Digital Shakespeare

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1   Rapid developments in digital technologies compel us to consider the task of digital humanities in theory and practice. A world increasingly driven by market economy rather than ideological difference has led to the coexistence and confluence of multiple manifestations of Shakespeare, and the digital platform is an open site where textual obligations meet performative options. We have much to gain from the archival stability of vetted, annotated, and open-access digital performance videos and the repertoire of embodied cultural history in cinema and live performance. Digital video can decouple text and performance in ideological formations and re-join them as open sites where negotiations of meanings take place.

2   One of the key features of Shakespearean performance in our times is self-referentiality and inter-media citational strategies. Adaptations refer to one another in addition to the Shakespearean pretext. Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* is a good example. It brings both the melodramatic and tragic elements of the play into stark relief against modern media history.

3   *Chicken Rice War*, a 2000 film from Singapore, is another example.

Videoclip

The two films, along with their undefined Shakespearean sources, engage in the kind of responsive, polyglot, inter-media conversation that makes reading across cultures so compelling today.

4   Buoyed by a tag cloud, hundreds of thousands of performance videos, including promotional clips for stage productions, have colonized video-sharing and social networking sites around the world. [1] Some of these may be duplicates or transient, but digital screens have become "the default interfaces" for data mining. The public also express themselves audiovisually on these sites while shaping the resulting archive. [2]

5   **The Role of Digital Video**

The Internet is never a neutral, universal platform, but a collective of people and "institutions shaped by local pressures" to create and conserve cultural value. [3] It is also useful to bear in mind that global Shakespeare is not always a rosy undertaking. Touring an Arab adaptation of *The Tempest* to London to celebrate the 2012 Olympics would entail a very different level of

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[1] Such as South Korea's Daum tvPot and China's Tudou.com and Youku.com.

[2] Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau. "Introduction." In Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, eds. *The YouTube Reader.* Stockholm, 2009. 16; Jens Schröter. "On the Logic of the Digital Archive." In *The YouTube Reader.* 341.

[3] Kate Rumbold. "From 'Access' to 'Creativity': Shakespeare Institutions, New Media, and the Language of Cultural Value." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61.3 (2010): 313-337.

cultural prestige than rendering *Macbeth* in Zulu. Wars, censorship, and political ideologies can suppress or encourage particular approaches to selected plays or genres. The digital enterprise is built upon a volatile relationship among content creators (rights holders), platform providers, and funding agencies, as evidenced by Viacom's lawsuits against YouTube and numerous other cases.

6   That is why video is the holy grail in the present phase of digital humanities. Distinct from analogue media such as photography and film, digital video — as a non-linear, non-sequential medium—can support instant access to any sequence in a performance, as well as the means to re-arrange and annotate sequences, and to bring them into meaningful conjunction with other videos, texts and image collections.

7   Though visual and sonic media have become so large a part of the emerging Internet culture, the field of digital humanities lags behind these developments in both theory and practice, and "remains deeply interested [and invested] in text" or the codex book in both academic and commercial initiatives. [4] In the many new media studies departments, where the emphasis is often on social media, fan culture, video and video games and, in contrast to the digital humanities, too little value is often placed on "legacy media" and the literature and arts of the past. [5] While recent scholarship has begun to address live theatre's place in the new media, it has not fully engaged the digital video's impact on the field due in part to a continued interest in new textualities in "the late age of print." [6] There is a gap between these emerging fields that a new approach to performance studies through online video collections can help to bridge.

8   Shakespeare studies has a paradoxical presence in the twenty-first century where online video is a widely recognized genre. There are many text-based projects, such as online editions. [7] Take the iPhone app *Shakespeare* for example. There are electronic versions of edited play texts, digital facsimiles of folios and quartos (including *Edward III* and *Sir Thomas More*), [8] but full video recordings of theatrical productions are still uncommon. Besides my open-access project, *Global Shakespeares* (launched in August, 2010), the only other online, full-length performance video resource available to the general public is a commercial enterprise with a goal to sell a "best seat in the house experience." Launched in October, 2009, the company behind the *Digital Theatre* aims to preserve and monetize archival records of live performances: "British productions that once would have been lost are now being purchased by global audiences."

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[4] Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth. "The Digital Humanities and Humanities Computing: An Introduction." In Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth, eds. *A Companion to Digital Humanities*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. xxiii-xxvii, esp. xxiii. See also Katarzyna Kwapisz Williams. *Deforming Shakespeare: Investigations in Textuality and Digital Media*. Torun, Poland: Grado, 2009; George P. Landow. *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006; Espen J. Aarseth. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

[5] In his theorization of cinema within the histories of media cultures, Lev Manovich defines new media forms through five principles (numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding). New media forms are defined in contrast to print, television, and other electronic media. Lev Manovich. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001. 21-50.

[6] Christy Desmet. "Paying Attention in Shakespeare Parody: From Tom Stoppard to YouTube." *Shakespeare Survey* 61 (2008): 227-238; Richard Burt, "To E- or Not to E-? Disposing of Schlockspeare in the Age of Digital Media." In Richard Burt, ed. *Shakespeare After Mass Media*. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 1-32; Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Katarzyna Kwapisz Williams, *Deforming Shakespeare: Investigations in Textuality and Digital Media*. Torun, Poland: Grado, 2009.

[7] Most notably the Internet Shakespeare Editions (internetshakespeare.uvic.ca).

[8] For instance, the *Perseus Collection: Global Shakespeare* (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/collection?collection=Perseus%3Acollection%3AShakespeare_Globe) and the *Shakespeare Quartos Archive* (http://www.folger.edu/pr_preview.cfm?prid=216).

9   Video in Virtual Worlds

Video is now 1) the core of virtual environments, 2) websites associated with theatre companies, and 3) a small but rich array of scholarly digital archives. Characterized by unique dynamics and challenges, each of these three areas adds a new dimension to performance studies.

10   These days one can attend a virtual performance of *Hamlet* or a staged reading of *The Winter's Tale* on Second Life, a three-dimensional virtual world allowing users to interact online with each other through their personalized avatars. In *Mabinogi Hamlet,* a three-dimensional medieval-themed MMORPG (massive multiplayer online role-play game), one assumes the dual roles of the gamer and the player in the theatrical sense. There is a storyline following the narrative of the Shakespearean tragedy, but the participants are free to reinvent the wheel as they converse with a character named Marlowe who holds the script of *Hamlet*, watch an animation of the ramparts scene, join Hamlet and Horatio on a stealth mission to follow Claudius, and eventually dress up to become Hamlet — letter in hand and joined by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on a mysterious ship. It takes an average player approximately four hours to finish the quest, approximately the same amount of time to perform the play uncut. Interestingly, the game ends with a curtain call. All the characters and gamers appear on stage to receive applause. [9] Built around sleek visual effects, games such as these are part performance archive and part performance event, combining rehearsed, programmed events and improvisational, contingent actions on and off stage.

11   As well, many theatre companies have experimented with interactive contents and online videos — live or recorded — to engage the audiences at different stages. Some projects bring globally circulating texts closer to a local audience. When Taiwan's Contemporary Legend Theatre was planning their fourth adaptation of Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in 2004, the company created a website with rich materials where audiences cast votes for their favorite versions of the adaptation. The company staged the version with the most votes — one that highlighted Taiwan's history as a post/colonial island. Other projects focus on bringing local, site-specific performances to a global audience. Some of them are sustained by various forms of nationalism. As the National Theatre Live entered its second season on October 14, 2010, nearly 200,000 people saw London productions broadcast in high definition to 320 screens in cinemas and theatres in 22 countries. Accompanied by majestic music, the promotional video on its website announced with a sense of national pride. The video broadcast made stage performances more affordable and increased the production value of the plays for both on-site (privileged) and off-site (mass) audiences.

12   As the boundary between traditional notions of live and virtual performances becomes ever more permeable, online scholarly archives also evolve to alter the landscape of performance studies in significant ways. Some offer interactive research space for users to "roam" about, while others are more akin to curated, guided, restrictive museum exhibition, such as *Stagework* (http://www.stagework.org.uk/). The MIT Shakespeare project contains a global array of videos of live performances from the Arab world to Brazil, and *Hamlet on the Ramparts,* a clearinghouse of geographically distant visual and textual resources for a single scene (http://shea.mit.edu/ramparts) which recently appeared on a list of editor's picks in the *New York Times*. [10] While most digital projects promise innovative uses of audio-visual contents, they have yet to decide on a model of operation: fully open-access, commercial solutions, or a hybrid form. Not all projects are collaborative in nature or embrace the open-access model. As a commercial enterprise launched in October, 2009, *Digital Theatre* (http://digitaltheatre.com/) sells downloadable full videos of stage performances and an iPhone app that tracks theatre productions in the U.K., with an emphasis on London.

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[9] Developed by NEXON in South Korea, Mabinogi has been especially popular in East Asia. It also has a following in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. *Mabinogi Hamlet* was released in August, 2010.

[10]   URL   http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/subjects/h/hamlet/index.html,   accessed December 2, 2010.

13   Central to all three areas of video interpolation — virtual world, theatre company websites, and digital archives — is the question of cultural memory and reconstruction of the real. If performance is the means through which cultural and historical knowledge is produced and conserved, the open-access, participatory, performative digital archive adds an additional dimension to the process of acculturation. The socially constructed world of live performance is by definition ephemeral because it enacts what is constantly shifting, and only offers glimpses of a phantom past that continues to elude us. The digital platform allows audiences to curate their own memories of the performative present that is itself a trace of the past. And the trace of the past lives on as specters of presence in digital form.

14   *Global Shakespeares* **Site**

     This is where *Global Shakespeares* digital archive comes in, which I co-founded. Targeting a global audience, the video-centric, collaborative archive addresses the issue that "in spite of an increasing number of bright spots, initiatives in the video field have always been more patchy than those involving texts." [11]

15   Of course digital video can never replace live performance. The answers we will get from objects in this multimedia environment depend crucially on the questions put to them. It has now become possible to bring together a coherent collection of video recordings of complete productions of sufficient depth to create a densely interconnected video environment in which one can move freely from one performance or sequence to others based on the particulars of the performances themselves rather than solely based on their relation to play text, or to the needs of a text-driven understanding of their significance. A video-centered archive gives us the precision of reference and the depth of access to the basic documentary materials of the field long taken for granted in the domain of textual studies.

16   Scholarly study requires precision of reference and provision of the means to make evidence available in excerpts; in the case of text footnotes and quotation from sources satisfy this need. In the domain of video, the equivalent functions include the ability to define a video segment precisely, to insert sequences into one's own interpretive construction, which might be a multimedia essay with playable clips in line or as clickable citations, or a set of annotated clips for presentation.

17   But citation — even the citation of replayable clips as moving image footnotes — is only one side of what might be called the deployment of video as a common object available to be discussed, reframed, reinterpreted by others.

18   The *Global Shakespeares* site allows users to include numerous video clips selected and arranged to show not only what happens in videotaped live performances, but also how it happens — how meaning is created moment to moment in performance, music and shifting cinematic presentation. One can search a video recording using the text as an index, to define and save replayable user-defined video segments (virtual clips), and to combine one's own text, Shakespeare's text, or secondary literature and video into multimedia essays or presentations. In addition, one can select and "import" a video or image from the archive or other websites, such as Flickr and YouTube, for in-depth analysis and annotation. Videos can be clipped and embedded, along with still images if one so chooses, into a multimedia essay or in a shared space for discussion. This kind of communication brings the laser pointer to the essay and encourages deep analysis. Instead of just referencing a video and describing the scene, the writer can embed the exact moment and let the reader view the evidence directly and immediately. Students and professors in co-taught classes that are geographically distant can discuss the particulars of performances remotely using clips made and shared in real time.

19   Such tools make possible precise and copious video illustration, so that an argument or

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[11] Michael Greenhalgh. "Digital Still Images and Renaissance Studies (with a Short Section on Digital Video)." William Bowen and Raymond G. Siemens, eds. *New Technologies and Renaissance Studies*. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008. 27-72, esp. 40.

analysis of performed meanings can be shared, extended and critiqued. Even more importantly, having the ability to quickly capture and briefly annotate video sequences can suggest and enable new kinds of discoveries that might not even have been thought of without the tools.

20   The *Global Shakespeares* archive connects live performances to the concepts of rehearsal and re-play through a federated global search experience. Tags created by researchers can be added to what is publicly available for searching. The data can be viewed as a table, plotted on a world map with satellite and hybrid map-satellite options, or timeline. Dynamic timelines and maps used in conjunction with faceted browsing and tagged video, allow users to trace the paths of production and diffusion of touring productions. If "distant reading" and graphs, as Franco Moretti suggests, can bring about important changes to the study of literature, such tools for visualization are at least as important for performance studies. For any given period scholars tend focus on a select group of canonical works, and, as a result, they have allowed a narrow slice of history to pass for the total picture. [12] Maps and timelines of the large number of productions can suggest new questions and unexpected relationships, and — especially important for the study of world-wide performance and emerging forms in a global context — counter the biases of metropolitan constructions of the field of study.

21   Case Studies: Almereyda's *Hamlet*

Artists of international stature such as Peter Brook, who appropriated the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* often confront thorny issues of authenticity. The artists and their audiences are energized and challenged at once by their extensive knowledge of one area of theatre practice and equally extensive ignorance of another. However, in the absence of contextualization, the artistic and critical energy has fueled a blame game informed by various conventions of authenticity (Japan represented by cherry blossom and Hamlet the skull of Yorick and so on). Digital archives can reveal neglected transtemporal and intercultural connections and help us contextualize these works.

22   An example is a series of scene analysis of Michael Almereyda's Buddhist-inflected film *Hamlet* (set in modern-day Manhattan). This is enabled by research tools offered by my *Global Shakespeares* digital project. Armed with the resources in my open-access archive, I delineated the film's counterpointing of Shakespeare's words with Buddhist and other intertexts from Asian religious traditions. The most notable of these is the contrast between Hamlet's despairing "to be or not to be" in this film and Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's discourse on "interbeing." Another scene of interest is Claudius' prayer in his limousine. As Claudius is jolted by a nasty and dangerous swerve (Hamlet is doing the driving!) and laments the failure of his words to reach Heaven, his hand covers the video image of the pilgrimage. These visual citations of Asian religious culture turned out to be significant elements of Almereyda's film.

23   Through minute examination of the film, clip definition and replay in conjunction with cross-references within the archive, one can find striking visual and textual references embedded within the film that are meant to be "discovered" by interactive technologies of viewing. From the tiny fragment of subtitles visible on the monitor in the backseat of Claudius's limo in Almereyda's *Hamlet*, our team identified the film as the German documentary *The Saltmen of Tibet*. Viewing the clip in context, it became clear that the moment was a turning point in the documentary as well as in Almereyda's *Hamlet* — it marked the passage of the salt gatherers into the sacred territory of the salt goddess, just at the moment at which Claudius' attempt at prayer fails, he recognizes his own exclusion from grace.

24   The most sustained infusion of Buddhism in the film is the use of clips from *Peace is Every Step,* a documentary about Thich Nhat Hanh, leader of the Engaged Buddhism movement. His teachings on "interbeing" answer the brief, repeated video loops of Hamlet reciting the half-line "to be or not to be" while actively making suicidal gestures — pointing a gun at his head,

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[12] Franco Moretti. *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*. London: Verso, 2005; John Bender and Michael Marrinan. *The Culture of Diagram*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010.

sticking the barrel in his mouth earlier in the film. As Thich Nhat Hanh continues he is not heard, or not fully heard by Hamlet who is not looking at the screen, but focusing on a hand-held monitor showing his own footage of an erotic encounter with Ophelia. Even this video, however, encodes Eastern spirituality as an alternative, since the book Ophelia is reading, and with which she partly covers her face, is Krishnamurti's *Living and Dying* with a big photo of the sage on its cover, alluding to the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.

25   These key details were elements of design that were not indicated in the published screenplay, and required iterated examination of specific video sequences and the annotations we had made for them in the context of visual evidence from elsewhere in both films and related image materials on the Web.

26   The film becomes even richer when compared with aspects of other adaptations, and especially with the plans, described in the published screenplay, for using a Buddhist-inflected chant as a counterpoint to Hamlet's "To be" soliloquy.

27   For these works, the ability to save and revisit clips and annotations, and to weave images and texts into a video-rich analytic framework can alter our understanding. Take *The Merchant of Venice* for example. In the Chinese tradition of performance, the play is often retooled as an adventure of an attractive woman lawyer or an outlandish tale involving a pound of human flesh. [13] Cross-cultural interpretations can activate elements of the play that, over several centuries of Anglo-European readings, have become obscure to communities that gravitate towards the ethics of conversion as a key site of tension in the narrative. [14] Likewise, African and Eastern European stage and cinematic traditions — with a useful historical distance from Anglophone cultures — have ignited new artistic energy by dispossessing the modern Hamlet's post-Enlightenment "intransitive inwardness" created by a blind spot in the West, as Margret de Grazia has theorized.

28   **Conclusion**

I would like to spend the last five minutes on a number of larger questions in Shakespeare studies. We have come a long way in the three decades since J. L. Styan's *The Shakespeare Revolution*, which imagined a "new role for stage-centered criticism" that uncovers the original "Shakespeare experience." [15] In 1996, before the advent of the multimedia-enhanced Web environment, James Bulman referred to the ways in which the "technologies of film and video" can transform readers into viewers by making accessible "performative elements that would have been denied them" in the study of Shakespeare.

29   One of the most thought-provoking moments in *Hamlet* for me as an archivist and researcher is the ramparts scene. When prompted by his father's ghost to remember him and his words, Hamlet responds by committing the ghost's words to writing.

30   The access to performance on multiple levels — rehearsal, production, reception — is the first step to engage with the 'multiple material existences' of a single play. [16] We should recognize technology's capacity to assimilate performance to the play text. The digital archive makes performances legible, but more importantly, it highlights the constant tension between embodied and disembodied memories. The challenge is how to avoid reifying the author-function in performance criticism and "how *not* to replace the old textuality with a new form of

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[13] Alexa Huang. *Chinese Shakespeares*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 69-70 and 115-123.

[14] Janet Adelman. *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in* The Merchant of Venice. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

[15] J. L. Styan, *The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. 5; James C. Bulman. "Introduction: Shakespeare and Performance Theory." James C. Bulman, ed. *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*. London: Routledge, 1996. 1.

[16] James C. Bulman. "Introduction: Shakespeare and Performance Theory." James C. Bulman, ed. *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*. London: Routledge, 1996. 2.

performance textuality which may be 'read'." [17] Recent work has shown an acute awareness of the unfinished business of the earlier 'revolution' of Shakespeare and performance studies. We now recognize the specificities of performance — "stage behaviors" — not as appendages that give way to the literariness of the Shakespearean script but as agents that participate in defining the play. [18]

31   In this context, the digital archive is a valuable mnemonic device to preserve ephemeral experiences, but the archiving process will always introduce frictions between embodied (live) and disembodied (recorded) performances. In constructing a privileged relation to our past, the archive as a repository of artifacts and meanings has a dialectical relation to historical knowledge. The video archive provides multiple pathways to the theatrical experience, but it also manifests ways of knowing that experience.

32   In the current period, new media tools have expanded from text-centric models — in which other media are present but are adjuncts of the text — to forms in which image, audio or video collections can become the starting place for an exploration across media. It is part archival record and part performance, because video can register the theatrical contingency in a manipulable medium (with a rich network of video cross-references) that creates discursive knowledge about site-specific performed events. Archiving the otherwise ephemeral history of performance is an important goal, but even more important are the new research questions such archives enable.

33   In a broader context, these developments in digital humanities might spell the beginning of the end for global Shakespeare as unproductive shorthand. The globalization process often replays the message of a Eurocentric or North American centered world as a universal on a grand scale, though often without the heroic narrative of conquest. What global Shakespeare might be, in an age in which communication is worldwide, instantaneous, and image-rich is of course a site of conflict as well as new artistic and research opportunities. Recognized for its artistic creativity and now established as a field of scholarly inquiry, transnational theatre remains an ostracizing label, categorizing a group of cultural products that can conveniently be cordoned off. The meanings of transnational theatre are not always determined by post-colonial vocabulary or the discourses of globalization. While post-colonial critics commonly privilege works that critique the role of Western hegemony in the historical record of globalization, my open-access digital archive shows that global Shakespeare has tackled a much wider spectrum of issues and themes. With the dramatically increased availability of primary research material, the field will, one hopes, eventually move toward a mode of inquiry that inherently considers Shakespearean performance in comparative contexts. That is the task of the digital archive.

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