

“Cut me to pieces”

Shakespeare, fandom, and the fractured narrative

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Abstract— This paper considers the tensions and interactions between a classic play, its modern staging and live broadcast, and its playful reinterpretation by fans via social media platforms such as Tumblr. In the context of cultural theory and organizational policy, the live broadcast of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* is shown to be a complex, fractured, transmedial cultural experience with significant implications for its live theatrical and broadcast audiences, as well as online audiences drawn from the fan base of its lead actor. Examples of fan production are shown to extend and reinterpret the core narrative, further fracturing the narrative across unofficial platforms and creating new, interactive cultural experiences.

Keywords—theatre, live broadcast, NT Live, Shakespeare, digital, interactive, narrative, fandom

Towards the end of the Donmar Warehouse theatrical production of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, the title character, outnumbered by enemies, throws down his sword and exclaims “Cut me to pieces!” [1] (A5:Sc6:L3953). Across the world, that’s exactly what happened. National Theatre Live (NT Live) broadcast this performance live to cinemas where fans not only watched but recorded it on handheld devices, extracted clips and silent animated gifs, recaptioned and reinterpreted them, shared them on social networking sites, and reposted them, often without context.

Coriolanus [2] starred Tom Hiddleston in the title role, an actor with a particularly enthusiastic and active online fan community. Despite a legacy of Shakespearean roles both on stage and screen, it is clear from usernames that the majority of Hiddleston’s twitter and Tumblr fans were introduced to him via his role as Loki in blockbuster films *Thor* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), and *Thor: The Dark World* (2013). *Coriolanus* was of interest to these audience members precisely because of Hiddleston’s involvement and the fandom demonstrated clear demand for cultural consumption of this actor in this role before the performance opened, throughout its run, and after the live performances ended. Pre-performance activity focussed around sharing, remixing, and producing original content from official posters and videos released by Donmar and NT Live as teasers for the play; sharing enthusiasm or jealousy around access to tickets (tickets sold out on the first day); and, as it was many fans’ first exposure to NT Live, understanding the mechanism for the wider delivery of

the live broadcast (e.g. one commenter asked “What channel will it be aired on?” [3]). As the run progressed, fan activity included reviews both of the play and of the experience of seeing Hiddleston (onstage or at the stage door), sharing of photos taken during the play, reflexive debate and criticism of some fan behaviour which breached rules of etiquette, and a building anticipation and excitement of the live broadcast (including the incredible lengths that some fans were willing to travel to their nearest participating cinema, seemingly worn as a badge of honour). Immediately following the NT Live broadcast on 30th January 2014, fan production focussed on reactions and reviews of the play itself, alongside remixing and reimagining images and clips from the high quality live stream which had been shared illegally online and, later, original fiction inspired by the play.

In the past five years, NT Live has broadcast over twenty theatrical productions live, and ‘as-live’, into cinemas around the world. Research into the NT Live experimental pilots notes the importance of social media as discovery platforms for creative content and acknowledges that the “experiential goods” produced by live performance are complex to translate digitally [4] (p.1). NT Live swiftly moved from thinking of live broadcasts as a surrogate for the theatre experience to understanding them as a separate and different cultural product [5] (pp.8-9). I attended two NT Live broadcasts of *Coriolanus*, one in Glasgow (UK) on 30th January 2014 and the ‘as live’ Encore screening in Falkirk on 11th March. Encore screenings are broadcast exactly the same as the live version and therefore contain all the same interviews and extras, however the advertising and surrounding context can change.

Both screenings opened with a looped series of adverts for other NT Live screenings and other (non-broadcast) productions upcoming from the Donmar Warehouse. These were intercut with written snippets of information about the play and the cast alongside rehearsal and production photos of the play we were about to see, as well as live footage from the Donmar of the audience assembling for the live production. Showing footage of the audience is becoming a standard aesthetic choice for screen directors of live broadcasts [6]. There followed an interactive advert and a superlative-laden onstage speech from NT Live presenter Emma Freud. It primarily consisted of describing upcoming NT Live shows before introducing a short film introducing the Donmar Warehouse and their production of *Coriolanus* [2].

This information, advertising, and interactivity blurs the borders of *Coriolanus* as a narrative. The play is placed firmly in its context as a Donmar production, an NT Live broadcast, and a 'cultural experience'. Although less emphasis was placed on the delivery mechanism of the broadcast than in previous NT Live productions, the screening was also clearly established as an innovative technical experience.

The short film which preceded the play further blurred the boundaries of the discrete narrative. It mixed archive footage with behind the scenes footage of makeup being applied to Hiddleston to introduce the title "The people must have their voices" [1] (A:2, Sc2, L:1395) and included interviews with actors, the director, and set designer to reflect on their decisions about staging the play and its relevance to modern times. Some of this footage had already been released in the trailers available from the NT Live website [7] and the documentary enhances an understanding of *Coriolanus* as a play and the context of its production, whilst, again, using images of the set and actors the audience is about to see in the play itself.

The transition from this (pre-recorded) documentary into the (live) play is particularly interesting. The end of the documentary showed the large window shutters of the Donmar being closed, this blackness faded up to an image of the stage, onto which a boy begins to paint a red line. Partly due to the pre-empting of images of the stage, and also that the scene is accompanied by the same non-diegetic music that was used in the documentary, it was not immediately clear that the screening had now moved from pre-recorded content to the live broadcast. This particular directorial choice reinforces the impression that this performance event was not just about *Coriolanus* the play, but about the overall experience of cultural consumption. The trailers, previous work by the actors, historical research, and identity of the venue are all brought together in the short documentary, pre-empting, analysing, and contextualising the play, which then seamlessly morphs into the live broadcast itself. NT Live broadcasts are a deeply hypermedial experience, mixing elements of theatre, cinema, television, and computing in a "post-cinematic mediasphere" [8] (p.67) which, surprisingly, did not appear to privilege the theatrical content. The wide reach of the live broadcast, and the fan reactions, create a truly post-cinematic "vast, open performative space, carnivalesque, participatory, and overtly self-reflexive" [8] (p.68). However, it is clear that the fracturing and remixing of the core narrative is not only the domain of fan sharing and production but is also deliberately featured in the authorised narrative of the experience.

At the interval, the cinema audience saw repeats of the pre-show adverts, again intercut with live footage of the stage and Donmar audience with an onscreen countdown to the "interval feature". This was an interview with director Josie Rourke where Freud focussed on her decision to cast MTV's "sexiest man in the world" as *Coriolanus*. The casting of big name 'celebrity' stars in a number of recent Shakespeare productions has been widely discussed in newspapers and blogs since the broadcast. In immediate reactions to the show, Freud's comments were widely criticised by journalists and fans. One reviewer stated that the 'DVD extras' "evoked neither theatre nor cinema but bad arts television" [9] and one Hiddleston fan

expressed an opinion prevalent in many blogs and comments about the mid-show interview: "I was disgusted. This is one of the world's greatest living actors, who is turning in the performance of a lifetime, and all you talk about is his sexiness? HAVE SOME RESPECT" [10]. It is clear that the presence of Hiddleston was a large contributing factor to the huge popularity of the production and during the interview Rourke acknowledged the legacy of her cast's previous film and TV work in bringing new audiences to the narrative. Other articles note the negative side of overwhelming popularity due to Hiddleston's fans. By this point in the theatrical run, the venue had begun to have problems with fan behaviour at the stage door where expectations of direct contact with the actors caused a disrespectful and threatening atmosphere [11]. Hiddleston fans were beginning to be quoted as explicitly only attending the play to see him ("One girl who has seen the show says: 'I don't much care for *Coriolanus* as a play, so I spent my time admiring the curve of Tom Hiddleston's arse again.'" [12]) whilst theatre aficionados demonstrated anger in reaction to what they saw as the undermining of their rights to access Shakespeare as 'real' fans: "One of the things I hate about fangirls is they go to shows to fantasize and don't care about the play. Their selfish buying up of more than 1 show means Shakespeare fans can't buy tickets" [11]. Some audience members also caused tension between different fan groups by using handheld devices to take photographs and tweet during the onstage action, a serious breach of theatre etiquette and clash of the cultures of (theatrical) dedicated attention and (Internet) ubiquitous connectivity.

The popularity and reach of *Coriolanus* as a live broadcast quickly led to demand for a DVD of the production [13]. Like the production of *Frankenstein* before it (notable for also featuring an actor, Benedict Cumberbatch, with a very enthusiastic and prolific fandom attracted to the play via a different character: Sherlock), there quickly arose considerable tension between fans demonstrating a firm expectation that they should be allowed access to recordings and those who want to preserve the ephemerality and liveness of theatre. The debate raged on social media, particularly when fans shared links to illegal copies of a full recording of the show, with many questioning (with widely varying levels of both eloquence and entitlement, e.g. [14]) the NT Live mission to "create greater access to the productions on our stage" [15]. Since February 2014, NT Live has begun to include a blanket statement in every autoreply to an enquiry:

"currently National Theatre Live does not produce DVDs. This is because National Theatre Live is filmed with the specific intent of it being shown on cinema screens and although it doesn't replace the theatrical experience it tries to emulate it as much as possible. We very much appreciate your desire to see the release of DVDs of our broadcasts but unfortunately there are no immediate plans to do this due to our rights agreements we hold with our artists. We will, however, continue to evaluate this decision." [16]

The people must have their voices, and despite NT Live efforts, illegal clips and full recordings from *Coriolanus* were shared widely throughout some fandoms and many fans remain unconvinced by the official position on recordings; a demand which directly challenges the notion of "limits to the 'anytime,

anywhere' attitude to the consumption of cultural content" asserted by NT Live [5] (p.41). Furthermore, although NT Live appears to be in support of "digital technology's ability to encourage participation and interaction and to promote new co-created content" [5] (p.10), it is clear that many of the creative responses to *Coriolanus* (particularly animated gifs) have been sampled directly from illegally shared files, making them particularly ethically complex as transformative, derivative works.

In the same way that fans (of various types) sought to enact a form of ownership over this play before and during its performance by expressing entitlement to tickets or tweeting photos and comments from theatre seats, post-event behaviours again exert ownership over the content of the play. The very mechanism that allowed the play to become so widely accessed (through both official screenings and illegal recordings) has an effect on the ways in which the play has been received and interpreted, and creatively reimagined by fans. The convenience of a digital copy lends itself to sampling in the form of still images and animated gifs, which are then edited and captioned without the requirement for great technical skill. But it is clear that the digitised form of the broadcast itself goes further than mere technical convenience. Wade notes: "What has thus emerged in articulations of mediatization is the notion of a passive and malleable viewer, a position that highlights the power of systems and the diminishment of individual autonomy. And it is not surprising that certain critical discussion has chafed at this kind of materialist methodology, as this outlook decenters and shortchanges the notion of the human (and aspects of agency and nonmaterial dimension)" [17] (p.57). It is clear from the following examples of fan production that human agency is very much present in the digital materialism of transformative works produced from *Coriolanus* and its surrounding context.

A playful series of images (clearly sampled from the high quality live broadcast file) effectively sum up and interpret the central relationship between *Coriolanus* and his mother, Volumnia [18]. The sequence consists of four images, the first is a still image that directly quote dialogue from the play: "I will not do it lest I surcease to honour mine own truth" (A3, Sc2, L2309) as *Coriolanus* refuses to pander to the people in the marketplace. The second and third images are animated gifs showing a short sequence of frames from the broadcast, sequentially captioned with the thought processes of the characters. In the first animated gif, *Coriolanus* is thinking "...I'm a strong warrior... I am fearless... I CAN CONTRADICT MUM". Volumnia is simply captioned with ellipses as she considers her response while Menenius (in the background) is "*waiting for it*". The third panel shows Volumnia's strong reaction – she throws up her arms in anger and is captioned with "ASFGHJKL!!!" to replace her Shakespearean dialogue while *Coriolanus*, realising his mistake, is captioned with "oh shit... shiiiiit... Aufidius help me.... really scared btw". The final, still, panel shows a placatory *Coriolanus* with a direct quote "Pray, be content mother, I am going to the market-place. Chide me no more." (A:3, Sc:2, L:2320-22).



Fig. 1. Series of images from *Coriolanus*, [18]

This image sequence very effectively captures the meaning and humour of the scene whilst partially translating it into the type of language used on social media. The post has nearly 6,000 'notes' (Tumblr's terminology for activity such as liking and reblogging).

Another Tumblr post provides a 23-line summary of *Coriolanus*, preceded by a tongue-in-cheek warning that the post "Contains spoilers for a 400-year-old play" [19]. The dialogue (in modern, informal English) wittily and accurately describes the narrative and the contextualising sentence is a clear, deadpan reaction to the annoyance of many fans that others were giving away spoilers for *Coriolanus* on social media before they had chance to see the broadcast content.

“CAIUS MARTIUS: Hi Aufidius. I know we're sworn enemies, but Rome banished me. Wanna kill them all?

AUFIDIUS: I love you. I mean... okay, sure, sounds good.” [19]

These examples demonstrate clear engagement with and understanding of the themes of *Coriolanus*, alongside interpretations and retellings appropriate to the social media context of their presentation.

Another commonly sampled scene was a kiss between Coriolanus and Aufidius. However, unlike the previous examples, this particular clip was often taken out of context and widely misunderstood. Fractured from its textual context (including the spoken dialogue and the performed reaction of Coriolanus to the kiss), the clip took on a new identity, bringing new meanings to its source text that were not present in the scene. Fans requested further information (“Does anyone know what this live play was about that prompted Tom and Hardley [sic] to kiss during one of the scenes? Like can you summarize the play for me?”) or had strong reactions against other fans who they felt were demeaning the play and its actors by overly focussing on the kiss (“People need to understand that Coriolanus isn’t just two guys kissing. Get over it” (Anonymous Tumblr users, quoted in [20]). Unlike the Volumnia image series, the kiss appropriations do not accurately communicate the sense of the scene – the trepidation and awkward humour of the scene as broadcast is misread as more overtly sexual – and the animated gifs take on their own identity as purely visual entertainment. Interestingly, there is evidence that even where fans are completely aware of the original sense of the scene, this short clip is still deliberately consumed as a separate, independent cultural product, alongside original fiction and art which focusses on the Coriolanus/Aufidius relationship. Kirwan criticises the ‘extras’ broadcast alongside the live production of *Coriolanus* as “an attempt to ensure interpretation is as homogenous as possible” [21] (p.276), however the re-fracturing of content (in lieu of ubiquitous access to the original or as a deliberate and self-aware fan choice) opens up these interpretations once again, creatively reinterpreting the theatrical experience a second time.

Fan theory emphasises the importance of fan production as a way of meaningfully engaging with cultural texts and the common insistence by fans that they have the right to become full participants in making meaning from cultural products, rather than passive consumers [22] (p.135, p.175). This is highlighted in the case of a cultural experience that, despite a highly complex process of development and mediatisation, remains ephemeral in its authorised form. The NT Live model of extending access through digital broadcasts but retaining a “current focus on building the live, communal experience in cinemas” [23] by restricting that access to a limited number of screenings creates a huge demand for a cultural product which would not otherwise have been felt so keenly by fans, and, ironically, drives the demand for unauthorised access. Speaking specifically about *Coriolanus*, one academic fan states:

“There is a group at the top doling out culture, and there are those who receive it. I think it's in the distinction between 'getting' and 'making' that you feel a kind of restlessness in the fandom. For those without access to the live performance or the broadcast, making .gifs and spreading them around is a way to assert access to the cultural thing and participate in its transport.” [24]

Consequently, it is not only the passion and active engagement of the fandom that creates a demand for consumption and follow-up creative production of *Coriolanus*-related cultural products but also the very mechanism of the live broadcast itself. Active reading of a transmedia narrative “sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption” [22] (p.98).

The core narrative of *Coriolanus* is fractured and complicated by its mediatisation and delivery as a live broadcast. Its existence in this form both enables and drives demand for fan consumption and production in a variety of modes, often at odds with NT Live’s focus on the live, ephemeral, and communal cultural experience. Fans demonstrate activate engagement with the text, and assert characteristics of ownership in spreading and remaking aspects of the narrative, often deliberately defying official modes of distribution and official interpretations. However, despite the tensions between the official and non-official narratives, in producing new content, extending interactivity and access, and encouraging particular interpretations, fan activity is not dissimilar to that of the official producers. NT Live’s *Coriolanus* is, at its core, a fractured, transmedia narrative.

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