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From zones to Zoom: Shakespeare on screen in the digital era

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Abstract

This introduction explores the consequences of the digital revolution on the production, distribution, dissemination, and study of Shakespeare on screen. Since the end of the 20th century, the rise (and fall) of the DVD, the digitalisation of sounds and images allowing us to experience and store films on our computers, the spreading of easy filming/editing tools, the live broadcasts of theatre performances in cinemas or on the Internet, the development of online archives and social media, as well as the globalisation of production and distribution have definitely changed the ways Shakespeare on screen is (re)created, consumed, shared, and examined.

Keywords

digital, web, screen, film, Shakespeare, Internet, Zoom

Résumé

Cette introduction explore les conséquences de la révolution numérique sur la production, la distribution, la diffusion et l'étude de Shakespeare à l'écran. Depuis la fin du XX^e siècle, l'essor (et le déclin) du DVD, la numérisation des sons et des images permettant de visionner et de stocker des films sur nos ordinateurs, la diffusion d'outils de tournage et de montage faciles, la diffusion en direct de représentations théâtrales dans les salles de cinéma ou sur Internet, le développement des archives en ligne et des réseaux sociaux, ainsi que la mondialisation de la production et de la distribution, ont

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radicalement changé les façons dont Shakespeare à l'écran est (re)créé, consommé, partagé et étudié.

Mots clés

Numérique, Internet, écran, film, Shakespeare, Zoom

This *Cahiers Élisabéthains* special issue stems from the World Shakespeare on Screen Congress that took place at the University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 in September 2019, a congress that has continued what José Ramón Díaz started more than twenty years ago with The Centenary Shakespeare on Screen Conference at the University of Málaga, Spain, in September 1999. This landmark event constituted 'Shakespeare on Screen' scholars into an international academic community at the very moment when analogue cinema was starting its decline and digitalisation began its rise. The Montpellier congress has also prolonged a series of conferences that have been organised at the University of Rouen, the University of Le Havre, and the University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 since 2003.

Not only did 2019 mark the 20th anniversary of the Malaga conference, but it also represented the 120th anniversary of the filming of *King John* in 1899, an originally four-minute silent movie by Herbert Beerbohm Tree, which inscribed Shakespeare on celluloid for the first time. One clip of the film has survived and is now digitally available on several platforms, from YouTube to the British Film Institute (BFI) archives or the Folger's educational resources.¹ As far as Shakespearean videos are concerned, YouTube has come to exemplify several trends, identified and explored by Ayanna Thompson:² the *archival impulse*, preserving and sharing older performances of plays; the *pedagogical impulse*, often implemented by large theatre companies or Shakespearean institutions, which share educational commentaries on plays to be used as supplements for students and teachers alike; and the *parodic impulse*, for instance, providing a 'rap' version of a play, creating comic vlogs, or debunking a play's patriarchal/sexist/racist ideology.³ According to Stephen O'Neill, YouTube can be of great value for students and scholars

since what emerges is a sense of Shakespeare as a body of knowledge that is shifting, incomplete and thus awaiting new interventions. In this way, YouTube Shakespeare not only has much to offer as archive, as a platform for vernacular expression, as a space to participate in what Shakespeare means. YouTube also has implications for scholars. It can become a space where Shakespeareans disseminate and share their work or where different roles – of YouTuber, fan and creator – might be assumed, thus enabling scholars to bridge the gap between popular culture and Shakespeare's more institutional markings.⁴

The congress also took place exactly thirty years after the release of Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989), which triggered the *fin-de-siècle* wave of screen adaptations and which belongs to a generation of films which has constantly been 'revisited through online multimedia', as Sarah Hatchuel has demonstrated.⁵ The Montpellier congress also took place

twenty years after the publication of the late Kenneth S. Rothwell's seminal *History of Shakespeare on Screen* which has since then become the landmark to study Shakespeare on screen, as is shown by the expert film-bibliography that José Ramón Díaz Fernández has kindly accepted to update for this special issue of *Cahiers Élisabéthains*. This bibliography reflects the vitality of the research field of Shakespeare on screen in the digital era, which has expanded and diversified exponentially over the past two decades. Rothwell's pioneering book already included a chapter on 'Electronic Shakespeare: from television to the web'.⁶ At the end of this premonitory chapter, Rothwell noted that

Shakespeare has emerged on the cutting-edge CD-ROM market with a Voyager Company *Macbeth* (1994), edited by A. R. Braummuller with commentary by David Rodes, which is a veritable electronic library combining the resources of a variorum with those of a concordance, a map and picture gallery, spoken and screened performances, and even a Karaoke, where a student can play a role in tandem with professional actors.⁷

Rothwell was writing at a time when we were experiencing the 'coming digital revolution [which] will connect in unpredictable ways with personal computers'⁸ and he specifically mentioned two then cutting-edge websites: Terry Gray's 'Mr William Shakespeare & the Internet' and a section of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that compiled 'a Web site to celebrate the first season of London's new Globe Theatre (1997)'. One can still find traces of Terry Gray's pioneering website which seems to have been preserved here and there but the original address (<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/>) can no longer be accessed. It requires patience to track down URL addresses, dates, and updates on the Internet: the digital era makes many things available for immediate consumption but is proving less reliable when it comes to long-term preservation, the question of sustainability and archiving remaining a key issue. Rothwell concluded his chapter on the idea of obsolescence:

The need to write a separate chapter on televised Shakespeare may be made obsolete as cutting-edge technology makes Shakespeare on television and film increasingly synergetic. But that is futurist speculation about electronic Shakespeare for the next century to validate.⁹

The beginning of the 21st century has definitely validated Rothwell's intuitions, making Shakespeare more and more 'synergetic' and dooming to quick obsolescence any kind of attempt to freeze Shakespeare in a digital framework. O'Neill's *Shakespeare and YouTube: New Media Forms of the Bard*¹⁰ and Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan's *Shakespeare and the Digital World*,¹¹ both published in 2014, will probably need updating soon: in their index, after the letter Y for YouTube, the letter Z will no doubt emerge, Z for Zoom.

The Montpellier congress focused on the digital era, a few months before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and before the sanitary situation forced us all to go more and more digital; a few months before the closure of movie theatres; a few months before the word 'zoom' started to take on a new meaning, expanding from the specific world of photography and cinema to become part of everyone's digital life, to become

synonymous both with social distancing and online meetings, in a computer world that makes us all potential screen actors and encourages a move from the big screen to the small screen – to the tiny screen, even, if one thinks of smartphones on which more and more videos are experienced. Much has happened to Shakespeare on screen since September 2019 that has given rise to new aspects and forms of ‘synergetically’ screening Shakespeare. If Marjorie Garber starts her *Shakespeare After All* with ‘Every age creates its own Shakespeare’,¹² it could be said that, in the digital era, especially during the current sanitary crisis, ‘everyone creates their own Shakespeare on screen’. The recent ‘Shakespeare under global lockdown’ special section of *Cahiers Élisabéthains*¹³ has notably shown how many companies have switched from theatre on screen to theatre on Zoom,¹⁴ which constitutes another stage of the digital revolution. Thus, just to take an example, Lord Denney’s Players, a theatrical group housed in The Ohio State University Department of English, have Zoomed a kaleidoscopic production of *Much Ado About Nothing* that allows spectators to rethink and reshuffle Shakespeare’s play through digital means. *Much Ado* is presented as follows:

Lord Denney’s Players’ production of *Much Ado About Nothing* was originally scheduled to run March 26–29, 2020 in the Ohio Union, but the state’s ‘stay-at-home’ order prevented the live show from occurring. Fortunately, ASCTech and LDP’s signature innovation saved the day: *Much Ado*’s surveillance culture readily translated to a film built using the same social meeting software that has enabled OSU to move its educational mission entirely online.¹⁵

This initiative, which can be compared to their recorded stage production of *Romeo and Juliet*¹⁶ which took place at the Van Fleet Theatre, Columbus Performing Arts Center, in April 2019, is emblematic of the way Shakespeare has been adapted to Zooming activities, which combine artistic learning and creation and make productions available worldwide in one click.

The Montpellier congress invited scholars to explore the consequences of the digital revolution on the production, distribution, dissemination, and study of Shakespeare on screen. Since the 1999 Málaga conference, the rise (and fall) of the DVD with its constraining region zones (a digital rights management technique to control DVD release depending on countries through DVD players which will only play disks encoded to their region), the digitalisation of sounds and images allowing us to experience and store films on our computers (bypassing regional encoding), the spreading of easy filming/editing tools, the live broadcasts of theatre performances in cinemas or on the Internet, the development of online video archives and social media, as well as the increasing globalisation of production and distribution (raising the question of technological availability worldwide) have changed the ways Shakespeare is (re)created, consumed, shared, and examined. Shakespeare’s screen evanescence and his transfictional and transmediatic spectrality have blurred the boundaries between what Shakespeare is and is not, leading us to question our own position as scholars who engage in spotting, constructing, and projecting ‘Shakespeare’ in audiovisual productions.

Actor-director Kenneth Branagh’s ghostly presence at the Montpellier Cinéma Utopia during the Congress was ominous of what has since then become a general and, to some

extent, dystopian practice. As a matter of fact, the Cinéma Utopia scheduled Branagh's film *All is True* (2018) during the congress. Utopia was the first cinema (and the only one so far) to show the film in France. Thanks to the digital tools, Branagh was virtually with the Utopia audience as he recorded a short introductory video to be shown prior to the screening, thus anticipating the absence-presence that the lockdown era has now turned into a habit. Six months later, gatherings in cinemas were forbidden. Here were Branagh's (digital) words:

What I love about Shakespeare, when it works, is that very personal quality that makes us feel that he is speaking directly to his audience – to each of us. Holding the mirror up to nature and reminding us of ourselves and restoring us with the certainty that we are not alone. If our lives are reflected in his work, then I suppose it became a natural question to ask whether his life was reflected in his work too. So began Ben Elton's quest as screenwriter, to take the facts of Shakespeare's life – and see whether the clues found there, might lead us back to the work itself, and vice versa. Was his own life raw material for his art? And that's where our film started and, one way or another, with Shakespeare, all human life is there. I hope you find something personal for you as you watch the film. Thanks for coming to see it. And thanks to Cinéma Utopia and to [the congress organisers] for organising the first French screening of the film and, for doing, to quote Mr Shakespeare, 'A good deed in a naughty world'.

Although Branagh avoided computer-generated imagery (CGI) for the film and instead used matte painting, a traditional technique in which painted glass is placed in front of the camera to give the illusion of a landscape, *All is True* is actually the first film that he shot with a digital camera, especially to emphasise candle-lit, intimate sequences à la Rembrandt. Traditional special effects going back to early Hollywood productions are thus mixed with state-of-the-art cameras that no longer use film stock, capturing footage in digital memory. This tension reflects how Branagh is one of the few Shakespearean directors who can be said to have straddled the pre- and the post-digital era. He shot his *Hamlet* (1996), *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017), and *Death on the Nile* (2021) with the high-resolution 70-mm film format. He also relished in CGI to make the Marvel superhero production *Thor* (2011), a film which Pierre Berthomieu describes as a 'Shakespearean blockbuster',¹⁷ echoing the betrayal of Othello by Iago, as well as Lear's and Gloucester's blindness in the figure of Odin facing his two rival sons, and taking up many aesthetic motifs of Branagh's own *Hamlet* and *Henry V* (1989). In this issue, Samuel Crowl's article, 'Citizen Ken: Branagh, Shakespeare, and the movies', aptly compares Branagh's career with that of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, and Franco Zeffirelli, arguing that 'Branagh is unique among these prolific makers of Shakespeare films in finding himself equally at home on stage and screen as an actor, director, and manager' and in working 'both sides of the cultural street: classic drama (including farce) for the stage, Shakespeare on film for a niche audience, and Hollywood blockbusters and genre films for the traditional moviegoer'. Branagh's specificity is thus not only to have revitalised Shakespearean adaptations at the end of the 20th century but to have fuelled his Shakespearean projects with his Hollywood endeavours (his *Hamlet* would not have been the same without the previous *Frankenstein*) and to have, in return, injected Shakespearean motifs into Hollywood scripts that

celebrate the creative energy inspired by Shakespeare (the 1991 *Dead Again* or the 2011 *Thor* as appropriations of *Othello*; the 2015 *Cinderella* as an echo of *King Lear*). Through his ceaselessly renewed ‘vaulting ambition’ of bringing Shakespeare to the people, Branagh has constructed over the years the ideologically complex persona of a working-class Shakespearean entrepreneur whose very intertextual *oeuvre* can be all the more studied and dissected thanks to digital tools.

While Branagh has embraced both analogue and digital cinemas, director Julie Taymor is known to have seized the possibilities of the digital in her first feature film *Titus* in 1999 and in her subsequent *Tempest* in 2010. Taymor’s *Titus* was made at a very particular moment. As Courtney Lehmann reminds us in ‘Precarious life: cinema, ontology, and the digital turn in Julie Taymor’s Shakespeare Films’, 1999 is the year when ‘the word “digital” in relation to “cinema” became a household name’ to comment upon the release of George Lucas’s first opus in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, *The Phantom Menace*, which was also ‘the first film from a major studio to rely heavily on digital technology’. Lehmann cogently uncovers the paradoxes in the discourses on the digital: although digital technologies have brought higher image resolution and sound quality, as well as improved the capacity to preserve celluloid films, they have been greeted, in the long tradition of iconophobia and artistic/cultural hierarchies, with a ‘language of loss’ that almost predicts the death of cinema. This battle between cinema and the digital has recently been epitomised by Martin Scorsese’s and Francis Ford Coppola’s anti-Marvel declarations.¹⁸ Taymor’s Shakespearean films offer a reflection on the tension between the analogical and the digital. *Titus* was shot on 35 mm but used CGI in many of its scenes, including the ‘Penny Arcade Nightmare’ sequences, slowing or freezing time to contemplate violence and horror. Filmed eleven years later, *The Tempest* includes an entire character, Ben Wishaw’s Ariel, that was constructed with CGI. Ariel’s scenes were first played in front of a green screen, then added to the celluloid footage in post-production. According to Lehmann, Taymor’s *The Tempest* is an ‘elegy for analogue production’, pointing to the ways in which cinema as an art form strives to ‘disambiguate “the human” from the “not human” and, more tellingly, those deemed “less-than-human”’. Cinema’s ontological crisis is thus incorporated into stories dealing with problematic configurations of the human.

The digitalisation of cinema has had profound consequences not only on the making of films but also on their distribution. In his article on ‘Shakespeare and *Keraliyatha: Romeo and Juliet*, adaptation and South Indian cinemas’, Mark Burnett explores two films that, although they are embedded in a regional milieu, ‘have had their most sustained exposure on platforms such as Google Play, Netflix and YouTube, making them typical of the ways in which Shakespearean cinema increasingly circulates via digital means’. The essay discusses two recent Shakespeare adaptations from Kerala, the south-west Indian state: *Annayum Rasoolum/Anna and Rasool* (dir. Rajeev Ravi, 2013) and *Eeda/Here* (dir. B. Ajithkumar, 2018), two films that are studied for what Burnett calls their ‘Kerala-ness’. It shows that the digital age allows regional cinema to be ‘Eeda’, that is to be ‘here’ but also to be there and everywhere. Thanks to digital tools, films, like Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ‘do wander everywhere, / Swifter than the moon’s sphere’ (2.1.6–7)¹⁹ and ‘can serve the fairy’ screens worldwide. For Burnett, these films

demonstrate the vitality and value of Shakespeare for a new digital audience. The platforms to which Indian Shakespeares are now gravitating allow us to explore issues of place in a more differentiated fashion even as they also provide opportunities for understanding the work of adaptation in its multiple regional manifestations.

Thus, Shakespeare on screen in the digital era invites us to rethink the articulation of the local and the global, digitisation rhyming with glocalisation.

The diversity and plurality of the 'local habitations' of Indian cinemas²⁰ over several decades, from 1949 to 2016, is conveyed in Poonam Trivedi's article, 'Framing Lear's fool in Indian films: "Doth any here know me?"', which focuses on three Indian films based on *King Lear*: *Gunasundari (Tale of the Virtuous Woman, 1949, Telugu)*, *Rui ka Bojh (Weight of Cotton, 1997, Hindi)*, and *Natsamrat (Actor King, 2016, Marathi)*. Zooming in on these three Indian Fools reveals how what precisely characterises the Fool is that he can never be 'framed' or reduced to one monolithic figure but calls for constant reconfigurations and 'dislocations', oscillating between the 'fabulist' and 'the acutely real or local'. The variegated titles of the three Indian versions under consideration, *Tale of the Virtuous Woman*, *Weight of Cotton*, and *Actor King*, are emblematic of the chameleon-like dimension of Shakespeare's scripts that seem to adapt to any milieu, to any filmic code or cultural tradition. Through the specific case of Indian films, Trivedi raises the issue of adaptations seen as 'Fakespeares', an expression that she borrows from Jim Casey's 2018 article,²¹ that is 'as simulacra, masks, several degrees removed from the "real" Shakespeare'. It is thanks to these 'Fakespeares' that today Shakespeare lives through what she identifies as 'global interculturality'.

Even more than cinema, television has been radically transformed by the digital. The move from cathode-ray tubes with their low resolution and colour-range limitations, to 4K ultra high-definition television sets with high-fidelity audio speakers, along with the change in screen format from 4/3 to 16/9, has allowed television programmes to look and be experienced like cinematic productions in aesthetic terms. In her article 'Shakespeare and the new discourses of television: quality, aesthetics and *The Hollow Crown*', Ramona Wray convincingly argues that one must acknowledge and situate 'the complexions of specific dramatic texts in all their stylistic and visual verve', mobilising a transnational approach that takes into account the fact that television productions can now be experienced on VOD platforms, out of their initial national contexts (and peritexts) of broadcasting. As part of *The Hollow Crown* television series, the adaptation of *Richard II* (dir. Rupert Goold, 2012) 'showcases evolving forms of technology, takes on board changing industrial contexts and pursues opportunities that have been made available by the digital universe'. The essay can be read as a call for scholars to explore television programmes as works of art in their own rights, identifying 'a distinctive style' and analysing, through close aesthetic reading, an 'imagistic and acoustic register' that achieves 'narrative intricacy and poetic responsiveness'.

With complex narration and poetics generally come intertextuality and reflexivity. Television series have become the new Shakespearean playground, as volumes such as Elisabeth Bronfen's *Serial Shakespeare: An Infinite Variety of Appropriations in American TV Drama*²² or Christina Wald's *Shakespeare's Serial Returns in Complex*

TV,²³ both published in 2020, testify. HBO's *Westworld* (2016–) is a television show that relies heavily not only on citations from Shakespeare's plays but also from works inspired by Shakespeare, such as Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985), an adaptation of *King Lear* as a Samurai film. The series' heroes are sentient androids whose palimpsestic memories and personalities are programmed and re-programmed with computer codes. As their self-awareness is notably triggered by a quote from *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's playtext is constructed as the way towards humanisation and emancipation. The digitalisation of Shakespeare's works is thus at the core of the show's story, fuelling the narrative progression. In his article 'Bring yourself back online, Old Bill: *Westworld's* media histories, or six degrees of separation from Shakespeare', Stephen O'Neill argues that the show not only advances a discourse of Shakespeare as posthuman but constitutes in itself a 'micro media history of Shakespeare', inviting fans to interact with the story through digital platforms and technologies. *Westworld* is thus at the centre of a constellation made of 'real' websites documenting the various institutions appearing in the show and of fan blogs and posts attempting to decipher the plot's intricacies. Shakespeare emerges, as O'Neill concludes, as both 'a figure of connectivity – between texts and their interpretive communities, between humans and technologies' and 'a figure of plenitude', proliferating in unexpected and fulfilling ways. This apt remark comes into fruitful dialogue with Reto Winckler's recent understanding of the adaptation phenomenon using computer science.²⁴ According to Winckler, the adapted text can be considered as a *source code* and the adaptation process as a more or less authorised *hacking* of this code, which updates the play (like a computer programme through operations of updating, forking, and porting) so that it 'works' better in new cultural and technological contexts. The adaptation can then itself be 'hacked' to give rise to other artistic works. For Winckler, the computer analogy is all the more useful since it allows Shakespearean scholars to reintroduce the notions of fidelity and filiation between Shakespeare's plays and their derivatives while affirming that the 'source' is not necessarily original or superior and that it was always there in the first place to be modified, reinterpreted, and adapted through cooperative work, Shakespeare having in fact always inherently been 'Fakespeare'. The playtext as source code even *depends* on these constant updates to continue to exist and remain relevant, just like what happens with open-source softwares. Winckler thus sees Shakespeare's plays as *sets of directives* to be 'executed' by theatre companies which will perform them, and as *source codes* from which many branches will stem.

As this postulate strives to reintroduce 'fidelity' in adaptation studies, it echoes Douglas Lanier's 2017 reflection on the frontier between 'Shakespeare' and 'not Shakespeare'. Lanier has argued that the source of any Shakespearean adaptation should be imagined as a *rhizome* composed of all previous Shakespearean motifs and adaptations: it is with this Shakespearean network, and not with a single original text, that a screen adaptation establishes a relationship of fidelity.²⁵ In this issue, Lanier contemplates the ideological implications of using the term 'screen'. Addressing the synergies in media due to digitalisation, scholars have progressively replaced the study of 'Shakespeare on film' by the study of 'Shakespeare on screen', just as the terms 'text' and 'performance' have superseded 'literature' and 'theatre' in order to meet the

demands of expanding academic fields. In a symptomatic way, the two versions of the Cambridge Companion, both edited by Russell Jackson, have reflected this shift: The 2000 *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* has morphed into the 2020 *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*. In a salutary way, Lanier's essay argues that the use of the word 'screen' may literally *screen* – in the sense of conceal and obscure – 'distinct viewing experiences and materialities of production'.

Surely a Shakespearean film cannot be studied in the same way as theatre streaming at home, which is the way theatres have found to avoid completely silencing and closing their performance spaces. Since its closure on Wednesday, 18 March 2020, The Globe Theatre has been exploring 'new ways to stay connected and share digital joy and wonder with you, our extended Globe family'. With the series of videos 'Love in Isolation', they invite famous actors to 'share some of the greatest words ever written by Shakespeare from their places of solitude and sanctuary'.²⁶ The National Theatre explains that theatre on screen 'is theatre for everyone any time, anywhere',²⁷ that it is 'Unmissable theatre, whenever you want it'. It invites spectators to 'Take a front row seat . . . from the comfort of your own home', 'And enjoy new plays every month', 'On all your favourite devices'.²⁸ The Royal Shakespeare Company, that has created the 'Sonnets in solitude' series of videos,²⁹ explains how to go 'from our place to yours' and 'How to watch online performances'. It provides 'A step by step guide of how you can enjoy our online performances at home on your TV, laptop or other device, with troubleshooting tips'. It is this variety of devices and modes of production and viewing that has transformed Shakespeare on screen into a digital forest. To tackle this forest, one needs to forge new differentiating tools of analysis. The impulse to abstract and smooth out the particularities of screens should, therefore, be avoided in order fully to assess and examine Shakespeare's remediation in this diversified digital era.

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Notes

1. See Michael Anderegg, 'Was it the First Shakespeare film? The Silent *King John*', *Shakespeare and Beyond*, Folger Shakespeare Library (27 November 2018), <https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2018/11/27/was-it-the-first-shakespeare-film-the-silent-king-john/> (accessed 5 May 2021).
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10. O'Neill, *Shakespeare and YouTube*.
11. Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan (eds), *Shakespeare and the Digital World. Redefining Scholarship and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
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