

BACK TO THE FUTURE *Hamlet Encounters* and the use of VR to address a time “out of joint”

ANITA ORFINI
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI ROMA TRE

Abstract – The aim of my contribution is to investigate how Shakespeare has entered the cyberspace and in particular the reasons for and modalities in which the arts company CREW chose *Hamlet* to portray a time “out of joint” (Shakespeare 2003, p. 126). Since every generation seems to find in Hamlet and his troubled time a metaphor for current conflicts, CREW used the play to draw a parallel between the quest for truth in the conflicted world of the seventeenth century and our own times. The use of VR inevitably leads to the loss of reference points, therefore the experiencer of the virtual space must negotiate his/her senses that cannot be trusted anymore. Thus, *Hamlet Encounters* offers the tool needed to highlight how technology is changing our own perception of the world and how it brings us to question ourselves like Hamlet does.

Keywords: Shakespeare; cyberspace; CREW; media; theatre; immersant.

1. Introduction

The aim of my contribution is to show how the introduction of Shakespeare to a Virtual Reality world opens up new opportunities and challenges for addressing the Bard – and especially *Hamlet* – with new media technologies. The possibility to experience Shakespeare in such a way not only questions the role of the spectator but also today’s time “out of joint” (Shakespeare 2003, p. 126), because the virtual space brings about a radical redefinition of our senses and therefore invites us to embark on a quest for truth.

In the last decades, Shakespeare has entered the so-called ‘cyberspace’. The term ‘cyberspace’ was initially coined by William Gibson in his book *Neuromancer* in 1984. He described it as:

A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation [...] A graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding. (1984, p. 67)

Gregory Kramer later defined it as “a simulated environment where communicators in different places and different times can meet face-to-face” (1995, p. 291). Another definition of ‘cyberspace’ was given by Dodge and Kitchin. In *Mapping Cyberspace*, they point out that:

At present, cyberspace does not consist of one homogeneous space; it is a myriad of rapidly expanding cyberspaces, each providing a different form of digital interaction and communication. In general, these spaces can be categorized into those existing within the technologies of the Internet, those within virtual reality, and conventional telecommunications such as the phone and the fax, although because there is a rapid convergence of technologies new hybrid spaces are emerging. (2001, p. 1)

One of the challenges to virtual reality concerns the loss of critical distance, a problem which arises when applying VR to what we call the ‘immersive theatre’.¹ As Catherine Bouko states,

The immersant experiences confusion between the real and the imaginary universe, even at the level of his approach to the existence of his body in the space: the body scheme can be manipulated; the ability to situate one’s body in a space can be impeded. The immersion achieved in this third stage is such that even when the immersant stops cooperating, he is unable to distinguish between the real and imaginary worlds, his approach to his own body being hampered. It is hardly worth stating that such moments of immersion are temporary and very difficult to attain. (2014, p. 460)

The peculiarity of immersive theatre is the breaking down of the frontality that characterizes traditional theatre, but at the price of leading the immersant, who is physically and sensorially sunken into the imaginary world the virtual reality created, to lose his/her reference points. Since the boundaries between stage and audience are deleted, the experiencer must

¹ The phenomenon is well explained by Gareth White, who believes that immersive theatre is “an inviting but faulty term to use to describe the phenomena it currently designates. Immersive theatre often surrounds audience members, makes use of cleverly structured interiors and ingenious invitations for them to explore, addresses their bodily presence in the environment and its effect on sense making, and teases them with the suggestion of further depths just possibly within reach. But it has no strong claim to creating either fictional or imaginative interiors in any way that is different in kind than in more conventionally structured audience arrangements” (2012, p. 233).

therefore redefine his/her own senses and actively work in order not to lose the critical distance traditional theatre provides.

2. Shakespeare and Virtual Reality

Shakespeare’s extraordinary way of describing human nature in a kaleidoscope of visions and perspectives has always held a particular appeal for artists in general, as well as for those who experiment with new technologies, and VR artists are no exception. Virtual Reality – a term coined by Jarod Lanier in 1989 – is defined by Coates as electronic simulations of environments experienced via head mounted eye goggles and wired clothing which enable the end user to interact in realistic three-dimensional situations (Coates 1992, p. 127). The Royal Shakespeare Company, for instance, used Motion Capture technology to create an onstage digital avatar of Ariel in *The Tempest* in 2017,² and for its version of *Titus Andronicus* in 2018. In the last five years there have been at least three VR artists who have taken Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and turned it into a VR experience. The first one is Javier Molinas, whose work *To Be with Hamlet*³ is a production created for the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. This project consists of a live theatre performance, but what is extraordinary about it is that everyone in the world can be a part of it. Thanks to Motion Capture technology, you can walk with Hamlet and look around the battlements of his castle: “The project’s M3diate technology will allow up to fifteen audience members to perceive each other as they explore Elsinore Castle together”⁴. The second one is *Hamlet 360: Thy Father’s Spirit* created in 2019 by the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company in partnership with Google. In this 60-minute adaptation of the play the viewer plays the role of the ghost of Hamlet’s murdered father and has the opportunity to explore the scene in a cinematic 360° experience. Its creators explain that the performance not only changes

² For this occasion, the Royal Shakespeare Company co-operated with Andy Serkis and his London-based production company called the Imaginarium Studios. Serkis is famous for his performance as Gollum in Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, in which VR was used for the first time in cinema history to create a complex character. He managed to create a version of *The Tempest* in which the character Ariel, thanks to sensors, could transform and change shape before the very eyes of the spectators. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/04/theater/at-this-tempest-digital-wizardry-makes-rough-magic.html>.

³ As Javier Molina clearly explains on his website: “In order to bring the immediacy and intimacy of theater to the virtual space, we are using Ikinema software with Optitrack face and motion capture technology to create a live, photorealistic avatar of Prince Hamlet. A 3D scan of the actor will be applied to a virtual ‘skeleton’ made from the motion capture data to create a virtual Prince Hamlet that is as dynamic and realistic as a live actor [...] For nearly half a millennium, productions have given you the chance to see Hamlet. This is your first chance To Be With Hamlet”: <https://www.javiermolina.net/tobewithhamlet>.

⁴ *Hamlet VR*: <http://hamletvr.org>.

the way one can experience theatre, but also offers the opportunity to bring it to a wider audience. It also can be a powerful tool for teachers to bring into their classrooms⁵. The third one, and the focus of this article, is *Hamlet Encounters*.

3. *Hamlet Encounters* and the time “out of joint”

The IFTR (International Federation for Theatre Research) World Congress entitled “Theatre and Migration. Theatre, Nation and Identity: Between Migration and Stasis” was an event that took place in Belgrade from the 9th to 13th of July 2018. In room 509, on the fifth floor of the Faculty of Philology, I had the chance to experience *Hamlet Encounters*, a project by the Belgian multidisciplinary artist Eric Joris and the Professorial Fellow at RCSSD Robin Nelson that combines theatre and Virtual Reality. The project was made by CREW,⁶ an arts company experimenting with digital technology applied to live events whose aim is to “visualize how technology is changing us”⁷. The group was founded by Eric Joris, who has been working with experimental immersion-based performance since the 1990s. CREW, as Kurt Vanhoutte and Nele Wynants state,

triggers the theatrical imagination of design and production, text and sound. The artistic outcome tends to be hybrid; with the technological live art of CREW troubling installed categories of theatricality leading to immersive embodied environments that challenge common notions of (tele)presence, spectatorship, interactivity and narration. (2010, p. 69)

Two of the most important installations of CREW are *Crash* (2004), which “problematizes the distinction between the body seeing and bodies being seen. It is impossible to distinguish between them because the visitor is at once spectator and performer” (Bokhoven 2008, p. 208), and *U_raging standstill* (2006), where the ‘immersant’ was for the first time free to move around with the aid of multimedia tools, such as prostheses. The person loses himself/herself during the performance and is eventually able to physically feel his/her body, even though the experience is virtual (Merx 2005, p. 224).

⁵ You can watch *Hamlet 360: Thy Father’s Spirits* – in two dimensions if you do not have a VR headset – at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jc88G7nkV-Q>.

⁶ “‘VR’ appears to be transformational by nature: instead of looking at an image, one feels to be a part of it. This embodiment is enhanced by physical movement, touch, sound, etc... For the ‘immersant’ it blurs the distinction between live and mediated reality. It is this shifting moment in between the perceived and the embodied world, the ‘transitional zone’, that became ‘the stage’ of CREW’s live performances and research. The immersive experience becomes therefore a construct in the mind and body of the spectator. In a way he co-directs the performance”, *Artist Talk - Digitale Kunst: Eric Joris: Artist Talk - Digitale Kunst: Eric Joris (dieangewandte.at)*.

⁷ CREW online: <http://www.crewonline.org/>.

One of the main themes of CREW is that the experiencer perceives his/her body not only in space but also in time.⁸ This is also one of the main themes in *Hamlet Encounters*.

Hamlet Encounters is only the second part of a larger work by CREW focused on Shakespeare’s most famous tragedy. It all begun in 2017 with *Hands on Hamlet I* and *Hands on Hamlet II*, a prototype and the first part of the Belgian company’s long-term project which finally culminated in *Hamlet’s Lunacy* in 2019. *Hands on Hamlet I & II* are two Virtual Reality installations. The first one is addressed to one person at a time and has a duration of 18 minutes, while the second is for one actor and one spectator, with each session lasting 20 minutes. The experiencer is provided with an HTC Vive, a Virtual Reality head-mounted device that allows him/her to be immersed in the experience.⁹ These two experiences were the first step in what *Hamlet Encounters* would eventually become. In fact, there are some similarities between this first step and the second one (the use of VR and the immersive dynamic of the installation), but also some differences, since the project has been steadily developed in order to provide a better and more captivating encounter.

4. The illusion of creation

To experience *Hamlet Encounters*, the immersant puts on a VR headset and suddenly finds himself/herself in the world of *Hamlet*. He/she is led by Joris through the experience and moves through the real space that is marked within the room with a red line. The VR environment you can enter is Elsinore castle, where you have the chance to meet the avatars of some of the characters of the play: Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, Polonius, and the Ghost. Portraying the Ghost has always been one of the biggest challenges for companies performing

⁸ “Crew’s plays preserve the fluctuation between the real and the imaginary. In particular, this is made possible by the way in which the immersant is addressed. At the beginning of *Eux*, a male voice calls the immersant by his first name, at the same time as it is shown on a screen. The participant is invited to embody a character, yet his personal identity is nevertheless taken into account” (Bouko 2014, p. 462).

⁹ The method used by Eric Joris and his CREW is well explained by Catherine Bouko: “The immersant’s body experiences first-hand the fluctuation between what is real and what is imaginary. In numerous immersive performances, the perceptive confusion caused by illness acts as a starting point to explore our perceptive processes and identity construction. In the Belgian company Crew’s performances, the participant is plunged into a modified perception of character via a head-mounted display. The feeling of immersion essentially comes from the 360-degree vision which the display allows; the image which is projected in front of the participant’s eyes follows every movement of his head. These images mix pre-recorded sequences with scenes produced with performers in real time, around the participant. One such example is in *Eux* (Crew, 2008), where the spectator takes on the role of a patient suffering from agnosia (a loss of recognition)” (2014, p. 461).

Hamlet on stage. Sometimes it was represented only as a shadow, sometimes like a human being. In this case, the ghost is an avatar. This allows the experiencer not only to see the ghost – just like Hamlet does – but also to experience the transcendent and supernatural nature of the spirit by moving through its body. Furthermore, since the experiencer can move freely and even walk through the characters’ bodies, he/she can also be considered a ghost. One of the peculiar characteristics of this project is that the immersant becomes part of the play, as he/she shares the space and time of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

The way *Hamlet Encounters* immerses the experiencer in the story vaguely recalls *Sleep No More*,¹⁰ the 2011 project of the British theatre company Punchdrunk based on the play *Macbeth*. It was set in a five-floor hotel space and the public, instead of being seated, could freely move around the set. The abolishment of the stage as well as of the fourth wall is something that occurs also in CREW’s project. However, the difference between *Sleep No More* and *Hamlet Encounters* lies in the degree of agency of the immersant. In the first project the public can only walk on the actual stage and move around; in the second one, the experiencers can skip from one scene to another and interact with the avatars. In fact, using a remote, the user can explore the scene going back and forth, thus experiencing a nonlinear form of storytelling. Further, while walking through the Castle, the immersant comes across some white bubbles. Putting her head into them, she is transported into a studio in Brussels where she can see the actors, wearing MoCap suits, recording the scenes from *Hamlet*. This allows the experiencer to actually see the process behind the virtual experience while being immersed in it. Nevertheless, there is a distinction between the parts recorded in the studio and the full VR environment. The process in the studio is captured on 360° film, to let the experiencer of *Hamlet Encounters* fully look around in the “go back” session. However, she cannot move freely, as the virtual space of the experience allows her to do.

When entering the room, one does not immediately put on the VR headset and start the performance but, as Joris and Nelson are keen to point out, every audience member has to look at a screen where they can see how the person before them is experiencing the performance.

Rather than a difficulty to be hidden, the medium’s visibility is exploited and lodges itself at the heart of this theatrical language: at particular moments, the immersant may be absorbed to the point of substituting the environment for everyday reality; the medium appears transparent and the created world seems to

¹⁰ As Josephine Machon states, the British company Punchdrunk aims for participants to “become most aware of being in the moment”: <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/vol0701/felixbarrett/home.html>. More information about Punchdrunk and their project here: <https://www.punchdrunk.org.uk/project/sleep-no-more/>.

be offered without any intermediary. At other times, he becomes aware of the artificial nature of the world into which he is plunged and adopts a position external to the work. (Bouko 2014, p. 463)

Watching the previous experience allows immersants not only to get a sense of the whole process and the creation of the illusion, but it also gives them a perception of the experience from the outside and influences their ‘encounter’. Furthermore, CREW wants the experiencer to see not only the illusion but also the creation of it by letting her wait outside and watch what is happening in the environment where the previous attendant is experiencing the virtual world. Thanks to this strategy, as Ármeán states, “The participant is mostly a visitor until the point where s/he gets the VR headset and literally steps into the VR world” (2020, p. 6).

5. Theatre or VR? That is the question!

The difference between traditional theatre or cinema and the kind of experience provided by CREW’s project is that in the first case, what is primarily involved is the relation between mind and eye, whereas in the second one the relation is much deeper and more complex. Thanks to Virtual Reality, theatre can allow the audience member to take a step forward and let herself get involved not only with mind and eye, but also with her whole body. As Meyer states: “The use of space in a VR drama is more like theatre and less like film. In theatre, actors must negotiate the positions and distance of the stage. The users of a VR drama will likewise occupy the space of the story” (1995, p. 219). The main difference between the space in theatre and VR can be found in the role of the actor as well as the audience. While theatre as traditionally performed in Europe since the eighteenth century is typically characterized by a strict separation between the enlightened stage and the darkness in which the spectator is immersed, in cyberspace there is no difference between them, since the experiencer is both an actor and the audience simultaneously. In fact, at some point when an experiencer is watching and listening to Gertrude and Claudius talking to each other, Polonius turns towards the immersant and asks if she is still following what is going on. Human experience is of course based on a cognitive level, but traditional theatre or cinema can only provide an objective symbolic representation which we can call, at the very end, reductive. In comparison with theatre, where the spectator is seated in a proscenium and separated from the stage, the space in a VR production is not perceived as a fixed frame but as a moving space where our senses are engaged in a multisensorial and multimodal way. As a matter of fact, productions such as *Hamlet Encounters* are keen on involving the experiencer in a ‘journey’ to involve his/her body

in a creative reflection about de-automation that cannot be achieved in traditional theatre.

Another difference between theatre and VR, and one of the main topics explored by CREW, is how human beings perceive themselves. Even if surrounded by obscurity, the audience members of a theatre play are still aware of their bodies, while when experiencing the same play with VR technology they will lose their way. This state of disorientation inevitably brings a whole new perception of the self now immersed in a virtual space. Body and mind are challenged to radically redefine themselves and subsequently to find new ways to relate to and act in space and time. The spectator, wearing a head-mounted display, is completely lost in a space disconnected from a touchable reality that he/she nonetheless tries to interact with. The gap between touchable reality and virtual space “could evoke an intensified corporeal experience” (Bakk 2019, p. 173). The experiencer must negotiate not only her perception of the body but also the way she now experiences what she hears and sees.

The full-body vision of the experience provided by *Hamlet Encounters* and VR in general, leads to an avoidance of the common binary separation of meaning and experience. It is a multisensual experience. Some aspects of *Hamlet Encounters* are by all means cinematic, but the ability the immersant has to move through the space or to see what the actors in the Brussel studio are doing brings a new perspective to the experiencer that is precluded by traditional theatre or cinema. In fact, when the immersant finds herself in the dimension of *Hamlet Encounters* she is simultaneously in three different worlds.¹¹ The first one is the real world, in which she is wearing the mocap suit; the second is the world of the actors in Brussel, and the third is the one of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. This combination, along with the way in which the project redefines the body as well as the mind, brings about a different way of perceiving oneself that dislocates the normative way of moving around space and interacting with it. As previously said, VR creates an immersive environment where you lose critical distance. CREW is not interested in achieving this effect for its own sake: they want to create a space where critical distance is simultaneously nullified and amplified. This leads to self-reference and self-reflection. It is up to the experiencer to decide what to do, how to change the perspective or the distance, or even where to go by using the remote control to switch from one space to another. In *Hamlet Encounters*, the immersants can take control of their own experience and become directors of themselves.

¹¹ In his *The Second Media Age*, Mark Poster states that our culture “is increasingly simulational in the sense that the media often changes the things that it treats, transforming the identity of originals and referentialities. In the second media age ‘reality’ becomes multiple” (1995, p. 3).

6. The quest for truth in a conflicted world

Since Shakespeare wrote it, *Hamlet* has been a crucial and fundamental text that every generation is confronted with. The appeal of the play is due to the fact that Hamlet not only questions his own world, but also ours. Since its main themes are so universal, every author, reader or spectator can easily find his/her own personal universe reflected in it (Harris 2010, p. 10). Using various technologies or methods of staging, directors and artists have provided their own specific interpretations of the text, with each focusing on one or more specific aspects of the play. As Shaughnessy states, every generation finds in *Hamlet* “a uniquely sharp and eloquent image of current conflicts and anxieties” (2011, p. 191). That is why *Hamlet Encounters* represents not only one among many Virtual Reality experiences, but also reflects the thoughts of its creators on history and the state of truth in contemporary society. Indeed, *Hamlet Encounters* can be seen as a metaphor of that time “out of joint” (Shakespeare 2003, p. 126) that the Shakespearian protagonist must face in the play. Eric Joris and Robin Nelson want to highlight a parallel between the seventeenth and the twenty-first century. The world Shakespeare lived in was a world in transition, a time of great changes in terms of culture and society that shifted everyone’s perspective on life. It was, therefore, also a strongly conflicted world. The seventeenth century was characterized by some great conflicts such as the wars of religion that devastated Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and the English revolution, just as our contemporary time is still devastated by conflicts and wars. In that time “out of joint” (Shakespeare 2003, p. 126) Hamlet is left alone confronting not only himself but also all the other characters of the play, most of whom he cannot trust. The quest for truth in *Hamlet* is, according to Nelson, comparable to the search for truth that twenty-first century people find themselves engaged in in an age of fake news. Joris and Nelson suggest that as the seventeenth century marked the rise of science and the birth of the Enlightenment, so the twenty-first marks its demise. In an interview with Ágnes Karolina Bakk, one of the collaborators of CREW, Chiel M. Kattenbelt, clearly underlines the link between our time and the one of Hamlet:

The world of our own times could also be considered as a world-out-of-joint, as a conflicted world, in particular politically (the rise of populism), economically (the rise of protectionism) and ecologically (the issue of climate change). (2019, p. 170)

Despite the strategies to ensure a critical distance to the experience, using VR technology still affects the natural awareness of the immersant. In fact, the senses are so completely redefined that she will eventually lose track of the passing of time. This is precisely one of the criticisms which has been leveled

against VR: it creates a sort of immersive environment which brings the user to lose the critical distance required to distinguish what he/she sees and experiences from reality.

A person exposed to an immersive display sees an audiovisual interactive scene that fully envelops him/her and is updated according to head and body movements. Hence participants in an IVE tend to experience place illusion: the sensation of physically being part of a scenario instead of seeing images of it from the outside. (Blom, Llobera, Slater 2013, p.471).

VR embodies mediality, media as “extensions of ourselves serv[ing] to provide new transforming vision and awareness” (McLuhan 1994, p. 76), as described by Marshall McLuhan, to an unprecedented degree. Therefore, experiencing *Hamlet Encounters* does not just invite reflection about *Hamlet*, but also reflection about the perception of oneself in a VR space that allows the immersant to re-discover a new ontology of their own body, realising Ryan’s vision from the early 2000s: “In this world of our creation we would take on any identity we wished, but our virtual body would be controlled by the movements of the real body, and we would interact with the virtual world through physical gestures” (2001, p.49). For instance, descending the stairs of the VR castle the experiencer has to negotiate the virtual space, as well as the actual one because she has the feeling of going down – she also reaches for the handrail – while actually standing on a flat floor.

One of the main features of Shakespeare’s plays is the use of dramatic irony, and this feature is prominent in *Hamlet* as well. This kind of literary device allows characters to disguise themselves under a mask that hides their real intentions or feelings. Most of the characters in *Hamlet* fight out an internal conflict between truth and falsehood. One of the great questions about the text addresses the nature of Hamlet’s lunacy. Is his madness real or fake? It is precisely this aspect of the use of language that is underlined by Crew in order to create a link between the quest for truth in *Hamlet* and the quest for truth in the VR space where the audience can no longer trust their senses. During the ‘encounter’ they find themselves in a virtual place where they lose all points of support. Therefore, they must revise their way of approaching the world through movements and, metaphorically, through thought and language. Thus, if in *Hamlet* the characters cannot trust one another because they are aware of intrigue and deception, in *Hamlet Encounters* the experiencer cannot even trust him/herself. Hamlet has to embark on his quest for revenge while his whole world is shifting from one vision to another: he is experiencing the shift to modern times, and also from trusting his loved ones to fearing their lies. Everything is drawn into question. Hamlet himself goes crazy, to the effect that both the other characters and the reader/spectator must question his madness:

The choice of *Hamlet* as the theatrical frame is important because Shakespeare’s play deals with a historical time and a narrative moment when everything becomes questioned, the whole world is out of joint, conflicted. (Ármeán 2020, p. 8).

Negotiating with our own senses means that we cannot trust them anymore. Subsequently, we must find out what is true and what is false. That is to say, through the VR medium we are immersed in a situation which meta-theatrically reflects the state of confusion and destabilisation which Hamlet experiences in the play.

7. Conclusion

New technologies are challenging our world and the way we experience it. With *Hamlet Encounters*, CREW wants to raise awareness about our troubled time, creating not only a fully immersive experience but also a new reality in which the audience can have the possibility to experience Shakespeare’s drama in an unprecedented way. The installation emphasises how the strengths of VR technology, especially the fully immersive dimension, engenders a lack of critical distance, a feature provided instead by the theatrical frame as well as by the boundaries between stage and audience. Taking advantage of this situation, *Hamlet Encounters* uses this virtual and unobstructed dimension of VR to highlight the parallels between Hamlet’s and our own time “out of joint” (Shakespeare 2003, p. 126).

Bionote: Anita Orfini holds a PhD in Russian Literature at Roma Tre University (Rome). Her main interests are Russian contemporary literature and Russian postmodern remakes of *Hamlet*. She is the editor of the literary column dedicated to Russian literature of the online magazine “Culturificio” and collaborates with CCOP, an Italian Interuniversity Center for the study of post-Soviet culture and counterculture.

Author’s address: anita.orfini@uniroma3.it

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