

Seth Lewis\*

## The Myth of Total Shakespeare: Filmic Adaptation and Posthuman Collaboration

**Abstract:** The convergence of textuality and multimedia in the twenty-first century signals a profound shift in early modern scholarship as Shakespeare's text is no longer separable from the diffuse presence of Shakespeare on film. Such transformative abstractions of Shakespearean linearity materialize throughout the perpetual remediations of Shakespeare on screen, and the theoretical frameworks of posthumanism, I argue, afford us the lens necessary to examine the interplay between film and text. Elaborating on André Bazin's germinal essay "The Myth of Total Cinema," which asserts that the original goal of film was to create "a total and complete representation of reality," this article substantiates the posthuman potentiality of film to affect both humanity and textuality, and the tangible effects of such an encompassing cinema evince themselves across a myriad of Shakespearean appropriations in the twenty-first century (20). I propose that the textual discourses surrounding Shakespeare's life and works are reconstructed through posthuman interventions in the cinematic representation of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Couched in both film theory and cybernetics, the surfacing of posthuman interventions in Shakespearean appropriation urges the reconsideration of what it means to engage with Shakespeare on film and television. Challenging the notion of a static, new historicist reading of Shakespeare on screen, the introduction of posthumanist theory forces us to recognize the alternative ontologies shaping Shakespearean appropriation. Thus, the filmic representation of Shakespeare, in its mimetic and portentous embodiment, emerges as a tertiary actant alongside humanity and textuality as a form of posthuman collaboration.

**Keywords:** André Bazin, Posthumanism, Cinema 3.0, Shakespeare, Database Cinema, Gender, Florence Pugh, Object Oriented Ontology, Reality, Post-Cinema, Post-Shakespeare, Collaboration.

On 12 March 2021, the Royal Shakespeare Company broke new ground with the inaugural performance of *Dream*—a digitally immersive rendition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which the boundaries of humanity and technology

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\* University of New Hampshire, USA. [seth.lewis@unh.edu](mailto:seth.lewis@unh.edu)

seemingly dissipate. Directed by Robin McNicholas of the London-based art collective Marshmallow Laser Feast, *Dream* signals a profound moment in Shakespearean production as the technologies of film making and gaming coalesce with the theatre to create a new understanding of what it means to experience Shakespeare. The fifty-minute production follows a digital Puck (played by EM Williams) through a simulated Athenian forest as he engages with the virtual avatars of Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed, each appearing as an onscreen assemblage of various items. Audience members also take part in this virtual Athenian world. For the fee of ten pounds, viewers can appear live, on-screen alongside Puck and the other fairies as a virtual firefly. Digital clusters of fireflies interact with Puck, directing his path throughout the forest by having audience members click the trackpad on their laptop, roll their mouse, or simply touching their screen in the direction they wish to travel. *Dream* is the first production to virtually render all aspects of performance—audience, cast, and set—in a digital space of interaction, and the simulated world of Shakespeare’s play is made possible through a myriad of technological means.

The visually captivating world of *Dream* hinges upon its extensive multicamera set up and the gaming technology of the Unreal Engine developed by Epic Games. *Dream* utilizes forty-seven cameras set up on a 360-degree rig to capture every angle of movement of the actors and the audience. At the same time, the Unreal Engine is rendering these images into the digital Athenian forest almost simultaneously. Such immediacy between cast and audience illuminates the interactive possibilities between new technologies and performance. And although it is seemingly impossible to predict future iterations of Shakespeare, recent productions, specifically those on film and those which utilize film technology, indicate a trajectory best understood through a contemporary lens of film theory. *Dream*, for instance, exemplifies the diffuse presence of Shakespeare in modern media ecologies by highlighting the proclivity of filmic representations to meticulously engage with Shakespeare’s life and works without fully engaging with his text. As Alexis Soloski points out in her review of *Dream* for the *New York Times*, “Shakespeare is the pretext, not the point” (*NYT*). The conceptualization of a Shakespearean adaptation devoid of most elements of Shakespeare’s text forces us to reconsider how Shakespeare is enacted, embodied, and understood in an age of pervasive technology and digital instantaneity. The question arises, then, how can we, as scholars of early modern literature and culture, reconcile the Shakespeare of the past with the filmic Shakespeare of the digital future?

Film theory suggests that a continuity between cinema, textuality, and reality is not only possible, but actualized throughout history. André Bazin’s 1946 essay “The Myth of Total Cinema” articulates the dialectical tension between the artistic and technological histories of cinema by exploring the

human desire to replicate reality. Bazin argues that more than a technological revolution of the photographic image, cinema is “an idealistic phenomenon” which exists throughout history in the artistic pursuit of realism and predates the technology which makes possible film making (17). As such, the foundational function of cinema, according to Bazin’s theory, is one of duplication and representation. That is, the concept of the cinema emerges out of the desire for “a total and complete representation of reality” which reconstructs “a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief” (20). Thus, the technology of modern cinema raises ontological questions about humanity, industrialism, and agency. For if the foundational pursuit of realism is based in the desire to replicate the world through a technological lens which privileges human existence, can reality ever be truly expressed on film? And if so, what does this mean for the digital interplay between humanity, textuality, and film?

### **Post to Post: Shakespeare, Cinema, and Humanism**

The prefix “post” in terms such as posthumanism, post-cinema, and post-Shakespeare underwrites an ontological fallacy of continuity. Of course, certain iterations of this triad do concern themselves with the inevitable thereafter, the period when existence moves beyond the need for the human, the cinema, or a Shakespeare. My argument, though, recuperates a sense of transition and extension in the age of “posts.” Rather than focusing on the cessation of humanism and its various forms, the “posts” at work in this article reveal a sustained evolution of the human ideal and the possibilities inherent in the cybernetic shifts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Ihab Hassan is one of the first critics to engage with posthumanism in this manner. He writes:

We need first to understand that the human form—including human desire and all its external representations—may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism. (843)

Posthumanism, as Hassan conceives of it, is a natural relocation of the human ideal in regard to the technological world. As such, posthumanist theory continues to evolve alongside the advancements of technology, materializing through N. Katherine Hayles’ concept of technogenesis: in her words, “the idea that humans and technics have coevolved together” (10). In a similar fashion, I argue that the posthuman shifts of the twenty-first century are indicative of the imbrication between the human subject, film technology, and the digital world.

The concept of a post-cinema, for instance, is not unlike Hassan's postulations. New Media theorists Shane Denson and Julia Leyda argue that post-cinema, more than an eradication of contemporary cinema, signifies "the collection of media, and the mediation of life forms, that 'follows' the broadly cinematic regime of the twentieth century—where 'following' can mean either to succeed something as an alternative or to 'follow suit' as a development or a response in kind" (2). Post-cinema, then, can be understood as both the digitally attuned heir to the cinema of the twentieth century as well as the culmination of two centuries of technological advancement and artistic desire.

Bazin foresaw the technological transformation of the cinema as an inevitable outcome set in motion by the inception of film technology. Articulating an infinitely regressive feedback loop between film and reality, Bazin posits: "Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it near and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented!" (21). And indeed, the cinema as we know it in the twenty-first century is profoundly different from that of Bazin's age. The digitization of modern cinema, for instance, is bringing film closer and closer to the totalizing ideal Bazin describes, and productions such as the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Dream* are reconfiguring the balance between the human and the digital, reality and film. Lev Manovich argues that technology is pushing humanity towards new forms of realism, specifically through the ability to digitally render simulated three-dimensional spaces. Manovich writes:

Bazin's idea that deep focus cinematography allowed the spectator a more active position in relation to the film image, thus bringing cinematic perception closer to real life perception, also finds a recent equivalent in interactive computer graphics where the user can freely explore the virtual space of the display from different points of view. And with such extension of computer graphics technology as virtual reality, the promise of Bazin's "total realism" appears to be closer than ever, literally within arm's reach of the VR user. (172)

The realism Manovich anticipates is uniquely modern and explicitly technological. Using virtual reality technology, media in the twenty-first century is breaking away from the illusory tactics characteristic of *trompe l'oeil* art, and film making is blurring the lines between the human and non-human. To phrase it differently, the realism of twenty-first century-cinema exists in a feedback loop between humanity and technology, and the reality being displayed on screen is inseparable from the technology rendering it possible.

Kristen Daly puts forth a similar treatise in her germinal essay "Cinema 3.0: The Interactive Image." The sequential heir to Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Daly's essay proposes a new understanding of cinema concurrent with modern technology and digital

cultures.<sup>1</sup> Daly argues that “a new way of making sense of the world is being represented in our contemporary cinema—a new form, which better represents the new economies and systems of work, play, and violence of the digital networked society” (81). Of the newly defined cinematic age, Daly proffers three aspects which redefine what it means to produce and consume cinema in the twenty-first century: first, to define modern cinema as a product of technological advancement is to acknowledge the new ontological networks between the audience, the cinema, and the digital world; second, the constructions of linearity, continuity, and narrative are increasingly giving way to fragmentary modes of reception which privilege digital technologies; and lastly, cinema is moving towards a database model which invites viewers to engage in digital and neurological forms of navigations as a means of interpreting the pluralities of modern film (90). These three postulates serve as an ideal buttress for examining the posthuman potentiality of film to replicate reality and textuality in that they represent both a succinct overture of the object oriented ontologies of the twenty-first century as well as the nascent media ecologies of the digital humanities. As Hayles points out, the digital humanities is “envisioning the future as it may take shape in a convergence culture in which TV, the web, computer games, cell phones, and other mobile devices are all interlinked and deliver cultural content across as well as within these different media” (52). Thus modern, post-cinema can be understood as an ideal conduit through which Shakespearean scholarship reaches its posthuman potential.

The conceptualization of a posthuman Shakespeare, or post-Shakespeare in this sense, is not a novel idea. As Christy Desmet brilliantly reminds us, the movement away from liberal humanist subjectivity is “first discussed in Shakespeare studies by materialist writers” such as Catherine Belsey in her 1985 publication *The Subject of Tragedy* (1). Recent publications such as Karen Raber’s monograph *Shakespeare and Posthumanist Theory* and Stefan Herbrechter & Ivan Callus’ collection *Posthumanist Shakespeares* are indicative of such materialist origins while remaining distinctly modern in their attentiveness to digital culture. And while these two publications are vital to comprehending the posthuman shift in Shakespearean studies, I situate Shakespearean appropriation as the locus of the post-Shakespeare movement. Engaging in the ongoing debate regarding Shakespearean fidelity, the convergence of post-cinema and post-Shakespeare provides a critical perspective

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<sup>1</sup> Daly situates her intervention as the natural successor to Deleuze’s cinematic volumes and their respective conceptions of cinema. She describes *Cinema 1* as being defined by “rational and stable representations” of images; whereas *Cinema 2*, responding to World War II, presents “seemingly irrationally linked images” which coincide with the postwar world (81). *Cinema 3* is thus initiated by modern technology changing worldviews on film.

regarding the representation of Shakespeare's "authenticity" in twenty-first century-media ecologies.<sup>2</sup> The question is no longer whether film making has altered cultural and scholarly perceptions of Shakespeare; instead, we must now ask how Shakespeare is embodied and understood across a post-cinematic, digital society, and what this might mean for his text.

Critical responses to the fidelity of Shakespearean appropriation in the twenty-first century are deeply enmeshed in the tenets of posthumanism and the digital age. Douglas Lanier proposes an approach to cognizing the post-human shift in Shakespearean adaptation by reading Shakespeare through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome. The most basic philosophy of the rhizomatic approach, according to Lanier, "is an emphasis upon differential "becoming" rather than Platonic "being"" (28). A rhizomatic approach to Shakespearean adaptation therefore warrants an ontological shift in the fidelity debate:

If we conceive of our shared object of study not as Shakespeare the text but as the vast web of adaptations, allusions and (re)productions that comprises the ever-changing cultural phenomenon we call "Shakespeare," the rhizome can offer a compelling theoretical model. A rhizomatic conception of Shakespeare situates "his" cultural authority not in the Shakespearean text at all but in the accrued power of Shakespearean adaptation, the multiple, changing lines of force we and previous cultures have labeled as "Shakespeare," lines of force that have been created by and which respond to historical contingencies. (29)

The networked approach central to a rhizomatic reading of Shakespearean adaptation is paramount in understanding how Shakespeare is remediated and reconstructed throughout history, yet, as Desmet points out in "Alien Shakespeares: 2.0," the rhizome model isolates certain elements of the non-human world by adhering to "an organic model rooted in the familiar world of human beings" (2-3). To mitigate the anthropocentric implications of a rhizomatic model, Desmet extends Ian Bogost's theory of alien phenomenology. Bogost's theory, as Desmet understands it, "reworks object oriented ontology... to emphasize ever smaller objects and specifically to incorporate the computer into its theoretical purview" (3). In summation, the theoretical framework of alien phenomenology, "which weaves a path between material objects and networks as models for posthuman relations," best represents the digital

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<sup>2</sup> D.J. Hopkins et al. first discuss post-cinematic Shakespeare in their chapter "Nudge, Nudge, Wink, Wink, Know What I Mean? A Theoretical Approach to Performance for a Post-Cinema Shakespeare" (2003). Their understanding of post-cinematic Shakespeare, though, is limited to the ways in which film actors are encouraged to express agency when playing a Shakespearean role, ultimately making it their own.

Shakespearean networks of the twenty-first century by functioning “as the computational counterpart to Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome” (3).

To dutifully represent the post-cinematic realities of Shakespeare on screen, my argument focuses on where Lanier’s and Desmet’s converge. Arguing that Shakespearean discourse in the twenty first century is infinitely bound in the digital networks of filmic representation, I illustrate how the (post)human desire to replicate reality manifests itself throughout modern Shakespearean adaptations. Bazin’s theory of totalizing cinema enframes the current shift in Shakespearean studies, and the posthumanity of twenty-first-century-film-making is creating waves in two major areas: our understanding of Shakespearean authorship and the gendered embodiment of Shakespeare’s female roles.

### **Post-Stratfordian? A Digital Debate**

John Madden’s critically acclaimed film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) engendered a wave of Shakespearean entertainment that would take form throughout countless remediations in the post-cinematic universe of the twenty-first century. Carving a space for future directors to have their way with Shakespeare, as it were, Madden’s imaginative and at times romanticized world of Elizabethan England refashioned the possibilities of filming Shakespeare: more than just resituating Shakespeare at the end of the twentieth century, Madden sought also to converge the allegedly oppositional spheres of Hollywood entertainment with early modern literary culture. In many ways, though, the film’s greatest influence is its engagement in the Anti-Stratfordian debate. Madden’s creative liberties immersed Christopher Marlowe (played by Rupert Everett) into the public spheres of popular culture and American filmmaking, calling into question Shakespeare’s authorship through revisioning the relationship between the two literary figures. The most notable moment of revisioning comes in the scene in which Marlowe refines Shakespeare’s ideas into the plot that would become *Romeo and Juliet*. This scene, according to Robert Sawyer, reflects the cultural milieu of the late twentieth century by transforming Shakespeare and Marlowe “into congenial, and even collaborative, rivals” (*The Critical Rivalry* 289). More importantly, however, this transformative depiction of Marlowe and Shakespeare instigates a large-scale cultural rupture in the contemporary understandings of Shakespeare’s life and works by foregrounding a sense of plurality that would become intrinsic to Shakespearean construction in the digital age. Concurrent with this shift, the post-cinematic representations of Shakespeare on screen materialize an Anti-Stratfordian reality in which Shakespeare is disembodied and reconfigured.

The new configurations of Shakespeare in the digital age are akin to the cybernetic shift in genealogical constructions, both in the humanities and in the cinema. Similar to Lanier's rhizomatic approach to Shakespearean adaptation, the digital networks of modern epistemology are forcing us to grapple with the new, multifaceted Shakespeare of post-cinema by embracing digital genealogies and moving away from ontological certainness. Stefan Herbrechter avers that a genealogical rendering of posthumanism is integral to maintaining a critical interrogation of anthropocentrism. Working through Foucault's cognizing of genealogies,<sup>3</sup> Herbrechter emphasizes the shared focus of posthuman and genealogical critique:

Critical posthumanism understands itself as a critical denaturalization of (liberal) humanist subjectivity or as an "ongoing deconstruction of humanism". In doing so, genealogy and critical posthumanism both "explore the conditions of possibility of contemporary beliefs and practices" and "uncover the historical contingencies that made it possible for people today to think and act as they do." (*Critical Posthumanism*)

Herbrechter's connecting of posthumanist thought with genealogical construction establishes the framework for shaping Shakespeare in the post-cinematic age without centering humanity. Equally important, a posthuman genealogical rendering of Shakespeare allows us to understand how films such as *Shakespeare in Love* dictate and differentiate Shakespearean scholarship and adaptation.

Roland Emmerich's 2011 film *Anonymous* engages in the posthuman genealogical reconstruction of Shakespeare by presenting the Oxfordian Theory of authorship through a post-cinematic lens. The film broaches the Stratfordian debate by disrupting the spatial and temporal borders between modernity and the early modern age while simultaneously blurring the distinction between film and reality. For example, the film's establishing shot opens with Derek Jacobi, playing himself, stepping out of a taxi in a busy New York City street before walking into a theatre where he is set to perform a production of *Anonymous*—the purportedly true account of Shakespearean authorship. On stage, Jacobi incredulously recounts a brief history of Shakespeare's life, remarking that "Our Shakespeare is a cipher; a ghost"; and to reclaim the works of Shakespeare, he puts forth "a darker story, of quills and swords, of power and betrayal, of a stage conquered and a throne lost" (Emmerich). That is, Jacobi proffers an enterprising story aimed at restitutions for the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford. Halfway

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<sup>3</sup> For Herbrechter, genealogies, in the Foucauldian sense, are constructed networks which focus upon the "social and historical production of systems of knowledge, power and discourse" (*Critical Posthumanism*).



through Jacobi's monologue, though, the onscreen stage divides, and shots of Ben Jonson preparing to take the early modern stage converge with the famed Shakespearean actor. In an apparent act of sharing the stage, Jacobi's and Jonson's joint presence disrupts conventions of cinematic continuity, ultimately inviting the audience to engage with the film's "meta-construction and intertextual linking," a fundamental aspect of Cinema 3.0 and the post-cinematic age (Daly 92).

For viewers, *Anonymous* engages with the posthuman constructions of Shakespearean genealogy and totalizing cinema in two ways. First, *Anonymous* explores the plurality inherent to the digital age by forcing audience members to place the film within their own respective networks of understanding. Daly identifies this trend as symptomatic of the nexus between technology and media. She reveals that many modern directors have a tendency "not only to allow but also to encourage plural and uncontrolled discourses and independent relationships between characters, situations, and audiences outside of authorial control" (92). In this sense, then, the networked approach to crafting narrative in the post-cinematic age is akin to the digitalized spheres of technology and media in terms of profuse ontological origins. Thus, the narrative focus of *Anonymous* operates through the audience's ostensible willingness to accept plurality within their networked understanding of Shakespeare. This is, of course, not a new concept for viewers of *Shakespeare in Love*. Just as Madden's film before it, Emmerich's largely inventive interpretation of early modern literature, history, and culture encourages a post-Shakespearean future hinged upon pluralities.<sup>4</sup> Second, Emmerich's film engages with its viewers by acting upon the affective powers of Jacobi's celebrity status. In playing himself in *Anonymous*, Jacobi engenders an ontological tension between his filmic embodiment and that of the physical world. In this regard, Jacobi's ethos as one of the most decorated Shakespearean actors is, at times, oppositional to his Anti-Stratfordian stance in the film. Yet, as Daly explains, "Interactions with digital media have made [viewers] familiar with a disordered, hybrid, and unhierarchical navigation of information" which makes possible the reconciliation of the Jacobi of the real world with the Jacobi of *Anonymous* (92). Jacobi's celebrity status therefore extends the diegetic layers of interpretation in *Anonymous* by forcing audience members to reckon with Shakespearean constructions across reality and film.

In a similar fashion, Jim Jarmusch's 2013 film *Only Lovers Left Alive* conflates the spheres of reality and inhumanity to reconfigure Shakespeare. Starring Tom Hiddleston and Tilda Swinton as vampiric versions of Adam and Eve, *Only Lovers Left Alive* portrays the intricacies of non-human romance in

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<sup>4</sup> Concurrent with its Oxfordian theory, *Anonymous* alleges that Marlowe is murdered because of his knowledge of the business dealings between Shakespeare and Edward de Vere.

the twenty-first century. Hiddleston's and Swinton's characters, being vampires, require human blood as sustenance, and Jarmusch reimagines Christopher Marlowe (played by John Hurt) as their supernatural drug dealer. Marlowe's characterization in the film as a 500-year-old vampire who fakes his own death and now sells drugs to other vampires is one of the more creative reconfigurations of the early modern playwright; yet the Shakespearean implications of this film supersede Marlowe's reinvention. In several moments throughout the film, Marlowe casts aspersions on the idea that Shakespeare penned the works attributed to him, insisting that he is the sole author of the entirety of Shakespeare's texts. For example, Marlowe expresses that he wishes he had met Adam before writing *Hamlet* as Hiddleston's character would have provided him an excellent "role model" for the prince of Denmark (Jarmusch). And after drinking tainted blood by mistake, Marlowe makes a dying declaration of resentment for having never received his accolades for writing Shakespeare's oeuvre.

The Anti-Stratfordian stance encoded in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, albeit grounded in the supernatural belief in vampires, is but another variation of the Marlovian theory of authorship. Jarmusch, however, complicates theorizations of authorship by proffering the notion that such questioning is irrelevant to the twenty-first century-viewer. Embracing the cultural uncertainty and the inherent multiplicities of the digital age, Jarmusch assumes what I define as a post-Stratfordian demeanor towards Shakespeare's life and works. For instance, when asked if he believes in the Anti-Stratfordian theory, Jarmusch answers "Yeah, I'm a definite total Anti-Stratfordian completely. And yet, in the end, it doesn't really matter at all who wrote it ... I think it's fascinating, fun and interesting," he continues, "But in the end, like I said, it doesn't matter. Whoever wrote those sonnets and those tragedies, specifically—wow, I don't care who it was" (*Vulture*). Jarmusch, rather than placing a critical focus on the fidelity of Shakespeare's oeuvre, understands that Shakespeare in the twenty-first century is not limited by humanist borders. He makes certain to note that the idea of Shakespearean authorship is "one of the greatest conspiracies ever perpetrated on humans" (*Vulture*). That this theory, according to Jarmusch, is happening "on humans" raises the ontological question of how Shakespeare is understood across the mediated spheres of humanity, reality, textuality, and digital screens. Such convergent ideals, in this sense, invite posthuman interventions, and film making is bringing about new ruptures in Shakespearean discourse.

Textual criticism is also moving towards a posthuman understanding of authorship which privileges multiplicity and technology. The 2016 publication of the *New Oxford Shakespeare*, for instance, exemplifies a post-Shakespearean shift in early modern studies. Moving beyond previous understandings of authorship, Taylor et al. credit Marlowe with co-authorship of the three parts of *Henry VI*. The establishment of authorship in this edited collection, Sawyer

avers, can be seen as analogous to the digital identifiers inherent to the technologies of bitcoin and blockchain technology. Sawyer grounds his comparison in the five criteria outlined in Steve Pannifer's understanding of digital identity<sup>5</sup> ledgers: "1. many writers; 2. immutable history; 3. degree of transparency; 4. limited trust; 5. transactional nature" ("Bitcoin, Blockchains and the Bard" 66). Elsewhere, Petr Plecháč utilizes artificial intelligence programs to analyze the text of *Henry VIII* to reveal potential collaborators, namely John Fletcher. Analyzing specific scenes through the "combined analysis of vocabulary and versification and modern machine learning techniques," Plecháč concludes that "We can thus state with high reliability that *H8* is a result of collaboration between William Shakespeare and John Fletcher" (1, 9). Both the efforts of the *New Oxford Shakespeare* and Plecháč's computer analysis are indicative of the direction in which the digitally mediated Shakespeare of the twenty-first century is headed. Foregrounding the posthuman efforts of the films and publications listed in this section, we can begin to understand how non-human actants are moving scholarship towards a post-Stratfordian age in which technology, fidelity, and reality seemingly converge. As such, the state of the Stratfordian debate in the twenty-first century is inseparable from the filmic realities which reflect Shakespeare's diffuse, digital embodiment.

### Shakespearean Databases and Gendered Realities

When discussing the nuances of embodiment and the critical differentiation between the terms non-human and inhuman, Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova raise the salient point that "Gender and sexual difference, race and ethnicity, class and education, health and able-bodiedness are crucial markers and gate keepers of acceptable 'humanity'" (2). In early modern studies, too, these same terms are used to demarcate accessibility, propagate whiteness, and promote the unfettered afterlife of "The Bard."<sup>6</sup> The recent shift towards a post-cinematic Shakespeare, though, has engendered a new reality in which the digital networks of mediation and indexicality are pushing against Shakespearean historiographies to recuperate a sense of awareness regarding the treatment of gender, sexuality, and race, both in his text and in the appropriations which extend his canon.

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<sup>5</sup> Steve Pannifer specializes in the fields of cryptocurrency and the identification of digital currency users.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the introduction to Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*. Titled "Preface and Prelude," Bloom signals that his authority on culture, theory, and literature are above reproach. Bloom's positionality and his aesthetic assertions exemplify the tenets of Charles Mills' publication "White Ignorance." The reading of these two texts in tandem stems from Reginald A. Wilburn's pedagogical approach to navigating whiteness in the reading of early modern texts.

Daly's theorizing of a database model of cinema brilliantly captures this moment by explicating how collations of information are subtly overtaking narrative functions while simultaneously forcing viewers to undertake an agential approach to watching films. According to Daly, "the database," which she understands as a product of digital technologies, "implies a form of cinema less concerned with storytelling and visuality and more interested in cognitive and navigational processes" (90). In this sense, the digital restructuring of cinematic forms instigates a paradigm shift in which audience members gain a greater role in determining how a film is experienced and mediated by revealing the intersections of gender, embodiment, and databases. Simply put, the database model of cinema generates posthuman interventions which are mapping new realities onto Shakespeare's characters.

The highly mediated and globalized medium of database cinema conflates the realities of the internet and the screen, inviting audience members to extend and complicate the diegetic layers of films they watch. Much like the discussion in the previous section which examined the implications of Derek Jacobi playing himself on screen, the digital processes of database cinema are enacting a posthuman shift in the depiction of women in Shakespearean films by creating semiotic networks mediated and enfolded into one another. Actor Florence Pugh, for instance, is blurring the boundaries between Shakespearean embodiment and folk-horror feminism due in part to her burgeoning celebrity as well as the mediated networks of database cinema. Her roles in William Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* (2016), Richard Eyre's *King Lear* (2018), and Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) are not simply in conversation with one another; rather, the discursive networks of the internet, the cinema, and reality are constantly remediating the respective narratives of each film in which she appears. Daly understands this newfound trend in narrative revisioning as indicative of the technological world and the pervasive mediation between the digital and the human. She posits that the construction of narrative on film is more complex and intertextually linked than ever before largely because of online communal spaces and digital immediacy (85). To understand the posthuman impact of Pugh's roles, then, requires a cognizance of the ways in which the technology of the twenty-first century is altering film, and subsequently, Shakespearean appropriation.

The genealogical construction of Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* situates the film as an exemplary starting point for this case study regarding Shakespearean embodiment and remediation across multiple databases. The film's remediated history is as follows: Oldroyd's 2016 film is adapted from soviet director Roman Balayan's film *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1989); Balayan's adaptation builds upon Andrzej Wajda's film *Sibirskia Ledi Magbet* (*Siberian Lady Macbeth*) (1962); both Balayan's and Wajda's films remediate Nikolai Leskov's 1865 novella *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk Distric*; and finally,

Leskov's novella is a derivative of the character Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. Such heightened levels of remediation and revisioning at work across history prefigure the digital interplay between modern cinema and internet databases, and we gain a greater sense of how female embodiment is constructed across various mediums, digitally and (inter)textually. Pugh's role as the film's protagonist Katherine Lester, then, can be understood as both the culmination of the character's evolution throughout various mediations as well as a new entry into the digital database of Shakespeare on screen. For example, Lester's development throughout the film conjures the archetypal characterization of Lady Macbeth by undertaking an agential position which threatens the male dominated spheres of the film. The differentiation, however, occurs when Lester materializes her agency into subversive actions against the limiting strictures of the patriarchy by poisoning her father-in-law, murdering her controlling husband, and smothering her adulterous lover's alleged child. The murderous and vindictive depiction of Lester germinates new digital actants across the databases of modern cinema and Shakespearean studies by exacerbating the characterization of Lady Macbeth. As a result, both Pugh and Lady Macbeth assume a transformative disposition which opposes patriarchal dominance with the same violence historically associated with the restriction of womanhood.

Pugh further ruptures notions of female embodiment in Shakespearean films with her role as Cordelia in Eyre's *King Lear*. Set in a militarized version of London in the not-so-distant future, the realistic tendencies of *King Lear* invite audience members to locate the film within their own temporal place, emphasizing the reality of a digitally modern Shakespeare. Accordingly, Pugh, whose character has been described as the "millennial Cordelia," embeds the uncertainty and angst of the twenty-first century into Shakespeare's text with brilliant indifference and meticulous subversion (*The Hollywood Reporter*). In this sense, Eyre's decision to adapt the movie into a military state further politicizes Cordelia's resistance to adhere to King Lear's demands of flattery by calling into question her status as an ostensibly unmarried and apolitical figure. On screen, this translates to Cordelia literally standing up for herself as her sisters remain seated, reifying Kent's questioning of Lear: "Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak / When power to flattery bows?" (1: 1: 144-145).<sup>7</sup> The resulting rupture of Cordelia's onscreen refashioning in this scene is one of political and gendered agency akin to that of Lady Macbeth. Manifesting across cinematic and internet databases, Pugh's new take on Cordelia grounds itself in the affective powers she garnered in her role as Katherine Lester, and when viewed in conjunction, Pugh's fusing of Cordelia and Lady Macbeth highlights the posthuman capability to reclassify female embodiment in Shakespearean

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<sup>7</sup> These lines are cited from a combined text in *The Norton Shakespeare*.

films by filtering Shakespeare's characters through new algorithms of intertextuality.

Presenting an aggregate reality of technology, genre, and posthumanity, Shakespeare on screen is no longer confined to the dichotomy of fidelity versus infidelity; instead, Shakespeare is now encoded through and reconstructed by the linking mechanisms which constitute the digital interplay between humans and databases. In this regard, Aster's film *Midsommar* — which follows a group of friends as they attend a Swedish festival that devolves into a violent ceremony hosted by a pagan cult—further accentuates the reconfiguration of Shakespearean embodiment through Pugh's role as the film's protagonist, Dani.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the film, Dani suffers a series of traumatic losses, and these events culminate with her being crowned May Queen, the matriarch of the movie's titular festival. In this role, Dani must choose the ninth person to be sacrificed as part of a ceremony, and she chooses her ex-boyfriend Christian, who is sedated, disemboweled, and stuffed into a bear carcass. In a series of cross shots between Dani and Christian, we see the protagonist's disposition alter from tears to a faint smile as she watches him burn alive.

The film's conclusion and Dani's subsequent portrayal as a murderous heroine of the folk-horror genre engages with the databases of modern cinema to reconfigure Pugh's on-screen embodiment across previous and future films. More specifically, Pugh's roles as Katherine Lester in Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* and Cordelia in Eyre's *King Lear*, when mediated through the contextual database of *Midsommar*, undergo a genealogical transformation which further rejects the dominance of patriarchal suppression and governance. That is, in the viewer's perception, the database model of cinema obfuscates the differentiation between Pugh's role in *Midsommar* from those in *Lady Macbeth* and *King Lear* by working through a form of posthuman collaboration across film and reality, intimating a new sense of filmic identity and embodiment for female roles in Shakespearean texts and films.

### Conclusion: Total Shakespeare

In Act 3 Scene 2 of *Hamlet*, the Danish prince instructs the visiting players on how to accurately portray the play he commissions by intoning, "For anything so o'erdone is from / the purpose of playing, whose end both at the first and now / was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to / show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very / age and body of the time his form and

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<sup>8</sup> The title *Midsommar* also playfully gestures to Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

pressure” (3.2:18:21).<sup>9</sup> Encoded in these instructions is Hamlet’s belief that a totalizing representation of reality would conjure feelings of guilt in Claudius by laying bare the nature of his humanity. Such realistic acting, Hamlet believed, had the potential to cross the boundaries of the stage and affect reality. Two centuries later, this same desire to render an authentic realism becomes the basis for the development of the cinema. As André Bazin reminds us, the notion of representing reality has a sustained presence throughout history, and its emergence at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is one of mere coincidence.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, then, we can view *Hamlet*’s play-within-a-play as a precursory effort pushing towards the idea of a total cinema — that is, the convergence of film and reality.

In terms of Shakespearean cinema, the idea of a Total Shakespeare, one which tethers the realities of the early modern age and our own through film, is evolving and reconfiguring alongside the realignment of the liberal humanist subject. In the twentieth century, films such as Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet* (1948) and Renato Castellani’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1954) attempted to occupy a liminal space between reality and screen through fusing elements of the two. *Hamlet*, for instance, features shots of the real ocean transposed alongside a fabricated Elsinore, and *Romeo and Juliet* was shot on location in Verona, Italy and advertised as being “Superbly filmed in its actual setting” (Castellani). The efforts of these films, however, failed to render Shakespearean reality in the eyes of realist critic Siegfried Kracauer. In his monograph *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* Kracauer conceives of these films as more aesthetic than realistic; in doing so, he argues that these films represent “an unnatural alliance between conflicting forces” of filmic and Shakespearean reality (37). It makes sense, given the nature of cinema in the twentieth century, that Kracauer could not locate reality in the filmic dissonance between Shakespeare’s age and his own. The evolving nature of epistemology and cinema in the twenty-first century, though, affords new frameworks which allow for the comprehension of the coalescence of Shakespeare, film, and reality.

Looking at the post-cinematic age of the twenty-first century, which is defined by multiplicities and ontological uncertainty, the emergence of a Total Shakespeare is no longer escapable. As Shakespeare’s text is no longer separable from the diffuse presence of Shakespeare on film, we are bearing witness to the convergence of textuality, reality, and film. Pervasive technology and posthuman interventions across film databases and genealogical constructions are altering the way Shakespeare is understood both inside and outside of the academy by engaging in new forms of collaboration with his life and texts.

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<sup>9</sup> These lines are cited from a combined text in *The Norton Shakespeare*.

<sup>10</sup> Bazin argues that “The photographic cinema could just as well have grafted itself onto a phenakistoscope foreseen as long ago as the sixteenth century” (19).

The transformation of the cinema, too, plays into the creation of a Total Shakespeare. Bazin explains, “Today the making of images no longer shares an anthropocentric, utilitarian purpose. It is no longer a question of survival after death, but of a larger concept, the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real with its own temporal destiny” (“Ontology of the Photographic Image” 10). Accordingly, understanding the posthumanity of modern Shakespearean appropriation proffers the chance of creating an equitable future for Shakespearean discourse couched in the synthesis of the human and non-human world.

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