

Shakespeare Lives!:
Anniversary Revivals and Exhumations of Shakespeare

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Abstract

The British Council Project *Shakespeare Lives!* launched as part of the events celebrating the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death exemplifies the continuing investment in Shakespeare as a cultural brand and commodity. The project translates Shakespeare into contemporary culture, offering Instagram versions of his plays, "Mix the play" application in which users are invited to direct their own scenes from the original plays and short films, reinventing Shakespeare in a variety of forms and contexts. My major focus will be on these short video clips, each presenting a different perspective and investigating new thematic and formal possibilities inherent in Shakespeare's drama, ranging between self-referential deconstruction of race and intertextuality in *Othello*, the celebration of the comic and carnivalesque potential of *Hamlet*, the exploration of alternative/disabled corporealities in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, old age in *King Lear* or using the technique of the Manga cartoon to present Lady Macbeth's transformation in *Macbeth*. Referring to the concepts of spreadable media and digimodernism, my aim is to investigate how the British Council makes Shakespeare a spreadable commodity, combining the technologically advanced popular cultural aesthetics with a degree of updated yet re-circulated controversy and subversion. Such strategies involve, for example, the use of computer-generated imagery or cartoon techniques, kitsch aesthetics, the grotesque humour, on the one hand, and the problems of race, gender, old age or disability, on the other.

Keywords: *Shakespeare Lives!*, anniversary, digimodernism, race, disability

1. Introduction

The British Council Project *Shakespeare Lives!* launched as part of the events celebrating the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death exemplifies the continuing investment in Shakespeare as a cultural brand and commodity, or as Sonia Massai puts it "a successful logo or brand name" (2005: 4). Engaged in what in a series of questions Massai describes as "normative influence" and imposing "Western values over other cultural traditions and economies" (2005: 4), Shakespeare is certainly one of the tools of cultural globalization. Part of its effectiveness, however, derives from its flexibility and malleability, openness to appropriation, rewriting and revision, in other words – its paradoxical openness to locality (Massai 2005: 4-5). Shakespeare can also be approached as "an empowering resource which has allowed other sources to make themselves heard, to stake a claim to cultural centrality" (Chedgzoy qtd. in Massai 2005: 5). Referring to the cultural complexity of Shakespeare, Donald Hedrick and Bryan Reynolds propose to use the term of "Shakespace" to account for the interactions between "countless commercial, political, social, and cultural spaces" "stimulated, occupied and affected" by Shakespeare (2000: 8). Shakespace is thus still largely "an official territory", as Hedrick and Reynolds argue, "promot[ing] various organizational social structures that are discriminatory, hierarchical, or repressive", yet significantly, it is also a "transversal territory" in which various movements across conventions and outside dominant sociopolitical structures flourish (2000: 9). In the year 2000 Hedrick and Reynolds saw Shakespace as expanding into the twentieth century as a territory for these transversal movements. It is interesting to see how Shakespace has transformed over the recent years and what kind of collisions and movements were inspired by new technological opportunities made available in the twenty first century.

The recent decade has witnessed major intensifications in what Barbara Hodgson named as the Shakespeare trade (1996) or Daniel

Fischlin and Mark Fortier called the Shakespeare industry (2000: 16) occasioned by two significant celebrations: the 400th anniversary of his death (2016), preceded by the 450th anniversary of his birth (2014). The former in particular engages in keeping alive the workings of its trade by the continuing exhumations of what – as many would say – has never ceased to live. The anniversary celebrations are, by definition, realized in the official space and involve various cultural and academic structures and organizations. The contribution from the British Council, the organization and institution officially engaged in promoting British culture abroad, seems thus more than expected. Although undeniably part of official celebrations and thus engaged in the long lasting globalizing project, *Shakespeare Lives!* launched by the British Council in 2016 sets out to reach quite a different cultural territory from what can be called the usual Shakespace. The aim of this article is to investigate the strategies used by the creators of *Shakespeare Lives!* project, focusing on technological aspects of digimodernism and the transversal movements across the Shakespace sketched by the selected videos being part of the project.

2. Deadly/undead/ly Shakespeare

On the first pages of *The Empty Space* (1968), Peter Brook referred to Shakespeare as one of the model examples of the deadly theatre, the commercial, stagnated, repetitive experience devoid of intensity and offering no emotional or intellectual stimulation, writing that: “Of course nowhere does the Deadly Theatre install itself so securely, so comfortably and so slyly as in the works of William Shakespeare. The Deadly Theatre takes easily to Shakespeare” (1990: 12). He also suggests that part of that deadliness comes from the existence of a deadly spectator to whom “the right degree of boringness is a reassuring guarantee of a worthwhile event” (Brook 1990: 13).

As part of the celebrations of anniversary of Shakespeare’s death, the British Council project confronts the concept of the bard’s demise self-consciously and ironically. Capitalizing on the ambiguities

of deadly implications – including Peter Brook’s sense of the deadly theatre – the project plays with various notions of life and death of Shakespeare as a cultural icon and trademark. Although the official trailer’s commentary focuses on the straightforward promotion of its global cultural product by what could be described as advertising jargon, suppressing the local and complicated colonial/postcolonial cultural contexts, the attitude of the British Council project is perhaps more aptly captured in the image of Shakespeare as a zombie/ living dead brought back to life, problematising the nature of Shakespearian exhumations. With the intention of “bringing the UK’s number one cultural icon to everyone”, as the anniversary trailer in a form a Prezi presentation announces, *Shakespeare Lives!* translates Shakespeare into contemporary culture, offering Instagram versions of his plays, “Mix the play” application, in which users are invited to direct their own scenes from the original plays, and short films, reinventing Shakespeare in a variety of forms and contexts. Representing the current mainstream ways of transmedia storytelling and translating Shakespeare into the standard ways of exchanging information and creating cultural products, the project experiments with what McLuhan described as the relation between environment and anti-environment (see the section below). On the one hand, adjusting the original to the new ways of communicating involves radical changes of genre, length, emphasis, medium and meaning. On the other, using the new media to present Shakespeare challenges the assumptions of status, use and validity of popular Internet communication. The short video formula typical for the YouTube channel demands a radical interference with the original plays. Each film being part of the project presents a different perspective and investigates new thematic and formal possibilities inherent in Shakespeare’s drama, ranging between self-referential deconstruction of race and intertextuality in *Othello*, the celebration of the comic and carnivalesque potential of *Hamlet*, the exploration of alternative/disabled corporealities in *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream, old age in *King Lear* or using the technique of the Manga cartoon to present Lady Macbeth's transformation in *Macbeth*.

3. Technology, digimodernism, spreadable media and Shakespeare

According to Marshall McLuhan, “any new technology, any extension or amplification of human faculties when given material embodiment, tends to create a new environment” (1997: 110). The new environment is self-conscious and “anxious” (McLuhan 1997: 113) and “[t]he artist as a maker of anti-environments permits us to perceive that much is newly environmental and therefore most active in transforming situations” (1997: 114). All arts and sciences, when “acting in the role of anti-environments [...] enable us to perceive the environment” (McLuhan 1997: 111). Anything that changes the status of environment from low to high density, e.g. technological changes, turns the (old) environment into “an object of attention” (McLuhan 1997: 114). Transposing Shakespeare into short video films stylised to resemble films made by youtubers or an interactive game of staging your own scene from Shakespeare, is an anti-environment to Shakespeare as a classic. Simultaneously, Shakespeare provides the anti-environment exposing the way popular digital media and new communications are used to share a meaningful and “anxiously” relevant content.

The online global celebrations of Shakespeare's death anniversary can be considered as part what is called sometimes digimodernism (Alan Kirby) or digital culture (Charles Gere) and are connected with the concept of spreadable media (Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green). In contrast to the scholars who claim that the new media caused a radical change of the mode of thinking and contemporary culture, Charles Gere suggests that digital culture is a source not an effect of digital technology – that certain ways of thinking made this technology possible: “digital technology is a product of digital culture” (Gere 2002: 13). So digital culture is as much a product of technology as it is of “techno-scientific discourses, [...] avant-garde art practice, counter-cultural utopianism, critical theory

and philosophy" (Gere 2002: 14). It is interested in exploring questions of interactivity, multimedia, networks, telecommunications, information and abstraction, and the use of combinatorial and generative techniques (Gere 2002: 76).

These tendencies in arts were, as Gere argues, together with digital technologies – part of the same culture – “cybernetic culture” concerned with the questions of “interactivity, feedback, the relationship of organisms with their environment and the transmission and reception of information” (Gere 2002: 76) – a kind of proto-digital culture.

Henry Jenkins and Alan Kirby, on the other hand, emphasize the opposite directionality of the process – new technologies are seen as the source of the change in other spheres of life. Digimodernism described as “the twenty-first century's new cultural paradigm” (Kirby 2009: 1) involves a new form of textuality based on the “textual consumer's” active development and dissemination of a text (Kirby 2009: 51)¹. Digimodernist textuality is “characterized in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple authorship” (Kirby 2009: 1). Although *Shakespeare Lives!* films were produced by professional teams and feature professional actors and acknowledged artists, their format imitates the user generated youtube content, easily spreadable and consumable. Shakespeare thus becomes part of the easily spreadable culture, making “the bard” alive to the more regular Internet users. Henry Jenkins and others see the radical effects that the spreadable media exert on practically every aspects of life and culture: “the affordances² of digital media,” as Jenkins, Ford and Green argue,

¹ According to Kirby, “The digimodernist text in its pure form is made up to a varying degree by the reader or viewer or textual consumer [...] such a reader or viewer gives to the world textual content or shapes the development and progress of a text in visible form” (Kirby 2009: 51).

² The term originally used by James J. Gibson (1979) in the environmental context: “The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal,

provide a catalyst for reconceptualizing other aspects of culture, requiring the rethinking of social relations, the reimagining of cultural and political participation, the revision of economic expectations, and the reconfiguration of legal structures (Jenkins et al. 2013: 3).

Jenkins argues that "'Spreadability' refers to the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of contents than others", including the economic structures and available communication networks as well as the attributes of the very content that people wish to share (Jenkins et al 2013: 4). Making Shakespeare spreadable thus involves the use of new media technologies to enable its/his circulation, the readjustment of the already existing economic structures of the British Council, including the attributes that can encourage sharing and appealing to an audience that builds digital networks and exchanges content. In this context one of the most important strategies employed in *Shakespeare Lives!* short films is combining the technologically advanced popular cultural aesthetics with a certain degree of updated yet re-circulated controversy and subversion. Such strategies involve, for example, the use of computer-generated imagery or cartoon techniques, kitsch aesthetics, the grotesque humour, on the one hand, and the problems of race, gender, old age or disability, on the other.

The structure of *Shakespeare Lives!* short films resembles the one characteristic of music videos, adjusted to the requirements of fragmented and multiple viewing experience. The latter case results in the "multi-layered" structure of videos – each new viewing might reveal to the viewer a different possibility of interpretation or a new detail to re-integrate. Fragmented viewing experiences are connected with structuring the videos around the so called multiple hooks and repeated semiotic particles (Negus 1996: 95). They allow for the

what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. [...] It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment" (Gibson 1986: 127).

different “points of entry” (Jenkins 2006: 57) into the video, multiple moments that can attract the viewers’ attention (hooks), the possibility of resuming the act of watching at several points.

“Dear Mr Shakespeare” or “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, the short videos selected here for closer analysis, are structured around visual and auditory repetitions – similar frames from which new aspects are developed in short but dense strides. The fast changes of perspective, brief camera takes, fragmentariness, gaps in between the particles both encourage multiple viewing and permit the fragmented viewing experience, adding to their spreadability. They also address significant problems – of race and postcolonial identities and of transhumanism and disability – challenging the original but simultaneously testifying to its enduring relevance. The two videos selected here also engage the artists who are already part of the new – more easily spreadable – media and popular culture. Born in Kenya and living in Britain, Phoebe Boswell is an artist strongly visible on the internet; she combines traditional drawing and digital technologies in her art. Ashley Thomas, also known as Bashy, co-starring with her, is an actor and musician, whose “Black Boys” and other songs would be familiar to young audiences and relevant to the theme of race and racism. Viktoria Modesta, a bionic performance artist, fashion model, pop singer and song-writer, again belongs to figures strongly present in the new media. Her artistic projects challenge the ways of understanding identity and corporeality, while the director of the video, Sing J. Lee, combines his experience in music and art to produce technologically innovative videos and commercials. The decision to engage artists whose art runs across traditional divisions between cultural spaces and media redefines the audience, status and cultural significance of this relatively new area of Shakespace.

4. “Dear Mr Shakespeare”/ *Othello*

“Dear Mr Shakespeare”, inspired by *Othello* and written by a visual artist and filmmaker Phoebe Boswell, starring also Ashley

Thomas (mentioned above) explores the issues of race and gender, the topics already highlighted in a number of *Othello* adaptations and rewritings. The film seems to play with the condition of exhaustion and unabating relevance, exposing its own repetitiveness through meta-commentary and cross-references to history and culture through the means of spreadable sources, such as youtube and cliffsnotes. It is a self-reflexive and self-conscious comment on the continuity and notoriousness of the racial issue in Shakespeare. In the monotonous song-like recitation, the film presents the contradiction of accusation (of racism) and celebration (of race) and the paradoxes of building a character who is denied his identity. The figure is constructed through racist imagery but given complexity and dignity in the contemporary rewriting of the scene 3 Act one - of Othello's testimony before the Senate, which is recited twice in the film and which reaches, according to the speaker, "way way down deep in the migratory soul":

I only told her my stories of the places I've been,
Of the trauma, the drama, the things that I've seen.
The faraway, the exotic, it all seeped into her heart,
That's the only voodoo I do, you can't keep us apart.³

Arguably, the most innovative part of the film is the use of charcoal drawing combined with digital animation, which is particularly effective in exploring the concepts of blackness, otherness and fear. By juxtaposing the two characters, the film examines the shifts in positionality between the subject and the object, the artist and the model, the real person and the animated figure, Shakespeare as a male canonical playwright and Boswell as a female, brown-skinned non-canonical artist, the master and the slave, to name only some of them.

The use of charcoal is particularly important in exposing the difference between colours and their perceptions. This is explored in the contrast between the model and the drawing, animated into an

³ <http://blog.shakespearesglobe.com/post/151468149693>.

obscure figure - darker, blacker, more devillish, nightmarish, dangerous, animalistic, or subhuman than the prototype - playing to, and em-bodying at the same time, the racist preconceptions penetrating the original text (see the discussion in *Race in William Shakespeare's Othello*). The animated figure of an intensely black man seems to represent an image deformed by the racist fear of the Other. Invisible to the artist, mocking her with his convoluted body, strange gestures, incongruent movements, speechlessness, and grotesque submissive gaze, the figure is a reminder of the past, slavery, humiliation, rejection, subalterning. It represents a shadow that always follows people with black heritage even if they are no longer underprivileged or silenced. The final scream, first presented as a part of animated charcoal drawing and then enacted by the black actor, is a silent one (cf. Spivak 2003), inaudible yet dramatically intensive and exaggerated to resemble the lion's roar rather than the silent scream of the famous painting by Edvard Munch ("The Scream" 1893). By activating the negative associations with subhumanity or animalism, the film reclaims the attributes of blackness as power. The similar effect is produced by the layer of charcoal on the artist's hands, visible throughout the film and exposed by their contrast with the evening dress she is wearing. Symbolically, the more she is engaged in artistic creation, the blacker and "dirtier" she becomes; the charcoal on her body - and the fact that it can spread on other - might be seen as a symbolic representation of the reclamation of the cultural power of blackness and a commentary on the relativity and constructedness of difference and race.

5. "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

"A Midsummer Night's Dream", co-devised and performed by Viktoria Modesta, a bionic artist, singer, dancer and model, uses the possibilities offered by digital technologies to explore the questions of corporeality, disability, the transhumanist relation between the body and the machine, as well as natural and digital realities. The tricks

played on Titania in Shakespeare's play by magic are replaced here with digitally generated three-dimensional projections and simulations. The original comic confusion of identities based on class and taste inversion is replaced with the less obvious and partly ambiguous suggestion of falling in love with one's own reproduced image - the meaning which is not necessarily apparent in the first experience of watching the film⁴. The narcissistic fascination is simultaneously very corporeal and disembodied since the whole story within the story is happening as part of simulated reality experienced by Titania, whose brain and body are connected to various technological appliances. Digital futuristic imagery and the narcissistic theme offer a significant commentary on the perception of disability and the prosthetic body, on self-acceptance and transformative and performative possibilities open to the amputee artist. In this respect the video subverts some of the discourses developed around disability - medical, moral, biological or social - focusing instead on the affirmative model, seeing disability as an identity and power⁵. Playing with the notions of gaze and stare⁶, the video reshuffles the power dynamics of being looked at and control over gaze.

Being quite similar to her other music videos, Viktoria Modesta's film possesses the features of an easily spreadable and reusable product. While offering the simple narrative based on a scene from Shakespeare's play, the film can also function as a regular music video with the elements of choreography and dance, a love story in the background, and rather simple but stylistically consistent music. The

⁴ These interpretations were mentioned in an interview by Michael Levin, published in Huffington Post, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michaellevin/viktoria-modesta-not-your_b_12428166.html.

⁵ See the discussion on models and discourses of disability and their implications for understanding disability in Lewis (2006) and the comments on the affirmation model in Swain and French (2000).

⁶ For the explanation of the difference between the two see Garland-Thompson (2009).

intertextual references of the film can lead to a number of more complex interpretations related to gender, race (Bottom is a black cybernetic figure), corporeality and freedom, and exploring the relation between humans and machines. This film in particular received comments from confused viewers not knowing how to classify it, which actually was interpreted as a proof of its success: the aim of the project was, as the artists say, to “do away with what has come before” (interview by Michael Levin).

Conclusions

In his *An ABC of Contemporary Reading* (1977) devoted to vanguard tendencies in art, Richard Kostelanetz - quoting Ezra Pound - saw experiment as a matter of survival: “Willingness to experiment is not enough, but unwillingness to experiment is mere death” (Pound qtd. in Kostelanetz 1977: 344). The *Shakespeare Lives!* project certainly keeps both Shakespeare and his art alive by subverting what most of the theatre and drama audience and readers would be waiting for as part of the official celebrations launched by the British Council, setting out to meet the expectations of the younger digitally literate generation instead.

By filtering his works through the 21st century digital and new media technologies and addressing currently valid issues and problems, *Shakespeare Lives!* seems to succeed in lowering the “degree of boringness” in Shakespeare and increasing the levels of attention and anxiety. However, the project might intensify the feelings of tiredness and exhaustion as well as the impression of deadliness of the now well-established digital media. With the omnipresence of transmedia storytelling and other forms of transmediality, the project’s forays into the new cultural and technological space might pass unnoticed in the flood of similar events and marketing strategies.

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