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# Introduction

## Theorizing Shakespeare's seriality

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‘Sometimes one has the impression that Shakespeare has in fact written three or four plays and kept repeating the same themes in different registers and keys’, Jan Kott observed in his landmark study *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1975: 171). As Kott and others have noted but never discussed in detail, Shakespeare can be regarded as a serial writer interested in revisiting his own writing from new angles, in new constellations and in new genres. Using the works of previous authors as well as replicating the works of rival theatre companies, he placed his plays in an adaptational network that has grown significantly ever since and now includes all Shakespearean adaptations written, performed and filmed across centuries and art forms. This network allows for serial readings that explore the ways in which Shakespeare’s plays were adapted in a serial manner, that is, in patterns of repetition with variation that invite comparison, often in a way that sheds light on the serial dramaturgies of the plays and between the plays. This volume examines seriality in this twofold sense, as a particular form of (self-)adaptation and as a method of serial reading that establishes intertextual and intermedial links.

Reading for seriality sharpens our awareness of the ways Shakespeare's plays make use of internal contrastive correspondences and repetitive sequences within each individual text as well as between the plays, but also between Shakespeare's oeuvre and its subsequent adaptations, appropriations and remediations in different historical moments and different aesthetic media. As a new formalist method, serial reading draws attention to the way each play not only gives shape to cultural, political, psychological and aesthetic concerns but also gives shape to these *again*, thus producing something different in the process. As Umberto Eco has argued, seriality is characterized by a 'dialectic between repetition and innovation' (1985: 175), and for serial storytelling, this means that repetition has to be transformed into novelty. This dramaturgical challenge 'on closer inspection turns out to be a core problem of modernity itself: the problem of renewing something by duplicating it' (2017: 29), as Frank Kelleter has pointed out. Shakespeare's plays, written at the onset of many developments that shape our late modern, late capitalist, postcolonial and pre-apocalyptic present moment, lend themselves to a serial reactivation also for this reason: they allow for a self-referential revisiting of modernity's core characteristics, its past and its potential futures. Vice versa, locating serial patterns in Shakespeare's oeuvre means identifying the early modern forerunners of an aesthetics that has often been understood as the hallmark of modernity in response to the industrialized production and distribution of serial products, the standardization of everyday life by patterns of seriality, and the rising importance of seriality in the natural sciences. As the chapters on early modern seriality in this volume demonstrate, self-referential revisiting was already part of historiographical and dramaturgical practice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Serial reading, therefore, entails a two-way hermeneutic approach. By serially mapping various Shakespeare plays onto each other, as well as onto other contemporary dramatic works and later historical refigurations, the readings produced are themselves performative. To revisit the plays serially means thinking together repetition and difference, the historical and the contemporary, the theatrical and the cinematic. If every part of a series is reconfigured by the continuation of the series, then Shakespeare's seriality tells us a lot about how both later adaptations and our academic engagement with his plays change the plays themselves.

Reading Shakespeare serially means to look at repetitions as the creation of difference (Bronfen, Frey and Martyn 2016: 9). Douglas Lanier has described this transformative effect of serialization as a question of mutual projection: ‘every adaptation actively projects – rather than passively reflects – its source(s), after which the adaptor can then strike a particular attitude – reverent, ambivalent, revisionary, hostile – towards that projected source’ (2017: 299). This transformation of the earlier or first part of the series by its later parts is, however, not only an effect of the adaptor’s work but also of the observer’s activity, who perceives and interprets such a series. Since every adaptation changes our view of its serial predecessor, ‘[s]trictly speaking, and by definition, the work does not precede its variations in a clearly identifiable way’, as Maurizio Calbi has argued for Shakespearean returns in twenty-first-century film (2013: 7). Serial reading can also establish links between Shakespeare’s plays and later works that have not been noted before and that are not signalled in any explicit way, as we can see in the current debate about the border between Shakespeare and ‘not Shakespeare’ in adaptation studies (Desmet, Loper and Casey 2017) and the status of ‘found adaptations’ (Cartmell and Whelehan 2010: 18), ‘unmarked adaptations’ (Lanier 2017: 300), or ‘non-adaptations’ (Mallin 2019).

Thus, serial reading not only investigates a given series but itself establishes a series in acts of serialization that enable a comparative analysis of the parts. As Simon Rothöhler has pointed out in his introduction to theories of seriality, the series is to be understood as a process rather than a product or substance (2020: 14), and therefore, it makes intelligible not only the recurrence of forms but also their change. Its productive tension between repetition and variation is further enriched by the tension between continuity and discontinuity, relationality and distinction, the whole and its parts, redundancy and innovation, hierarchy and coequality, segmentation and sequencing, as well as stagnation, return and progress (Rothöhler 2020: 11–12; 14–15). Each act of serial reading will navigate this spectrum and explore the specific seriality of concrete case studies. Looking at Shakespeare’s plays and their afterlives in their specific contexts, our volume is dedicated to the interplay of aesthetic and epistemic or theoretical forms of seriality.

Because *Shakespeare and Seriality* is interested in cross-pollinations when reading the historical and the contemporary

together across art forms, it covers a broad historical range, starting with Shakespeare as a serial writer in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and ending with complex TV serial dramas of the twenty-first century. Its three main sections on ‘Reading Shakespeare Serially’, ‘Performing Shakespeare Serially’ and ‘Televising Shakespeare Serially’ connect the early modern and the modern. Thus, for instance, chapters on Shakespeare’s serial writing read Shakespeare’s texts with psychoanalytical theory and look at how James Joyce’s and Samuel Beckett’s modernist aesthetics return to and unfold Shakespeare’s serialities. In our section on serial Shakespeare performances, we bring together an exploration of how audiences may have watched plays serially in early modern London with later theatrical experiments of serializing the plays, either by presenting them as sequels or by staging them in a serialized form, as successive instalments, that probes into the multiple meanings created by a changing cast. The chapters in ‘Televising Shakespeare Serially’ ask how, with this performance and publication history in mind, the complex TV series of the twenty-first century not only create new adaptations but also allow us to read Shakespeare’s plays in a different light.

Our approach thus follows the work of scholars like Nicholas Grene, Emma Smith, and Tara L. Lyons who use current serializations of the history plays as a starting point of historical inquiry. Thus, Grene opens his study *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays* with an account of his experience of watching the BBC broadcast of *The Wars of the Roses*, an adaptation of the three *Henry IV* parts and *Richard III*, to ask whether Shakespeare’s histories might have had a comparable impact on their original audiences (2002: 1–2). Smith explores the 1960s TV series *An Age of Kings* for its ‘reciprocal relations between Shakespeare, serialization, and popular culture in the 1590s and the 1960s’ (2007: 134) and shows how ‘the juxtaposition of “Shakespeare” and “serialization” enables us to articulate some significant questions about narrative production and consumption in the sixteenth and twentieth centuries’ (2007: 147). If contemporary theatre practice and TV drama privilege a serial conception of these plays, a historical perspective draws into focus how they may also have been popular as individual plays before they were launched as a series in the 1623 Folio edition. It also shows that they need to be understood in the larger theatrical sphere, in particular the ‘interplay between the rival companies,

[which] suggests that the broader serial of English history on stage was not constructed around a single author or playing space, and that, for early modern audiences, consuming plays across these categories was a more usual form of theatrical spectatorship' (Smith 2007: 141). However, there is also ample evidence that the histories were conceived and received in a serial manner before their Folio publication, as indicated by the titles of the Quarto editions such as *The First Part of the Contention betwixt the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster*. Lyons has argued that 'the principles of seriality and historicity, and not authorship, largely motivated' the variety of dramatic collections that preceded The First Folio (2012: 187). As she explains, serialization was driven by economic factors. Book sellers found that by marketing these plays as prequels and sequels, they were able to convince customers to return to their bookstalls and buy new instalments of serial historical drama, much as this serialization also drew audiences back to the theatres for new performances. Adam G. Hooks makes a similar claim for the way serial publication produced Shakespeare as a brand. As he notes, once Shakespeare's 'plays had been shown to be profitable, his name could be recognized and exploited as a marketing tactic' (2016: 136).

However, as the considerable work in repertory studies has shown, the order in which early modern audiences watched plays is far from certain: each audience member would have experienced specific serial effects depending on the order in which they saw particular plays. As Eoin Price has put it, it is very probable that many theatregoers saw plays 'out of order' due to the current revivals in the repertory system, watching imitative plays before their models and hence perceiving the earlier plays as repetitive or imitative (2022: 161). What is more, repertory studies have pointed out that some recurring features of plays were perhaps less due to the serial writing methods of particular authors, but more to practices of particular companies (cf. Rutter 2008; Kuhn 2017; Tavares and Johnson 2022). The engagement with Shakespeare both as a marketable brand and as modern myth as well as the reversal of origin and copy are at the heart of many of the chapters that look at how Shakespeare's plays were and can be read serially, how they were staged and keep being staged serially and how they are reimagined for specific sociopolitical concerns and aesthetic predilections in current TV series.

## Reading Shakespeare serially

The first section, ‘Reading Shakespeare serially’, discusses Shakespeare as a serial writer who not only recycled works by others but also revisited his own earlier writing in his plays, thus establishing serial reconfigurations across his oeuvre. For instance, Richard P. Wheeler has argued that

the development of Shakespeare’s art is repetitive. . . . There is nothing like a clear, linear progression from one work to another or from early work to late. As in the development of the human psyche, nothing is ever just left behind in Shakespeare’s art. From the *Comedy of Errors* and the early history plays to *The Tempest* and beyond, characteristic themes, conflicts, relationships, configurations of desire and frustration and fear are repeated over and over again. But nothing is ever just repeated either. Instead we can watch his art finding new possibilities in old configurations, and renewing the basis on which the old configurations exist. (2001: 296–7; see also Bronfen 2018)

Russ McDonald has shown for Shakespeare’s late plays that his method of serialization included both the macro-level of plot elements like fraternal power struggle and the micro-level of single sounds that create a serialized ‘sonic texture’, which added to the impression that the ‘late plays feel almost obsessively reiterative’ (2009: 97). As these observations indicate, the plays themselves may invite us to develop a principle of serial reading that always works in both directions, making us read the earlier plays in the light of their later refigurations and vice versa. We take this method further to look at the adaptational series that we can identify in the vast adaptational network that has kept growing for more than four centuries. Given the twofold reading direction as well as the awareness that authors collaborated in writing, that company practices shaped the texts and that scripts may have been adapted in later revivals, serial reading does not aim to establish teleological thinking and value judgements that cherish Shakespeare’s late writing as the culmination of his art (McMullan 2009). Rather than suggesting that Shakespeare’s serial writing meant a process of perfection, this volume seeks to explore the multidirectionality of serial reading and the seriality effects created by specific readings.

The section's opening chapter by Elisabeth Bronfen elaborates her method of serial reading for an analysis of the serial patterns in Shakespeare's romance *Cymbeline*, which reworks the interest in secrets, secrecy and cryptomania that Bronfen already locates in his earlier plays *Twelfth Night* and *Romeo and Juliet*. While Bronfen thus offers a case study of how Shakespeare adapts and transforms his own earlier plays, Aleida Assmann's chapter chooses *Othello* to discuss the fundamental relation between the role of empathy and the serial patterns of storytelling in which it is enhanced. Desdemona's empathy is stimulated by Othello's stories, and this immersive listener craves not only for endless repetition but also adapts the fictional narrative by inventing for herself a series of new roles in which she can enter her imaginary world. She is thus akin to the readers of early modern romances that recycled well-known plot elements in repetition with variation.

The next chapter turns to the question of whether Shakespeare's historical dramas, usually, as discussed above, arranged in two tetralogies in posthumous printed editions, were conceived and received as serial in early modern London. As Grene has elucidated, Shakespeare's history plays explored dramaturgies of sequentialization in which 'no play was complete in itself' but required and advertised a 'narrative sequel' (2002: 21). In the interplay of repetition and variation, continuation and interruption, Shakespeare created 'a series that is chronologically continuous but formally discontinuous' (247). A serial reading of the history plays was endorsed by the First Folio publication that placed the plays in their sequential chronological order rather than in the order of their composition and that retitled the plays to emphasize the royal succession order (Smith 2007: 144–5). While, as Smith argues, 'a serial understanding of the history plays has become a theatrical norm' today, she draws attention to the way this goes back to the Folio's organization of the history plays 'as a specific intervention, not a natural reflection of authorial intention or readerly expectation' (2022: 4). As L. Monique Pittman has recently discussed, the serialized histories keep having relevance in the twenty-first century for the negotiation of race, gender and nationality (2002). Carla Baricz's chapter identifies two different principles of serialization in the tetralogies: while seriality in the *Henry VI* tetralogy is dominant and each play can be analysed as continuation and supplementation of the previous plays, Shakespeare in the later *Henry IV* tetralogy

pursues a strategy of serial rewriting that is more revisionary and focused on character rather than plot. Here, seriality is recessive rather than dominant.

As the final piece in this section that opens the discussion to adaptations by later authors, Claudia Olk's chapter traces how Joyce and Beckett adapted Shakespeare's writing for their own modernist poetic operations that created seriality as an important structural principle. Joyce and Beckett read Shakespeare serially to construct self-conscious and gendered intertextual genealogies for their works that retrospectively reactivate Shakespeare.

## Performing Shakespeare serially

The theatre has developed its own ways of serializing Shakespeare's plays, which are explored in the second section on 'Performing Shakespeare serially'. Theatrical performance is an inherently serial art form for several reasons: Firstly, every theatrical production is repeated with differences on each occasion of performance. As Richard Schechner has put it, every performance consists of 'restored behaviour', so that '[p]erformance means: never for the first time. It means; for the second or the nth time. Performance is "twice-behaved behaviour"' (1985: 36). The relationship between origin and copy is equally unclear in theatrical performance as in any aesthetic series, since a production's particular performance aims at reproducing a non-existent original and can in turn become that new imaginary original: even though 'neither the play text, nor any script with production notes, nor the opening night's performance can be considered the "proper" or "original" performance which all subsequent shows are meant to imitate as perfectly as possible, all artists involved in a particular performance will orientate themselves according to such an illusionary original' (Wald 2007: 18), thus establishing a series with a shifting hierarchy. Marvin Carlson speaks of 'a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model' that guides each theatrical performance and, thus, the serial replication (2004: 5). As typical of seriality, variation is almost as important as repetition here. As Herbert Blau has pointed out, each performance requires a sense of novelty or originality, which means, paradoxically, that 'it wouldn't be the same if it were only the same, it would be nothing but repetition, not as right as it

was, spontaneous, as when it happened for the first time' (2001: 28). Blau hence concludes that for serial theatrical performances, there is 'no *first time*, no origin, but only recurrence and reproduction, whether improvised or ritualized, rehearsed or aleatoric, whether the performance is meant to give the impression of an unviolated naturalness or the dutiful and hieratic obedience to a code' (1987: 171).

Secondly, all theatrical performances of Shakespeare's plays are adaptations – they necessarily differ from the text versions, which themselves differ from the original series of performances. This means, as Margaret Jane Kidnie has pointed out for *Hamlet*, that 'in terms of ontology one can never say, in an absolute sense, what *Hamlet* is, or where one can find it: there is no thing that will always, forever, be *Hamlet*. This is quite different from saying there is no *Hamlet*. There is always a *Hamlet*' (2005: 117) – and it is always already a serialized *Hamlet*, we may add.

Thirdly, theatre history invites a comparative viewing of new productions in the light of previous realizations – and can make audiences think about alternative future realizations, that is, about the future continuation of a series. As Carlson has shown, theatre history turns every stage into a stage potentially 'haunted' by past characters, objects, conflicts and motifs in each new production. Since 'the recycled body of an actor . . . will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles', casting can create its own effects of seriality in the theatre (Carlson 2008: 10). Classics like Shakespeare's plays are particularly prone to such spectral presences of influential productions of the past, with *Hamlet* possibly being 'the most haunted of all Western dramas' (Carlson 2008: 4). Such spectral relations can also be the incentive for serial readings, for example when Brian Cox, who has become famous for his portrayal of *King Lear* in the acclaimed production by the National Theatre in 1990, directed by Deborah Warner, takes over the part of Logan Roy in the current TV series *Succession*, which has been discussed as an adaptation of *King Lear* (Wald 2020; Bronfen 2023).

Isabel Karremann's opening chapter contextualizes Shakespeare's plays in their early modern serial practices of production and reception. It investigates serial performance practices in early modern London with a focus on the character of Falstaff as a serial figure. Situating Falstaff and the historical figure on which

he was modelled in the larger context of early modern writing for and beyond the theatre, her chapter explores the configuration of serial memory. Sarah Hatchuel's chapter turns to the question of what it means to theatrically or filmically reconfigure one play as the sequel of another play. Focusing on projects that present *Antony and Cleopatra* as the sequel of *Julius Caesar*, she identifies three different operations that she calls sequelization, serialization and conflation, which each create with specific dramaturgical and ideological effects for the plays' gendered plots. Jonas Kellermann turns to the inherently serial art form of ballet, which is particularly insightful for analysing the tension between preserving and reforming aesthetic traditions in repetitions with variation. His case study of Benjamin Millepied's staging of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* at La Seine Musicale (2022) investigates what it means to queer *Romeo and Juliet* via casting actors of different genders for each night's performance. Asking, for instance, whether the same pose taken by a male-male, male-female or female-female couple has different meanings, his chapter tests which analytical and theoretical insights we can gain from bringing together seriality and ballet.

## Televising Shakespeare serially

Even though it is the final section, serial adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in complex TV were in a way the starting point for our volume. As Richard Dyer has argued, television can be regarded as the 'apotheosis of seriality' (2000: 146), and in TV series, the 'compulsion to repeat effectively' (Davis 2007: 28) becomes a constitutive narratological technique that makes audiences aware of repetitions with differences as well as of effects of accumulation and (over)saturation. TV series that belong to the recent trend of 'complex TV' (Mittell 2015) are characterized by long narrative arcs, large budgets, high production standards, a cinematographic look, elaborate scripts written by teams of prestigious authors, casts that include well-known actors, and, above all, by narrative complexity and self-reflexivity. Drawing on cinematographic seriality's enhanced emotional attachment (Hudelet and Crémieux 2021: 1), they have left behind the 'soothing, ritualized seriality' typical of soap opera (Hills 2005: 190) and developed sophisticated experiments with serial accumulation, reversal and variation. Frequently, they are not

aired weekly by broadcasters but instead are available on demand on streaming platforms and pay-TV channels. In this regard, they have left behind the structuring of the everyday lives of their viewers, who can instead watch entire seasons in an uninterrupted flow, replay and pause scenes – for instance, for the highly attentive watching of forensic fandom – follow the links to actor profiles that are often embedded in the series, and share their views in fan forums. Given these new transmedial reception circumstances and the innovative, narratologically complex dramaturgies, current TV series have often been labelled as ‘not’-TV, ‘post-network’ TV or as series ‘after TV’ or ‘beyond television’ (Leverette, Ott and Buckley 2008; Halskov 2021; Dunleavy 2018; Spigel and Olsson 2004).

As we have shown in our own monographs, serial TV Shakespeares can be considered the most thriving and culturally influential adaptational Shakespeare aggregate of the new millennium (Bronfen 2020 and Wald 2020; see also Greenhalgh 2022 for an excellent overview). Drawing on a number of genres, TV series have refigured Shakespeare’s plays to investigate topical concerns like the corrosion of democracy and the influence of media moguls on policy-making, inequalities in late capitalism, the rise of right-wing terrorism, the challenges of A.I., Europe’s postcolonial responsibilities, and the current state of (post-)feminism. Current complex TV series in turn invite us to read Shakespeare’s plays serially, both by tracing hitherto unnoticed intertextual links between the early modern plays and their postmodern adaptations – frequently via film and popular culture of the twentieth century – and by looking at the plays in the light of the serial patterns of outbidding, repetition with variation, accumulation and dramaturgical reversal that we have grown familiar with in current TV series. These series also invite us to think differently about Shakespeare audiences, who might better be understood as active ‘users’ (Fazel and Geddes 2017) or even co-creators, given the responsive scripts or ‘evolving narratives’ (Kelleter 2017) of TV series that take into account audience reactions and creative dramaturgical projections as developed in the various fan forums spawned by each TV series. Sometimes, as *Matt Hills* has shown, fans rework the serial features of the narratives in acts of ‘collapsed seriality’ that transform the slowly accumulating, multi-stranded and sometimes disorientating narratives of the TV series into spatially organized maps or encyclopaedia. A second fan strategy is ‘navigated seriality’, which focuses on particular strands

of the narrative and leaves out others, thus changing seriality via editing and ‘re-sequencing’ (2005: 197). Others ‘teleologise’ seriality by re-interpreting previous episodes and seasons as the preparation of the ending, thus investing random circumstances that impacted the series’ development with a deeper meaning (Hills 2005: 199–200).

The section’s opening chapter by Stephen O’Neill discusses what we can learn from the selective Shakespeareanisms in the TV series *Succession* for adaptation theory and for our methods of locating and exploring Shakespearean intertexts. Exploring how *Succession* repeats with a difference, creating its own serial Shakespeare aesthetics and eliciting further seriality effects in online cultures, the chapter presents three forms of serial reactivations in and via *Succession*: Shakespeare as cipher, as ideology and value and as ontology. Kinga Földvary analyses the strategies of serial appropriation in *Shakespeare & Hathaway: Private Investigators*. She argues that the comedic crime series uses textual poaching in a manner that reflects on Shakespeare’s own poaching from earlier authors and on the methodological challenges that any serial reading encounters. Christina Wald’s chapter discusses how the TV miniseries *Station Eleven* imagines Shakespearean reactivations after a flu pandemic causes the end of the world as we know it. With a particular interest in psychoanalytic and ecocritical concepts of repetition compulsions as serialized forms of acting out and working through, the chapter links serial TV Shakespeare to cultural theories of serialization and asks about their political significance to (re)think the future beyond harmful repetitions of the past.

The post-apocalyptic TV series *Station Eleven* depicts an end and a new beginning – and for our collection, it likewise constitutes the finale and yet points to future potentials and alternative worlds of research on Shakespeare and seriality. The miniseries takes its title not only from the novel *Station Eleven* by the Canadian author Emily St. John Mandel, but also from the work of Mandel’s fictional author figure called Miranda, who writes a graphic novel called ‘Station Eleven’ shortly before the global collapse of modernity. In the post-apocalyptic world, this graphic novel becomes a resource for several characters who draw on it as practical advice for survival and meaning-making and who derive aesthetic solace from its visuality in a time after cinema and TV. As Wald’s chapter argues, not only the author’s

name, Miranda, but also the graphic novel's action that explores possible futures after severe damage suggests an affinity to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Thus, while this collection contains no specific chapter on Shakespearean graphic novels, their cultural presence is registered in serial TV dramas in a transmedial manner. As current research has shown, graphic novels are a particularly vibrant cultural site for serial rewritings and serial readings of Shakespeare plays. For instance, Emma Hayley has shown that for artists working under the umbrella of *Manga Shakespeare* in the last decades, the gender-bending and the focus on double heroines in *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* have been a vital source of inspiration (2010). Shakespeare also holds a privileged position in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* serial comic novels, in which his plays are used as 'pliable elements of mythology within a narrative of many, rather than as discrete and inflexible texts for translation', as Josh Heuman and Richard Burt have argued (2002: 162–3). Kevin Wetmore draws attention to the mutual influence between theatrical performance and graphic novels that require transmedial serial readings: comic books in the series *Classics Illustrated*, created by Albert Kanter, conceived themselves as the gateways to mature literature, hoping to encourage young readers to seek out the original texts or their theatrical performance. The way in which Shakespeare was reconceived in these comics, in turn, explicitly made use of famous theatrical productions, such as Laurence Olivier's film version of *Hamlet*, so that the linkage between different popularizations of this tragedy itself attests to seriality: 'the movie, inspired by the play, shapes the comic that is adapted from the same play' (Wetmore 2006: 176).

In addition to graphic novels, there are, of course, other contemporary media for future research in Shakespeare and seriality, such as video games and AI-generated literature. Here, too, we can expect a melange of transmedial influences and investments, along with transformations and mutations to emerge. And yet, Terence Hawkes' famous assertion 'Shakespeare doesn't mean: we mean by Shakespeare' remains applicable (1992: 5). If his plays are used by us to generate meaning, banking on his cultural authority and his brand, then he also continues to mean owing to the serial appropriations as well as serial readings of his work, in the past and in contemporary culture.

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