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Shakespeare in a Video Cassette

While browsing the Hobbet *Hamlet* Collection, I came across a VHS tape of the 1983 cult film *Strange Brew*. This Canadian movie was directed by and stars Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas as two brothers who discover that their boss at a brewing company plans to take over the world. The plot itself has various ties to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, some of which include the branding of Elsinore beer, the murder of the previous company owner, and a quest for justice embarked upon by the protagonists. The film is a modernized and quirky remediation of the 17th century theater production and is encased in the box-like packaging of the cassette. By analyzing the history of the VHS format in tandem with The Laws of Medium and Jens Schröter's synthetic intermediality theory, I came to reconsider the *Strange Brew* tape as an extension of human ability, an amalgamation of medias and as both an advancement and relic of the movie-watching experience.

Firstly, the *Strange Brew* (Moranis and Thomas) video cassette should be analyzed for its ability to amplify human capacity. Our physical bodies cannot accomplish much without the help



Figure 1. The *Strange Brew* VHS tape from the Hobbet *Hamlet* Collection.

of the technology we've developed over the years and, even then, the things we can achieve are still limited in scope. VHS is a vehicle for mass storytelling across long distances. This form of entertainment first emerged in the mid-70's as a home product by the Victor Company of Japan (Cusumano 52), its introduction into the mass consumer market having a profound impact on film-viewership beyond the confines of local cinemas. At that time, anyone who owned a television could have potentially been a customer. Video recorders such as the VHS became so

sought after by the public that they eventually became the top consumer electronics product in the world by the 1980s (Cusumano 62), a testament to this media's reach across the globe. With movies now entering the realm of the home, filmmakers now had the ability to interact with even more people than ever before. Instead of projects being relegated only to theaters, people could purchase whichever storylines piqued their interest. VHS cassettes such as *Strange Brew* allowed stories to be shared to a revolutionary degree at the time. If you had a VHS player back then, you suddenly had the opportunity to view a wide variety of movies. All the themes and messages communicated within the tapes were able to reach the eyes and ears of hundreds around the world. Because of this breakthrough, remediated ideas also found a wider audience. *Strange Brew's* take on *Hamlet* was able to be viewed on a great scale thanks to the period of time in which it was released. As a consequence of the format in which it was sold, audiences were able to see how aspects of Shakespeare's play within this movie were reworked into a comedic and all-around absurd plot. The people behind this project make us remember *Hamlet* through the interwoven references. Shakespeare's work is brought into the present through this tape, immortalizing him inorganically and symbolically freeing his plays from decay. In this manner, the playwright has never truly died.

Next, we should consider the second Law of Medium, one which concerns how the object in question obsolesces media that came before it. The rise of VHS did not consequently derail the film industry or shut down cinemas worldwide. This technology did, however, challenge and eventually surpass the primary home video system at the time, the VCR. In the early 1970s, VCR was the most sought after single consumer electronic product (Cusumano 52), a success that

would eventually lead to companies both within and outside of the United States to develop more refined models. VHS was the next step in the evolution of entertainment media throughout the 20th century. Magnetic video recording itself came to be from competition with the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) to use technology previously engineered for audio tape recorders used in mass entertainment media years prior (Cusumano 58-9). Video recording products preceding the



Figure 2. The standard home VCR of the 1970s.

VHS were rarely popular within the consumer market. This was because these items were bulky, had poor picture quality, or possessed less than ideal viewing formats (Cusumano 59), attributes that VHS cassettes would eventually improve upon.

With a redesign of the home video prototype, the Victor Company caught the public's interest and brought all sorts of films and the stories they contained into the domestic sphere. Because of the ameliorations made out of the company's need to compete with fellow producers, movies such as *Strange Brew* were now accessible to families and subsequently found themselves in someone's living room. Technological improvements in the home entertainment industry increased the chance films could be viewed by the masses and, as a consequence, influenced if VHS films adapting Shakespeare's works would reach large audiences as well. The physical design of the *Strange Brew* (Moranis and Thomas) cassette is a result not only of economic commercial structures of the late 20th century but also of people's interest to push entertainment media to its limits. Developers were driven to bring an experience once housed within cinemas into a new space. The proliferation of home entertainment systems since the introduction of the VHS proves that humans are interested in watching movies in the privacy of their homes and away from the public eye. Converting rooms into our own "personal cinemas"

allowed people to explore their respective tastes in subject matter and collect films that aligned with these preferences. Whether purchasers were Shakespeare fans or just lovers of outlandish comedies, those who bought *Strange Brew* chose and watched a visual production rooted in a stage play from four hundred years prior.

Thirdly, an object should be examined for its ability to retrieve something from the past. *Strange Brew* is just one of many examples of Shakespearean works being transported into modern times through cinematic media. Some of the most notable cinematic titles in recent times include the best picture winning feature *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden) and the sports-based teenage romance of *She's the Man* (Fickman). While both of these films were released at the time DVDs were being established as the new way of viewing movies, there had already been a variety of Shakespeare-related material released on VHS. Disney, for example, reworked *Hamlet* into a more “family-friendly” tale with their award-winning animated piece *The Lion King* (Allers and Minkoff). Not each of these VHS tapes necessarily included a complete reworking of one Shakespeare’s works. A number of VHS recordings were tapings of stage performances put on by different acting companies. In addition, some Shakespearean films, such as Trevor Nunn’s *Macbeth* (Casson), were re-recorded on VHS. This media platform served as a way to reintroduce films made years before its development to the public, keeping these movies relevant and accessible. This reformatting of past works according to the latest technology at the time continued the process of bringing Shakespeare’s plays into the present. In Trevor Nunn’s case, visual narratives tied to the playwright’s stories did not become obsolete because of the platforms they were released on and were instead granted the chance to be viewed by a more modern audience. This would later continue on into the subsequent stages of entertainment technology’s evolution. In a way, VHS tapes like *Strange Brew* (Moranis and Thomas) are

records of past historical literature. As mentioned before, encountering references to Shakespeare's writing in films makes us recall his plays. We are reminded of the characters he wrote, the themes he wove into his works, and his influential contributions to theatre. The brewing company and characters involved in *Strange Brew* are all tied to the tragic tale of a mourning Danish prince ready to enact bloody revenge. The movie is definitely more comedy-based than its source material, but the subtext remains. Even if one was not necessarily familiar with *Hamlet*, audiences of the 80s were exposed to elements of the play by watching this VHS tape.

Finally, there's the fourth Law of Medium: the reversal of the promise given by the object. The VHS was a worldwide phenomenon for its ability to bring the movie-watching experience to the home. Having popularized the viewing of films outside of cinemas, the public had the notion that they could watch movies anywhere. If you had the VHS tape of the film, then you had the power to view it wherever you pleased. Of course, this idea had many limitations,

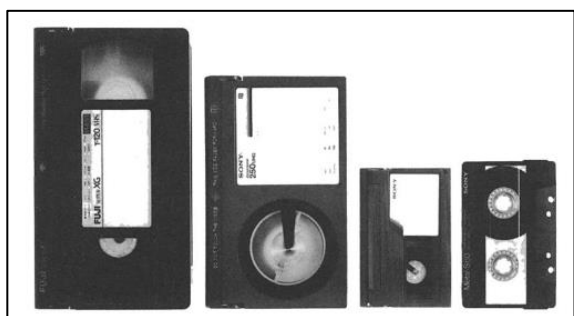


Figure 3. Cassette Comparison (left to right - VHS, Beta, 8mm, and audio).

some of which would influence the rise of newer and better entertainment systems such as DVD. For one, VHS tapes like *Strange Brew* could only be watched if one possessed the correct media player. One could not simply purchase a cassette and immediately thereafter view the film. This was a pitfall considering all one had

to do to watch a movie in theaters was pay the price of a ticket. Without the correct technology to interpret the tape, you were out of luck. Another similarly-related problem was that even if one had a VHS player, they were still dependent on a properly-functioning TV. Not only did this mean that consumers needed to own another prerequisite form of technology to view VHS films,

but it also restricted the number of spaces where one could watch entertainment as well. While it's true that about 98% of homes in the United States owned a TV set towards the end of the 20th century (Stephens), one could not just unplug their TV and take it wherever with them. Movie-watching spaces were still regulated because of the technology necessary to play a tape. Thus, the promise that consumers could view films “whenever they wanted” was not guaranteed.

Just as VHS did with its VCR predecessor, new entertainment systems would rise to improve upon the popular standards at a point in time. In this case, the creation of the digital versatile disc or DVD in 1997 (Dawson 96) would have a great effect on the home product market. In 2004, VHS only accounted for about six percent of the \$10.7 billion amount consumer spent on both VHS and DVD products (Alarab), an indication that the latter was shifting the standard for home appliances. While this change of systems was not immediate, films needed to adapt and companies subsequently invested in formatting their products for DVD players. But this development still had the same constraints as VHS: viewing spaces were still delineated and one needed to possess various forms of working technology to watch films. Eventually, wireless streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and many others would rise to champion the “watchable everywhere” idea. Yes, there still exist constraints regarding these platforms, but one no longer needed a specific media player to accompany their format-specific movies. Instead, both the screen we watch films on and the media player it uses have become one, our phones and TVs eliminating the need for an entire level of technology necessary in both VHS and DVD systems. This evolving of how the public watches films has left the *Strange Brew* (Moranis and Thomas) tape in a bit of a limbo-like state: the system that interprets the film is no longer popular around the world. Online methods of viewing film have become the standard, lowering the chances that consumers would go out of their way to buy VHS movies in present day. *Strange*

Brew, a project that once was able to find wide viewership as a result of the format it was fit for, is now hindered by it. Unlike Shakespeare's plays which have continued to find readers via the book medium over the years, the narrative encased within the VHS tape has now become a relic in its respective industry. The communication of *Strange Brew*'s story to others is presently impeded by technology that, in the past, had granted the movie the chance to be heard and seen by thousands.

Lastly, I examined my chosen item by considering Jens Schröter's theory of synthetic intermediality to round out my analysis of this medium. According to this theory, "multiple media can transcend their individual parts to form an intermedia that is a new unity" (Iyengar), an idea that embodied by the *Strange Brew* (Moranis and Thomas) VHS cassette. As previously stated, the ways in which the masses used to experience entertainment media fifty years ago is much different than it is today. There was once a time when the only groups with the ability to distribute products such as film were institutions and corporations (Ritzenhoff 136). Films were first shown in theaters and, if television networks obtained proper rights, some were played on channels. As home entertainment grew in popularity, the push for better movie-watching products gained steam and with it, the search for the best ways to communicate cinematic motifs and vocabulary in technological packages. According to Dr. Yvonne Spielmann, the medium of video is important in new media, stating "it is in video where aesthetic strategies of film interrelate with electronic image processing" (133), with aspects of technology and cinematic arts converging together to bring about an entirely new experience for us to enjoy. *Strange Brew*'s format as a VHS combines technical elements to

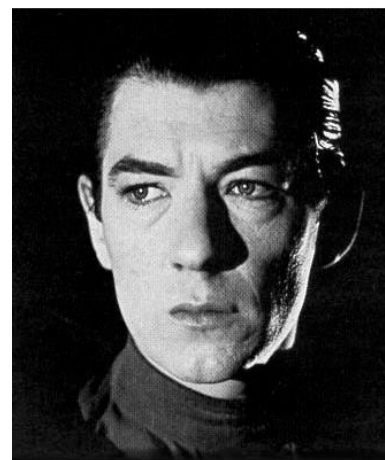


Figure 4. Ian McKellen in Trevor Nunn's *Macbeth*.

bring forth the creative, the cassette designed to display the wacky happenings within the movie's plot. If the tape was not properly constructed with all its components working, viewers would be unable to watch the McKenzie brothers stop their nefarious boss from exacting his plan of worldwide domination. Elements such as cinematography, acting, and screenwriting would be lost if the cassette's inner structures did not work together to translate the project for us to see and hear. As a result, we would not be granted the ability to view Moranis and Thomas' take on *Hamlet*, endangering the "survival" of Shakespeare's narrative across the technological plane. By creating entertainment media, we are depending on man-made invention to deliver art to the public. Technology can conserve stories as it does when it comes to media rooted in Shakespeare's plays, but should it fail to function properly, we lose the story, characters, and the ideas tied to the project in question. *Strange Brew*'s VHS tape is a symbol of the relationship between human storytelling and the artificial constructs they have created to bolster their tales. Through technology, we hope to reach wider audiences and to experience timeless narratives in an entirely new fashion.

The act of storytelling has been a key attribute of the human race for centuries, with our ancestors having once used both words and visual art to communicate information about their culture as well as their surroundings. The film *Strange Brew* (Moranis and Thomas) was released on VHS as a means to spread the misadventures of the protagonists to the public, carrying the story of *Hamlet* along with it. Humanity is hardly complacent with what they've made in the present, however. As the fall of VHS proves, we constantly look to the future, dreaming of creating the next big thing. With recent the popularity on streaming platforms and online entertainment services, one must wonder if how the relationship between cinematic arts and technology will continue to evolve in the years to come. Perhaps a new level of technological

integration spurred on by human ingenuity will provide us newer immersive ways to experience Shakespeare's works. The only question, of course, is which experiences will suffer as a result of such advancements.

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