Shakespeare's Humanizing Language in Films and TV Series

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Abstract

If Harold Bloom presented Shakespeare, in a rather essentialist way, as the author who invented the Human, US television series project Shakespeare as a playwright who conveys a humanity in constant redefinition, reconstruction and reassertion. Shakespeare is not mobilized to define the Human in a fixed way, but rather contributes to an extension of what we consider human. In such science fiction series as *Star Trek*, *Person of Interest* or *Westworld*, Shakespeare's words become the signs through which machines and robots reveal that they are becoming human or rather that they had always already been human. This dialogue between Shakespeare and "post-human" series echoes that established in *The Elephant Man* filmed in 1980 by David Lynch, a director who has invested the fields of both cinema and television.

Humanizing the Post-Human

This essay explores scenes from films and television series in which Shakespeare's sixteenth-century language is appropriated by so-called "freaks" or post-human androids; it argues that Shakespeare's words contribute to constructing a humanizing perspective on what could first appear "alien." In a 1999 book entitled *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom presents Shakespeare as the author who invented the "Human" through characters who thought aloud, reflected on their actions and revealed their psyches to us: Shakespeare would have engendered what we conceive as psychological inwardness and would thus have literally created the way we think about ourselves as humans and as subjective beings. The loophole in Bloom's demonstration is that it is based on character analysis only and evades any historical and cultural approach. But, paradoxically, Bloom's rather essentialist and reactionary position has been appropriated and distorted in shows that tend to redefine and construct (post)humanity in a progressive way. In the wake of David Lynch's seminal film *The Elephant Man* (1980), which changes our perception of Romeo radically, and of such science fiction series as *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (CBS
1987-94), *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011-16) and *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-), Shakespeare's words become the signs through which machines and robots reveal that they are becoming human or rather that they had always already been human. In fact, through the mobilization of Shakespeare's words, these "Others" start challenging our perceptions of their very otherness. Instead of being compared to humans and considered failures or freaks, they become their own references in what should be deemed human. Similarly, transported in these new contexts, Shakespeare's words take on new, unexpected meanings: the appropriation changes our perception of the "primary" text and questions the very notion of the "original" source, no longer encouraging hierarchical comparisons but inviting jubilant acknowledgment and acceptance of what these characters can do with and to Shakespeare. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's conception of artistic relations between works as rhizomes, networks spreading horizontally and resisting cultural hierarchies of source and influence, is here a valuable metaphor to reflect on this phenomenon, inspiring recent theoretical conceptions of Shakespearean appropriation (Deleuze and Guattari 2014, 21-40; Lanier 2014). We will see that, if *Star Trek* speaks of Shakespeare's humanizing power in a very explicit way, *Person of Interest* on the contrary never raises the playwright's name, while *Westworld* plays reflexively with our recognition of the Shakespearean presence.

**Becoming Romeo in The Elephant Man**

Westerns such as *My Darling Clementine* (1946) or *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and, in the 1960s, a science fiction series such as *Star Trek: The Original Series* (NBC 1966-1969) already used Shakespeare's words to indicate the advance of "civilization" in the Far West or in a far-away galaxy (Hatchuel 2015, 1946-53). These fictions also reflected the American drive to appropriate part of European "high culture" and Shakespearean tradition. But the imperialist advance of "civilization," especially that of the American white man, is far from implying processes of humanization as such; on the contrary, the Frontier reveals all too often the white man's savagery.

To my knowledge, we owe to David Lynch, a director who has invested both the fields of cinema and television, the first use of the Shakespearean language on screen to humanize a being who could at first seem nonhuman to some characters inside the story and even maybe to some spectators. Lynch's *Elephant Man* (1980) adapts and fictionalizes the tragic life of John Merrick, who suffered from serious congenital defects. At the end of the nineteenth century in London, surgeon Frederick Treves (played by Anthony Hopkins) rescues John Merrick (performed by John Hurt) from a fair where he had been put on display. He examines him and finds him a shelter at the hospital. Frederick quickly understands that John can communicate perfectly despite his deformities and that he is endowed with fine intelligence and sensibility. John Merrick is found and captured again by his
fairground owner. He manages to escape but is eventually chased by a crowd of people who treat him like a plague-ridden beast and corner him in the toilets of a train station. John cries out, "I'm not an elephant. I'm not an animal. I'm a human being. I'm a man," before passing out.

*Elephant Man* revisits the issue raised in *The Tempest* on the identification of a human being: "What have we here? A man, or a fish?" (Folger Digital Texts 2019, 2.2.25), asks Trinculo when he sees Caliban, replaying the Valladolid debate held at the Colegio de San Gregorio in 1550 and 1551 (Seth 2010; Hart 2003). Theologians, lawyers, and statesmen in Charles V's realm debated over the way the New World should be conquered. Could the Spanish colonize the Americas and rule over the natives? Could they put an end to ways of living that could include cannibalism and human sacrifices, or were Amerindian cultures legitimate? Even though the debate was not strictly about whether the Amerindians were human or not, it aimed at defining the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of their enslavement and, therefore, at granting them the status of free men or mere merchandise to be bought and exchanged. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

In Lynch's film, John Merrick's cry of despair, "I'm not an elephant... I'm a man," sounds like the reply that Caliban could have given Trinculo: "I'm not a fish; I'm a man." Merrick's journey is, in fact, placed in a Shakespearean context in more ways than one. The cast of the film includes many British actors famous for their Shakespearean roles: John Hurt (Merrick), Anthony Hopkins (Treves) and, above all, John Gielgud. Lynch could have given the part of the head of the hospital — quite secondary in the story — to many actors. The fact that he asked Gielgud, considered as one of the greatest Shakespearean actors, to play Carr Gomm reveals a strong desire to provide the story with Shakespearean echoes. These resonances reach a climax in a very moving scene in which John Merrick meets an actress, Mrs. Kendal, played by Anne Bancroft.

In this scene, located at the very middle of the film, when John still feels safe in the hospital, Mrs. Kendal talks to John about the joy of theater and gives him a book — the text of *Romeo and Juliet*. The whole sequence allows for a total redefinition and rebirth of the main character.

John discovers Act 1, scene 5, in which Romeo and Juliet kiss for the first time. He reads Romeo's line: "If I profane with my unworthiest hand / This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this: / My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand / To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss" (Folger Digital Texts). In the play, the reference to the lips and hands turns the lovers' bodies into blazons but, in the film, it also invites us to change the way we look at John's body: it encourages us to see John as a subject of poetry. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

John has almost closed the book and put it aside, when he is surprised to hear Mrs. Kendal deliver Juliet's reply. With confidence, she starts performing Juliet whose part she knows by heart. John's hesitation at this point is particularly touching. It reveals that his experience of life so far
has led him to internalize the fact that love, even performed love, is something that can't happen to him and is beyond his wildest thoughts. Playing Romeo is not obvious when one is seen, or when one sees oneself, as an "elephant man." While the camera has come closer to their faces, John progressively stops looking at the book: he doesn't only read but plays the part intensely and emotionally. In this process, he becomes a new man. The editing switches to shot/reverse shot as if to enter the scene with Romeo and Juliet, and makes us almost forget the first level of fiction. But, by reading what should remain an unvoiced stage direction, "Then it says they kiss," John comes out of the world of the play and reveals his embarrassment and awkwardness: he considers Romeo as exterior to him and again signifies that love is not for him. Yet, Mrs. Kendal kneels in front of him and keeps playing Juliet, bringing him back into the courting dialogue, until she kisses him on the cheek. At this point, John and Mrs. Kendal are filmed in the same field, which underlines the intimacy between the two. The kiss, less given by Juliet than by Mrs. Kendal herself, fulfills an aspiration for love. It is an act that asserts John Merrick's humanity through the idea that he can be loved. It is a gesture that crosses the boundary of the Romeo and Juliet fiction and invites us in our turn to cross the boundary of the film to embrace difference.

The last exchange of the sequence completes the process of redefinition in a remarkable way. By saying, "Oh, Mr. Merrick, you're not an elephant man at all. You're Romeo," Mrs. Kendal resolutely presents John Merrick as a human being, sensitive to theater, art, words, emotions and love, but, more crucially, she also redefines our vision of Romeo. The final close-up on Merrick's face and the harmonious string music create a moment of epiphany. Through his words, characters and play, Shakespeare offers here a mediation that allows the filmmaker to shatter prejudice and to extend our empathy. If Shakespeare is maybe not the inventor of humanity as Harold Bloom asserts, the playwright certainly appears as a mediator whose cultural capital is used to transform the spectator's gaze.

Moreover, this filmic appropriation challenges our vision of what the character of Romeo may look like, contributing to change spectacularly the "originary" text and even questioning the very notion of "origin." If Merrick is Romeo, then Romeo is Merrick. Romeo is not only transformed into a man suffering from deformities — suddenly, it turns out that Romeo has always looked like John Merrick, and Juliet has always loved him thus. This retroactive redefinition is possible because Romeo is a character from a play whose physical attributes have never been fixed: they necessarily correspond to those of the actors playing him. Moving from Elephant Man to Romeo, John Merrick is shown as a being that was always already human, capable of love and worthy of love, and Romeo is revealed as a character who could be badly deformed. The sequence thus challenges the very title of the film which, if one thinks in the wake of Mrs. Kendal, should have
been called *Romeo*. We are therefore encouraged to read Lynch's film as a *Romeo* without *Juliet*, the story of a man filled with a love forever to remain unrequited.

Television series raising the question of (post)humanity follow the trailblazing trend set by Lynch in 1980. Shakespeare appears again to signify a process of humanization experienced by machines or robots, but also to force our perception of them to evolve. Three series are cases in point: *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (CBS 1987-94), *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011-16) and *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-), each of them adopting a specific intertextual strategy to present Shakespeare as a humanizing vehicle.

**Embracing the Human Condition in Star Trek: The Next Generation**

*Star Trek: The Next Generation* appropriates Bloom's discourse in a very straightforward, almost naive, way, but distorts it at the same time. Episode 3.10, entitled ""The Defector,"" broadcast in 1990, opens on a scene from *Henry V* being rehearsed (dir. Scheerer 1990). Two men sitting by a fire play Act 4, scene 1, wherein King Henry chooses to remain incognito to hear his soldiers confide about their fear during the night before the battle of Agincourt (Folger Digital Texts). King Henry is played by the android, Data. The setting of the play is revealed to be a computer-generated hologram aboard the starship USS Enterprise led by Captain Picard. Data is a synthetic life form with artificial intelligence, a self-aware android who serves as the second officer aboard the Enterprise. Though he has impressive computational capacities, Data first encounters difficulties with understanding some human behaviors, inspiring him to try to feel emotions and find his own humanity. Data's effort to become part of humanity and develop his emotional experience is a major point in the series' narrative. In this scene in which he rehearses his performance of *Henry V*, Picard tells him that there is no better way than "embracing Shakespeare" if he wants to "learn about the human condition," thereby giving a voice to Bloom's position. As Picard's wisdom and leadership are hardly ever questioned in the series, Shakespeare and humanity are linked here in a very authoritative way. But Bloom's position is also subverted because, in this case, Shakespeare is mobilized not to invent humanity but post-humanity. Shakespeare's language becomes testament to processes of humanization in which machines and robots progressively gain consciousness by reading, playing, or quoting the plays. Cited in this *Star Trek* episode is not only Shakespeare's *Henry V*, however, but also Kenneth Branagh's screen adaptation of the play, through echoes of camera framing, colors, and general *mise-en-scène*. Branagh's film was released in 1989, just a year before this *Star Trek* episode was produced. *(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*
In the Shakespearean dialogues, King Henry refuses to describe himself as more than a man in a discourse seeming to abolish social classes only to deny his responsibility in the launching of a deadly war. In *Star Trek*, Data's performance gives a funny and ironic meaning to Henry's line, "I think the King is but a man, as I am" (Folger Digital Texts 4.1.105-6). This time, what is abolished is the divide between human being and machine. Shakespeare is thus used as a weapon of massive humanization, making the androids evolve, and making Captain Picard's and the spectators' view of them evolve as well. Retroactively, the appropriation invites us to see King Henry as a war machine trying in this scene to find his humanity again after having triggered a bloody conflict between England and France. By contrast, Data, as a very peaceful, kind and eager-to-learn android, is presented as the one who protects human treasures: by playing Shakespeare aboard the *Enterprise*, he ensures the playwright's continued existence in a faraway future. He even studies performance history: beyond the performances by Laurence Olivier and by Kenneth Branagh, Data mentions two other great enactments of Henry V that he cites as inspirations and that still remain unknown to us — those by Shapiro and by Callmark. Even though Picard wishes Data to stop imitating previous actors and find his own "human" voice, the android paradoxically becomes the protector of Shakespeare's cultural legacy through his exploration of humanity and of the humanities.

The Ghost in the Machine in Person of Interest

Shakespeare haunts post-human series sometimes more discreetly. Contrary to *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011-2016), created by Jonathan Nolan, never speaks of Shakespeare as a playwright and quotes the plays only in subtle, indirect ways. For instance, the series includes, in Season 2, episode 14, Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking speech, transcribed in ASCII language and displayed by a super-intelligent computer. The image remains on the screen only for a fraction of a second.

Fans spotted it, translated it from computer language to English and discovered the quote from Lady Macbeth. How can we account for this almost subliminal presence of Shakespeare's play? The series' heroes, John Reese and Harold Finch, actually live with strong feelings of guilt and remorse. Reese blames himself because he failed to prevent his fiancée's death; Finch blames himself because he caused his best friend's death. In both cases, their responsibility is a "damned spot" that will not go away, despite all their good deeds. In this context, it is no wonder that the Machine, the hyper-connected and super-intelligent computer they use to find the persons of interest they need to take care of, displays an error screen — Lady Macbeth's lines in which she says she cannot wash the blood, the symbol of the regicide she has engineered, off of her hands. Shakespeare here becomes a narrative clue, an Easter egg with high cultural value, calling for the
spectators' literary knowledge to understand the series' subtleties and decode its mysteries. Finch's intelligent Machine starts to become autonomous and more and more human. As it calls Finch "Father" and asks him to forgive its failures and its incapacity to act, it starts evoking the character of Hamlet. Paradoxically, the father figure is not a Ghost, but Harold Finch who is very much alive, while the notion of Ghost is...in the Machine, as the expression goes. *(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*

This reading of the Machine as Hamlet is, in fact, encouraged by a scene that takes place earlier in the series. In season 3, episode 23, Greer, a competitor who wants to create his own super-computer, marvels at the Machine's extraordinary abilities and quotes Shakespeare to praise its merits: "What a piece of work is your Machine, Harold. In action, how like an angel. In apprehension, how like a god!" Greer here rewrites lines from Hamlet: "What a piece of work is a man! [...] In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!" *(Folger Digital Texts 2.2.327).* *(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*

The quotation, in which the word "man" is replaced by "machine" in a context where the machine is, indeed, developing into a conscious being reveals how, in Anglophone culture, human nature is often constructed through the conjuring of Shakespeare. Greer may be speaking Shakespeare's words, but it is definitely the Machine that behaves more humanely than some men in the series and gives a new form to Hamlet's existential dilemma. We may also notice that Greer speaks with a very British accent, following the tradition of the British villain within Hollywood cinema. The relation between the US and Shakespeare has always been complex: it oscillates between the rejection of Shakespeare's original Britishness and the desire to appropriate the plays by making them more "American" and popular *(Lanier 2002).*

**Going Off-Script in Westworld**

If *Person of Interest* never acknowledges Shakespeare's presence openly, the TV series *Westworld* *(HBO, 2016-)*, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, celebrates the power of filmic appropriations to play with our possible awareness of the Shakespearean intertext as a humanizing means. The series' narrative takes place in Westworld, a technologically advanced Wild-West-themed amusement park populated by android hosts, presenting therefore an explicit American theme and taking up the tradition of citing Shakespeare in Westerns. In the park, the androids are rebooted at the end of each day and of each narrative arc. The high-paying guests may indulge their wildest fantasies (hurt the hosts, rape, or kill them) without fear of retaliation, since the hosts are programmed not to hurt the humans. From the start, the series thus raises the question of who really behaves in a human way and who does not.
After a program update, some androids experience glitches in their behaviors. They seem to become conscious of their situation and start… quoting Shakespeare. From the very first episode, *The Tempest, Henry IV, King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet* find their way into the robots' lines. Through repeated shots and loops in variation, *Westworld* offers a reflection on both the performance of actors and on the shooting of several takes and their editing within the filmic flow.

The stage is a place where we repeat what cannot be repeated: a performance is necessarily unique and ephemeral. The androids in the series, by performing an identical narrative loop that is reset every morning, are actors who reproduce exactly the same gestures and the same actions each day on the great stage of the theme park. Since they remain forever young, they also contribute to the blurring of timelines for spectators, who may wonder whether they are watching scenes from the past, the present, or the future. Because the androids are physically present in the theme park with the guests and, therefore, share the same place and time as their audience, they resemble stage actors. However, they are also the equivalent of movie actors, whose image is repeated infinitely, forever fixed without any variation each time the film is projected. The player piano, which appears prominently in the series' opening credits and in the scenes happening in the saloon, reflects this very tension: the instrument points both to a musical performance taking place in a given place at a given time and to a music sheet played again and again, without any change, just like a television fiction each time it is broadcast.

By enlarging the theater stage to a gigantic theme park (a one-day train journey is apparently not enough to cross the whole place), the series makes the android actors evolve in the cinematic world of the Western. Images of Monument Valley send us back to a mythical Far West, which never existed except in the cinema (Bertetto 2015, 97). *Westworld* builds a universe of simulacra where theater actors move about in a film world. Like actors on a movie screen, the robots are inserted in a highly dramatic environment, appearing as spectral figures, both present and absent, that can be manipulated by their creator-puppeteer Robert Ford, again played (coincidentally?) by a Shakespearean actor, here Anthony Hopkins.

Film editing, which can shape the image of an actor by cutting and dividing his body into different shots, is echoed in the computer programming of the robots' every gesture and word and in the reconstruction of their artificial bodies, at the end of each day, by lab technicians who even call themselves "butchers." But the aim of the series is to show that the repetition of the same gestures, of the same words and of the same narrative situations, can end up being the source of change — from small variations to emancipative upheavals. It is indeed through an iterative loop that some robots begin to evolve and to acquire self-consciousness. *Westworld* confirms what the character Caprica 6 asserts in the final sequence of TV series *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci Fi 2009):
Baltar. Does all of this have to happen again?

Caprica Six. This time, I bet no. […] Mathematics, law of averages. Let a complex system repeat itself long enough, eventually something surprising might occur.

*Westworld* shows the same images of robots starting their day all over again… until eventually "something surprising" occurs. The shots of Dolores' daily routine, when she wakes up, goes downstairs, and speaks to her father on the porch, are repeated three times in the pilot episode, every twenty minutes. The same take is used for the first two mornings, the series forcing us to watch it again while we are seeing the show for the very first time. But the take is slightly different on the third morning, as the father suddenly shows Dolores a picture of a woman in Times Square, a picture he found in his field. This incongruous element suddenly un hinges the narrative loop. The next time Dolores wakes up and meets her father on the porch, he has been replaced by another android actor. Dolores does not seem to notice the substitution. We soon learn that the robots are regularly re-programmed to play other parts in the park. The previous scripts they learned can reappear like palimpsests, creating layers of memory that act as generators of a more and more complex identity until self-consciousness emerges. The series thus paradoxically presents "real" personalities as generated by the ghosting of previous fictional roles (Carlson 2001).

By becoming self-conscious, the androids are suddenly aware of their conditions as "actors" in both meanings of the term — they realize that they are acting in a fictional world, and they endeavor to act to change their fates. Because the androids' days stop being exactly the same as their level of self-consciousness increases, *Westworld* suggests that the projection of similar images is a source of epiphany and of awareness, not only for the characters but for the viewers as well. In this sense, the revolver's circular movement in the opening credits is programmatic since it announces a "double" revolution — the germ of transformation is planted through the repeated return to the point of departure. As the narrative loops are broken, the robots start to improvise their lines and go off script (in the sense of both the computer script and the film script) and rebel against the park managers. And it is through Shakespeare that this emancipative rebellion happens.

In the first episode of the series, a seemingly deficient android starts talking, mixing fragments from *King Lear* and *Henry IV, Part 2*. At first, the engineers checking it are puzzled: they do feel that the tone has changed, that the register is different, and that they are presented with a discourse which is as strange as it is unfamiliar. In that sense, they stand as reflections of the viewers who understand that a literary work has been quoted but do not know which one it is (if the quotation from *Lear* may easily be recognized by an Anglophone audience, the line taken from *Henry IV* is, on the contrary, more difficult to identify). The engineers are at first ready to admit that the android
is just "off script," an expression which will make those who have already recognized the canonical texts smile. It is the creator of the androids, Robert Ford, who finally recognizes the origins of the words, exclaiming: "Shakespeare!" *(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*

Ford thus emphasizes the process being experienced by a viewer, from the impression that something is incongruous, to the recognition that this is a quotation, and to the possible identification of the intertext. Shakespearean quotations are all the more spectral in that they are recognizable without being necessarily identifiable: an audience (mainly an Anglophone one) can recognize Shakespeare's style and rhythm without always knowing the play from which the quotation comes (especially if it is from one of the playwright's least well-known works). Intertextuality can trigger disconcerting moments that make us question what we perceive, which particularly destabilizes the fabric of an Anglophone fiction — since, to dialogues already in English, fragments from a different-sounding, sixteenth-century English will be added. The sentence "By most mechanical and dirty hand" (from *Henry IV, part 2*, 5.5.31) is, in the play, pronounced by Pistol, who tells Falstaff that Doll, his mistress, has been thrown into prison by "a most mechanical and dirty hand" (Folger Digital Texts). In Shakespeare's time, "mechanical" described manual labor (from Greek, *mekhanikòs*, inventive, ingenious). The new context in *Westworld* brings another meaning to the Shakespearean word, again rebooting the "original" line. It also invites us to think that the android is aware of being a mechanical creature, controlled by an engineer, raising general awareness that the show is scripted, acted, and directed.

Douglas Lanier has recently claimed that "the source for any Shakespearean adaptation is best imagined as a network — or rhizome — of prior Shakespearean adaptations" and that "it is to the Shakespeare network and not to a single originary text that a Shakespearean adaptation establishes some relationship of fidelity" (Lanier 2017, 297). *Star Trek*, *Person of Interest* and *Westworld* certainly constitute a network of references that appropriates Shakespeare's words and redefines their meanings in a context of humanization. As bold and inventive adaptations, they contribute to what such plays as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry V* or *King Lear* will mean for future artists and spectators, shaping our expectations and projections of "Shakespeare." Just as, in the rhizomatic model, filmic appropriations lose their status of "secondary" works, the machines appear, through the playwright's words, as the sensitive beings that they have probably always been, no longer subjected to a hierarchy that considers human beings as "primary." As with *The Elephant Man*, it is less the Other who becomes human — this Other who first seems on the outer edge of humanity — than the viewers who start to see the Other with a new, humanizing perspective. These appropriations thus project Shakespeare as a playwright who conveys a form of humanity in constant redefinition, reconstruction, and reassertion. Shakespeare's language is not mobilized
to define the Human in a fixed way but, in fact, *extends* what we should consider human — just as these shows encourage us to extend and revise what Shakespeare is and means.

Notes

1. *Forbidden Planet* (dir. Fred M. Wilcox 1956) is also a science-fiction film based on *The Tempest*, reflecting on processes of civilization; it only, however, mobilizes Shakespeare's play as a narrative basis, without using Shakespeare's words themselves.
References
may be more useful, in this instance, then to think of a web of hypotexts that exist in some relation to each other and to the adaptation — a neighborhood of texts.

Applying this model to critical work in the field of Global Shakespeare thus requires not just a decentering of the Shakespearean text but also cognizance of the neighboring texts whose traces, influences, reflections, and refractions may be observed in the adaptation. This reconceptualization shares the move towards "decentered multiplicity" forwarded in recent theorizations of the Shakespeare rhizome by such critics as Douglas M. Lanier and Alexa Alice Joubin (Lanier 2014, 28). The Shakespeare rhizome is a model that goes beyond the Shakespeare texts and "necessarily includes faithful and unfaithful adaptations, and adaptations of them, and adaptations of them" (Lanier 2014, 29). What this alternative model of the Shakespeare rhizome requires is for us to "conceive of our shared object of study...as the vast web of adaptations, allusions, and (re)productions that comprises the ever-changing cultural phenomenon we call 'Shakespeare'" (Lanier 2014, 29).

What the theorization of the neighbor and the neighborhood opens up instead is a space for considering the ethical charge both of our orientation as scholars and of the relationship(s) between these various "adaptations, allusions, and (re)productions." To conceive of these relationships as neighborly and to conceive of discrete groups as neighborhoods requires us to consider not just lines of influence, but also the paradoxical potential for proliferation and contraction. To analyze Arshinagar within the framework of a neighborhood of Indian Romeo and Juliet adaptations is then not just to disclose citational traces or lines of influence, but to consider how it neighbors these adaptations. In the following sections I focus on two elements of the film — its experimental use of language and its depiction of the nation — to demonstrate how Arshinagar both disturbs and preserves what constitutes an Indian adaptation of Romeo and Juliet.

Indian Popular Cinema and Neighboring Languages

While Arshinagar is the first Bengali filmic adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, it draws, as has been demonstrated above, on a long history of Romeo and Juliet adaptations in Hindi popular cinema. Largely because of its reach in a country where a significant percentage of the population are illiterate, Hindi popular cinema performs what Benedict Anderson described as the role of print-language in imagining a national community, providing an awareness of "fellow viewers" (to adapt Anderson's term "fellow-readers") who are bound not necessarily by geography but by a shared set of prescribed values and beliefs. Partly as a product of this role, the language of Hindi popular cinema or "filmi dialogue" has become a form of national lingua franca that circulates outside of celluloid. On the other hand, Bengali cinema, like other regional cinemas, is marked
by its linguistic and corresponding geographical exclusivity. While Bengali cinema consciously shaped itself as a culturally superior contrast to the commercial "stunt-filled adventure – romance genres" of Hindi popular cinema, it has been increasingly influenced over the last few decades by the dominant *masala* Bollywood films and now it is largely only language that continues to separate Bengali popular cinema from its pan-Indian Hindi counterpart (Gooptu 2010, 31).

*Arshinagar* works in part to reflect this influence, but it also troubles the established separation between these neighboring languages, both of which derive from Sanskrit. Though Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* presents the Montagues and Capulets as inherently socially similar, there is a hint at a discernible distinction between the two families when Tybalt suggests he recognizes Romeo by the way he speaks: "This, by his voice, should be a Montague" (1.4.165-6). What is barely hinted at in *Romeo and Juliet* is amplified to become the defining feature of the soundscape of *Arshinagar*. Every character has a unique style of speaking, making them easily identifiable by their voices. At the most basic level, *Arshinagar*’s soundscape distinguishes the Mitras from the Khans. As a cultured Muslim family, the Khan's lexicon is peppered with words having Persian-Arabic roots. While some of these would be a standard part of the Muslim Bengali lexicon, others seem to be borrowed from Urdu. On the other hand, the Mitras largely use standard colloquial Bengali, relying on words with Sanskrit etymology. Thus, the religious identity of each family is further underscored by distinct lexicons; we know by their "voices" whether they are Muslim or Hindu.

In his seminal work on code-mixing in India, linguistics scholar Braj Kachru has suggested the code-switching (switching from one code or language to another) and code-mixing ("transferring linguistic units from one code to another") are "essentially used as communicative strategies with various motivations" (1978, 108; 111). He identifies three distinct types of code-mixing with respect to Hindi: Sanskritization, Persianization, and Englishization, with the former two associated with Hindu and Muslim identity respectively, and argues that one of the primary functions of these shifts and mixes of different codes is to "reveal or to conceal region, class and religion" (1978, 111). *Arshinagar* depicts these shifts and mixes with respect to Bengali where, as demonstrated above, a Persianized Bengali points to a Muslim identity, while a Sanskritized Bengali points to a Hindu identity.

Even within the Khan family, however, there are subtle distinctions. When Sabir Khan is convinced by his grandmother to come to the aid of Tayeb, whose hotheaded nature has landed him in jail, he says to his sister, "Ei shob tumi ki bolchho appa, tumie bhalo jaano, / ragle pore na mumkin taar buke shamlano. / Dimaag taar ekdomi noi shoja. / Daadi-jaan aapni she bojhan" ("What're you saying Sister! You know well / Tabbu's hot temper is impossible to quell! /
I've tried to reason with him in vain! / Grandma you explain!). Sabir's fluent Bengali borrows a few words from Urdu. His grandmother, Daadi-jaan, on the other hand, speaks Urdu with a few words of accented Bengali sprinkled in. Convincing him to come to the aid of his sister, she says, *Dekho Sabir, aurat-er kaun acche aar, baap, khasam noi bhai* ("Look Sabir, who else is there for a woman...but father, husband, or brother?") The Khan family hails from the northern province of Awadh and in the speech patterns of the different generations we can trace their assimilation into the eastern state of Bengal.

In addition to Bengali and Hindi-Urdu, the film also incorporates a number of English words and phrases, resulting in a hybrid code referred to by the portmanteaux Benglish and Hinglish. These have generally been considered "a marker of modernization, socioeconomic position, and membership in an elite group" (Kachru 1978, 113) and have more recently been understood as "the aspirational language of the upwardly-mobile, vernacular [...] working classes" (Orsini 2015, 200). The latter instance is reflected in the interactions between the slum dwellers as they incorporate English words like "majority," to indicate political dominance, into their daily interactions. In a private conversation between Manik the teashop owner and his wife, who encourages him to consider the offer for his property to allow their son a better future, the words "offer," "teacher," "best," "school" and "English-medium" are all in English. At the other end of the spectrum, we have Rono — in all likelihood a product of this English-medium schooling — whose speech is peppered with English phrases like "Baby just wait!"; "Fusion is in!" These are, however, paradoxically not emblematic of upward social mobility or superior education, but are instead borrowed or absorbed from popular culture. Thus, the use of English in this film is multifaceted: ranging from quotidian life to popular culture to legal and political registers, it is largely determined by who is speaking it. The use of English thus simultaneously reflects the global dominance of the language and the film's imbrication in the local frictions of linguistic politics.

At its most complex iteration, code-mixing in *Arshinagar* involves all three languages within a single interaction, like Reshma Bai's introduction to the puppet show that forms the film's framing device:

*Accha aisi waisi kahaani na acche* (No ordinary tale this!)
*Eke bare bilayati qissa* (A foreign one!)
Sex-pee-yaar *Sahib ka*. (Written by Lord Shakespeare himself!)
[Onlooker: Sex?]
*Arre sex naht baba* (No! No! Not sex!)
*Sala sab kuch te aajkaal lok sex dhunde* (People look only for sex these days!)
Ami bolchilam ki Sex-peeyar Sahib (I'm talking about Shakespeare Sahib!)

Gi-rate writer! (Great writer!)

Uska likha hua yeh qissa acche (A tale written by him!)

Vaise sex bhi acche thora bahaut. (Well, sex is there too, in small doses)

Following what Reshma Bai is saying over here requires varying degrees of knowledge in all three languages, from certain words in English to the syntactical structures of Hindi-Urdu and Bengali.

In its use of multiple languages, Arshinagar allows us to conceive of language relations as neighborly as well. While being cognizant of the diachronic relations between languages that belong to the same Indo-European family, the film also allows us to take a synchronic perspective, reflecting the ways in which these languages continue to border, push, influence, shape and neighbor each other in contemporary India. The broad and diverse lexicon is balanced by the formal constraint of rhymed verse, with characters often completing each other's line-rhymes. The speaking styles of Arshinagar's characters are thus not merely marked by differences, but ultimately come together to form a complete and coherent semantic whole. The shifting, or rather hybrid, linguistic registers of the global, the national and the local mirror a similar shifting of place that is central to Arshinagar's privileging of location. Thus, Arshinagar does not merely complicate what constitutes an Indian filmic adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, but more broadly what counts as a Bengali film.

The Nation as Neighborhood

Scholarly consensus has been that Indian popular cinema is intimately concerned with the nation and nationalism, often mapping the social, political, and historical concerns of national identity onto the cinematic family. The filmic adaptations of Romeo and Juliet utilize one of the industry's core cinematic tropes — heterosexual, romantic, and transgressive love — in their exploration of this nation-as-family metaphor and function simultaneously as a barometer for dominant social concerns. The catalytic feud between the Montagues and the Capulets is set up within a specific framework of conflict ranging from class in Bobby (1973), to language in Ek Duje Ke Liye (Made for Each Other, 1981) to patriotic loyalty in 1942: A Love Story (1994) to religion in Ishaqzaade (Rebellious Lovers, 2012). Arshinagar follows in this tradition by mapping the conflict between the two families onto contemporary religious strife between Hindus and Muslims.

However, while prior adaptations of Romeo and Juliet that are concerned with "what it means to be 'Indian'" deal with the central category of the family whose homogeneity envelops and subsumes difference under a shared morality, Arshinagar uses the heterogeneous neighborhood as
its analogue for a state in turmoil (Dwyer 2014, 37). The town is a microcosm of Indian society: unmistakably diverse, its fragile unity under threat from the competing demands of religious and political allegiance, balancing a commitment to tradition with the advancing forces of modernity and development, and controlled by the rich and powerful. Gendered and religious identities take on different valences in this context where both difference and equivalence are apparent, and by moving from the implied ultimate reconciliation inherent in the category of the family to the profound ambivalence at the core of neighborly relations, Arshinagar provides us with a more provocative and productive mode of depicting and understanding the nation.

This is perhaps most evident in the figure of Tayeb (Tybalt). Tayeb is Rono’s image in the mirror. Color-coded as his photo-negative, he resembles him not just in appearance but in his love for his cousin Julie. Though a permissible match for a conservative Muslim family, the volatile Tayeb is never presented as a viable marriage prospect, coded instead as a thug and outsider (Sen 2017). He embodies the figure of the neighbor — “that intimate other...with whom we can partially identify, but who displays a strange, potentially hostile desire — a death drive — that uncannily threatens the dream of community” (Edmondson 2011, 10).

If Arshinagar is a film about the Indian nation, Tayeb represents the limit case of citizenship. In his first appearance in the film, he is incited to violence by Monty (Mercutio) who seems to know just which buttons to press. Tayeb scoffs at the Mitra gang: "Tau tora Mitter, amra holam Khan / Bahadur Shah’r ujir amar dadu’r dadu’r dadu" ("Yet you are mere Mitras, while we are Khans sublime! / We are descendants of Bahadur Shah the Great"). Monty responds by taunting him: "Khub bujechhi chandu / Na Shahrukh na Salman tobu ‘ami Khan’ / Tor baap chhilo refugee, podobi Akhtar / Adh pagla chani se chokhe, Unani daktar / Tui ki bhabe hothat holi Khan?" ("Ah! Now we’ve got it straight! / Not Shahrukh, nor Salman, and yet he is a Khan! / Your dad was a refugee, surname Akhtar! / Half-crazy bleary-eyed a Unani doctor. / How come you suddenly turned Khan?")

Though Tayeb calls himself Khan and is frequently put to work by them to intimidate uncooperative sections of the town, he is never quite considered a full member of the family. He cannot escape the fact that he is dependent on his maternal relatives and that his father was an Akhtar, a refugee, presumably from neighboring Bangladesh. Though he boasts that his mother's family is descended from the retinue of Bahadur Shah, this claim to nobility does not hold much weight. His claims to the family and to the nation are through his mother and are therefore outweighed by his father's outsider status. Thus, Tayeb presents another productive site for the theorization of the neighbor. Though he is related to the Khans, his non-Indian lineage prevents his complete assimilation — both into the family and into the nation. He is the figure that both
"rattles" and "ratifies" the legitimate citizenship of Arshinagar's residents (Edmondson 2011, 10). The nation, in Arshinagar, is thus not merely a contained entity but rather one that acknowledges and excludes its neighbors.

Arshinagar is thus experimental not just in its use of language and its blending of film and theater; it also seeks to build on and complicate the nation-as-family metaphor that is so prevalent in Indian popular cinema. The figure of the neighbor and the space of the neighborhood are most pronounced in Arshinagar's thematic and narrative components, but expanding this focus on the simultaneously proximate and different to the film's form, language, and genre allows us to conceive of the boundaries between cinema and theater, Bengali and Hindi, original and adaptation, Shakespeare and "Global Shakespeare" as pliable, porous, and reflective. Ultimately, what the film offers us is not just an alternative iteration of Romeo and Juliet, but, in its rich experimentation, a novel approach to the genre of adaptation itself.

Notes

1. The Baul occupies a fundamentally ambiguous role within the Bengali imaginary. The word itself is usually glossed as "mad" and members of this syncretic religious sect, which draws on both Hinduism and Islam, reject orthodox religious practices. They are best known in popular culture for the orally transmitted popular Baul songs that celebrate spiritual freedom.

2. All transcriptions from the film are my own. Unless otherwise noted, I make use of the translations provided in the film's English subtitles. However, where necessary, I provide my own translation. This is because the film's subtitles seek to retain the effect of the rhymes present in the original and in doing so occasionally sacrifice conveying a more literal translation.


4. Quotations from Romeo and Juliet are taken from The Norton Shakespeare, third edition (Shakespeare, 2015) and cited parenthetically by line number.

5. For studies on the overlap between the Indian nation and Indian popular cinema, see National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987 by Sumita S. Chakravarty; Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Contemporary India, by Rachel Dwyer; Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India, by Priya Jaikumar; and The Cinematic ImagINation: Indian Popular Films as Social History, by Jyotika Virdi.

6. A selection of books particularly concerned with nomenclature in the field of Global Shakespeare: Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance, edited by Dennis Kennedy; World-wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance, edited by Sonia Massai; Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations, by
Thomas Cartelli; Postcolonial Shakespeares, edited by Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin; Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage, edited by Parmita Kapadia and Craig Dionne.

7. See The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology, by Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard for an extended discussion on the figure of the neighbor in the fields of critical theory and psychoanalysis.

8. In The Neighboring Text, George Edmondson analyzes three different texts dealing with the story of Troilus and Criseyde to forward this notion of a horizontal (as opposed to genealogical) relationship between texts within the context of psychoanalytic and medieval understandings of the figure of the neighbor.


10. For a discussion on pertinent versus attested likenesses in Shakespeare adaptations see "Pertinent Likeness: Kurosawa's The Bad Sleep Well as a version of Shakespeare's Hamlet" by Ann Thompson and John O. Thompson.

11. Reviews of the Urdu 1947 Romeo and Juliet compare the performance of Nargis (who played Juliet) with that of Norma Shearer, who had played Juliet in an American movie (directed by George Cukor, 1936) a decade earlier. Given what we know of the functioning of the Indian film industry at that time, it's very likely that the Urdu version relied to a certain extent on the American film that preceded it.

12. In her talk, "Image as Text in Arshinagar (2015): A Bengali Experiment with Shakespeare" at the 2016 Indian Shakespeares on Screen conference, Koel Chatterjee listed these among several filmic citations in Arshinagar, arguing that this rich layering of references transformed the "image into text" for contemporary consumers of Shakespeare.

13. English language media frequently uses the Romeo-Juliet reference when reporting cases of honor killings and/or love jihad (also called Romeo jihad). In fact, the unpleasant connotations of the term "Romeo" form the primary meaning associated with the name in India, as it is frequently used to describe young men who make a practice of harassing women on the streets. The recent promotion of "Anti-Romeo squads" in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, ostensibly to protect the honor of women, draws on this connotation of the name.

14. In her paper, "Shakespeare and Cultural Appropriation: The Case of Vishal Bhardwaj's Haider and Aparna Sen's Arshinagar," circulated at the Shakespeare and Cultural Appropriation Seminar at SAA 2019, Shormistha Panja also argues for an important distinction between the two inter-religious couples. She suggests that the difference between the two generations is a
product of encroaching globalization and capitalism that have rendered older ties — like those of family and religion — meaningless (Panja 2019).

15. Both Robert Stam and Linda Hutcheon in their work on adaptation theory use Gerard Genette's taxonomy of transtextuality, one that delineates the different types of relationships between texts, in order to point to the inherently palimpsestuous nature of adaptations.

16. For multilingual quotations, the use of underlined italics points to Hindi-Urdu, the use of italics points to Bengali, and the use of roman script points to English.
References

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