances are insignificant: they may well carry, however unconsciously, a politics. In relation to the home-dance video, for instance, Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seier argue that posting performances on YouTube is not only a strategy of self-expression but also one of “self-distanciation beyond the exhaustive, hierarchical procedures of traditional media institutions”.<sup>54</sup> And, perhaps something similar is at work when YouTube users turn to *Hamlet* and remediate the soliloquy. It is as if there is some symbolic affinity between Hamlet’s anxious desire to determine an identity for himself and the invitation of the YouTube platform: “Broadcast Yourself”. The key point here is about the possibilities of the Bardic function or, more precisely,

<sup>48</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 7.

<sup>49</sup> See Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, 27-30.

<sup>50</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/user/shaktim>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>51</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cetJxqiR11w>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>52</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEPVEZ2m6Ok>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>53</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OB4VGDtnytU>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Kathrin Peter and Andrea Seier, “Home Dance: Mediacy and Aesthetics of the Self on YouTube”, in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, eds., *The YouTube Reader* (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 201.

<sup>55</sup> See Kylie Jarrett, “Beyond Broadcast Yourself™: The Future of YouTube”, *Media International Australia*, 126 (2008), 132-144; and Meeyoung Cha et al, “I Tube, You Tube, Everybody Tubes: Analysing the World’s Largest User Generated Content Video System”, *Proceedings of the 7th ACM SIGCOMM Conference on Internet Measurement* (2007), 1-14.

<sup>56</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity and Identity on the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2001), 11.

<sup>57</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>58</sup> Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography, 1974-1989* (New York: Aperture, 1990), 2.

<sup>59</sup> The phrase is Thomas Healy’s. See “Past and Present Shakespeares”, in John J. Joughin, ed., *Shakespeare and National Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 214.

<sup>60</sup> Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22.

<sup>61</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations”, in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 174.

<sup>62</sup> Lehmann, *Shakespeare Remains*, 1-24.

the kinds of agency afforded to the individual media user by convergence culture. That call captures the extent to which YouTube is a participatory platform. Yet as commentators have recognized, the strap line and trademark simultaneously signify the site’s connections to corporate mass media.<sup>55</sup> With the purchase of YouTube by Google in 2006, the coincidence of the “two You Tubes” or the commercial imperatives of the site with those of the community, has become more pronounced, not least in the way that advertisement pop-ups and banners are now a notable feature of the browsing and viewing experience. Viewed in such terms, YouTube becomes another example of the ways in which our (online) lives bear traces of mass media, the marks of the corporate in the form of adverts and sponsored features, the sense that our social identities and even modes of expression are conditioned by media images. There is a form of agency, one determined by the coordinates of the internet and the digital, which, as Lisa Nakamura argues, “puts pressure on the formerly solid and anchoring notion of identity” to create “images of identity and after-images”.<sup>56</sup> Such cyber-effects could be seen as an accentuation of what some critics have interpreted as the fate of creative production within the seemingly depthless culture of postmodernity.<sup>57</sup> In this culture, creativity is forced to reconcile itself to “the world as an endless hall of mirrors, as a place where images constitute what we *are* ... and where images constitute all of what we *know*”.<sup>58</sup> Thus, while enabling a “participatory culture”, allowing everyone to perform the “Bardic function”, YouTube can also denote at best a limited agency, at worst an imagined agency within mass media consumer culture. We might say that this tension is crystallized in Hamlet’s “To be”, which at once constitutes *the* words or speech to perform, yet also the words that can potentially signify anything and everything, such is their reduction to cliché or to postmodern parody.

That character and play can be said to express such a contemporary, postmodern understanding of the relation between individual identities and their cultural expressions or that the play’s ubiquity and endless repeatability has rendered it a “fetishised cipher”, an empty signifier, will be a scenario familiar to Shakespeareans.<sup>59</sup> The character has always suggested a futurity, “proleptically in tune with the latest present”, and it is *we* who make him so.<sup>60</sup> The multiplicity of Hamlets on YouTube, the extent to which one upload leads to another and another, combined with the multiplicity of uses and forms that *Hamlet* takes on the platform, potentially points towards the realm of the simulacra and a dispersal of a Shakespearean aura. Thus those YouTube users that seek to expropriate the Shakespeare referent might be seen as engaging in a nostalgia for a lost aura – “when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” – and a nostalgia for a point of ‘origin’ or the ‘authentic’ Shakespeare.<sup>61</sup> And yet, Shakespeare, a set of texts and intertexts, “remains” in popular culture.<sup>62</sup> On YouTube too, Hamlet never dies. The examples I have discussed suggest that Hamlet is used in multiple and meaningful ways: a technology of narrative; as matter for online creative production and entertainment; as a ready-made template onto which a user might fashion an identity; and as a small window on the YouTube interface and within the hypermedia spaces of contemporary culture.

I would argue that it is precisely this multiplicity of content, form and function that makes YouTube *Hamlet* valuable, especially when this material is approached and understood in terms of the logic of convergence culture, a logic that holds that every text or digital object within a media landscape is up for grabs. The value of convergence culture for Shakespeare studies is less about extending to Shakespeare a cool cache or injecting it with the capital of cultural currency, though this might be a natural consequence. Rather, the value resides in the capacity of convergence to realise a fluid, unpredictable, and unbounded mediascape where the “Bardic function” can be exercised. This can result in a bite-size Shakespeare or the parodic and comically absurd, as in the plot of *Hamlet* re-imagined as an episode of the American serial comedy *Scrubs* or as the formulaic crime show *CSI* (“CSI members try to figure out how Ophelia really died!”).<sup>63</sup> But as with vlog-style performance of “To be”, these creative mash-ups of Shakespeare and TV shows by YouTube users constitute an appropriately post-modern disruption of grand narratives, a freeing-up of the text from its master author and from associations with high culture, associations that potentially foster exclusion or fear. The creative, vernacular productions on YouTube are thus indices of the mutable hermeneutic field that is *Hamlet* and its cultural afterlife. They also evidence a popular and not simply pop culture Shakespeare and, as such, serve as reminders that Shakespeare’s plays are themselves forms of entertainment. YouTube Shakespeare should be harnessed as one of the ways to ensure the continuing circulation and relevance of Shakespearean texts and perhaps in the interests of a less institutionalised and valorised Shakespeare too.

More specifically, the YouTube uploads such as those that I have discussed can serve the interests of Shakespeare pedagogy, especially for those learners more at home with the hypermediacy of the internet and the digital than the printed text.<sup>64</sup> Through the disparate *Hamlet* content on the platform, there are real opportunities to, for instance, compare and contrast performances across different time and media. As an ever expanding archive, YouTube means access to a range of worldwide films and other productions that otherwise might not come to our attention. There is, for example, the *Hamlet* short “To Fight or not to fight” from Poland or the Derry Film Initiative *Hamlet* in Irish (with English subtitles).<sup>65</sup> YouTube is also a good space for engaging students in current iterations of Shakespeare by looking at the practices and vocabulary of online life such as the vlog or the mash-up. These practices present opportunities to examine questions of genre, forms of address and linguistic register, and modes of representation that, through comparison and contrast, might further illuminate these aspects in the Shakespearean text. In this regard, I think YouTube Shakespeare will shortly displace the Shakespeare movie as a teaching resource, not least because the former enables a much more immersive experience in Shakespearean intertexts than the latter.<sup>66</sup>

The question I opened with – “To tube or not to tube” – has taken us beyond the specifics of one YouTube user’s expropriation of *Hamlet*’s words and into the intangible co-ordinates of Shakespeare’s cultural meaning, significance and currency in relation to a new, exciting medium. In tracing some instances of the remediation

<sup>63</sup> <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVIrhPi\\_QhU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVIrhPi_QhU)>, 7 November 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RiUpFnKWDpg&feature=related>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>64</sup> For an endorsement of YouTube as a teaching tool, see Christy Desmet, “Teaching Shakespeare with YouTube”, *English Journal*, 99. 1 (2009), 65-70; and also Thompson, *Passing Strange*, 165-167.

<sup>65</sup> “Hamlet – To fight or not to fight”, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sN6NVLWQI>>, 7 November 2011. The Derry Film Initiative Irish language production <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIe7VTLojI8>>, 7 November 2011.

<sup>66</sup> On the use of the film clip in Shakespeare pedagogy, see Laurie E. Osborne, “Clip Art: Theorizing the Shakespeare Film Clip”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 53. 2 (2002), 227-240. And, on the move from “Shakespeare on film” to “Shakespeare on screens”, see the essay by the same author, “iShakespeare: Digital Art/Games, Intermediality, and the Future of Shakespearean Film”, *Shakespeare Studies*, 38 (2010), 48-57.



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<sup>67</sup> Sonia Massai, ed., *World-Wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance* (London: Routledge, 2005), 6.

<sup>68</sup> Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 39.

of *Hamlet* on YouTube, this article has sought to consider the forms, potential uses and also implications of Shakespeare content on YouTube more generally. Sonia Massai has commented on the “Shakespearean field”, which she notes “determines what it is possible to say about or do with Shakespeare at any particular moment in time”.<sup>67</sup> My purpose here has been, in part, to bring productions of Shakespeare on YouTube to the attention of the field but also to address the cultural politics of these interventions. YouTube suggests that individuals do indeed have something to *say about* and *do with* Shakespeare, perhaps by building on what has been described as the plays own “fundamental commitment to expression”.<sup>68</sup> Thus, YouTube Shakespeare suggests a new, legitimate and meaningful form of Shakespearean, cultural and media activity.

## Shakespeare's Rome: A Space of Interrogation

Maria Del Sapio Garbero, ed., *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 231 + xi pp.

Maria Del Sapio Garbero, Nancy Isenberg and Maddalena Pennacchia, eds., *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome* (Goettingen: V&R Unipress, 2010), 388 pp.

### 1. A Space of Interrogation

The representation of Rome in Shakespeare's plays is always associated with a profound interrogation of Renaissance spatial and temporal boundaries: it appears as a space in which past and present coalesce to cast new light on early modern English culture and politics, divided between the search of its own cultural identity and the influence of the classic heritage. The diachronic and synchronic study of the ways Rome and England intersect in Shakespeare's production is the object of two collections of essays recently published as *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome* (2009) and *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome* (2010). The two volumes present a variety of essays showing, from different viewpoints and critical perspectives, the way Shakespeare looked at Latin culture and was inspired by ancient Roman historical characters and settings to pose questions about crucial issues of his own time.

The four key-concepts developed by the papers are suggested in the titles: "Identity", "Otherness", "Empire" and "Body". *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome* is divided into two sections, respectively "What is it to be a Roman?" and "The Theatre of the Empire", focusing on the construction of both single and cultural Roman/English identity. *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome* proposes the division into "Human Bodies" and "Earthly and Heavenly Bodies", exploring the way the body is (re)located in the early modern map of knowledge, with reference to the human but also to animal and vegetal life.

Maria Del Sapio Garbero's introductions to the collections – "Performing 'Rome' from the Periphery" and "Shakespeare's Rome and Renaissance 'Antropographic'" – constitute the indispensable threshold to enter the Roman textual world: she suggests that Rome in Shakespeare's plays mirrors the Renaissance complex historical milieu, in which the cultural episteme was being shaken by the intersection between the humanist heritage and the birth of a new scientific thought and where the world geographical pattern had been changed by new discoveries. In this review-essay, I would like to examine some of the questions discussed transversally in the volumes, while also offering a parallel (necessarily partial) analysis of the plays.

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## 2. “What is it to be a Roman?”

The starting point to analyse Shakespeare’s Roman plays may be the definition of Roman identity, which is the object or instance of Manfred Pfister’s discussion of *Coriolanus*. The play better epitomises *and* questions Romanness and its masculine values, based on “austerity and heroic self-discipline, civic pride, and public service”,<sup>1</sup> characteristics which, though projecting a cohesive and strong identity, can hide contradictions and weakness.

Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* is no longer Plutarch or Livy’s legendary general, but a man split between the adherence to those values and the impossibility to fully interpret them. His mother Volumnia is, in this respect, a pivotal character: though a maternal figure, she lacks any feminine traits, in order to better drive her son to incorporate the Roman masculine qualities. This generates a complex mother/son relationship, which may be further understood through Janet Adelman’s reading of *Coriolanus* in the light of the myth of Romulus and Remus. According to Adelman’s analysis in “Shakespeare’s Romulus and Remus: Who Does the Wolf Love?” (*IOE*, 19-34), as the foundational myth of the twins nursed by a she-wolf implies, Roman masculine identity emerges from a scenario where the feminine/maternal element is purged and replaced by the ferociousness of a she-wolf. In *Coriolanus*, Adelman identifies Volumnia with the she-wolf, who induces the protagonist to fully adhere to a hyper-masculine Roman model, whose destructive potential (in the myth represented by the fratricide) is dramatised “first against the outsider-twin Aufidius and then against his ‘sworn brother the people’ in Rome (2.3.88)” (*IOE*, 29).<sup>2</sup>

If *Coriolanus* presents some contradictions of the male Roman identity, Volumnia, the feminine archetype when associated to the she-wolf, also provides a model of womanhood present in the Roman patriarchal system. She is probably the only woman entrusted with the task of saving the country and her political success is evident in a cue pronounced by a senator: “Behold our patroness, the life of Rome” (5.5.1). The full meaning of the epithet “patroness” is investigated by Antonella Piazza, who in “Volumnia, the Roman Patroness” (*QB*, 121-134) suggests how Volumnia’s unexpected power is basically due to her age and consequently to desexualisation. Volumnia, though a woman, appears as a masculine figure, because, as the saviour and re-founder of the city, she has to embody the masculine qualities that also associate her with the legendary she-wolf. Politically, the figure of the patroness, then, may also be seen as a synthesis between Elizabeth and James I, or as Piazza, highlights, as a “suggestion to the contemporary James to look back to ‘prudent’ Elizabeth I for advice” (*QB*, 134). Beside, by questioning the Republic, Shakespeare seemed to respond to the political anxieties of his time, such as the insurgence of republican ideas, that Shakespeare projected ahead, prophetically forerunning the events that would lead to the civil war and to Charles I’s execution.

The political dimension of the play is further discussed by Maurizio Calbi, who, in “States of Exception: Auto-immunity and the Body Politic in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*”, conceives Rome as a body and reads the main hero’s banishment from

<sup>1</sup> Manfred Pfister, “Acting the Roman: *Coriolanus*”, in *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare’s Rome*, 36.

Hereafter this volume will be indicated as *IOE*. Pfister is also the author of “Rome and Her Rats: *Coriolanus* and the Early Modern Crisis of Distinction between Man, Beast and Monster”, in *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare’s Rome*, 239-258. Hereafter the latter volume will be indicated as *QB*.

<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, as Drew Daniel argues, Romanness implies suicide in order to assert the nobility of the masculine construction that, in *Hamlet*, is nevertheless contested by the protagonist. (“‘I am more antique Roman than a Dane’: Suicide, Masculinity and National Identity in *Hamlet*”, *IOE*, 75-90).

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a Derridean perspective, as an act of auto-immunisation on the part of Rome's organism, which expels what was meant to protect it (*QB*, 77-94). Coriolanus's banishment cannot be sacrificial and is doomed to forerun the tragic return of the hero, potentially destructive for the community. In Calbi's view, the Republic portrayed in the play is very similar to a state of exception as theorised by Agamben, in which paradoxically life is regulated by a suspension of the law, a condition that cannot guarantee safety even after the removal of the dangerous element.

While Calbi reads Rome as an organism, a body expelling illness in *Coriolanus*, Michele Marrapodi and Claudia Corti analyse the question of the body in relation to the play differently. In "*Mens sana in corpore sano: The Rhetoric of the Body in Shakespeare's Roman and Late Plays*", Marrapodi focuses on the metaphor the physical body of Coriolanus represents within and for the State (*QB*, 197-218); in "*The Iconic Body: Coriolanus and Renaissance Corporeality*" (*QB*, 57-76), Corti discusses what she defines the "physicalization of the playtext", offering a complex view of the overall way in which the body is presented on stage, as an icon, as a token and as a simulacrum, also referring to early modern politics and the way the body metaphor was functional to political discourses.

### 3. Hosting History

*Coriolanus*, as we have seen, proves a complex play posing questions about identity and politics. According to Adelman some of the problems haunting *Coriolanus* are solved in *Cymbeline*, revealingly composed in the same period. *Cymbeline* is chronologically the last Roman play, a complex romance that combines different settings and temporalities, providing a very intricate historical background mixed with a Baroque atmosphere. In "*Other from the Body: Sartorial Metatheatre in Shakespeare's Cymbeline*" (*IOE*, 61-74), Paola Colaiacomo analyses the complexity of *Cymbeline* in relation to the seeming/being dichotomy as symbolised by garment. In the play disguise, confusion about characters and other devices do not offer the usual Shakespearean insights, as its main aim is to smooth some tragic events evoked in the previous Roman plays. Thus, as Adelman points out, the haunting of the she-wolf as well as the fratricide is reworked in the story of Cymbeline's sons, lost in the wilderness but fed by a man, so to retain their heroic masculinity but free from the infection of the savage feminine (*IOE*, 33). The expurgation of the maternal element is also enacted in relation to Posthumus's birth, 'ript' from his mother's womb, an event that was interpreted as a sign of fortune in classical and early modernity. This aspect is analysed by Iolanda Plescia, who in "*From me was Posthumus ript: Cymbeline and the Extraordinary Birth*" (*QB*, 135-148) investigates the Caesarian section and its cultural implication in Renaissance culture from a scientific viewpoint.

Thus, as Adelman suggests, *Cymbeline* proposes a mitigated version of the foundational myths of Rome, which had proved problematic in the other plays, in order to produce the logic of a *translatio imperii*, "a sanitized and appropriately Britishized version of Rome's founding twins, an altogether suitable basis for the



relocation of Rome to England” (*IOE*, 34). Even the rape of Lucrece is reworked through the subplot of Imogen and Iachimo, which does not end with the woman’s sacrificial death. What is striking here is that Shakespeare alternates the strategy of expelling the Other (see *Coriolanus*) with the opposite mechanism of appropriation. Politically, Marrapodi explains, Shakespeare’s aim is to exorcise “domestic anxieties of political disgregation and [present] a patriotic ideal of national sovereignty”, enacting an “ideological appropriation” of Italian history (*QB*, 198; 205), a manipulation which Del Sapio reads in the light of Derrida’s concept of hospitality and from a more textual perspective (*IOE*, 101).

The ambivalence of the Derridean host, who is simultaneously questioned and legitimated by the arrival of a stranger asking for hospitality, reverberates in Shakespeare’s discursive strategy that retains the Other, objectifying it, hosting it like a guest or hostage; in “Fostering the Question ‘Who Plays the Host?’” (*IOE*, 91-106), Del Sapio argues that the Other is ‘textualised’ “according to the double movement of *identification* and *distancing* entailed in his re-reading of Rome” (*IOE*, 98. My emphasis). This is particularly evident with female characters such as Cleopatra and Tamora, whose Otherness is doubled by their being women and strangers, but Del Sapio also highlights the presence of another guest/ghost that is probably more haunting than haunted, i.e. the legacy of the past heritage represented by the figure of Caesar. This aspect is discussed also by Maddalena Pennacchia in “Antony’s Ring: Remediating Ancient Rhetoric on the Elizabethan Stage” (*IOE*, 49-60), who shows how *Julius Caesar* stages a remediation of the classical tradition, through the controversial characters of Caesar himself and through Antony’s ‘modernised’ rhetoric. But the figure of Caesar in the play for most of the action is represented by his corpse, a fact that shows the body differently from how it appeared in the plays analysed so far, triggering further questions on the position of the body in the Renaissance and its role in Shakespeare’s discursive strategies.

#### 4. The *Body Politic*

Caesar’s corpse assumes a paradigmatic dimension in the very complex net of cultural intersections giving shape to the Renaissance body question.<sup>3</sup> Many essays, in both collections, deal with *Julius Caesar*, mainly discussing the Brutus/Antony’s contest; notably, these two characters have different rhetorical approaches in explaining to the people the reasons for Caesar’s murder. In “Body and History in the Political Rhetoric of *Julius Caesar*” (*QB*, 219-236), Alessandro Serpieri argues that both rhetoric and the way the corpse is shown to the audience are the most relevant factors in determining Antony’s victory: “scenic space and persuasive rhetoric are the very element on which Shakespeare bases his most political and public play” (*QB*, 221). Indeed, according to Serpieri, making Caesar a spectacle allows Antony to win over Brutus’s classical rhetoric: while Brutus calls on his honour and respectability to persuade people of the rightness of his actions, Antony enacts a different strategy based on a ‘proof’ (the body) that in his words

<sup>3</sup> The essays presented in *QB* focus on the way the body is internally examined and externally repositioned in the world through Shakespeare’s Roman *corpus*. The essays in the section entitled “Earthly and Heavenly Bodies”, which I cannot discuss here, treat the chain of being as an unstable structure under the influence of Renaissance medicine, cosmography, and science in general. See the essays by Andrea Bellelli, Giovanni Antonini and Gloria Grazia Rosa, Maddalena Pennacchia, Nancy Isenberg, John Gillies, Gilberto Sacerdoti (who is also the author of “*Antony and Cleopatra* and the Overflowing of the Roman Measure”, *IOE*, 107-118).

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does not need any other rhetorical device – a fact that is obviously denied by his very sophisticated rhetoric, by his physical use of the space at his disposal and by his involving people, “actors in *his* scene” (QB, 231).

In this respect, in “Performing Anatomy in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*” (QB, 95-108), Ute Berns states that “the two speeches actually invoke different epistemological models.... The success or failure of [the] speech depends on this link between authority and truth” (QB, 98-9). Whereas Serpieri analyses rhetorical devices in detail, Berns reads the play in a more materialistic view, considering the contest as an expression of the cultural/scientific changes occurring at the time. The ‘authority’ represented by Brutus and the ‘truth’ represented by Antony, in fact, evoke “a specific historical development in the practice of anatomy”, with reference to the different methods in dissecting the bodies used by Mundinus and Andreas Vesalius, respectively recalling Brutus and Antony’s strategies. Mundinus used to lecture *ex cathedra* a dissection that was practically made by surgeons and ostensors, and, as Berns states, “the presence of the corpse, during his performance, was not of crucial importance” (QB, 101). How not to think of Brutus, speaking from the rostrum, distant from the audience and from the body? Vesalius, on the contrary, personally dissected the corpse, involving the audience, not lecturing but *showing*, so recalling Antony ascending the rostrum, speaking next to the body, inviting people to form a ring around them and finally unveiling the ‘fact’. Thus, the contest condenses more than one meaning and reflects the complex stratified culture of Renaissance England.

In “Antony’s Ring” Maddalena Pennacchia gives a political interpretation of the contest, by reading the difference between Antony’s and Brutus’s strategies in terms of levels of awareness in the use of verbal and body languages. She reads the passage from the Republic to the Empire, after Caesar’s death, in terms of a shift in the practice of communication, necessary to address a larger audience: “In the play, admiration and reverence for the classical modes of public communication appear problematically mixed with the need to celebrate new communicative models elaborated by Elizabethan culture” (IOE, 50-51).

In presenting “new models” through Antony’s performance, Shakespeare assumes a controversial position. Indeed, in my opinion, the effect of the contest goes beyond the celebration of these models, almost appearing as a warning against the power of words. What seems to me very striking in relation to *Julius Caesar* is that indirectly Shakespeare dramatises how science too is a ‘discursive’ practice in continuity with humanities, as Del Sapio states in “Anatomy, Knowledge, and Conspiracy: in Shakespeare’s Arena with the Words of Cassius” (QB, 33-56): “the anatomist is both a physician and a philosopher” (QB, 37). Claiming that there can be a ‘fact’ opposing any discursive interpretation is a danger Shakespeare’s play warns against. Through Antony’s Baroque rhetoric, Shakespeare demonstrates that the vision of truth/reality is in any case constructed, entangled in a complex intersection of textual strategies. Vesalius/Antony’s rhetoric is based on a sensorial perception that the Bard reveals to be deeply affected by verbal and body languages. Words can contaminate perception like poison in one’s ear.

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## 5. The Female Body

The centrality of the body on Shakespeare's stage *in presentia* or *absentia* so far analysed has yet left out the fundamental question of how women's body is represented and the precise function it has in the Shakespearean cultural system. Two typologies emerge: the virginal, innocent woman (Lucrece, Lavinia, Imogen) as opposed to the savage, sexually uncontrollable woman (Cleopatra, Tamora, the wicked queen of *Cymbeline*).

In *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome*, the question of the female body is examined in particular by Barbara Antonucci in "Blood in Language: the Galenic Paradigm of Humours in *The Rape of Lucrece*" (QB, 149-160) and Gilberta Golinelli in "Floating Borders: (Dis)-locating Otherness in the Female Body, and the Question of Miscegenation in *Titus Andronicus*" (QB, 275-286), who discuss both typologies in relation to *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) and *Titus Andronicus* (1594).<sup>4</sup> What emerges is that the body of women in the Roman plays is often associated with contamination, intended as infection or miscegenation, as happens with the protagonist of the poem; for Antonucci: "After the rape, Lucrece instantly feels infected and poisoned" (QB, 153), a condition that cannot be healed but through suicide. The idea of contamination returns in relation to Lavinia, Titus's daughter, who has also been raped and mutilated and *has* to die because 'contaminated' by the violence she has been inflicted: her death is conceived as a relief, an act that restores her dignity.

In the case of Lavinia, a Roman young woman, however, contamination assumes a strong ethnical and cultural connotation since the rapists are two Goths, Chiron and Demetrius. This point is developed in detail by Golinelli, who focuses on how *Titus* expresses the fear of being invaded by an Other that is sexually and racially connoted. In fact, the play is set in late imperial Rome, confining North with the Goths and South with the Moors. The mixing of these populations, on the one hand, appears inevitable and, on the other, triggers a series of bloody events, which inscribes the play into a Senechian genealogy. Particularly significant for Golinelli is the birth of a black-moor child (QB, 282), who renders the confines of the Empire unstable, producing (and revealing) the anxiety for the female body dominance. The source of instability is indeed Tamora's body: "in the play borders and otherness are at the same time visible and contested by the permeability of race and borders themselves, by the fact that both body and language could reveal and conceal the truth" (QB, 282-3). Otherness, in this case, resists classification, refuses to be a guest/hostage in the house of the host.

## 6. "The Theatre of the Empire"

The second section of *Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome*, "The Theatre of the Empire", immediately identifies theatre as an instrument to represent, more or less critically, the phenomenon of imperialism that was beginning in Shakespeare's time. Indeed, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the birth of the

<sup>4</sup> In the same volume, the following essays focus on the female body from a gender perspective: Paola Faini, "Cleopatra's Corporeal Language", 161-170; Simona Corso, "What Calpurnia Knew: *Julius Caesar* and the Language of Dreams", 171-190; Viola Papetti, "Under the Sign of Ovid: Motion and Instance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", 191-196; Mariangela Tempera, "*Titus Andronicus*: Staging the Mutilated Roma Body", 109-120.

Western cultural identity that, oversimplifying, was based on three historical ‘facts’: the formation of the European modern nations; the transnational circulation of humanist classic culture, whose values were functional to the nationalist rhetoric; and the prospect of colonial expansion as a consequence of the discovery of the New World. In respect to these overlapping events, England, a newborn nation, had to negotiate its cultural position in relation to the authority represented by the classics in order to claim its autonomy; on the other hand, it had to look back to Roman imperial history to find answers about its own new emerging empire. The anxieties about imperial expansion are represented in *Titus* and *Cymbeline*, as the one manifests the dangers of expanding territories and confines, while the other aims at finding a continuity between Rome and Britain, through the identification with Augustus’s Imperial Rome.

From a postcolonial perspective, Antonucci in “Romans versus Barbarians: Speaking the Language of the Empire in *Titus Andronicus*” (*IOE*, 119-130) and Golinelli in “In Dialogue with the New: Theorizations on the New World in *Titus Andronicus*” (*IOE*, 131-144) explore the way *Titus* epitomises the conceptualisation of the racial other, a question that obviously was of great importance as a consequence of the new geographical discoveries and in the view of the nascent empire. In the play, the initial Roman/Barbarian opposition is significantly blurred, opening uncanny questions about who the barbarian actually is. The episode of the child substitution signals indeed that Shakespeare, and probably his audience, questioned themselves about miscegenation and its consequences. If *Titus* projects the English anxiety about the confines of single and collective identity on Roman Empire, *Cymbeline* directly presents a confrontation between Rome/Italy and Britain, coming to a final synthesis between the two cultures, through the process of the *translatio imperii*. This point is discussed in “Shakespeare’s Writing of Rome in *Cymbeline*” (*IOE*, 157-174) by Laura Di Michele, who reads *translatio* not only in terms of space (starting from Lefebvre’s theories), but also from a gender perspective: “What we are called to witness here is the metamorphosis of the new emerging nation: *Roman Britain* (and James I’s Great Britain, as well) is neither a ‘feminine’ society subjected to the danger of invasions as Elizabethan England usually conceptualized herself, nor a ‘masculine’ society as imperial Rome was in the collective imagination of the British. The new Britain (like Imogen) is both feminine and masculine (*IOE*, 171).<sup>5</sup> The figure of Imogen emerges as a pivotal figure, able to synthesise masculine (through the recourse to disguise) and feminine, and possessing the same archetypal power of Volumnia or Lucrece, without proving desexualised or being a sacrificial victim. As previously discussed, then, *Cymbeline* represents the fusion and overcoming of themes presented in the other Roman works; whereas the Elizabethan works expressed anxiety for the dynastic succession, the future of the monarchy et cetera (see, for example, *Julius Caesar*), the Jacobean plays (such as *Coriolanus* and *Cymbeline*) reflected tensions related to the passage from Elizabeth’s reign to James I’s absolutism and the fear of the insurgence of new republican ideas. The attitude towards the idea of the empire also changed: whereas *Titus* shows the

<sup>5</sup> A spatial analysis of Rome/London opposition is also offered by Carlo Pagetti in “Shakespeare’s Tales of Two Cities: London and Rome”, *IOE*, 145-156. Giorgio Melchiori discusses the re-signification and so the transference of classical culture in Shakespeare’s play through the mediation of the morality tradition in “‘They that have power’: The Ethics of the Roman Plays”, *IOE*, 191-205.



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encounter between different cultures, in terms of a weak centre vs a threatening periphery, *Cymbeline* re-proposes the confrontation with another culture, inverting the centre/periphery dichotomy and finally transferring imperial authority from the old centre (Rome) to the new centre (Britain). The image of the empire is not only politically relevant, but it has also to do with the idea of writing: “[T]he colonizer is like the playwright, in that they both ... trace lines and mark boundaries on the land and on the territories portrayed in maps, on stage and page” (*IOE*, 158). Here, Di Michele echoes Del Sapio’s previous suggestion to consider Shakespeare as a host. The coloniser/playwright/host creates boundaries; Shakespeare’s works trace the confines of the Western Self, confines that, however, he also questions through the representation of an Other, who resists a univocal interpretation and returns its gaze onto the audience, onto ‘us’.

In conclusion, the essays presented in *Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare’s Rome* and *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare’s Rome* analyse the entire Shakespearean Roman canon, revealing the cultural implications that stem from a confrontation between different times and places. Rome appears as a ‘space’ where Shakespeare’s past and present converge, also amazingly projecting these issues in the future, considering how questions related to a country’s cultural hegemony or the post-Imperial legacy are still relevant today.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the Globe was inaugurated with a Roman play, *Julius Caesar*, almost prophetically foreseeing that, about four centuries later, a new Globe would be built precisely in Rome, as Nancy Isenberg demonstrates in “Shakespeare’s Rome in Rome’s Wooden ‘O’”, *IOE*, 175-190.

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Gabrielle A. Hezekiah, *Phenomenology's Material Presence: Video, Vision and Experience* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2010), 91 pp.

Reviewed by **Enrica Picarelli**

In the essay entitled “Lived Bodies: Phenomenology and the Flesh” (*Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, 1994, 86-111), Elizabeth Grosz identifies in the female body the source of a difference that unsettles the universal notion of corporeal experience articulated by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The notion represents the core of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical inquiry, which he takes, to extend it, from Edmund Husserl, for whom phenomenology sets out to “conduct research into essence within the framework of a reflection that involves ... absolute self-givenness” (Husserl quoted in Hezekiah, *Phenomenology's Material Presence*, 1); it occupies a central position in the research undertaken by Gabrielle Hezekiah in *Phenomenology's Material Presence*.

A brief introduction to the debate on phenomenology as voiced by Grosz follows. This theoretical aside is intended as a framing of Hezekiah’s study, which focuses on “materiality, perception and consciousness” (77), and provides a perspective to address some of the issues she raises, particularly the centrality of the body in the elaboration of a woman’s experience of the work of art.

The first phase of the phenomenological process starts with the body in its everyday encounter with the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, through experience and perception the phenomenologist acquires the means to establish that knowledge is situated in the world, which stems from the relationship he entertains with his corporeal schema. This phase prepares the ground for the moment of suspension that follows, when the (male) philosopher puts a distance between his natural perceptions and the realm of the phenomena in order to realize that consciousness is universal and constituted by absolutes. But the idea that consciousness is undifferentiated is criticized by many feminist scholars, for example Lucy Irigaray, Judith Butler and Grosz. The latter, in particular, maintains that it reproduces a masculinist preconception that takes male perception as a disembodied universal, ignoring the difference represented by the woman’s experience of her body as a source of desire. She writes against the approach pursued by Merleau-Ponty that links desire to derangement, emphasizing the role that sexuality plays in our relationship to the world, and arguing for a conceptualization of “voluptuous passion” as a defining element of the process towards self-perception (*Volatile Bodies*, 110). Her observations expose the bias of phenomenological critiques that ignore the sexual specificity of the perceiver; in particular, she states that if the body is the “vantage point from which I have a perspective”, it is also not affected by the same “dynamical force, with the same psychological structures and physiological features” that interest men (*ibid.*). Insisting on the positivity of

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desire for a female apprehension of material existence, Grosz grounds in sexual difference the phenomenological search for the body image that informs Merleau-Ponty's inquiry. Turning desire into a source of otherness, she offers an insight into phenomenology that starts with difference and stresses immanence and irreducibility as the foundations of consciousness and presence.

Although *Phenomenology's Material Presence* is not directly concerned with sexuality and femininity, Grosz's observations provide a valuable starting point to comment on it. Hezekiah's aspiration to "stay ... with the trace of the viewing experience" (iii) resonates with Grosz's call for a positioned strategy of addressing perception, inviting the reader to focus on immanence and corporeality when approaching a video. It situates the origin of the research in the author's intimate approach to the video-art of Ghana-born, Trinidadian director and scholar Robert Yao Ramesar. As clarified in the preface, one of the aims of Hezekiah's research is, in fact, to address the body and how it is called into being by Yao Ramesar's pieces. She intends to write "into and towards" (ii) the relationship established by a "visual encounter" that addresses her eye and consciousness as a (female) individual (ii), and declares that the theoretical investigation informing the book moves from a subjective experience of the videos. At the same time, the recurring references to the aural dimension of the pieces, as well as to the materiality of the films, with their grainy and fickle texture, suggest an almost sensual involvement with the object of study. Even if not explicitly stated, these aspects seem to ground analysis in the author's senses, research being the hypersensible locus of an approach to video-art intended as a means to reach self-perception.

It is in this "experience of contact" (iii) that Hezekiah locates her scholarly interest in phenomenology, finding in the carnal appeal of the videos the 'dynamical force' of a personal journey into contemporary Caribbean art. The most interesting aspect of *Phenomenology's Material Presence* is the way in which the author recognizes the videos' ability to perform an original philosophical inquiry instead of reproducing it. Hezekiah argues for "[v]ideo's ontology – the nature of its being in the world" as being "at once immanent and transcendent" (76). She takes video as a source of original investigation, endowing it with critical and theoretical specificity. She observes that Yao Ramesar's pieces "enact phenomenology as method in the process of intending their way into the world, restoring us to that world by bringing the trace of presence, consciousness and perception through their material bodies" (76). This foundation successfully facilitates the passage from the subjective stance voiced in the preface to the theoretical position sustained in the book.

*Phenomenology's Material Presence* is intended as a piece of experimental writing that attempts to "see phenomenologically" through three videos produced by Yao Ramesar in the 1980's and 1990's – *Heritage: A Wedding in Moriah*, *Mami Wata* and *Journey to Ganga Mai*. It is very well grounded in pure phenomenological analysis, which it articulates thoroughly and in a lucid fashion, facilitating the approach even for readers unacquainted with this philosophical school of thought. Hezekiah dedicates a chapter to each video, which she reads in counterpoint to different

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stages of the phenomenological inquiry, namely the psychological reduction, the transcendental and eidetic reduction and the immersion into Time and Being. All of them are strictly related to the theoretical framework established in the introduction, which provides an overview of the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, whose philosophies represent the coordinates informing *Phenomenology's Material Presence*. The monographic analyses expose how the videos summon up the “commingling” (26) of individual perception and a broader form of consciousness. According to Hezekiah, this moment of contact corresponds to an experience of disembodiment that allows the perceiver to reflect on the act of perception and to witness the manifestation of the Heideggerian Being as it takes place in and through the video. She declares that video “exists for us as that space of openness that is the Dasein” (68) and that it is through the immersion into this abstract dimension that we are returned to ourselves with a heightened knowledge of the world.

According to Hezekiah, through techniques that lengthen and distort time, what is often regarded as an artistic object becomes the initiator of a process of deterritorialization that creates a gap in vision, allowing for something invisible and imperceptible to find its way toward consciousness. Focusing on “connections, intention and consciousness”, Hezekiah’s experience regards looking as “an act of theorizing” (iii) that takes subjectivity as a starting point to interrogate the process of vision and how vision is ‘made’. She states that Yao Ramesar’s insight into the everyday life of Trinidad and Tobago conjures up a compelling relationship between the viewer and the video’s bodies that make visible “a poetics of seeing and becoming” (i) that pertains to the nature of the Dasein. Thus, in phenomenological fashion, her study brings together the embodied nature of a material contact with the work of art, with an approach that interrogates abstract notions of “manifestation and the visual” (6). It is the interweaving of self-perception and “collective consciousness” that suggests “a theory of encounter grounded in embodied consciousness and a metaphysics of presence” (77). This coming together of immanent and transcendental dimensions defines *Phenomenology's Material Presence* as a “meditation” on the “experience of a world co-constituted by video and by [Hezekiah’s] presence as a viewer of it” (ibid.), making it a valuable contribution in the field of phenomenological studies.

From a postcolonial perspective, one cannot avoid noticing that the book lacks a proper introduction to Yao Ramesar and does not establish any relationship between his work and that of other Third-world filmmakers, such as his mentor Haile Gerima. Hezekiah says almost nothing about the scholar and director, even though his videos, focusing on Caribbean culture and folklore, have attained international popularity, especially since he collaborated with Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, directing “The Saddhu of Couva” and “The Coral”. The analytical chapters offer a satisfying description of the techniques employed in the chosen works, such as solarization, depixelation, desaturation and suspended animation. Unfortunately, they do not contextualize them and give no information as to



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the occasions of the filming and the motivations behind Yao Ramesar's artistic choice of blending documentary and fiction. The details about the director and his position as a Caribbean artist are limited to the introduction and regard his theorizations in the field of aesthetics, to which he contributes with the technique of "Caribbeing".

*Caribbeing* is a cinematographic method devised by Yao Ramesar in the mid-1980's. It is characterized by the exclusive use of natural light, strong chromatic contrast, slow motion and a blend of still and moving images that, according to the film-maker, displace "colonial rationalist conventions" of looking. Hezekiah's insight into *Caribbeing* is that it "attempts to make visible a Caribbean reality submerged through centuries of colonialism, slavery and indenture" (3), but she does not go in depth with the implications of this approach, even though the bibliography reports some personal interviews with the author, which might have provided further information and analysis on the politics informing his aesthetics. Hezekiah indicates that Yao Ramesar may have developed the idea of *Caribbeing* in response to postcolonial issues of memory and representation. The stimulating suggestion that the scholar-director is moved by a desire to re-vision colonial history by offering a decentralized look on Caribbean reality is strengthened by Hezekiah's declaration that "[t]he formal techniques serve to dislodge audiences' sedimented viewing of the cultural object" (4-5). However, she does not recognize any political motivations in *Caribbeing*, and sticks to the strictly phenomenological implications of the filmmaking by investigating how Being appears in the obeah ritual filmed in *Mami Wata* (chapter 2) and in the Ganga Dashara celebrations recorded in *Journey to Ganga Mai* (chapter 3).

Issues of counter-representation and an interrogation of the bias of traditional ways of looking that occupy a prominent place in the work of other filmmakers such as Trin T. Minh-ha and Isaac Julien would be expected to follow. However, Hezekiah skirts them, arguing that Yao Ramesar holds a controversial position with respect to Third Cinema theory in that his work "does not seek to supplement, supplant or speak to a colonial archive. It does not explicitly address questions of identity and representation [and] is not located in northern 'host countries' where the conditions of diaspora and exile are often most keenly felt" (5). These considerations sound precipitous for a research rooted in postcolonial issues and would require further analysis, especially as they deal with a diasporic experience with which Yao Ramesar is familiar, considering his history of displacement from Ghana to Trinidad. However, the author admits to be unhappy with postcolonial theory, on the ground that its focus is on meaning and signification and that it bypasses the question of consciousness which is instead raised by theorists such as David MacDougall and Natalie Depraz, whose works inspire her research. Hezekiah seems to imply that postcolonial theory, as a form of academic writing, "imposes theorizing upon the moving image" (iii), whereas her aims are "to dwell with the experience of looking", holding on to "the moment of vision" (iii) in order to focus on the problems of manifestation and consciousness.

In her discussion discursive and textual analysis is discarded in favor of an experiential approach based in perception, subjectivity and presence. The author takes the image as a repository of presence, endowed with the potential to create newness. Hezekiah writes that the videos “exist as a call” (73), inviting the viewer to abandon pre-formed notions of Caribbeanness in order to gain a new perspective on perception and knowledge. She is especially interested in showing how they provide a means to foreground “the existence of a presence that is more than is given to us in appearance” (74). References to “becoming” are made and linked to what, following Husserl, the author describes as “the possibilities of the visual” (6). These are, in turn, related to the notion of “essence” that informs visibility, unfolding as “a field of possibilities” (45) that video-art captures and materializes. Implicated with this metaphysical background, video’s manifestation retains a bundle of unexploited potential whose concretion is, however, not addressed in the book.

In this analytic context then, the nature of presence is not entirely clarified and its relationship to a general notion of becoming remains vague. Is becoming to be regarded as what is left in the passage from immediate perception to representation? Is it to be associated with the a-subjective, eventual forces evoked in Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of deterritorialization?<sup>1</sup> What is its relationship to postcolonial politics, especially to the issue of identity? The focus on phenomenology excludes the possibility to address these questions, grounding the analysis in a strictly aestheticizing perspective. Hezekiah’s concern is, in fact, with appearances. She reports Yao Ramesar’s words defining *Caribbeing* as “an attempt to represent the supernatural essence of Caribbean existence beyond the realm of linear realism” (1), but does not really address the question of how realism emerged in the first place in colonial visual culture or how it can be counteracted. This lack of analytical background weighs on the exploration of the videos, which Hezekiah opposes to a tradition of looking that unfortunately her study does not cover. The absence of a theoretical overview on documentary technique, which represents a significant formal component of Yao Ramesar’s videos, adds to the impression of incompleteness that emerges from this part of the analysis.

Furthermore, much of the compelling emphasis that Hezekiah places on the body in the first part of the book is lost in the following chapters and conclusion. These focus entirely on how Yao Ramesar’s work “perform[s] its own philosophical inquiry into being and consciousness” (6). There is a definite preponderance of the transcendental element in the analysis that leaves many questions unanswered. The most pressing ones relate to how Hezekiah’s look as a female, independent scholar living and researching in Canada relates to the work of a Trinidadian film-director and how to account for her position and experience of the videos from a distance. Moreover, considering the importance she places on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, more space to investigate the direct involvement of her body in the encounter with the work of art could have been provided. Instead, by linking corporeal perception to the transcendental, Hezekiah presupposes “a subject willing to release its own intentions and to allow its being to serve as a medium for the

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

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passage of being” (52). This approach neutralizes the sexual and cultural specificity of her analysis, exposing the fundamental problem of phenomenology as it is voiced by feminist theorists, namely the presumption of universality that underlines its intent to provide a theory of self-evident and absolute truth.

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Shakespeare at the Napoli Teatro Festival Italia 2011.  
*The Tempest* (dir. Declan Donnellan) and *Richard III*  
(The Bridge Project, dir. Sam Mendes)

Reviewed by **Santa Russo**

Naples, Teatro Mercadante, 30 June 2011.

Declan Donnellan, a British theatre director and writer of international fame, arrives in Italy for the first time with his production of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in Russian with surtitles in Italian. Students and scholars of English literature, Shakespearean studies and Russian language, as well as enthusiastic theatregoers, sit among the audience in a hot evening of the *Napoli Teatro Festival Italia*, now in its fourth edition.

The play begins: Prospero, an old man in belt and braces, sits downstage in front of a white, curved wall with three doors. As if to concentrate, he conjures a storm, which is only glimpsed through the partially opened doors. Thunder, lightning, water. The latter element is predominant throughout the play: during the storm scene, real water cascades onto the mariners' heads while waves periodically foam and tumble, through projections, on the white wall; when Miranda and Ferdinand become sexually excited, Prospero douses them with a bucket of water, as if they were copulating dogs; poor Trinculo, in this production an effete dandy interested in fashion and diamonds, is pursued by the several Ariel(s) who continually drench him with a watering can.

When Prospero recounts to Miranda the reasons for their exile, the usurping Antonio and his Neapolitan accomplice emerge like speechless wax statues from two of the three doors, to silently give body and presence to their past treachery and powerfully draw Miranda's attention to the narration. Miranda actually sees them and becomes more interested in her father's story. "Dost thou attend me?", Prospero frequently asks his daughter; his very long narration could have put Miranda off, hence the narrative device of the repeated questions to Miranda throughout the scene in the Shakespearean text.

In Donnellan's production, the appearance of Antonio, Prospero's brother, and Alonso, the king of Naples, becomes a 'multimedial' – and to a certain extent even 'intermedial' – device whereby theatre simulates cinema, to bring to life Prospero's articulate retelling of the past events that brought him and Miranda to the island twelve years earlier. *The Tempest* is a play in which invisibility and visions, magic, music and 'quaint' devices play an important role for the development of the story, yet there are no 'apparitions' at the moment of Prospero's recounting to Miranda in 1.2; it was the director's choice to add those 'apparitions' in his production of the play. Donnellan could have used a video installation, or a projection on the white wall, to show Prospero's past in a more vivid way, but he decided to have the actors on stage, 'embodying' the past as in a *tableau vivant*; perhaps, the choice



came out of an awareness of the excessive length of the scene and of the fact that this, along with the recitation in Russian, could have been a real cause of distraction not only in Miranda but in the audience too. The *tableau vivant* ‘approach’ combines theatre with the art forms of painting and photography and one could talk of a multimediality of sorts, for this production, as ‘special’ effects are adapted to the theatrical space (as in the case of the apparitions).

The multimedial ‘device’ occurs a second time in the same scene when Ariel, the airy spirit who reluctantly serves Prospero, reports that he has carried out his master’s commands in exact detail and that all the passengers of the vessel leapt overboard, the king’s son Ferdinand having been the first to jump. At this point, the spirit stops his narration and opens one of the three doors. In this case the *tableau* is dreamy, watery, timeless and we see Ferdinand as he drowns in the sea: hanging by one foot, head down, the actor is in a blue and suffused light as he floats in the airy water. The effect is astonishing, and for the first few seconds the audience may well believe this to be a projection and not the actor in the flesh.

The frame of the door behind which Ferdinand appears works as a cinematic frame; this is a dreamlike scene where the borders of the door, four sides of a rectangle, become a metaphor for how a theatre performance can insert some cinematic effects while remaining preponderantly theatrical.

The simulation of multimediality helps the audience visualize what the characters are talking about. In a canonical performance, as they listen to the lines spoken by the other characters, the audience may picture

Antonio, Alonso and Ferdinand in their minds, but in this production the director adds something magic, which in a sense partakes of – and redoubles – Prospero’s art. As Shakespeare’s exiled duke conjured “the direful spectacle of the wreck” “with such provision in [his] art”, thus revealing the shipwreck to be an illusion created by his magic, so Donnellan’s Prospero is able to project – thanks to the same art – the characters onstage and enliven his narration of the story.

The ongoing process of remediation is a cultural process and describes what happens when Shakespearean texts are transferred from paper to digital platforms: Katherine Rowe and Thomas Cartelli in their book *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (2007) shift the paradigms of Shakespeare on films and make possible new interaction between critical, cultural, textual and media studies, highlighting how the meta-theatrical aspects of Shakespeare’s plays are remediated from stage and books to modern expressive media. (Thus in Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000) the

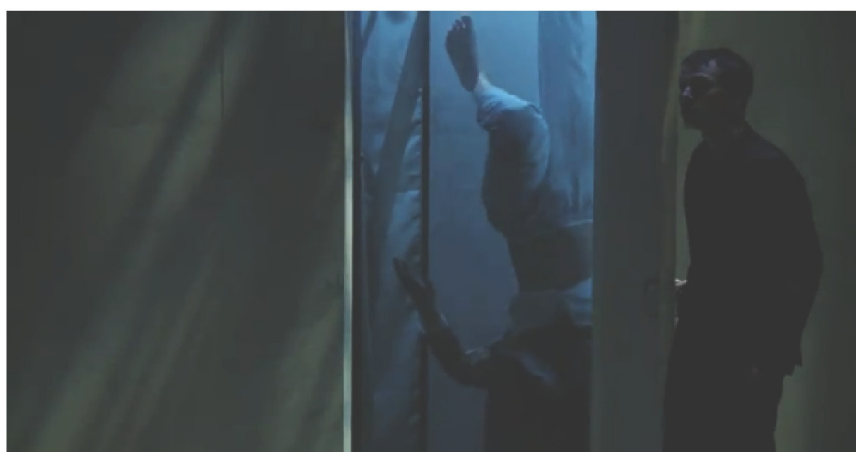


Fig 1: Declan Donnellan, *The Tempest*, 2011, courtesy of NFI Napoli Festival Imagine. Click on the image to watch video.

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mousetrap is not a play within the play but, as the flyer sent by Hamlet to Gertrude and Claudius proclaims, “A Film/Video by Hamlet”). In Donnellan’s production, remediation works differently: in *The Tempest* there are cinematic devices adapted to the theatrical space and cinema is brought back to its rudimentary form, so to speak (in the case of the *tableaux vivants*). Theatre remains the dominant space, as actors in the flesh simulate cinematic projections onstage – not the other way round. As shown by the ‘appearance’ of Ferdinand ‘underwater’, theatre preserves its specificity of having characters played by actors *there* and *then* onstage, but at the same time it welcomes a simulation of re-mediation.

The nature of the play itself invites theatrical invention; most professional productions try to capture the magic and wonder expressed by the play, and many modern directors adapt the text according to their artistic, free interpretations. Donnellan duplicates Ariel, the airy spirit, who here becomes a group of five besuited actors/musicians: one is the leader and actually speaks the lines; the other four are a silent, persistent presence on the stage, playing some musical instruments and executing all of Prospero’s commands. The reinvention of the character is suggested by Ariel’s actual nature – he is a ubiquitous, airy spirit – and it helps achieve a strong visual effect; indeed, nothing is left to imagination in this production. In Shakespeare, at Prospero’s command Ariel performs near-impossible feats and appears in different guises: a flaming light in the storm, a nymph of the sea, a harpy at the banquet, Ceres in the masque; in this production, at some point Ariel acrobatically becomes the log Ferdinand bears while talking with Miranda. Insofar as it is a combination of sounds, images, music, ‘projections’ and words, theatre is always already a multimedial genre. In Donnellan’s *The Tempest*, the limits of what is possible on stage are pushed further, yet at the same time the performance never lets one forget one is watching theatre: it may originally use special effects but it remains elegantly, unashamedly, *theatre*.

Donnellan’s is also a specifically Russian *Tempest*: Ariel’s accusation against the courtly party turns into a Soviet show trial; the marriage masque features cheerful peasants dancing with scythes, as in old propaganda films celebrating the wonders of Soviet agriculture; when Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban raid Prospero’s cell, they discover a department store with fashionable clothes, mobile phones and credit cards, the new emblems of post-Soviet Russia. Through the process of cultural cross-fertilization, Donnellan takes a familiar play and makes us see it – and our present *through* it – in a new light.

A final, brief note on language: as Shakespeare’s text is recited in Russian, the Italian audience who does not speak the language pays a different kind of attention to the words and consequently takes greater notice of all the other aspects of the production, in particular of the actors’ incredible physicality and expressivity. The Italian surtitles on the screen are by necessity shorter than Shakespeare’s text, even if they retain some of the original’s seventeenth-century language and expressions. In the shift of attention away from the language, the experience of watching the play becomes even more intense.

Donnellan's intensely physical production of the play mixed music, dance, video and 'theatrical' projections, bringing the island setting to life, and highlighted the play's theme of illusion; "we are such stuff as dreams are made of", and the result is that Prospero's project, "which was to please", did not fail at all.

The autumn epilogue of *Napoli Teatro Festival Italia* – 14-15 October 2011 – presented *Richard III*, directed by Sam Mendes, with Kevin Spacey playing the role of the Shakespearean villain. Mendes returns to the stage to direct Spacey: the last time they worked together, in the film *American Beauty* (1999), Spacey won the Academy Award for his performance and Mendes won it as Best Director. An incredible *coup de théâtre* coming directly from London, from the final year of The Bridge Project, a unique three-year series of co-productions by The Old Vic – whose artistic director is Kevin Spacey himself – BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) and Neal Street, Mendes's production company.

*Richard III* has some of Shakespeare's best known lines – "Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this sun of York", "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse", among the others – and has been played by great stage actors, Lawrence Olivier being the most famous one. About his *Richard III*, Mendes stated in an interview: "In a sense this is one of the first great portraits of a modern dictator. It is astonishing living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that there are still figures today on the front page of every newspaper, Gaddafi, for example, or Mubarak, who are exactly what Shakespeare described and anatomised 400 years ago. Staging *Richard III* with an international company allows you to loosen the ties that make it purely English and, in doing so, perhaps it becomes a little more global, a study of dictatorship".

As a matter of fact, Sam Mendes has produced a modern-dress production in which the protagonist becomes an autocratic archetype, so the audience can easily find contemporary resonances in it. It is not the first time that a production of *Richard III* uses modern costumes: in the film directed by Richard Eyre, with Ian McKellen playing the role of the malevolent, deformed usurper, the costumes suggest that the setting is a fictional fascist England of the 1930s. As the *Guardian* theatre critic Michael Billington writes in his review, in Mendes' production "contemporary clothes remind us how today's dictators seek spurious constitutional legitimacy and become skilful media manipulators".

What is interesting in this production is the use of multimediality, which is not just hinted, or simulated, as in the case of Donnellan's *The Tempest*. At the very beginning of the play, Spacey



Fig. 2: Sam Mendes, *Richard III*, 2011. Click on the image to see video.

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sits irritably slumped in a chair watching an old TV footage of his brother's regal triumph; he then angrily stops the video with a remote control, before speaking the famous lines of his first monologue (fig. 2). On the back wall of the stage, for the audience, there is a projection of what he is watching on TV. This is the first incursion of other media – television, video projections – in the theatrical space and more will come later. Even before that, a big “Now”, the very first word of the play, appears, projected on the wall when the lights in the auditorium are still switched on. The word dominates the scene before the beginning of the performance, being at the same time a reminder of the literal start of the play, the indication for the audience to put *Richard III* in a modern context, and the first occurrence introducing the multimedial dimension of the play. More titles like the opening “Now” projected on the walls appear throughout the production, mainly to introduce the characters: the audience read “Clarence”, “The Citizens”, “Buckingham”, and so forth, all written in capital letters. The titles are projected on the walls of the scenography between one scene and the next, when the stage is dark and the setting is being changed by the technical staff; the impression the audience get is that of chapters in a running DVD. Just like novels, most DVDs are divided into chapters or scenes, each with a title, allowing the user to jump from one to the other and quickly access any chosen part of the film. Cinema enters the theatrical space, in this case as home cinema, cinema enjoyed at home. This multimedial device is used throughout the play, the last title being “Bosworth Field” projected on the wall among moving clouds.

Clouds. They are not a casual element in the multimedial component of the play: in the chapter/scene labelled “The Citizens”, in the third scene of the second act, the men are presented as chattering commuters, wearing black suits, with bowlers on their heads, reading newspapers and discussing the political situation; front stage, all in a line as if they were travelling in the Tube, the citizens hold on to an imaginary handrail and make small talk. While they are on stage, some clouds appear, projected on the wall: this is clearly a reproduction of Magritte's famous surrealist paintings, with men wearing black suits and bowlers, clouds on the background. The multimediality at this point is multilayered: the projections of the clouds and the title are what one may consider the ‘proper’ multimediality of a theatrical performance; on the other hand, the reproduction of the French artist's paintings is a *tableau vivant*: an incursion from another art, painting, and a simulation of multimediality.

Photography is also present in this production of *Richard III*. In the first scene of the second act, when the sick King Edward IV wants to “set [his] friends at peace on earth”, a photographer is onstage to take pictures of the other characters while they shake hands. And, when Richard is finally crowned king, upstage there is a huge close-up photograph of Spacey's face in black and white. The photograph is a duplication of Richard III himself, a visual metaphor of the villain's ‘looming large’ on the political scene.

The most genuinely multimedial moment of the play and the most elaborate scene is when Richard, faking reluctance, accepts the crown; in Shakespeare's text,



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the stage direction reads “Enter Gloucester aloft, between two bishops” and in Shakespearean times, at the Globe theatre, it was certainly played from the balcony, which usually housed the musicians and could be used for scenes requiring an upper space. In this production the scene is completely reimagined and Richard talks to Buckingham and the citizens from a big screen: he is praying with a pair of phoney monks and he seems really surprised by the intrusiveness of a spying camera. The effect is that of a video screen press conference, or a video call on Skype; the camera frames Spacey’s face and the audience can enjoy his facial expressions – which is not always possible during a theatre performance because of the different positions of the seats. In this production, multimediality and theatre are intertwined; in the case of the titles or the presence of a video onstage, the spectator’s point of view is not constrained by her or his seat: everyone sees everything, as at the cinema.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, theatre directors and stage designers prove Shakespeare to be our contemporary. If the Shakespearean word is what they work with, the language of Shakespeare’s texts lends itself to experimenting with new forms. Whether it is just hinted and simulated or actually integrated into theatre performances through the use of digital technologies, multimediality is the present form of staging Shakespeare.

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## Shakespeare in the Web. *Romeo and Juliet* on Twitter

Mudlark Company and the Royal Shakespeare Company, *Such Tweet Sorrow*, April-May 2010, <<http://www.suchtweetsorrow.com/>>, 22 September 2011

Reviewed by **Linda Jennifer Buono**

'Tis true; there's magic in the web of it.  
William Shakespeare, *Othello*

Maybe Shakespeare had already realized that in some way the Web would change his theatre. In fact, the Web 2.0 has modified not only the relationship between users and technologies, but also our interaction with the world of literature and theatre. The concept of "Web 2.0" came into being during a conference brainstorming session between Tim O'Reilly and his staff in 2004 (<http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>). Mr O'Reilly is the founder of the O'Reilly Media, one of the most interesting publishers for computer technology books. The *Web 2.0* is based on the "open source", a technology that offers the possibility for everyone to create, modify, deny information circulating on the net. It is the real revolution of the Web: anyone can take part in the circulation of knowledge and culture through the use of a personal computer. William Shakespeare and his works take advantage of the Web's new face; databases and archives are just two examples of the massive contribution of the web to establishing an open diffusion model of Shakespeare's theatre: the *Internet Shakespeare Edition* (<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/>), the *Shakespeare Electronic Archive* (<http://shea.mit.edu/shakespeare/htdocs/main/index.htm>) and the *Interactive Shakespeare Project* (<http://college.holycross.edu/projects/isp/>) are some well-known digital archives of the Bard's texts, which, by including also illustrations and film clips of the plays, have helped the consolidation of multimedia pedagogy as one privileged approach to the author from Stratford-upon-Avon.

William Shakespeare has inspired countless performances, revisions and adaptations of his plays, in all media and throughout the globe. Katarzyna Williams, in *Deforming Shakespeare: Investigation in Textuality and Digital Media* (2009), has analyzed the role of play and fun in the interpretation of Shakespeare's works. In her study she identifies MUD as one site of "play" on the internet, and gives the following definition: "One of the Internet accessible, text-mediated virtual environments which set up a particular performative mode of reading (and writing) is Multi User Domain. The MUD refers to the virtual worlds designed on the Internet in which users can create narratives within which they play and interact". In the early nineties, Stuart Harris demonstrated how the multi-user text-based environment marked an important change in the perception of the textual and its relation to the performative. On 12<sup>th</sup> December 1993 there took place the first online performance of the *Hamnet Players*. It was a digital revision of *Hamlet*, created by Harris, and the whole tragedy was set in the virtual space of IRC (*Internet Relay Chat*). The actors

chosen for the project had to write their own lines in the text-based environment and, unsurprisingly enough, the play's early modern language underwent a radical change; Shakespeare's language was translated into modern colloquial English mixed up with IRC jargon and was characterized by the verbal stylization of computer writing. The actors intentionally made spelling mistakes and used obscene language, which accentuated the distance from the original play. *Hamnet Players* annoyed Shakespearean purists, but the fun and the playfulness of writing as performance on IRC started a new way of (re)writing and performing Shakespeare.

*Such Tweet Sorrow* (<http://www.suchtweetsorrow.com/>, 22 September 2011), a digital revision of *Romeo and Juliet*, is among the most recent web-based re-inventions of Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> This project was planned and realized by Mudlark Company and the Royal Shakespeare Company from April to May 2010. Mudlark is a cross-platform production company that delivers commissions, campaigns and applications and produces mobile phone games, virtual world experiences, TV programmes, and so on. The Royal Shakespeare Company is known worldwide not only for its theatre

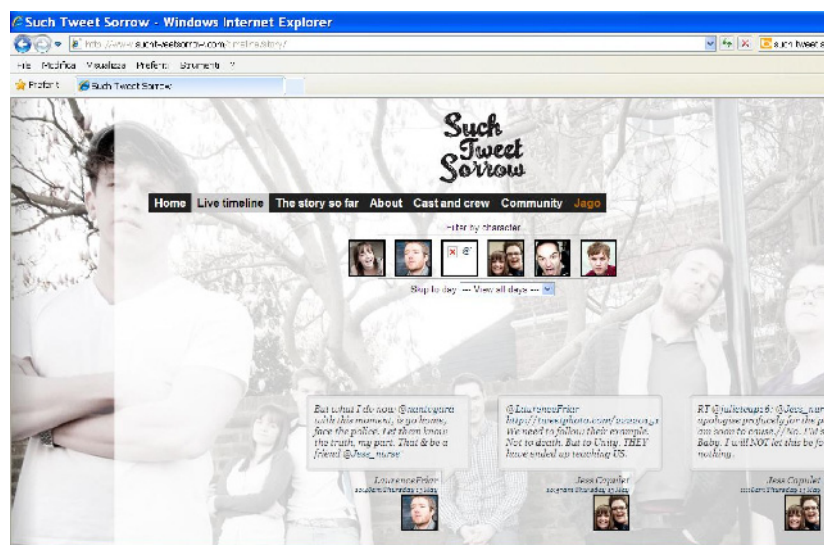


Fig. 1. The home page of the project *Such Tweet Sorrow*

performances, but for its extensive education projects and outreach work, the aim of which is to engage more people with Shakespeare's world. The official *Such Tweet Sorrow* website, which is still online, presents the project with these words: "Two families in the same town have loathed one another for years. But a boy from one and a girl from the other fall in love – deep, sweet and destructive. You know the tale of *Romeo and Juliet* but now you can see it happening live and in real time – in modern Britain and on Twitter. Six characters live the story over the five weeks of *Such Tweet Sorrow* and you can experience it with them". The title of the project comes from the famous line pronounced by Juliet in the second act of the original tragedy: "*Parting is such sweet sorrow*". The word "sweet" was substituted with the word "tweet", the funny name adopted to define the messages left on the social network *Twitter*. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to the author's subscribers or followers. All users can send and receive tweets via the Twitter website, Short Message Service (SMS) or external applications.

The 'story' began with Jess Capulet's tweet, posted one year ago, on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2010, in which she remembered her mother's death in an accident. Mr. Montague was involved in the same accident, but he survived. Out of that tragic event a strong aversion was born between the two families. Jess and Tybalt Capulet had a sister,

<sup>1</sup> For a presentation of the project, see also the Mudlark website (<http://www.wearemudlark.com/projects/sts/>) and the Royal Shakespeare Company website (<http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/projects/such-tweet-sorrow.aspx>).

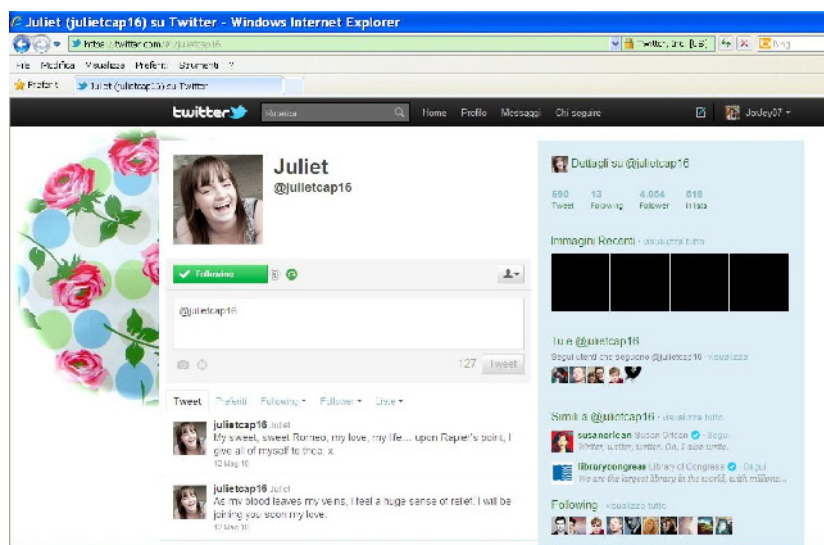


Fig. 2. Julietcap16's Twitter page

Juliet, who decided to organize a party for her sixteenth birthday. During that party she met Romeo and after a few days they fell in love and got married against their families' will. Laurence Friar, the owner of a pub, tried to help the lovers to go away from their town and live happily together but, despite the detailed plan for their escape and due to a misunderstanding, they killed themselves with drugs.

Roxana Silbert, *Such Tweet Sorrow's* director, said: "Throughout the five weeks of this performance, you will see and read the 'tweets' – Twitter updates which may be thoughts, messages, links or confessions – of Romeo, Juliet and

four other characters". *Romeo and Juliet* has been represented in many ways: stage versions, film, opera, ballet and musical forms. But this was the first time the tragedy was performed on a social network. The six actors, chosen from the Royal Shakespeare Company, had a script, written by Mudlark's writing team and they composed their tweets as if they were the real Romeo, Mercutio, Juliet, etc. In their digital public diary they talked about their feelings, who they were with, who they wanted to talk about. The biggest highlight was the huge level of active participation from the public. For example, during Juliet's birthday party, to which her Twitter followers were invited for virtual participation, the fancy-dressed guests uploaded their own masks, their favourite music or photos on the Facebook Event Page. Another evidence of active participation of the followers was the "Save Mercutio" campaign: fans started their own campaign to save Mercutio ahead of his impending death. This was not instigated by the production team and it was a hugely exciting, because unexpected, development.

As a product of Web 2.0, *Such Tweet Sorrow* is the perfect example of media convergence, which, by bringing together "the three C's" – computing, communication, content – means the capability of generating information through shared resources and the convergence of different interacting media. In order to get a clear idea about movements, feelings, events referred to in the characters' tweets, you have to visit *Such Tweet Sorrow's* blogs, YouTube channels and Facebook pages. Information in the Web 2.0 is decentralized, because it is controlled by both the webmaster and the Internet surfers; what is especially interesting in the case of *Such Tweet Sorrow* is that the acting there consists in surfing the Internet and using it the way the public to the story does, and that the story is made in the combination of the actions performed by the actors and the followers alike as they are online.

The language of *Such Tweet Sorrow* is its other interesting aspect. The Shakespearean plot was modified to make it suitable for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, Romeo and Juliet,



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and the other four characters, weren't different from our teenagers: they played with the Playstation, or they shared their love for music; they went to the stadium and supported their football team. Their language had to be translated to contemporary English. Unlike the Shakespearean tragedy, where there are long monologues, the tweets are very short, as is the typical communication among young people today and because of the maximum 140 characters for each message. Romeo\_mo and julietcap16 (these are the nicknames on Twitter of the leading actors) and their friends didn't respect English grammatical rules during their twittings, they cut the words, used acronyms or spelt words the way they were pronounced: "OMG" (Oh my God), "Oz" (for Australia), "4" (for the preposition "for"). They used swearwords, as in one of the tweets by Mercutio: «@romeo\_mo @Tybalt\_Cap May both your families rot in hell! Fuck #teammontague from now on its only #teammmercutio».

What was possibly the aim of *Such Tweet Sorrow*? I do not think that the Royal Shakespeare Company and Mudlark wanted to create a new Shakespearean canon: although they completely changed the set, the time and the language of the tragedy, their goal was still to engage a new kind of public with the world of *theatre*, and in particular with the world of Shakespeare's theatre. The youth generation is used to computers and "html" language, so it appreciated this new form of theatre. In the process, however, theatre became something else. In their case study the Mudlark Company verified that during the twittings of *Such Tweet Sorrow* there were a lot of visitors. These are the statistics until 10 May 2010:

94,910 Visits  
4,519.52 Visits / Day  
65,097 Absolute Unique Visitors  
299,710 Page views

Character: #Followers  
Juliet: 5834  
Jess: 3847  
Tybalt: 3941  
Mercutio: 3814  
Laurence: 3723  
Romeo: 3699<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the event, the Mudlark Company analyzed the final results of the project: media coverage went global, spreading across all platforms including US newspapers, 500 international websites, 4 national BBC Radio stations, Japanese TV, Indian national press e Sao Paulo radio. Within the first week, *Such Tweet Sorrow* obtained 30,000 followers and it became a Twitter trending topic. I like to imagine that, as Shakespeare was a great experimenter of language in his own times, today he would have written his works using the Web 2.0.

<sup>2</sup> <<http://www.figarodigital.co.uk/case-study/Mudlark.aspx>>

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## Cinema is a Video Clip on the Internet

Liz Tabish, *A Cinematic Translation of Shakespearean Tragedies*, 2008

<http://www.youtube.com/user/BettyFilms?feature=watch>

Reviewed by **Anna Maria Cimitile**

[T]he past as absolute future.

Jacques Derrida

Liz Tabish's *A Cinematic Translation of Shakespearean Tragedies* (2008) is a series of six short films, each reinventing a Shakespearean tragedy according to a film genre. The films can be viewed on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/user/BettyFilms?feature=watch>), in accordance with the recent trend, spreading among short films directors, to publish work on the web (on this fashion, see Killian Fox, "The Best Short Films on the Web", 19 December 2010, [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/dec/19/short-films-documentary-animation-viral>). The work originated as a student research project in Film Theory on "metaphor and cinematic montage" at university; the main idea was to "combine film genre with Shakespeare's tragedies" (Liz Tabish, email to the author, 20 August 2010). One short, *Romeo & Juliet: A Film Noir*, was shown at the 2008 deadCENTER Film Festival in Oklahoma City.

The subtitles of the films announce the genres chosen for the 'translation':

*Othello*: A Silent Film

*Romeo & Juliet*: A Film Noir

*Macbeth*: A Horror Film

*Hamlet*: A Classical Hollywood Motion Picture

*Julius Caesar*: A Surrealist Film

*Antony & Cleopatra*: A Cult Musical

From the silent film of *Othello* to the noir of *Romeo & Juliet* to the cult musical of *Antony & Cleopatra*, the six films all emulate the feature length film, even if each only lasts 4 or 5 minutes – the duration of a music video. In the translation to cinematic genres, the tragedies lose their most distinguishing feature, what generally scholars, theatre-goers and readers alike agree to consider the real stuff of Shakespeare: its language. In fact, with the exception of *Othello: A Silent Film* – which is, despite the subtitle (or rather, because of it), the only one to retain fragments of Shakespeare's verse, in the form of title cards inserted between one shot and the next – the films completely cut out language. We are only briefly reminded of it when, in the film of *Macbeth*, there are overlapped, quick close up shots of a mouth moving as if speaking – an apt cinematic reinvention of the second set of the witches' prophecies. In all the shorts, Shakespeare's language is replaced by soundtracks, one song for each film, playing to the end and lasting the length of the film from opening titles to credits, so that the films could really be seen as music videos, secondary material for the promotion of the music product.

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Indeed, in some shorts the cinematic translation of the Shakespearean tragedy seems to be the apposite visual version of the story told in the song: this is the case of *Romeo & Juliet: A Film Noir*'s story of interracial love with respect to Tom Waits's *Alice* and of *Othello: A Silent Film* with respect to Rufus Wainwright's *Evil Angel*. But even in the other films interesting, if less evident, connections between song and story are produced, from *Hamlet*'s story-in-yellow of Ophelia with the Cure's *Charlotte Sometimes* to *Antony & Cleopatra*'s story of glam-rockers he-Cleopatra and Antony with Brian Eno's *Baby's on Fire*. Even when the resonance between the Shakespeare story and the song is not evident or there is no immediate connection between the lyrics and the playtext, the soundtrack contributes to the translation of Shakespeare. In the case of *Macbeth: A Horror Film*, Radiohead's *Paperbag Writer*'s uncanny, introductory instrumental part and the rhythm of the song as a whole are a perfect match for the fast motion shots of the film; together with the latter, the song offers an apt rendering of the plot – made of encounters with witches and bloody assassinations, repetitive to the point of madness – of *Macbeth*. In some cases, the resonance of image, sound and the Shakespearean story is of a more undefinable nature, which opens up to the subtle play of intertextuality; in one case, the Shakespearean language actually re-enters the film by way of an uncanny and surprising 'de-tour'. Tom Waits's *Alice* tells of an obsessive, inappropriate love (that of nineteenth-century writer Lewis Carroll for young Alice Liddell) whose resonance with the Shakespearean story of the two "star cross'd lovers" is produced by some suggestive phrases in the lyrics. "I disappear in your name", "a secret kiss", or even "I will think of this / When I'm dead in my grave" are intriguingly evocative of the textual and metaphorical space of *Romeo and Juliet*, in a song that may also recall, for the ear familiar with the Shakespearean texts, *The Tempest*. The choice of songs and singers opens to intertextuality by way of other, longer 'de-tours': Tom Waits is the author and singer of *Romeo Is Bleeding*, which is contained in the album *Blue Valentine*, where he also sings *Somewhere* from Robert Wise's 1961 film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story*; and Rufus Wainwright features in Burt Bacharach's *Go Ask Shakespeare*, a song that beside the title contains reformulated lines from Shakespeare.

Partly due to the project of experimenting with genres, Tabish's shorts abound in echoes and resonances, mainly from classic films although not exclusively from those: if *Othello: A Silent Film* evokes Dmitri Buchowetzki's silent *Othello* of 1922 (only consider the way the Iago figure pays homage to Werner Krauss, who played in the same role in that film), *Macbeth* bears some resemblance to the 2003 official video of the soundtrack song. Originality not being the stake or goal here, the films cast Shakespeare into the present by placing it across different genres, media and aesthetics (cinema, the music video, the film trailer, the internet upload) and by delving into the archive of cinema and its 're-membrances' (adaptations and the genre film). Shakespeare is in the present as reinvented past, but its pastness is displaced as it is made coincide with cinema's past, in/as the future of early modernity. As subject matter, it gets reinvented in the encounter with the genres

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of the filmic transpositions and with the lyrics as well as the music videos of the songs; at the same time, the passé feel of the genre film makes the ‘actualization’ of a peculiar type, increasing our awareness of a polychronic Shakespeare in the sense given by Katherine Rowe in her discussion of a multimedia Shakespeare (“‘Remember Me’: Technologies of Memory in Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet*”, 2003) or by Jonathan Gil Harris with reference to the early modern material culture (“The Smell of *Macbeth*”, 2007; *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*, 2009).

Tabish’s translations of Shakespeare are silent films for the present era. They bring the era of early cinema into the present – they all do, from the “silent film” of *Othello* to the equally ‘silent’ “cult musical” of *Antony & Cleopatra* – or, which is the same, they cast the present in the old speechless world of... ‘new’ silent films. The resulting Shakespeare happens here and now – but this present is polychronic too – in a move that is at the same time retro (looking back to old film genres) and up-to-date (using YouTube as a vehicle for cinema, contributing to the reciprocal redefinition of their aesthetics), producing a multiple time/space for the adapted Shakespeare texts; “here and now” gets deeply affected by that looking into the dark backward and... surface of old/new media.

The horror film of *Macbeth* and the surrealist *Julius Caesar* are, in my opinion, the best in translating, in the new medium and genre, the Shakespearean tragedies. More specifically, there is one shared feature which contributes to this: in both films, the characters look straight into the camera, as if they were addressing the audience, and in so doing they bring us into their reality, making us feel interpellated in a more direct way by the tragic events and the ethical questions the playtexts raise. In *Macbeth*, moreover, it is as if the place of the audience coincided with Macbeth’s place and with the camera spot. This is a black and white film, where red is the only colour, used to highlight the blood spots on the blade and Lady Macbeth’s hands. The setting is a path in the forest, which comes our direction; the dagger hangs mid-air in the foreground, almost as if it were there for our exclusive, not for any character’s, gaze; apparitions look at us, and Lady Macbeth runs up the path and away from us as she madly rubs her bloody hands, only to turn our way again and again, showing us the proof of her guilt. Like the witches, Lady Macbeth looks towards us with her face-mask. In a similar way, in *Julius Caesar* the Romans, who wear animal masks, also look at us as they advance towards the camera/the audience/their victim. Indeed, the gaze from masks is the most disturbing and the most engaging for audiences.

I wish to conclude with one last remark on *Julius Caesar*; in the colour film we get a glimpse of the contemporary, small and somewhat desolate American town suburb; this is disturbingly inhabited by the figures in white Roman tunics and wearing masks, who, besides evoking the men-animals of surrealist taste (only think of Jean Cocteau’s films), also resonate with Hobbes’s *homo homini lupus* and makes me think of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. The feral citizens of Rome are here; the news they bring from the past is that the time is forever out of joint.





Fig. 1: Liz Tabish, *Macbeth: A Horror Film*. Still captured by the author from the dvd, *A Cinematic Translation of Shakespearean Tragedies*. Courtesy of the artist.

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