Old plays, new narratives: fan production of new media texts from broadcast theatre.

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ABSTRACT

When a theatrical performance is digitally broadcast live to cinemas, the limitations of temporal and spatial specificity are removed and the theatrical experience is simultaneously opened up to a wider audience and inherently altered. One such production, *Coriolanus* (Donmar Warehouse, 2013-14), starring an actor with a particularly enthusiastic online fan community, was broadcast to cinemas by National Theatre Live where fans recorded it on digital devices, extracted clips and produced animated gifs, which they captioned to reinterpret the play, sharing them online, removed from their original context. The transformation of theatre texts to cinemas to social media platforms raises exciting questions related to how fans interact with culture both as consumers and as producers of new media texts. How do the different transformations (technical and actively fan-produced) affect both the narrative and the cultural experience? How do new texts function as surrogates for, and extensions of, the 'official' narrative, as well as new interactive narratives in their own right? This paper addresses these questions in the context of as specific theatrical event as it crossed the boundary from a live, co-located experience into first cinema, then interactive hypertexts and memes. Drawing on theories of fandom and participatory culture, as well as post Web 2.0 analysis of Internet behaviours, the paper examines fan production of new media texts and how they both transmit and transform the source narrative via interpretation, re-interpretation, and misinterpretation.

BROADCAST theatre as a transmedia narrative

When a live event is filmed and broadcast to remote audiences, the very nature of

the cultural experience is changed. In the case of National Theatre Live (NT Live),

the process of filming a play and its transmission via satellite to multiple cinemas is

sometimes described in terms of 'stage to screen' or as a conversion from a theatrical

form to a cinematic one. However, whilst the technology of delivery of any cultural

product most certainly affects the content, it is problematic to consider live

broadcasts within a cinematic framework. With their live broadcasts, NT Live aims

to emulate the ephemeral, communal experience of theatre in the cinema, however it

is acknowledged that the cultural experience is not a simulacrum of theatre, but an

experience which is enhanced in some ways and inferior in others (NESTA, 2011).

These broadcasts are neither theatrical nor cinematic and instead fit closely into the

post-cinematic framework outlined by Steven Shaviro in his 2010 book, *Post-*

Cinematic Affect. Shaviro notes the radical difference between indexical cinematic

space which seeks to simply document a live event and a highly constructed "post-

cinematic mediasphere" of a cultural product that spans several forms of delivery

(p.67). NT Live events are widely advertised before the screening, through a

combination of print and digital media comprising posters, flyers, trailers,

interviews, production photos, rehearsal photos, and behind-the-scenes articles. This

publicity (intended to build an audience for the remote screening, which takes place

towards the end of the theatrical run) sits alongside the play's *epitext*, that is, the

usual apparatus of the theatre industry including publicity and reviews from the

performances that have already taken place. The live screenings contain a mixture of

advertising, still images of the play the audience is about to see, textual information

about the play and the cast, live footage of the audience in the actual theatre space,

pre-recorded documentary, live interviews, and of course, the play itself. The

advertising varies from screening to screening and is typically focussed on future NT

Live broadcasts, or plays by the same theatre company which are not being broadcast, however, screenings can also include advertising for live broadcasts from museums (e.g. British Museum, 2014) and a combined screen advert/mobile app which encourages users to "play along with the big screen" on their phones to earn rewards (CiniMe, 2014).
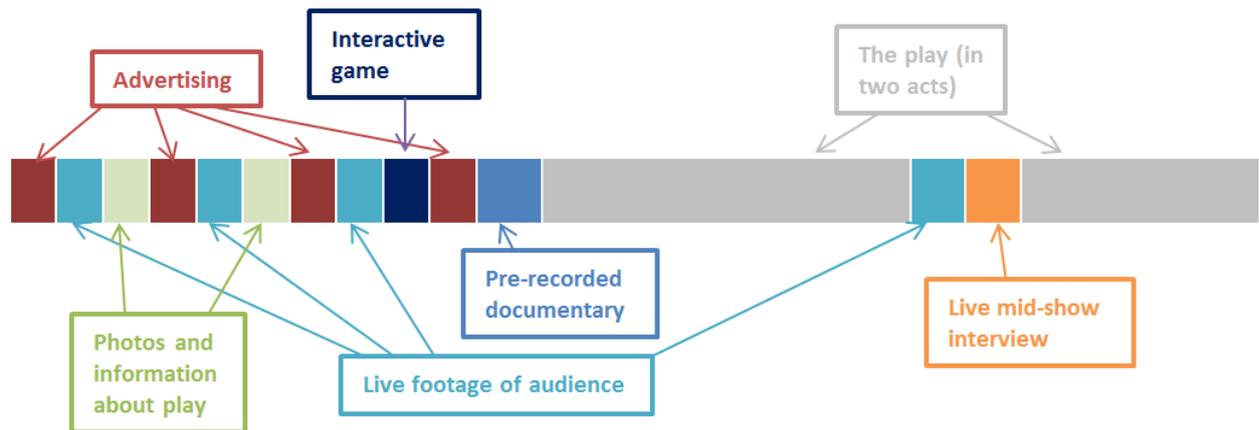

Figure 1 - simplified structure of NT Live broadcast of Coriolanus, 30th January 2014

Like live broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera (2014) before it, an NT Live screening conforms closely with the 'Super Bowl Dramaturgy' framework identified by Paterson and Stevens (2013), which compares the strategies of televised live sports events to the live broadcast of theatre. This model is inherently hypermedial, post-cinematic, and self-reflexive. Audience is used to convey a sense of place and liveness whilst liveness and authenticity are themselves complicated by attempts to capture them, and the live event is itself shaped by the process of broadcasting it. The remediation of theatrical events into a contemporary "media ecology" (Shaviro, 2010, p.7) itself creates a new cultural product with a new narrative, without any sense of hierarchy between the different sources of the content (for example, pre-

recorded documentary and live interviews placed alongside the onstage content). Furthermore, the surrounding context of the live screenings (with all the extra material screened alongside the play) and the epitext (for example pre-show teasers and discussions amongst communities) adds to the extension of this narrative far beyond the original play. Therefore, to consider NT Live broadcasts as theatrical, cinematic, or even televisual would be to misunderstand the ways in which these structures create an extended narrative across many media, platforms, and communities.

The contemporary masters of the transmedia narrative are Marvel. The Marvel multiverse is a shared fiction comprising the mainstream Marvel universe alongside all its variations and parallels from Marvel media, most significantly comics and films but also including toys, videogames, television, roleplaying games and more. Each new official narrative from Marvel is designed to take its place within the Marvel multiverse and contribute towards the overall transmedia narrative. Three films from the Marvel cinematic universe were instrumental in the growing celebrity of actor Tom Hiddleston who played Loki in *Thor* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), and *Thor: The Dark World* (2013). Hiddleston quickly became a firm fan favourite and examples of fan production featuring Loki (including fanfiction, artwork, memes, and remixed content from the films) is common in Marvel fan communities. When Hiddleston was cast as the title character in the Donmar Warehouse production of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in 2013 (which was to be broadcast by NT Live) it was in

the context of a large number of big-name stars playing Shakespearean characters on stage in London (*cf.* Madison, 2014) and the Donmar were keen to emphasise his (considerable) Shakespearean credentials, presumably to dissuade accusations of 'star casting'. Nevertheless, a large number of Hiddleston-as-Loki fans were attracted to *Coriolanus* precisely because of the actor's involvement and this community of audience members are not only enthusiastic and social media savvy, but also active consumers and producers of cultural content related to their favourite actors--no matter what the role. Marvel fans tend to be expert readers of transmedia narratives and as stated by Jenkins, "Fans have always been early adopters of new media technologies: their fascination with fictional universes often inspires new forms of cultural production […] Fans are the most active segment of the media audience, one that refuses to accept simply what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants" (2006, p.135). Fan production related to *Coriolanus* began before the play opened, sharing and remixing official publicity which continued throughout Dec 2014-Jan 2015 whilst the performances of the play in London inspired reviews and commentary (from fans who could attend) and jealousy (from those who could not). During this time, buoyed by both official publicity and fan engagement, anticipation of the NT Live broadcast grew. Notably, this play conformed to the pattern of televised sporting events in that, despite widening access to the mediatised version to a much greater audience, this created a heightened sense of prestige and exclusivity for tickets to the 'in the flesh' event (*cf.* Paterson & Stevens, 2013, p.158).

Immediately following the NT Live broadcast on 30th January 2014, fan production

focussed on reactions and reviews of the play itself, alongside (and relatively swiftly

subsumed by) remixes of images and clips from the high quality live stream which

had been shared illegally online. Active reading of a transmedia narrative "sustains

a depth of experience that motivates more consumption" (Jenkins, 2006, p.98) and

teasers from both fans and NT Live were instrumental in driving up demand for

access to *Coriolanus* in any (and all) forms. The level of demand is demonstrated by

the insistence of fan requests for a DVD of the play to be released (not a product

which currently forms part of the NT Live distribution model) and the, largely

unapologetic, sharing of illegal copies of the live stream. The transmedia nature of

this text itself contributes to the sense of fan entitlement to access and participation,

ironically reflecting the theme present in Shakespeare's text (and explicitly

mentioned in the pre-play documentary which formed part of the screening) that

Coriolanus, by engaging with the people, becomes himself public property.

NEW narratives

Whilst some fan sharing of content from the live stream of *Coriolanus* appears to

serve as a relatively simple surrogate for attending an official (but ephemeral)

screening in a cinema (clips and links to the full live stream are prevalent on various

social media sites, despite evidence of the removal of some due to copyright claims

by NT Live), the majority of examples move beyond simple sharing into the realm of

creative production, using the live stream as the basis of content. Fan production can be considered in three main categories: summarising and interpreting the narrative; sampling the original and separating elements of content into standalone cultural objects; and using the live broadcast as inspiration for wholly original content.

SUMMARISING and re-interpreting *Coriolanus*

A summary of the play is provided by Tumblr user Daasgrrl (2014) which simultaneously distils the narrative down to a concise but very accurate 23 lines of dialogue whilst also wryly commenting on the fan complaints to many posted reviews that they were giving away the ending: her summary begins with a warning: "Contains spoilers for a 400-year-old play". Numerous other fans post pseudo-reviews with very personal interpretations, often explicitly acknowledging and linking different fandoms (in addition to Hiddleston, the play also starred Mark Gatiss and Alfred Enoch, familiar to many viewers from *Sherlock* and *Harry Potter* respectively, each of which has its own extremely active fandom (Fauchelevant, 2014)).

Reinterpretations of the narrative also appear in non-textual forms, for example youtube videos comprising re-edits of the *Coriolanus* live stream that focus on one aspect of the story with a complementary pop song soundtrack (e.g. Broadwayluver222, 2014)--a form popular with Loki fans. Fan remix videos typically aim to use music to heighten the emotional (or comedic) impact of a re-edited

sequence of visuals, which emphasise or comment on a particular aspect of the narrative (*cf.* Russo & Coppa, 2012). However, by far the most popular format for fan production from *Coriolanus* is the animated gif. This format has been a mainstay of social media for some time but only recently has become the subject of serious study. A MIT Media Lab research project called *Mapping the Emotional Language of gifs* provides the following definition: "An animated gif is a magical thing. It contains the power to convey emotion, empathy, and context in a subtle way that text or emoticons simply can't." (Rich & Hu, 2014). One re-interpretation uses a series of gifs from single scene within the play to represent the overall theme of Coriolanus' relationship with his mother, Volumnia.

Figure 2 - series of edited images from *Coriolanus* (animated versions available from hiddleslokid, 2014)

This playful series combines still images subtitled with direct quotes from the text of the play with animated gifs that reinterpret a central conflict into the language of social media--in the third panel, Volumnia throws up her arms in anger and the caption spells out "ASFGHJKL!!!" As a representative of both the scene and a major overall theme of the narrative, this sequence is extremely effective in its translation of both narrative and emotional meaning across media platforms.

CREATING standalone cultural objects

Other forms of fan production eschew the translation of meaning from the original

narrative in favour of a fragmentation of the live stream into separate, standalone

cultural objects. These can take the form of single moments, sampled and edited

from the live stream, or as a collection of different gifs, related not to the meaning of

the narrative but to the curatorial preferences of the poster (for one example see

hard-on-for-hiddleston, 2014a). The technological characteristics of animated gifs

create a particular aesthetic. Firstly, they are silent, separating visuals from the

meaningful dialogue of the play. This, in itself, invites creative captioning to reinvent

meaning (although some examples are sampled from a captioned version of the live

stream, with the subtitles preserved by the fans). Secondly, animated gifs are limited

by technological apparatus used to create and display them. Some graphics

programs have a limit on the number of frames that can be included, and even

where this does not exist, the size of a file intended for online delivery via blog posts

creates a functional limit for the number of frames that can be included for a

reasonable download rate. Furthermore, it is extremely rare for browsers to display

the frames of an animated gif at a rate that matches the original video. The

dimensions of an animated gif are also limited by considerations of file size and the

width of the content pane in the intended delivery platform. A common result of

these technological characteristics is the creation and sharing of animated gifs which

tend to be small-sized images with under thirty frames, which typically play slower

than the original frame rate, on an infinite loop. Furthermore, fan production on blog

sites such as Tumblr, tends to include multiple animated gifs within one post,

arranged in sequence like the frames of a comic book.

Figure 3 - animated sequence showing fragmenting the live stream at micro-level (live stream by NT LIVE (2014), image sequence by fromhiddleswithlove (2014))

This fragments the live stream at a micro level, presenting a series of slow motion elements which demand close attention and emphasise the visual aesthetic of the scene. Sequences of this form are typically focussed on Hiddleston's face or body, emphasising visual pleasure over narrative meaning. Sequences of a scene where Coriolanus washes his wounds are particularly common as derivative works sampled from the live stream of the broadcast. Interestingly, this comic book aesthetic (frames separated by white space, as demanded by the technological characteristics of sequential animated gifs) is sometimes incorporated into a single image itself (e.g. compare hard-on-for-hiddleston, 2014b & 2014c).

Figure 4 - single animated gif showing added frames (hard-on-for-hiddleston, 2014c)

It is not unusual for fandoms to focus on gay relationships ('slash') in creative production as the treatment of the kiss between Coriolanus and his enemy Aufidius

at the beginning of the second half of the broadcast demonstrates. Captioned images and uncaptioned animated gifs of this moment were widely circulated on various social media platforms. Separated from its narrative context and used as a stand-alone cultural product, "The Kiss" (as it quickly became known across the fandom) was often misunderstood. The scene in the play showed a wary Coriolanus slightly disbelieving of events and his awkwardness provokes humour from the audience. As a separate, fan-produced artefact, the kiss is generally presented and read in a much more 'slashy' context. Examples show the livestream cut down to a clip which does not show Coriolanus' reaction but does include the audience laughing (I_am_tony_stark 2014), cropped and edited to remove part of the body language context and without sound (Queen-and-colfer 2014) and posted with explicit titillated reaction gifs (Tom-nippleston 2014). New meanings are derived from these works that were not present in the scene and a more overtly slash interpretation is deliberately promoted (even where other posts demonstrate that the producers are well aware of the original context for the kiss).

ORIGINAL cultural content inspired by *Coriolanus*

Coriolanus also inspires original content, often emphasising and developing the slash relationship between Coriolanus and Aufidius or mixing the fiction of the play with ficitonalised reality. A popular fanfiction site, http://archiveofourown.org/, shows nearly 400 fanfics about Coriolanus of which over half were written or updated since the Donmar Warehouse production opened in December 2013 and Hiddleston's

Coriolanus is heavily featured in original art posted on http://www.deviantart.com/, the majority of which is clearly created from official publicity photographs from the Donmar production, or still images from the NT Live live stream. Original art posted within the Hiddleston fandom on Tumblr focusses on the slash relationship.

TUMBLR and spreadability

A large feature of fan production is the way it is shared and curated across social media. Tumblr is home to a particularly active Hiddleston fandom, amongst a variety of other media fan communities and their creative activity. Rather than a blogging platform, Tumblr focusses on short-form 'microblogging' and as such the technological framework foregrounds sharing (reblogging) and annotation over long-form original content (*cf.* Fink & Miller, 2013). Tumblr mechanisms for approval and sharing also appear more similar to fanfic sites such as http://archiveofourown.org/ (Notes; Likes/Kudos; Reblog/Share) than to long-form blogging platforms or other popular social media. This focus on sharing and curation is apparent in many of the accounts which explicitly display their fandoms in their usernames and descriptions, with users acting as collectors and redistributors of fan-produced works, as well as participating in creative production themselves. Henry Jenkins refers to this type of content as 'spreadable'.

> " "Spreadability" refers to the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of a media text that might appeal to a community's motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes."
> (Jenkins, 2013, p.4)

The concepts of spreadability and 'stickiness' can be usefully applied to fan production of cultural products derived from unauthorised sharing of a live theatre broadcast. A theatre play is 'sticky' content in that it, by necessity, co-locates its audience in one time and place to consume that content. Whilst NT Live broadcasts remove the necessity for the audience to be co-located in just one particular venue, they emulate the scarcity model of theatre and strongly retain a appointment-based broadcast distribution method. Fan produced content, on the other hand, is driven by strong engagement with the media text, widely distributed within a sense of shared fandom, and enhanced by the technological characteristics of its delivery platform. It is easily discovered, available for free and on-demand, shared and collected with trivial effort, and evocative of the wider social structures that make production and sharing pleasurable. The tension between the authorised 'sticky' model of *Coriolanus* and the unofficial 'spreadable' content is keenly felt in both the fandom, who wish for further access to high quality cultural products, and NT Live itself, which resists the free, on-demand model in favour of an ephemeral, communal cultural experience.

As Jenkins notes (2013, p.27) spreading material literally and figuratively remakes it, creating new narratives for new purposes, and this process changes the perceptions of media consumption and production. As the above examples demonstrate, fan-produced works interpret, develop, misrepresent, and re-create the authorised

narrative of *Coriolanus.* However, whilst fan remixing of cultural content existed

long before the digital age, it is also clear that the very mechanisms of distribution

also contribute to the reconstruction of narratives, and that this is not only the

domain of fan producers. Microblogging, animated gifs, and social media apparatus

all affect the cultural products that they deliver, but the reframing of *Coriolanus* as a

transmedia narrative began long before its appropriation by fans. NT Live's process

of conversion of a theatre text into a hypermedial form, and its delivery within a

highly constructed surrounding context, creates a cultural experience which resists

stickiness and contributes to demand for both spreadable content and the right to

participate in the production of new narratives. The tensions between these models

of distribution go far beyond issues of economics and piracy, they are embedded

within the media form itself.

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