‘THE PARTICULAR INTENSITY AND NERVES OF THIS’

In early February 1964 when the buzz around the scandalous affair between Richard Burton and American screen goddess Elizabeth Taylor was at a fever-pitch, a new Broadway-bound production of Hamlet began to take shape in Toronto under the direction of the already legendary John Gielgud and starring Burton in his third go-round in the title role. Rehearsals with a uniformly accomplished supporting cast of British and American actors – which included such then and later-to-become stage-luminaries as Hume Cronyn, George Rose and John Cullum – proceeded at a speedy clip, though not without distractions prompted by occasional sightings of Ms Taylor. Sources indicate that Burton accepted instruction from Gielgud in an understatedly deferential manner – amicably trading anecdotes with him about fellow stage-legends, Ralph Richardson and ‘Larry’ Olivier – but seldom followed the old master’s directives, much less seemed to work very hard at mastering his lines.¹ Although the cast uniformly evinced respect and admiration for Gielgud – who seemed to know all their parts by heart and could rehearse them backwards and forwards – they also found themselves at sea without a rudder as opening night beckoned, lacking any determinate sense of an overarching concept or sustained interpretive focus for the production itself.² Seriously professional to a fault, the cast was often bewildered by the variability of Gielgud’s daily notes and directives, which would require, for example, the actor playing Guildenstern to be meekly obsequious in one scene, aggressively inquisitorial in another, without developing a consistent through-line of interpretation that would render his changes in tone coherent. Equally bewildering was how to reconcile Sir John’s insistence on their mastery of the musicality of the verse and constant tinkering with blocking and stage-properties with the one definite concept at the heart of the play’s production: that is, the decision to stage the play as a rehearsal of Hamlet, performed on a more or less bare stage by actors dressed in what were supposed to be the kind of clothes actors would wear to rehearsals.

The anxieties that beset the cast during their rehearsals and first two weeks of under-applauded (but financially rewarding) performances in Toronto, and that continued to preoccupy them in their next two-week run in Boston, gradually receded as Burton’s celebrity and growing mastery led to a record-breaking total of 138 performances in the part by the time the production’s run concluded eighteen weeks later, on 8 August, in New

² Though rather differently positioned, Redfield and Sterne both provide intimate insights into the rehearsal process and offstage discussions of the 1964 stage production that indicate just how under-conceptualized, under-rehearsed and mutable it was.
York. Just prior to the last month of that run (on 30 June and 1 July to be exact), the production was recorded in live performance on three occasions from seventeen different camera angles and edited into a film that was shown for two days (23–24 September 1964) in 2000 movie houses across the United States, and reportedly rewarded Burton and its producers with a $4 million gross return.

The idea of bringing a live theatre experience to thousands of viewers in different cities was trumpeted (by Burton among others) as a new art-form called ‘Theatrofilm’, made possible through ‘the miracle of Electronovision’, which was, in fact, one of several technological predecessors for recording moving pictures on videotape. The Electronovision process deployed ‘was basically a multicamera TV-style recording’ for which ‘Studio video cameras were positioned in the orchestra, boxes and balconies to mimic the audience point of view’, with a ‘kinescope film recording [later being] made of the video image for theatrical release’.3 As such, the points of view captured and conveyed were essentially the same as would be deployed in most early televised recordings of live theatre productions when ‘all shows were shot “in proscenium”’ and ‘the limited camera work possible in early television created an effect of spatial continuity more comparable to the theatre than the cinema’.4 In this respect among others, the Electronovision *Hamlet* effectively worked within the parameters established in ‘a spate of drama anthology shows with theatrical names, including The Kraft Television Theatre, Ford Theatre [and] Playhouse 90’ throughout the 1950s in the ‘so-called “Golden Age” of television’.5 Indeed, the last of these shows, Playhouse 90, had, by 1957, already begun to use an even earlier form of videotape recording technology, to substitute pre-recording for live production, and to follow cinematic practice by recording individual scenes in discrete takes on different sets. By contrast, the only concession to conventional filmmaking practice made in the Burton ‘theatrofilm’ was the distillation of a composite edited product from the footage of three recorded live performances.6 Though bruited as employing a new technology to bring a new kind of live-theatre immediacy to what would become a cinematic event, the Electronovision *Hamlet* could thus be said to operate as both an anomalous and nostalgic throwback to the already superseded days of live television recording.

Burton nonetheless insisted on the immediacy and ‘liveness’ of the reproduced theatre

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3 See www.braintvstv.com/essays/back-to-future.html. The next year the Electronovision process was deployed in an eight-day black-and-white shoot of a biopic about Jean Harlow in an effort to beat a Technicolor version of the same subject into the theatres. Though the Electronovision *Harlow* won its race, it was, according to our web essayist ‘braintrustdv’, considered ‘more of a curiosity than a movie and was pulled from its few bookings about as quickly as it had been shot’. In the aftermath of this and a few additional experiments, ‘the Electronovision cameras were relegated to video-movie history’.


6 Some twenty-eight years later – on 26 May 1992, to be exact – Richard Eyre and Ian McKellen would seek to replicate this experiment in an even more austere manner by training three cameras on their stage production of *Richard III* at the Lyttleton Theatre in London in order to produce ‘three separate videotapes [that] would never be edited and could only ever be viewed simultaneously [on three separate screens] by a visitor to the [British Theatre] Museum in Covent Garden. The adjacent screens show the full stage, the principals in each scene, and a close-up of whoever is speaking, so that the viewer, rather like a theatre audience, can “edit” the production, by switching attention between the three images’. Ian McKellen, *William Shakespeare’s Richard III: A Screenplay Written by Ian McKellen and Richard Loncraine* (Woodstock, NY, 1996), pp. 7–8. No doubt persuaded by his own observation that ‘the most obvious way of preserving a live performance is the least satisfactory’ (p. 7), McKellen would collaborate with director Richard Loncraine three years later on a screenplay and celebrated film version of *Richard III* (1995) inspired and shaped by the earlier stage-production. For astute commentary on McKellen and Eyre’s ‘triple record’ and Burton’s earlier ‘theatrofilm’, see Laurie Osborne, ‘Speculations on Shakespearean Cinematic Liveness’, *Shakespeare Bulletin* 24.3 (2006), 49–65.
performance in an interview he expressly gave to promote the American screenings of his ‘theatrofilm’ (and which, given the new miracles of the internet, can now be seen on YouTube). As Burton contends:

The film was shot . . . with an actual live audience and with the actors performing and either being adept or inadequate, or good or fluffing, or being articulate, just as they would if you went to see [the] production . . . none of the actors make any concession to this new process . . . [W]e don’t tone it down in order to seem like film actors or play it up because the cameras are perhaps a little further away than they would be in a film studio. It’s played exactly as is, and the result will be certainly unique, possibly extraordinary, and perhaps epoch making. That is something for the audience to decide. You get the immediacy of a live production of Hamlet on Broadway in the nervousness of the actors, knowing that they can’t go back on it, that this is it for all time, unlike in films, where you can, if you make a mistake, go back and do it again. I think the particular intensity and nerves of this is probably the same kind of thing that excites a real life audience in a real live theatre.°

Given the promotional bias of Burton’s remarks – and the extent to which they differ from a later reported comment that Shakespeare is ‘poison’ in the film box-office – it’s hard to know how much we should credit his assurance in the uniqueness and epoch-making nature of this undertaking, much less his confidence in the capacity of the Electronovision Hamlet to sustain the ‘immediacy’ of live performance.® Burton’s apparent conviction that the ‘particular intensity and nerves’ of this minimally mediated translation of ‘real live theatre’ could, when screened, continue to excite ‘real life’ audiences notably depends on his claim about the unlikeness between the precarious ‘once and forever’ conditions that informed the videotaped recording and the more deliberative, repeatedly revised-until-perfected conditions that obtain in filmmaking. He sees (or pretends to see) this mode of capturing a stage performance on the fly as a faithful if effectual substitute for the experience of live theatre as well as a preferred alternative to dismantling the theatrical dynamic in order to service a play’s adaptation to the more discontinuous and distancing practices endemic to the filmmaking process. Whether because Burton honestly believed that the miracle of ‘liveness’ conveyed by Electronovision could not (or should not) outlive its moment of production, or came to feel that such experiments were not, in the end, so momentous that they required preserving, all but two copies of the Electronovision Hamlet were eventually destroyed, one of which was consigned to the BFI archives in London, the other only recovered in an attic and made public by Burton’s widow, Sally, in 1988.°

‘CHANNELLING THE GHOSTS’

Our scene now shifts to early March 2007 and St Ann’s Warehouse in the recently gentrified waterfront neighbourhood of DUMBO in Brooklyn, and then to late October 2007 and the New York Public Theater, where the Wooster Group has undertaken a sustained ‘emulation’ of the 1964 ‘theatrofilm’ of Hamlet. One of the first experimental theatre companies to bring video monitors on stage and enter into dialogue with them in the course of a production (their first efforts summoning up some of the same indignation from their audiences that Bob Dylan did from his when he first went electric at the 1965 Newport Folk

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7 Burton’s promotional interview is available as an extra feature on the DVD version of the videofilm, currently marketed as Richard Burton’s Hamlet (dir., John Gielgud (1964) Onward Production. Sound, b/w, 191m), which also includes the text of the quoted passage in its accompanying booklet. Video footage of the Burton interview is also available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLqDW4ZqckQ.
8 As Laurie Osborne observes, ‘Burton implicitly invokes the irremediable flaws that the reproduced performance will represent as a significant factor in the production’s “liveness”’ (‘Speculations’, p. 50).
9 Ironically, as Osborne writes, ‘What was a stage Hamlet, temporarily envisioned and filmed as “theatrofilm” that “will never possibly be shown again”’ (Burton, Interview) is now only a DVD production which includes the interview and the ad ‘extolling the “liveness” and immediacy of the experience’ (‘Speculations’, p. 52).
Festival), the Wooster Group has recently begun to employ video footage in an even more singular manner, that is, as a visual prompt or model for their own efforts at imitation or emulation. Their 2004 production, Poor Theater, for example, featured not only a stirring side-by-side emulation of sections of Jerzy Grotowski’s Akropolis, but a painstaking effort by Group members to perform a dance-piece designed and described by choreographer William Forsythe, whose videotaped presentation was replicated by the Wooster Group’s Scott Shepherd as other members of the Group moved through their paces. While the tone, and mode of attack, of the Grotowski emulation was well-nigh reverential, and delivered a secondary ‘live’ performance that arguably superseded in power and effect its videotaped ‘original’, the representation of Forsythe and execution of his dance-piece was replicated by the Wooster Group’s Scott Shepherd as other members of the Group moved through their paces. While the tone, and mode of attack, of the Grotowski emulation was well-nigh reverential, and delivered a secondary ‘live’ performance that arguably superseded in power and effect its videotaped ‘original’, the representation of Forsythe and execution of his dance-piece seemed doubly ironized, with Shepherd assuming the guise of a self-absorbed new-age guru, and the other Wooster actors demonstrating, despite their adeptness and commitment, the obvious difficulties involved in mastering someone else’s art and craft.

By contrast with the mixed modalities of Poor Theater, the mood and mode of address of The Wooster Group Hamlet in its St Ann’s performances seemed structurally, if not designedly, parodic despite the reverential claims advanced about the performance in the programme notes. In the notes, the Group rather portentously identifies their production as ‘an archaeological excursion into America’s cultural past, looking for archetypes that shadow forth our identity’, which ‘attempts to reverse the process’ of transforming a theatre performance into film by reconstructing a hypothetical theater piece from the fragmentary evidence of the edited film, like an archaeologist inferring an improbable temple from a collection of ruins. Channeling the ghost of the legendary 1964 performance, the Group descends into a kind of madness, intentionally replacing its own spirit with the spirit of another.

These passages gesture towards a channelling of the ghosts of the theatrical past in a combined act of cultural recovery, subjective dispossession and collective hommage. But in claiming that the ‘fragmentary evidence of the edited [Burton] film’ constitutes ‘a collection of ruins’, the Group also appears, somewhat disingenuously, to conflate the purportedly ‘faithful’ film of the 1964 stage-performance with their own elaborately reconstructed version of it, which (a technical note in the programme tells us) has been ‘digitally re-edited . . . so that the lines of verse, which were spoken freely in the 1964 production, are delivered according to the original poetic meter’, and from which ‘some figures have been erased and obscured, . . . the duration of the play [having also been] shortened using fast forwards and jump cuts’. This re-editing process effectively precludes the staging of a sustained side-by-side dialogue with the Burton film by (literally) opening the film up for the Wooster actors themselves to displace, enter into, colonize, speak over and re-inhabit. Having deconstructed and reassembled the film that records the otherwise irrecoverable stage performance, the Group more often than not surrogates its rehearsal of the 1964 Hamlet to its re-edited version of that film, thereby doubly displacing its rehearsal of the 1964 Hamlet and making ghosts of the actors it sets out to channel.

At both the St Ann’s and the Public Theater performances, the re-edited theatrofilm was projected

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11 The differing tones of the two main pieces (a third, presented as a coda to the first, involved an emulation of the artist Max Ernst) evoked two differing takes on Poor Theater’s identification as ‘a series of simulacra’, the term itself being given a broad range of dictionary definitions in the programme, which extend from ‘a material image, made as a representation of some deity, person or thing’, to ‘counterfeit; travesty; sham’. 
THE WOOSTER GROUP’S HAMLET

15 Scott Shepherd channelling Richard Burton in The Wooster Group’s Hamlet.

on a large backcloth screen and on several smaller monitors, three of which remained visible to the audience throughout the production while others were placed in the sightlines of the actors in order to prompt their performance. The audience was not encouraged to notice the additional monitors above their heads (at St Ann’s), though the headset mikes worn by the actors at both sites were as conspicuous as they would be at a Madonna concert. At the Public Theater performance in October, I registered the presence of two recessed monitors set at the edge of the stage to help cue the actors, but could not discern the presence of any overhead monitors, and noted that two of the three smaller, rectangular monitors onstage (those with their longer sides up) were mainly used to display images of the Wooster actors themselves, sometimes held in static poses that did not always synchronize with the forward movement of the drama. (In one instance, halfway through the performance, the stage-right monitor held an image of Shepherd holding the skull of Yorick, something we did not actually see Shepherd do later in the performance, most of the gravediggers scene having been skipped or fast forwarded. In another, an image of John Gielgud was projected in the role of Hamlet’s father’s ghost from a 1970 Hallmark Hall of Fame televised production.)¹² In both venues, the live actors spoke in synchronic relation to the film-actors’ performances, but mostly over the sometimes muted but more often altogether suppressed spoken dialogue of Burton et al., while displacing with their own bodies the often editorially erased bodies of the actors represented on-screen.

Although often as deferentially emulative and occasionally as dialogic as it claimed to be, the Group’s performance was, in these and other respects, just as often interventionist and exaggeratedly reiterative. (The movements forward, backward and to the sides of a chair and table on rollers to approximate the shifts in camera angle from long-shot to close-up and back again in the theatrofilm were among the most pronounced examples of the Group’s often amusing, occasionally gratuitous, literalism. Why, after all, try to imitate something that is clearly inimitable?) Rather than embodying a sense of dispossession by, and ceding of control to, the ghosts of the theatrical past, the effect more closely resembled a calculated act of seizure or appropriation, the actors going so far as to order fast-forwarding of the videotape, the skipping of allegedly ’unrendered’ scenes, and even the substituting of scenes from recent Hamlet films directed by Michael Almereyda (2000) and Kenneth Branagh (1995), which were twice granted a freedom to speak directly to the audience seldom allowed to the Burton production. (Briefer, silent clips and images from earlier Hamlet films

¹² Gielgud played the same role in the 1964 production, but his lines were delivered by means of pre-recorded audio transmission, with the ghost’s physical presence conveyed only by an ominously outsized shadow.

Shakespeare Survey Online © Cambridge University Press, 2008
directed by Zeffirelli (1990) and Kozintsev (1964) were consigned to the smaller monitors.) And as noted above, what we saw of the Burton film in the Group’s ‘revival’ was a screen haunted by ghosts: the actors’ images often erased by the Group editors, and their words and gestures variously suppressed, emulated or parodied by the Group actors.

This repossession of the space of the dead by the living often generated oddly mechanized modes of emulation. As the Group actors painstakingly tried to record at the level of physical movement and gesture every move made in the Electronovision recording, they seemed more intent on reconstituting the final cut of the Burton video-film than on ‘reconstructing’ the performances to which it claimed to be roughly commensurate. In the St Ann’s version in particular, this effort involved the cultivation of a rigidly choreographed series of bird-like facial tics, splayed gestures and spasitic movements on the part of the actors, who came to resemble marionettes pulled in opposing directions by an unseen string. (The deployment of such gestures and movements seemed less pronounced, and more nuanced, in the Group’s Public Theater performance, which may have represented a refinement in the Group’s approach to the material.) As they tried to keep pace with the audio portion of the film playing directly into their ears, the actors engaged in an increasingly fevered competition with the film itself. What seemed to start out as a kind of stage-actors’ revenge against the threat posed to ‘liveness’ by innovations like ‘Theatrofilm’, in which living actors control the speed and pacing of the painstakingly ‘distressed’ video recording, and living bodies erase and displace the fading shadows of electronic reproduction, devolved (particularly in the St Ann’s performance) into a collective ‘descent’ into much the ‘kind of madness’ of relentless replication described in the programme notes. This impression became especially pronounced after the intermission at St Ann’s, as we watched the actors sustain their emulative experiment (with only slight variations) to the bitter end of the Burton film, rather than end it once its manifest point had been made (as was refreshingly the case in Brace Up! (2003, 1991), the Group’s earlier adaptation of Chekhov’s Three Sisters, which abruptly ended a step or two short of textual closure).

‘THE MEDIA’S THE THING’

Not quite seeing the point of the performance’s second half became a common refrain in responses to and reviews of the Group’s performances at the Public Theater, Ben Brantley’s remark that the performance ‘crossed the line from hypnotic to narcotic’ after intermission being representative (New York Times, 1 November 2007). Since arguing this point is where my own capacity for comparative recall will come most into question, I would like to delay that moment for now in order to entertain a related line of inquiry.

In some quarters – particularly in the experimental theatre community and among academics working in that area as well as in performance studies – the Wooster Group commands what amounts to a cult following (entirely deserved in my opinion). This following is especially evident when the Group performs on its home-turf, the Performing Garage on Wooster Street in New York’s Soho, and in their recently annexed home-away-from-home at St Ann’s. Though their move to the Public Theater in October led to sold-out houses and a two-week extension of their run, the audience that attended their performance on 26 October was half as large after intermission as it was at the start, and rewarded the actors with a comparatively weak smattering of applause. This decidedly unenthusiastic reception might well have been more the exception than the rule during the extent of their run, but, combined with the diminished house, might also indicate that many of those who came to the theatre in search of Shakespeare’s Hamlet – like the Times’s Ben Brantley – left with empty stomachs.

It’s possible that the Wooster Group’s studied avoidance of Shakespeare (until this year) has
allowed them to fly under the radar of the kinds of audiences who were drawn to their Hamlet production at the Public Theater. This is not, of course, the Group’s first effort to subject a classic play to their at times mesmerizing, at times clinically dissective, deconstructive techniques. Indeed, deconstructing classic plays, or ‘colliding’ them with B-movies or pulp novels, is the Group’s primary business. In the past twenty years, plays as differently oriented as Thornton Wilder’s Our Town, Eugene O’Neill’s Hairy Ape and The Emperor Jones, Arthur Miller’s Crucible, Racine’s Phèdre and (as noted above) Chekhov’s Three Sisters have become, in the words of Village Voice critic Michael Feingold, ‘grist for its postmodern mill’. And as Feingold rightly observes, ‘the results [of the Group] ground out were never simply the play the author wrote, but what might be called its continuation by other means, like Clausewitz’s definition of war and politics’.

‘But with Hamlet’, Feingold adds, ‘the Wooster Group has put its commitment on the wrong foot. The media’s the thing wherein they hope to catch – well, it’s hard to say whose conscience, or even whose interest, they expect to catch by what they’ve chosen to do’ (Village Voice, 6 November 2007). Feingold has more to say of interest to the argument I am seeking to develop, particularly regarding why the Woosters chose the Burton Hamlet production out of all others of greater theatrical and historic significance to emulate, and we will return to him later. But for now, I want to highlight what is clearly the chief target of his objection, namely, the Group’s foregrounding of electronic media, both new and old, in their production of Hamlet, which, for Feingold, is for that reason alone a production pursued for no rhyme or reason that he can discern. Indeed, it barely merits the word ‘production’ at all. Just so.

As noted earlier, the Wooster Group has achieved much of its renown, indeed has become notorious, for bringing to the stage and deploying in more or less prominent ways electronic media – mainly video monitors and pre-recorded sound – that become collaborative players in performances with which its live actors often interact. This practice has become more pronounced in the last few years and has become (for obvious reasons) particularly integral to the experiments in emulation it has recently been pursuing. For these reasons alone, the choice to build a Wooster Group Hamlet on and against the recording of the Electronovision Hamlet – and not, as Feingold might wish, ‘the 1930s Old Vic rendering that made Gielgud London’s hero’ – should be obvious. Since the Group’s prevailing ‘method’ of performance is, at this point in time, equally committed to emulation and mediatization, it required a recorded theatrical performance to emulate and remediate. What’s more, it no doubt found in Burton’s promotion of Electronovision’s avowed capacity to sustain the liveness and immediacy of stage-production the perfect opportunity to engage and elaborate on its own evolving efforts to bring living bodies and electronic media into interactive commerce with each other on the stage.

Earlier in this article I referred to two established aims that would appear to cross or overlap in the Group’s choice of subject matter: namely, the attempt to distil and reconstitute ‘liveness’ through the medium of electronic reproduction (in this instance, through the ‘miracle of Electronovision’) in the mid 1960s, and the Group’s efforts to integrate what were then ‘new media’ into their stage performances in the early 1980s. Both efforts variably focus on emerging challenges posed (and opportunities afforded) by contemporaneous developments in film, television, video, musical performance and recording, the manipulation of sound, digital reproduction and computer technology, and even the growing ubiquity of ‘surveillant and regulatory double imaging systems’. These challenges and the adaptational strategies they provoke – which Philip Auslander would characterize as collateral developments in ‘mediatization’ – have been held to unsettle the ‘ontological integrity’ of

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'live performance’ by subjecting it to a form of ‘contamination’ against which it is unable to compete.\textsuperscript{14} Though Auslander sees no reason to view ‘the historical relationship of liveness and mediatisation’ as a relation of ‘opposition’,\textsuperscript{15} he nonetheless concedes that

The ubiquity of reproductions of performances of all kinds in our culture has led to the depreciation of live presence, which can only be compensated for by making the perceptual experience of the live as much as possible like that of the mediatized, even in cases where the live event provides its own brand of proximity.\textsuperscript{16}

This, of course, is exactly what the Electronovision \textit{Hamlet} fails to do, and could not do other than fail to do, given its avowed commitment to a theatrically defined performance and reception aesthetic (see the Burton interview) and its choice of a newly available technology that promised to make the translation to film as seamless and transparent as possible. By contrast, compensating for the ‘depreciation of live presence’ by ‘making the perceptual experience of the live as much as possible like that of the mediatized’ is exactly what the Wooster Group has been moving towards over the last twenty years, though the Group would no doubt quarrel with the notion that there is anything compensatory like that of the mediatized, even in cases where the live event provides its own brand of proximity.\textsuperscript{16}

Depending on one’s point of view, then, the Group has either brought what might have begun as a compensatory strategy to the level of a highly evolved and ‘progressive’ aesthetic practice in works like \textit{The Wooster Group Hamlet}, or has taken its established theatre practice to a point of crisis by allowing it to become little more than a sophisticated form of mechanical reproduction. If I had to select my own point of view from these alternatives, I’d say that \textit{The Wooster Group Hamlet} does not, as Feingold would allege, subordinate or surrender what we still think of as \textit{theatre} to the tyranny of \textit{media} so much as submit itself to a series of \textit{remediations} that do not merely involve ‘the representation of one medium in another’\textsuperscript{18} but, rather, the imbrication or overlapping of one medium by another. In this respect, the Wooster Group’s aesthetic practice is ‘progressive’ not only insofar as it refuses to deny or ignore its already mediatized condition, or to lament the inevitability of its embrace of, and embrace by, collateral developments in new media, but also for its effort to integrate these elements in the development of new theatrical forms.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{14} Auslander, \textit{Liveness}, pp. 41–2.
\textsuperscript{15} Auslander, \textit{Liveness}, p. 53.
\textsuperscript{16} Auslander, \textit{Liveness}, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{17} Susan Sontag, ‘Film and Theatre’, \textit{Tulane Drama Review} 11 (1966), 33.
\textsuperscript{18} Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, \textit{Remediation: Understanding New Media} (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 45. As deployed by new media theorists, the term \textit{remediation} points not to continuous progress towards ever more sophisticated forms of representational practice (such that the new always requires the supplanting of the old) but to the imbrication of all forms of media, with theatre itself figured as one medium among many.
\textsuperscript{19} One may compare the Wooster Group’s practice of representing, embedding and interacting with other forms of media (both old and new) on stage with what the more adventurous directors of Shakespeare on-screen (Michael Almereyda, Baz Luhrmann and, particularly, Julie Taymor) have recently been doing: that is, not only gesturing to the many ways everyday life has become mediatized, but deploying different media in the development of increasingly hybridized artforms. Rather than reject the sources, materials and representational practices of the past, artists like Taymor find new ways of recycling and deploying them in the present. Note, for example, the remarkably inventive (and powerful) ways that Taymor deploys computer-generated visual effects to recycle Ovidian myth, indeed, to embody the genius of Ovid’s metamorphic art, in \textit{Titus} (1999), her recent film-version of Shakespeare’s \textit{Titus Andronicus}. For more detailed commentary on this subject, see Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe, \textit{New Wave Shakespeare on Screen} (Cambridge, 2007), especially pp. 45–96.
THE WOOSTER GROUP’S HAMLET

The Group is, of course, deeply invested in the myth of its own redoubtable avant-gardism, in the belief that its work has been ‘pivotal’ and ‘radical’ in assimilating new media, thereby boldly advancing the theatrical medium. Indeed, in one of its many more or less official efforts at self-definition and genealogical identification, the Group describes itself as having played a pivotal role in bringing technologically sophisticated and evocative uses of sound, film, and video into the realm of contemporary theater . . . [and in combining] radical restagings of classic texts, found materials, films and videos, dance and movement works, multi-track scoring, and an architectonic approach to design. Through a process of overlayering, colliding, and sometimes synchronizing systems, the structure of a piece gradually emerges during an extended rehearsal period as the various elements fuse into a cohesive theatrical form.

However self-congratulatory they may appear, the claims the Woosters make for their multi- mediatizations genealogically resonate with a host of similar claims made for theatre throughout the twentieth century as potentially the consummate, because most all-inclusive, art form of them all, a ‘total art, potentially conscripting all the arts into its service’. Such claims, as Susan Sontag writes, often fastened, in the first decades of the twentieth century, on the call for the emulation, and practical incorporation, of cinematic technique in theatrical production, as in Meyerhold’s summons to ‘“cinematify” the theatre’, to ‘use in the theatre all the technical means of the screen – but not just in the sense that we install a screen in the theatre’. Some may argue that the Woosters have, in their emulation of the Electronovision Hamlet, failed to take that last qualifying proviso to heart. But their inspired remediation of cinematic conventions, particularly in such works as House/Lights (2005, 1999), a ‘colliding’ of Gertrude Stein’s Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights (an allegory of mediatization in its own right) with a campy 1964 film entitled Olga’s House of Shame, plainly suggests otherwise. As Ben Brantley himself writes in a review of House/Lights, ‘The company has become the American theater’s most inspired and articulate interpreter of an age in which machines mediate between the perceiver and the perceived, between subject and object’, and may well be ‘the only troupe in the world in which theater beats the movies at their own game’ (New York Times, 28 February 2005).

Though Brantley’s admiration of the Group’s mediatized translations of the Zeitgeist seems diminished now that Shakespeare has become their objective, much the same may be said of the company’s performance in The Wooster Group Hamlet. The Group not only deploys multiple screens and monitors, dense supportive soundscapes, speech—acts delivered into standing-mikes in ways that resemble the stylings of rock bands, torch-singers and stand-up comics, but remnants of the Electronovision film that are so painstakingly ‘distressed’ that they begin to ‘read’ like staticky post—ings from a nightmarish David Lynch film as well as providing a visual archive of most inscriptions of the play made on screens large and small in the last forty-odd years. Auslander observes that in earlier ‘intermedia experiments’ like Robert Blossom’s Filmstage, which ‘comb[ined] live actors with film’, the ‘filmed images were inevitably more compelling’ than the live actors, most likely because the actors seemed ‘only pale reflections of the mediated representations that dominate the cultural landscape’. But this effect is only discernible in The Wooster Group Hamlet in its very last moments, and only because most of the actors have abandoned the stage to allow the Electronovision...
film the last word. Until then, the live actors, through their fast-forwardings and editorial elisions and erasures, not only control how we see the film, but serve as mediatized extensions of it, physically emulating shifts in focus and vocalizing the film dialogue their sound editors have suppressed. (They ‘control the vertical’, they ‘control the horizontal’, in a marked inversion of Rod Serling’s ominous claim of control over televised transmissions of The Twilight Zone (1959–64).) At the same time as the Wooster actors, in Auslander’s terms, ‘perform the inscription of mediatization within the immediate’, for example, by speaking the dialogue through their headset mikes, they also reserve the right to alter or ‘edit’ the production to suit their purposes as actors. After the Mousetrap scene is concluded, for instance, we watch as Scott Shepherd orders the film fast forwarded to ‘the recorders’, not just so that he might enjoy replicating Burton’s (and Hamlet’s) masterly dressing down of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but so that he might make the moment his own and, for that matter, ours as he defies anyone to ‘play upon’ him.

‘THE BEST IN THIS KIND’

That said, it seems crucial to reassess in closing the often parodic position The Wooster Group Hamlet assumes in performing its surrogation of what is, after all, not only an earlier exercise in mediatization but arguably the central play in the Western dramatic canon. Despite its avowed commitment, at this stage in its development, to imitation and emulation, the Wooster Group betrays, both in its mechanical and occasionally more freewheeling replication of the Electronovision Hamlet, a decidedly less deferential attitude towards the theatrical practices put on display there than it does, for example, in its 2004 replication of Grotowski’s Akropolis. Much of this difference in tone and mode of attack no doubt derives from the fact that, in the present instance, they have set out to emulate the performance of a classic play that is rendered in an unexceptional manner, as opposed to a strikingly inventive contemporary piece that was already rendered in a cutting-edge fashion. The mere structural juxtaposition of their mediatized stage and of actors exclusively focused on performing a rigorously ordered series of tasks with a modestly staged and even more modestly filmed (albeit, star-centred) 1964 production of Hamlet often makes the earlier production seem superannuated. Indeed, the Group’s mastery of new media technology – particularly as evinced in the physical erosion and manipulation of the Burton film – combined with the characteristic intensity and discipline its actors bring to bear on their replications, make the juxtaposed 1964 production appear to operate in an antiquated manner and with a discernible lack of momentum (exacerbated, no doubt, by the Group’s editorial excisions, elisions and interruptions). Speaking theatre-to-theatre as opposed to theatre-to-film, the physical discipline, energy, intelligence, self-consciousness and overall theatrical command of the Group actors make the professedly ‘daring’ 1964 ‘live’ production seem comparatively conservative in its bearing and execution, more the product of established mid-century Anglo-American dramatic conventions than of anything that could pass for originality or risk-taking in the heady experimental theatre atmosphere of 1960s New York. Indeed, in taking on such a Janus-headed production in the first place – with Gielgud looking squarely back to Edwardian traditions, and Burton, one of the

25 Auslander, Liveness, p. 54.
26 Shepherd’s order, ‘come to the recorders’, seems to me a profoundly purposive and uncannily apt emulation and remediation of Hamlet’s order to the First Player to ‘Come to Hecuba’, and ‘replicates’ some of the same dramatic effects. Just as Hamlet requires the reproduction of the Player’s depiction of a noble king-father’s brutal murder and a loyal queen-wife’s deep lamentation to ‘spur his dull revenge’, Shepherd requires the reproduction of this scene (both by Burton on film and himself on stage) to demonstrate his (and Hamlet’s) achieved mastery of his dramatic instrument.
27 Recounting a 1985 interview he conducted with co-founding Group member and film-star, Willem Dafoe, Philip Auslander notes that Dafoe said that ‘from his point of view as a performer, what he does when performing in a Wooster Group piece is virtually identical with that of acting in films – to him, both are primarily [forms of] task-based performing’ (Auslander, Liveness, p. 29).
last angry young men of the 1950s, playing bitter and caustic throughout and often wildly emoting – instead of something more overtly venturesome (like the closely contemporaneous Peter Brook King Lear featuring Paul Scofield), the Group may even be targeting the superannuated convention of the star-centred Broadway Shakespeare production head-on.\(^{28}\)

Intense, intelligent and inspired as his performance often is, no one today watching the 1964 film, for example, can fail to notice how little effort Burton expends in seeming to think the thoughts that he delivers, or in pursuing a performative through-line that demonstrates imaginative logic or intellectual rigor. Unlike the rest of the cast, Burton often performs his lines in a palpably pre-mediated form of casual recitation, as if focused more on how to deliver a speech or line with sufficient idiosyncrasy, speed or volume to maximize its uniqueness or singularity of address than on what the line or speech might signify or advance. Complicating their studied emulations by flattening, speeding up, or melodramatizing their lines’ delivery (a speciality of the inimitable Kate Valk, here doubling as Gertrude and Ophelia), the Wooster actors, for their part, make stage-acting itself an object of critical interest – and concern. Indeed, they take their company’s prevailing ethos of imitation to, and beyond, its limit, isolating it as a form of restored behaviour in extremis, thereby rendering it both strange and estranging, at once oddly compelling and alienatingly robotic. Rather than ‘play’ a character, they seek to reiterate physically, with tonal and rhythmic variations, that character’s earlier playing, in the process subtracting or emptying out the earlier effect of dramatic embodiment by, as it were, doubling the surface focus of our attention. By reproducing Burton’s performance of Hamlet, for example, instead of attempting to inhabit or ‘speak’ the character Hamlet directly – that is, by holding a mirror up to another mirror as opposed to nature – Scott Shepherd could be said to deny ‘the purpose of playing’ itself, though, given our age’s preference for simulacra, he could just as well be trying to show ‘the very age and body of the time his form and pressure’.\(^{29}\)

Although the simulating actors claim our attention with an intensity of address that exceeds whatever residual claim to immediacy the ‘distressed’ filmed performers can make, they generate that effect with a machine-like rigour that turns Hamlet itself into a pre-scripted race to the finish to no apparent end, the play also having been largely emptied out of any point or purpose beyond studied and sustained replication. The mechanized manner in which the Group pursues its emulative aims seems, in this respect, symptomatic of the fact that it is specifically Hamlet, and not just the star-centred Broadway or Electronovision Hamlet, that the Group is also channelling and targeting head-on. While Hamlet no doubt remains in many quarters Shakespeare’s most revered and celebrated play, for actors and academics who are compelled to turn and return to it again and again, it has no doubt lost much of its mystery, making it arguably the most difficult piece in the Shakespeare repertory to render ‘new’ or work compelling changes and variations on. As Marvin Carlson observes:

Our language is haunted by Shakespeare in general and Hamlet in particular, so much so that anyone reading the play for the first time is invariably struck by how many of the play’s lines are already known to her. Even more experienced readers (or viewers) can hardly escape the impression that the play is really a tissue of quotations. Our iconic memories are haunted by Hamlet. Who does not immediately recognize, in whatever pictorial style he may appear, the dark habited young man gazing contemplatively into the sightless eyes of a skull he is holding

\(^{28}\) Brook was, at this time, not only touring with his 1963 RSC production of King Lear, but premiering his even more provocative production of Peter Weiss’s Marat/Sade.

\(^{29}\) In an intriguing note added to the Public Theater programme, Oskar Eustis, the current artistic director of the Public Theater, writes that he sees ‘the Wooster Group looking back at Burton’s Hamlet with the same elegiac perspective’ with which Hamlet views Denmark after his return to Wittenberg, knowing that he ‘can never fully belong in his world again’. He then asks, ‘Were we ever that innocent? Were we ever that capable of direct, unmediated action, or acting?’ For what it’s worth, I doubt that the Woosters would reply in the affirmative to Eustis’s questions.
For such reasons among others, *Hamlet* has variably served, for much of the last century, as both a favoured site of radical transformation and of ‘numbing, repetitive enactment’.31 As Richard Halpern observes, ‘Not only does Shakespeare’s play already out its own meaning through constant performance, but in doing so it symbolizes the performance of history, which has become unendurably routinized, and thus caught in the toils of the Hamletmachine.’32 The Hamletmachine is, for Halpern, not just the title of the radically transformative Heiner Müller play (though it is that as well), but an historicized conceit premised on the ‘deepening [of] the cultural petrification’ that had already settled over the post-romantic conception of Hamlet in the nineteenth century. Contending that the machine ‘paradoxically’ represents ‘both tradition as repetitive propagation . . . and the ceaseless innovating drives that followed in the wake of industrial modernization’, Halpern extends the paradox to the figure of the ceaselessly questioning Hamlet himself ‘because he represents in a particularly oppressive form the burden of tradition for modernist culture’.33

Adapting these terms to our discussion of the Wooster Group’s recent exercises in mechanical reproduction, we may well see the Group’s own paradoxical commitment to ‘repetitive propagation’ and ‘ceaseless innovating’ brought to the point of crisis or contradiction by the ‘oppressive . . . burden of tradition’ *Hamlet* represents for a company so committed to building on the experimental cultures of modernism. Had the Group decided to faithfully replicate the entire version of *Hamlet* reproduced in the Electronovision film, it might have achieved a level of reproductive efficiency comparable to the mechanical regularity of the clockwork Hamlet and Ophelia of W. S. Gilbert’s 1892 literary satire, *The Mountebanks*, that Halpern discusses in *Shakespeare Among the Moderns*.34 But however devoted the Group may be to making their bodies the media through which earlier performances circulate – what Marvin Carlson terms ‘body ghosting’35 – the temporal disconnect between where they are now and where the Electronovision performance was then opens up a space that they often fill with sudden and unanticipated interpolations, including the incorporation of two haunting songs sung by the actor Casey Spooner concurrent with his performance as Laertes.36 The Group clearly does not follow Heiner Müller’s example of completely dismantling and rewriting the play, much less bring anything close to Müller’s engagement with politics and history. But it engages in sufficient (if not ‘ceaseless’) ‘innovating’ to avoid the effect of ‘numbing repetitive enactment’ Halpern describes. Although technical prompts and the actors’ repertoire of physical movements, tics and gestures are rigorously scripted, blocked and executed in synchrony with the Burton film, enough improvisatory energy is invested in the vocal delivery of reproduced text that marked differences may be registered in variations of tone, speed, volume and rhetorical attack, as well as on the level of attitude or mood. Indeed, by having her small cast double their roles (Kate Valk playing both Gertrude and Ophelia to often moving, often comedic, effect) and occasionally serve as voyeuristic stage-hands, lip-synch lines that are spoken by a laconic Bill Murray in the *persona* of Polonius and play awed witness to Charlton Heston’s thunderous delivery of the First Player’s ‘Hecuba speech’ (in cameo appearances drawn from recent *Hamlet* films), director Elizabeth

31 Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns* (Ithaca, NY, 1997), p. 273. Radical transformations of *Hamlet* are many and varied, both in terms of seriousness and quality. In addition to Heiner Müller’s *Hamletmachine* (1979), among the better-known are Joseph Papp’s *The Naked Hamlet* (1968) and, of course, Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966).
36 True to the Group’s collaborative aesthetic, Laertes’s songs were composed by Spooner himself in collaboration with Warren Fischer.
LeCompte brings more humour, irony and playfulness to the production than has yet to be credited. (She even adds an unscripted character, dressed in the garb of a nurse, who hovers protectively, if silently and ineffectually, over the proceedings, and whose very appearance may be designed to evoke the appropriative motive at the heart of the performance.)\(^{37}\) What’s more, she also alters, in the Public Theater production, the disproportionate privileging, in the St Ann’s version, of her own actors’ performances over those of the ghosts of the 1964 production.

When members of the Group were queried about its aims at a post-performance talk-back last March (2007), the actors uniformly claimed that the aim was the process itself, the work or exercise of imitation/emulation, which was ongoing and subject to change and new discoveries: an explanation that several auditors found somewhat unforthcoming. But in light of changes the Group seems to have made in the last seven months, I am much more willing to take them at their word. Though the nature and content of reception and attention will differ in all of us from eye to eye and ear to ear and, in performances like this one, even from generation to generation, I became aware, during the closing movement of the 26 October performance, that my own attention had begun to shift from the stage to the increasingly active and often sticky backcloth screen, prompted, no doubt, by the insistent rise in volume of the soundscape, which served as the screen’s commensurate audio accompaniment.\(^{38}\) The screen — then and, in my mind’s eye, now — was not so much opaque or impermeable by reason of the static as rendered mutable, and made me think of the amoeba-like permutations of the thought-shaping sea on the planet Solaris in Andréi Tarkovsky’s brilliant 1972 film of that name. Snapped back to attention by the playing out on stage of the duel between Laertes and Hamlet, and the dying words of the Prince, I just as quickly found myself redirected to the screen where the final scene of the Burton film was played out in full, without any replicative help from the Woosters. Failing to notice, much less consider, where the replicants had gone, and for the first time that evening being permitted direct access to the screen actors, I discovered what I initially took to be the Group actors again, a few seconds before the film’s (and performance’s) end, casting their irregularly sized shadows across the lower section of the screen. They had, in fact, left the stage while my attention was otherwise engaged.

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37 In the production’s programme and promotional materials (postcards and posters), the Nurse (‘played’ by Dominique Bousquet, who doubles as one of the Players) is, in fact, the only character from the cast who is depicted. Her eyes and the top portion of her face are portrayed above a pile of books and a DVD case that obscure the rest of her body. Four of the books are different editions of Hamlet. The DVD is Richard Burton’s Hamlet. The fifth book is titled Hollywood Nurse, one of a series of ‘naughty-nurse’ novels (Tropics Nurse, Desert Nurse, etc.) published by Marguerite Nelson in the 1960s. However, the Group was apparently inspired to deploy the Nurse in their performance and this image in their postcards in direct imitation/emulation of Richard Prince’s Nurse paintings and promotional postcards produced and distributed by New York’s Guggenheim Museum to promote their 2003 exhibition, ‘Nurse in Hollywood: Richard Prince: Spiritual America’, in which the Nurse paintings were featured. Prince is, revealingly, an ‘appropriation artist’ who is both celebrated and censured for his photographing of ‘public domain’ advertisements, and then enlarging and representing them as his own ‘product’. The Nurse-series is differently rendered. According to www.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/richard-prince/prince.html, ‘The Nurse paintings are premised on medical romance novels, a genre of pulp fiction that has its own section in Prince’s upstate New York library. For this recent series, the artist transfers enlarged inkjet reproductions of book covers to canvas, masking out all the supporting characters and text other than the titles by applying smudged and dripping pigment.’ The similarity of Prince’s process to the Group’s elisions and ‘distressings’ of the 1964 Electronovision film should be obvious. Thanks to Katharine Goodland for bringing the connection with Prince’s work to my attention.

38 One of my undergraduate students, Mallory Musallam, who attended the Public Theater production, offered this intriguing take on the film vs. theatre debate: ‘I felt that the characters behind their black and white barrier were intimately close, whispering pieces of their souls, while the characters on the stage seemed so distant . . . . I saw the menaces on the stage as a representation of advanced technology: an overbearing force in society that’s hyper-active, less emotional and more mechanical, ostentatious and unnecessary, and ultimately seeking to outdo things from an earlier time.’
to simulate the taking up of positions behind the screen by their (actually pre-recorded) shadows, presumably to allow the ghosts of 1964 a comparatively unmediated hearing, and, possibly, a belated hommage. The gesture seemed out of keeping with the Woosters’ reputation for being aloof and diffident, cool and remote. It also served as yet another in a series of inspired remediations: in this instance, a carefully designed channelling of themselves into the tributary stream of the ghosts of Hamlets past, passing, present and to come, shadows replaying shadows, the best in this kind.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{39} In a wonderfully apposite passage, Gerald Siegmund writes that ‘The theatre of the Wooster Group is a theatre of voices that adds to the presence of the theatrical event moments of absence in which it repeats those who are absent, dead, or forgotten via voice-masks. The use of media in this context furthers an understanding of the media in the old sense of “medium”, of a link with this spirit world. . . . The voices without bodies, the missing bodies . . . open the theatre towards a history that is always also the history of the theatre. This is what the mask stands in for . . . it grants ghosts . . . potential bodies and voices.’ ‘Voice Masks: Subjectivity, America, and the Voice in the Theatre of the Wooster Group’, in Callens, \textit{The Wooster Group and Its Traditions}, p. 178.