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Sarah Hatchuel

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Shakespeare's Humanizing Language in Films and TV Series

Sarah Hatchuel, University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

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).¹ 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 unworhiest 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, fulfils 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 unhinges 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.

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