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The Cognition and Performance of Resonant Temporalities in *Richard III*

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With Shakespeare it's all about time. Indeed, there are few playwrights so "time-beguiled as Shakespeare, yet few are as free from ritual repetitions of the temporal theme" (Fletcher 70). Shakespeare's body of work includes 1100 uses of the word "time," not including its variants, and 34 of those instances appear in *Richard III*, yet the play's use of linguistic time referents almost always seems conditional and contingent. The word "if" clocks in at 87 times, "yet" 42, "when" and "then" at 65 and 82 respectively.

It may seem tentative in its linguistic signifiers, but temporality, or, more accurately, temporalities, are significant in *Richard III* and its performance. The times represented in Shakespeare's play are concomitant, can be concurrent, and are often conceptualized. The very first word of the play is "now," while the penultimate poetic line begins with "Now civil wounds are stopped." (5.5.40). Both the signifiers and the signified of "now" and "time" resonate throughout *Richard III* yet can be difficult to delineate due to the intricate nature of the temporal mélange of the play. Performing, observing, and, to a lesser extent, reading Shakespeare's play reveal a multiplicity of times: Historical, Fictive, and Quotidian.

The analytical endeavor offered here reveals a myriad of ontological and epistemological concerns informed by distributed cognition, and, in a sense, creates a far-ranging cognitive inclusivity, as seen in *Richard III* and the world around it. Time is in the history books, in stage history, in productions, on the stage, in the actors, in the audience, and outside of the theatre, and what ties all of these together, and composes resonant temporalities, is the act of cognition.

In *Shakespeare, Theater, and Time* Matthew Wagner argues for a "temporal thickness," as if all times are layered into one experience (13), whereas, coming from a Performance Studies perspective, Jerzy Limon

asserts that these plays have time streams that flow in variable speeds and currents and are demarcated by what he calls the “fifth wall” (“Time” 216). How do humans perceive, much less understand, these intricate matrices of temporality? Gone are the days of conceptualizing audiences as passive receivers of plays: just as humans do not inertly take in their cultures or the world around them, they do not catatonically accept the theatrical experience and the representations of time therein—theatre is an act of cognition. Cognition is not just neuronal impulses and synaptic strength, not just all in the head, but a part of a system. “Distributed,” “Embodied,” “Situated,” “Extended,” and “Socially and Culturally Distributed” are different ways cognition has been theorized, but their difference is in degree, not kind. Some terms stress information storage in matter, such as costumes or lighting, whereas others emphasize shared cognition outside of the isolated brain. What ties all of these ideas together is that, as Lawrence Shapiro asserts in *Embodied Cognition*, “Cognition emerges from dynamical interactions among the brain, body, and world” (125). A recent article in the journal *Cognitive Systems Research* adds that “individual cognition is supported by, and is mutually co-constructed by larger social, institutional, normative, political, technological, and cultural systems and practices” (Cash 61). The brain, the culture of the spectator, the theatre, the play, the artist, the culture of the playwright, every element of production, are all part of a Mobius strip of distributed cognition, which is a neuronal impulse repeating itself across the varied constituents of that distribution.

David Herman aspires to draw all of these ways of categorizing cognitive systems into what he sees as “the nexus of brain, body, and environment (or world), ‘which he dubs the “mind’ ” (165). The term is useful. Still, considering that cognition is an act beyond our individual brains, how does all of this theorizing help spectators deal with the “fifth wall” or “temporal thickness” of all the time streams flowing through a production of *Richard III*? In her book *Shakespeare Neuroplay*, Amy Cook considers Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT), contending that “Blends are constructions of meaning based on the projection of information from two or more input spaces to a blended space, such that the blended meaning contains information and structure from more than one space” (11). Cook coins the term “neuroplay” for the neurological transaction between performer and spectator, “performed and received, staged and housed, you

and me, at the same time” (153). Part of this theatrical neuroplay is the cognitive blend of resonant temporalities in plays like *Richard III*. Historical, Fictive, or Quotidian time in Shakespeare’s play is a cognitive blend distributed across an entire system of cognition. For the ease of discussion, these three temporalities can be scrutinized individually, but they exist contemporaneously in the cognitive blend of the play. Historical time can mean everything, both real and fictive, that took place before the commencement of the play—it’s the tense of the past. Fictive time is the temporal setting of the play in which the characters and occurrences exist, a sort of present lie in that it progresses in narrative time, not the time it takes the actors to complete the play. The play’s present is a lie in the sense that it differs from the audience’s present. Quotidian time would be the “real” time as experienced by actors, spectators, and the larger world around them.

Like all of Shakespeare’s history plays, *Richard III*’s Historical time seems paradoxically cohesive and fragmented at the same time. The real world historical people and events that transpired long before the play was even written represent one stream of Historical time, while the history of theatrical production and spectatorship offers two other manifestations. One could also argue there are even Historical-Fictive or Historical-Quotidian times, as the play unfolds in the time of its setting, making its fictions historical through continued movement within that time, and the Quotidian, real world around it, constantly making the present turn into history, the hour of performance later than when first begun. Little wonder Majorie Garber posits in *Shakespeare After All* that productions of the history plays tend to conflate times (314). To extend and complement Garber’s assertion, such is the very nature of the cognition of time in the theatre that it is nearly impossible to not conflate times as they resonate in this highly particularized environment.

From the onset of the play, Richard does his best to bring time into the present when he opens with “Now is the winter of our discontent/ Made glorious summer by this son of York” (1.1-2), but by the second act, the First Citizen notes: “So stood the state when Henry the Sixth/ Was crowned in Paris but at nine months old” (2.3.16-18). The play is haunted by the past, and not just the real-world, historical episodes, but Shakespeare’s *Henry the Sixth* trilogy of history plays, which dramatizes the War of the Roses. The Plantagenet and Lancastrian thirty-two year struggle for the

throne left an indelible mark on the English history. Many in Shakespeare's audience, and even audiences today, would be aware of both the historical record and Shakespeare's previous first plays, the popular *Henry the Sixth* trilogy, written and performed in 1590-1592. *Richard III*, written in 1593-1594, chronologically followed, not unlike its historical counterpart. Both the historical and performance record would connect these plays and events for audiences.

Limon likens offstage Historical time to smaller events in the play's narrative that are not viewed by the audience, seeing them as part of a framework that all belongs to what he calls "diegetic time," or the totality of the time emanating from the play itself, not from some outside source (*Chemistry* 117). Regardless of its status as diegetic or not, Historical time is about memory, and an important part of memory is the cognitive capacity to track time, to compare and contrast. In *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* Corballis and Suddendorf postulate that "tracking of the passage of time typically activates the right hemispheric dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, which is also implicated in working memory which, along with judging temporal distance, may depend on the same dopamine-modulated neuronal system" (309). This cognitive relationship also has implications for the perception of the future: "Brain imaging has shown that both remembering the past and imagining the future are associated with frontal and temporal lobe activity, although there are specific areas in the frontal pole and medial temporal lobes that are more involved with the future than with the past" (Corballis 302). These processes are situated within *Richard III*, the production, actors, stage, theater, and the world.

One of Shakespeare's palpable images of the evocation of the past in *Richard III* are buildings, such as the Tower and Pontefract Castle. Prince Edward asks Buckingham if Julius Caesar had built the tower, which he affirms but also notes that "succeeding ages have re-edified" (3.1.68-71). Queen Margaret refers to the tower in a past tense when she accuses Richard with, "Thou kill'dst my husband Henry in the Tower" (1.3.119) while Rivers harkens back to an earlier time, stating to the other doomed nobles that "Within the guilty closure of these walls/ Richard the Second here hacked to death" (3.1.11-12). These representations are signifiers that contain information; in these instances, despite the existence of both the Fictive and Quotidian time, among the information is Historic time,

smuggled into a system of Extended Cognition that does indeed seem like “temporal thickness.”

Perhaps another view of how this act of cognition works is what Alan Richardson calls a “memory imagination system.” Neuroscientific accounts of said system see it as “looking backward and forward in time—the ‘Janus Hypothesis’” and it “tends to emphasize the utility of such an arrangement, which provides an ‘adaptive’ rationale for the otherwise perplexing fragility of episodic memory” (234). Richard constantly exerts great effort to dictate the substance of this Janus Hypothesis, creating both the backward and forward looking when he tells Queen Margaret and Rivers “Let me put in your minds, if you forget,/ What you have been ere this, and what you are;/ Withal, what I have been, and what I am” (1.3.131-133). Of all of Richard’s notorious ambitions, the struggle to control time and the other characters’ cognition of it is perhaps his most audacious and quixotic. One could argue that Richard strives to maintain this kind of domination of the audience too, as we spend more time alone, by far, with Richard than any other character. In fact, Richard looms large in the body of Shakespeare’s works, as the only bigger part in all of the plays is Hamlet. Richard’s first speech is 44 lines long, 42 of those spoken *solus*, on the stage. Thus, Richard often has the audience’s ear with little to no interruption. Even when he admits he’s a villain, Richard offers justification of how he was “Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature” (1.1.19) his Iagoian impulses wrapped in self-justification and suggestion. Richard attempts to dictate the Historic and, in a way, the Quotidian time, both past and present, with an eye toward the future.

The same kind of endeavor exists between the actors, the stage, and the audience. Peter Brook once wrote, “So it is that Shakespeare succeeded where no one has succeeded before or since in writing plays that pass through many stages of consciousness” (88). While his Shakespearean exclusivity may be questionable, his main assertion holds true for not only characters, but for actors and audiences. After all, “Drama as Shakespeare contrived it lived in performance, not in publication; and, as such, it continually stimulated, and relied on, the cognition of spectators. On a virtually bare stage, Shakespeare’s collaborators were not only his fellow players but the playgoers, who provides reactions to what is both seen on the stage and what is referred to but not necessarily seen there. Cognitive responses to a play could always be seeded, but their outcome was not

certain” (Kinney 130). Distributed cognition, by its very nature, can only be consistent in the most general of ways. Artists can be sure of their *intended* spectators’ cognitive responses, but, as each audience has a distinct makeup, in a world full of varying spectator cognitive patterns, they will have to settle for the likelihood that audiences will complete their part of the distributed cognition system in the anticipated way.

One reason for this lack of certainty is perception and cognition. Perception “involves ‘explaining away’ the driving (incoming) sensory signal by matching it with a cascade of predictions pitched at a variety of spatial and temporal scales. These predictions reflect what the [cognitive] system already knows about the world (including the body) and the uncertainties associated with its own processing. Perception here becomes ‘theory-laden’ in at least one (rather specific) sense: what we perceive depends heavily upon a set of priors....that the brain brings to bear in its attempt to predict the current sensory signal” (Clark 187, insert mine). The mammalian brain is, in a sense, associative, and deals with incoming stimuli, such as a line in a play, by using prior stimulations to create predictions already known by the brain. To put an even finer point on it, “When two stimuli are delivered within a short interval, the response to the second stimulus can be either enhanced or depressed relative to the response to the first stimulus...Whether a synapse exhibits paired pulse facilitation or depression depends on the recent history of activation of that synapse” (Citri 18-19). This phenomenon is a sort of “neuronal learning” that reveals the plasticity of the mammalian brain and accounts for the individuality of audience members’ responses to the performance.

Every human being does not have the exact same priors, or the same history of synaptic response to previous neuronal firings, so it stands to reason that audiences would not process and therefore perceive any stimuli, much less something as complex as a play or the experience of time, in exactly the same way. Fictive time, sometimes called Literary time, works in this same way, and is especially resonant in *Richard III*.

Shakespeare’s play and its characters are obsessed with Fictive time, constantly asking for the “O’clock.” Hastings queries “What is the o’clock,” and Buckingham declares “I go, and towards three or four o’clock.” Even Richard gets into these requests for the appropriate Fictive time, asking “Ay, what’s the o’clock,” and, after being told it is ten offers “Well, let it strike” (3.2.4, 3.6.101, 4.2.110-111). Later in the play he asks Catesby for the

“o’clock before the final battle starts, as “The clock striketh,” seeing in it and the movement of the sun as a harbinger of doom (5.3.46, 5.3.277). All of these demands are endeavoring to impress order on Fictive time, particularly in the last two acts of the play, as the audience can almost feel time running out for Richard, if not for the play and the theatrical experience.

How the audience deals with Fictive time is as equally fluid as the characters on stage. In fact, “If, in the audience, we are told, either literally in dialogue or through any other means of communication that the theatre has at its disposal, that a night, or two days, or a year has passed while the dimming and raising of the stage lights blinked our eyes for us, we can accept it as a given. In this respect, the passage of time in the theatre is literary—we, the audience, project ourselves into a fictive world that is represented before us” (Wagner 24). The repetition of these “projections,” on a neuronal level, leads to synaptic plasticity, which, “specifically refers to activity-dependent modification of the strength or efficacy of synaptic transmission at preexisting synapses, and for over a century has been proposed to play a central role in the capacity of the brain to incorporate transient experiences into persistent memory traces. Synaptic plasticity is also thought to play key roles in the early development of neural circuitry” (Citri 18). Perceiving and processing Fictive time could lead to a cognitive plasticity not available to merely Quotidian time, although the two are hardly divorced from each other.

When Richard divulges “plots have I laid,” or Edward dies far from the audience’s presence or present, or Hastings’ decapitation is only seen and comprehended through Lovell and Ratcliff returning with his head in hand, it is intimated that there is a world offstage that remains part of the Fictive world and, therefore, of its time. While many tend to think of this world in spatial terms, where does it exist in time? “Many metaphors of time are based on space and the dynamics of movement in space. The conceptualization of time is thus in some way derived from the perception of movement in space” (Droit-Volet 494). As the audience watches actors move to and from these implied spaces/times in the wings of the theatre, our experience of that movement resolves itself into resonant times. Bruce McConachie explains the audience’s ability to create narrative cohesion out of these different times and spaces as “the part-whole primitive,” which “helps audiences to incorporate more and longer strands of these causal

sequences into a general narrative schema; spectators recognize that one strand is part of a longer whole and that this whole, and so on, becomes a part of an even larger whole, and so on, as they elaborate a nested hierarchy of incidents to shape their narrative comprehension” (*Engaging* 166). The time of the stage joins with the implied time offstage to create a temporal whole. Cognitive Blending Theory would support McConachie while realizing that this part/whole primitive is strictly an act of distributed cognition, as stated above, a neuronal impulse repeating itself across the varied constituents of that distribution.

Quotidian and Fictive time are so concomitant as to regularly make parsing the two difficult. For example, there are many instances in *Richard III* where characters speak asides. In the company of Richard, Queen Margaret offers the aside “A murd’rous villain, and so still thou art” (1.3.134), or in the presence of Buckingham and Prince Edward, Richard, in reference to the young prince, ghoulishly utters as an aside “So wise, so young, they say, do never live long” (3.1.79). Does the speaker of the aside exist in the same time as those unable to hear? In the Fictive time, it seems they do not, as if all the characters freeze, or, at the very least, turn away, but in Quotidian time, or real time, the utterance unfolds in that time contemporaneously with the Fictive. One could treat the asides as characters merely muttering under their breaths, but it would still be a duration that the other characters would endure, muddying the waters of the Fictive and Quotidian. These asides are infused with curses, or predictions of the future, an important part of the Fictive time. Curses exist in *Richard III* as wishful prognostications of the future, and Shakespeare has an affinity for writing curses that have already been fulfilled in Historical time, never more so than in *Richard III*.

The play’s near obsession with the art of prophecy, and characters cursing each other’s futures, also makes these two times intertwine. Queen Margaret’s execration of Elizabeth that “Long mayest thou live to wail thy children’s death,” is rebuffed but followed by her rejoinder “O, but remember this another day,/ When he shall split thy very heart with sorrow./ And say poor Margaret is a prophetess” (1.3.299-301) or when the Duchess of York curses Richard with “Bloody thou are, bloody will be thy end” (4.4.195), there is a sense of *fait accompli* in seemingly all possible times on the stage. The curses are eventually made manifest in the Fictive World and Time of the play, with Elizabeth losing everything and Richard

offering “My Kingdom for a horse!” before he is slain by Richmond (5.4.13). At the same time, these events come to pass during “the two hours traffic of our stage” (*Romeo* 1.1.12), played out in the real time of the theatrical experience. Both the Fictive and Quotidian times are vital parts of the distributed cognition that makes up the world of the theatre. Limon posits that “the spectator can be in or out of the resultant blend, and can also ‘live in the blend,’ often below the level of consciousness” (*Chemistry* 14). It is the “in and out” that is difficult for the artist to always foresee, particularly as audience members do not always move between the two in conscious, much less consistent, ways. Playwrights and other theatrical artists must depend on varied blended spaces that live within the possibility of the grammar of the theatre, or its unique customs and traditions, such as the relationship between the audience and the stage/actors/language/etc. to make meaning.

Performance practices help create these cognitive blends, as “they are historically, culturally, socially, and aesthetically contingent behaviors that remake the text, constitute the event, mediate our participation in its performance and sometimes, incidentally, convey an effect of representation” (Worthen 145). However, distributed cognition works both ways, as the audience “engages in a conceptual process designed to transform the stage and its activities into a structured fiction” (Garner XVII). Shakespeare’s texts are also part of this distribution that cognitively helps humans make meaning, but Mary Crane Thomas reminds us “Meaning is not just the product of an exterior system of signs but is fundamentally structured by human cognitive processes....meanings that are determined by the interaction of the physical world, culture, and these human cognitive systems” (21, 12). In other words, Herman’s idea of the mind, as discussed above.

The time between acts and scenes, or the “dream time” when ghosts walk the earth, add to this discussion of cognition and *Richard III*. The ghosts of Prince Edward, Henry the Sixth, Clarence, Rivers, Grey, and Vaughn all enter severally and speak to Richard and Richmond, offering curses and praise for the following day, but these figures are radical members of the past of the play, dragged by seemingly some greater force than Shakespeare’s quill. Is this Fictive time? Quotidian? Neither? Both? This uncertainty is, no doubt, how Shakespeare, looking through the lens of Historical time, problematizes the idea of the other two times, hence the

label of “supernatural,” with its inability to fit neatly into anything other than a “dream time.” Both supernatural and dream time imply their opposites, a sort of natural, waking time, which are really just synonyms for Quotidian time, another part of the temporal thickness that exists in the attempt to tell a story from the theatrical stage.

In one such story, *Richard III*, Queen Elizabeth admonishes Richard with “An honest tale speeds best when plainly told” (4.4.361). The argument in this paper is that telling stories is never so plain or simple, especially when it comes to resonant temporalities and how they play out not only on the stage but in the audience’s real life. Theatre is an extended, heightened, and complicated version of the temporalities outside the confines of its performative space. *Richard III* reveals how plays, the theatre, actors, productions, the brain, memory, blended spaces, image schemas, and various forms of time are all integral to the theatre-going experience and the distributed cognition used therein..

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