

To Hold Up a Mirror: Preservation and Interpretation of Performance in a Digital Age

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It is commonplace to separate the methods of preservation of our cultural heritage from scholarly interpretation. Preservation is often described in more technical terms, while scholarship is deemed an intellectual engagement removed from the technicalities of electronic capture and persistence. This presentation challenges that distinction, and rather explores the dynamic, causal relationship between preserving a performance event and its subsequent interpretation.

The scholar's reception and elucidation of performance can be traced back at least to Aristarchus and his collation and annotation of the various written records of recitations of Homer's epic poetry that had accumulated by the second century B.C.E. More recently, the digitization of the Bayeux Tapestry illuminates the interplay between the translation, from one medium to another, and preservation of a fundamentally important object of human expression and its determining influence on how that object may be interpreted and received subsequent to its digitization.

Today, performance often entails rich, multimedia elements that pose considerable difficulties for preserving the event and making it accessible over time. As importantly, the methods of capture can limit but also allow new and exciting opportunities for scholarly exegesis, including the capture of various stages and components of the creative process, illuminating the context and history of the performance 'event'.

What does it mean to preserve our cultural record digitally? What new methods of interpretation may arise in response to a digital record of an otherwise fleeting and ephemeral event? What new means of publication will be needed to communicate adequately the various 'readings' of a digitally preserved performance?