

## Old Plays, New Narratives

### Fan Production of New Media Texts from Broadcast Theatre <sup>3</sup>

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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 a specific theatrical event as it crossed the boundary from a live, collocated experience first into cinema and then into interactive hypertexts and memes. Drawing on theories of fandom and participatory culture, as well as post-Web 2.0 analyses of Internet behaviours, the paper examines fan production of new media texts and how they both transmit and transform

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the source narrative via interpretation, re-interpretation, and misinterpretation.

### Introduction

#### Broadcast theatre as a transmedianarrative

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 a 'stage to screen' transformation 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 that 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 that seeks to simply document a live event and a highly constructed "post-cinematic mediasphere" of a cultural product that spans several forms of delivery (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 focused 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 (CineMe, 2014).

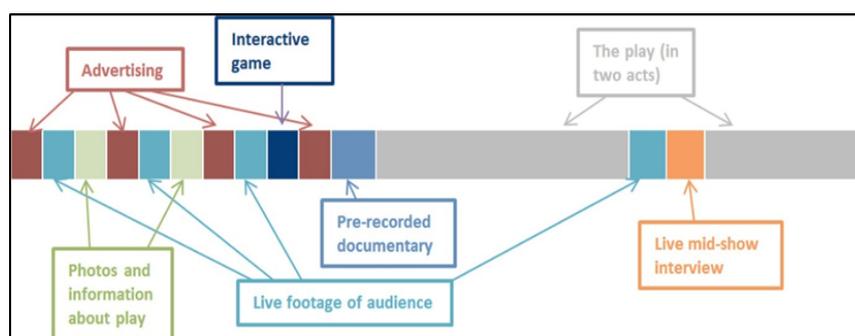


Fig. 1: Simplified structure of NT Live broadcast of *Coriolanus*, 30<sup>th</sup> Jan 2014

Like live broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera (2014) before it, an NT Live screening (see Fig. 1) 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 broadcastof 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, 2010,7) 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 theextension of this narrative far beyond the original play. Therefore, to consider NT Live broadcasts as theatrical, cinematic, or eventelevisual would be to misunderstand the waysin 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 fan fiction, artwork, memes, and remixed content from the films) are 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 producers were keen to emphasize 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, 135). Fan production related to *Coriolanus* began before the play opened, sharing, and remixing official publicity, which continued throughout December 2014 and January 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, the 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 mediatized 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 and Stevens, 2013, 158).

Immediately following the NT Live broadcast on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014, fan production focused 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, 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 that 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. The fan production can be considered in three main categories: summarizing 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.

### **Summarizing and re-interpreting *Coriolanus***

A summary of the play is provided by Tumblr user Daasgrl (2014); it distills the narrative down to a concise but very accurate 23 lines of dialogue whilst also wryly commenting on the fan complaints that many reviews posted online were giving away the play's ending – her summary begins with a warning: "Containsspoilers 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., Broadwaylover222, 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 emphasizes or comments on a particular aspect of the narrative (cf. Russo and 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 it become the subject of serious study. An 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 and Hu, 2014). One re-interpretation uses a series of gifs from a single scene within the play to represent the overall theme of Coriolanus' relationship with his mother, Volumnia (see Fig. 2).

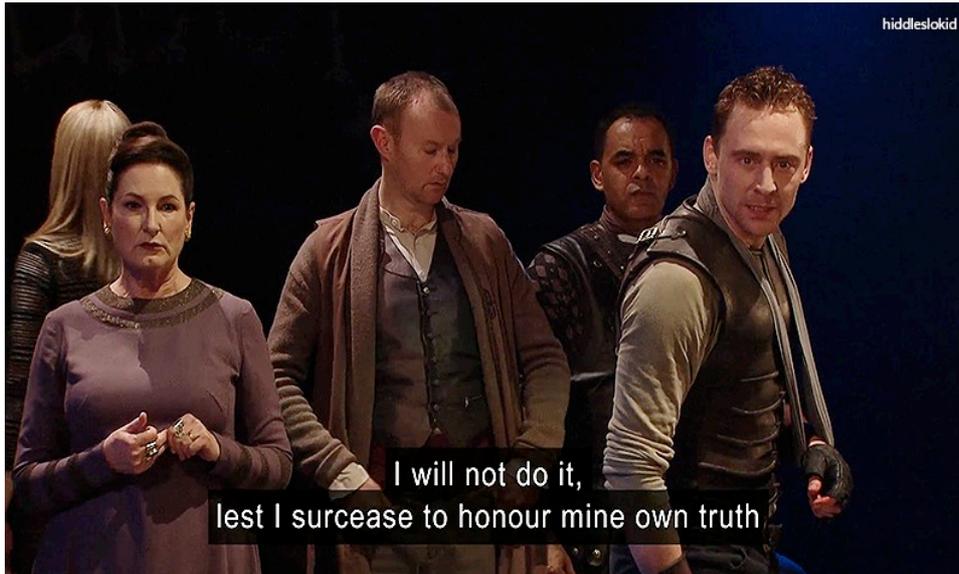




Fig. 2: series of edited images from *Coriolanus* (animated versions available from hiddleslokid, 2014)

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 livestream into separate, standalone cultural objects. These can take the form of single moments, sampled and edited from the live stream, or 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 the 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 limit 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 (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: animated sequence showing fragmenting the live stream at micro-level (live stream byNT LIVE (2014), image sequence by from *hiddles with love* (2014))

This fragments the live stream at a micro level, presenting a series of slow-motion elements that demand close attention and emphasize the visual aesthetic of the scene. Sequences of this form are typically focused on Hiddleston's face or body, emphasizing 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 and 2014c) (see Fig. 4).



Fig. 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 artifact, the kiss is generally presented and read in a much more 'slashy' context. Examples show the live stream cut down to a clip that does not show Coriolanus' reaction but includes the audience laughing (I\_am\_tony\_stark 2014), cropped and edited to remove part of the body language context, 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 emphasizing and developing the slash relationship between Coriolanus and Aufidius or mixing the fiction of the play with fictionalized reality. A popular fan fiction

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; Hiddleston's *Coriolanus* is also 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 from still images from the NT Live live stream. Original art posted within the Hiddleston fandom on Tumblr focuses 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 focuses 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/> (featuring Notes; Likes/Kudos; Reblog/Share), rather than to long-form blogging platforms or other popular social media. This focus on sharing and curation is apparent in many of the accounts that 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, 4)

The concepts of spreadability and 'stickiness' can be usefully applied to fan production of cultural products derived from unauthorized 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 an 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 authorized 'sticky' model of *Coriolanus* and the unofficial 'spreadable' content is keenly felt in both the fan activities that 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, 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 authorized 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 that resists ~~it~~ and contributes to demand 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, and they are embedded within the media form itself.

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