

The Comédie-Française Registers Project

Digitally Re-examining and Revitalising French Theatre History

[See the slides](#)

DH and Theatre History: a long (well, longish) history of collaboration

Over the course of a long history of collaboration (well as long as a relatively new field like DH will allow), two distinct currents of DH-theatre history projects have emerged.

The first are those projects which take a more literary approach to theatre history. Following in the long DH tradition of text-based analysis (Busa, Moretti), these center around theatrical texts, and produce literary analysis based digital resources: [hypertext enriched digital editions](#), statistical analyses of [composition](#) and [style](#) etc. A few examples of French projects that fall into this category include Claude Bourqui's encyclopedic [Naissance de la Critique Dramatique](#), and [Haine du Théâtre](#), whose approach pivots around theatrical controversies. It is worth noting that a number of projects of this style focus exclusively on canonical authors (ex: Georges Forestier's [Molière 21](#)).

The second group of projects take a more holistic approach to theatre history; with performance as the primary object of study, the focus shifts from solely texts to include all of the agents and elements constitutive of *la vie théâtrale* as a whole: authors, yes, but also actors, musicians, personnel and police; plays, certainly, but also sets, venues, audience. It is perhaps because of the ephemerality of the performance that DH is a natural fit for this style of project. With the impossibility of accessing the “authentic” — per [Walter Benjamin's conception of aura](#)— artifact under study, scholars have turned Benjamin's singularly focused paradigm on its head, opting to instead pursue a multifaceted exploration through documentary abundance. As [Latour and Lowe](#) argue, “*the real phenomenon to be accounted for is not the punctual delineation of one version divorced from the rest of its copies, but the whole assemblage made up of one —or several— original(s) together with the retinue of its continually re-written biography. It is not a case of 'either or' but of 'and, and'”* This notion, which they dub ‘trajectory’, implying, in the case of theatre performances, the compilation of copious and diverse “reproductions”— sources each offering different perspectives on a performance and its social, economic, political, and artistic context—renders, by virtue of the sheer volume of sources, the intervention of the digital a necessity.

The Comédie-Française Registers Project (CFRP) unequivocally falls into this second category of projects, but it is the use of the titular registers as a primary data source that sets it apart. In the case of many projects in this current, the ‘trajectories’ are assembled from a patchwork of documents from disparate sources which, while leaning some form of organization by chronology, lack the systematicity of ‘ideal’ datasets. Diversity of sources (and therefore perspectives) is good; gaping data holes, not so much. At the difference of other projects like [CESAR](#), [Dezede](#), and the [London Stage Database](#), the CFRP data includes sources not only from outside the institution but, crucially, from within, and the CF registers are significantly more complete than those from the Comédie Italienne leveraged by the [RECITAL](#) project.

The CFRP: historical foundation, modern realization

A singular data source, the registers are manuscript records of the company’s activities, meticulously kept by members of the troupe since its founding in 1680. Historically, materially, legally, politically, and culturally significant, they are integral in shaping CFRP’s approach to the study of theatre history.

Under royal patronage, the CF received the exclusive right to perform french language theatre in Paris as well as significant financial support. With respect to the company’s accountability to the crown, the registers occupied a key economic function: explicit proof of sanctioned use of funds.

Given that actors were at the time, for the crime of practicing a ‘sinful’ profession, excommunicated and, by virtue of the judiciary power of the church, stripped of a number of civil liberties, the registers also have important historical-legal significance: artisans with often common origins, they record the actors’ lives in much greater detail than ecclesiastical records could ever have provided. We know the exact date, time and location of [Monsieur and Madame Molé’s marriage](#); we have a detailed timeline of [Lekain’s illness and death](#); the registers constitute for the actors exactly what the church tried to deny them: a historical paper trail.

The physical objects themselves also attest to their importance. The registers are for the most part in-quarto volumes bound in vellum, using high quality paper and often including pre-printed rubrics and a title page decorated with the Royal coat of arms. What’s more, despite spanning well over a century, there is a remarkable consistency to the way in which the registers are dated. As a historical and documentary resource, they are unparalleled with respect to the records kept by other contemporary european theatrical institutions.

These material properties point to the significant political and historical importance of the registers to the CF as an institution—an elevated status which is reinforced by the fact that, through to today, new members inducted into the company are gifted a facsimile of the first register.

The irony of the registers as an object of study is that they subvert the very hierarchical tradition from which they emerged. Given the deeply seated influence of the institution, the cultural discourse of 17th and 18th century France was dominated by the official narrative, which, coupled with the emerging notion of individual celebrity, resulted in a hegemonic and iconic historical record; the canonical history of the Comédie-Française is one which venerates a few central figures while overlooking conflict, nuance, and the importance of the collective.

The registers subvert this monolithic approach to theatre history by centering narrative multiplicity and flattening hierarchies. In consulting the registers, the reader is confronted with the reality of the company's day to day operations, which depend on the collaborative efforts of a huge number of agents; in their pages, the works of Voltaire are listed identically to those of Françoise Graffigny, and tragic starlette Clairon is on equal footing with Monsieur. Bellemont, playing any number of ubiquitous unnamed valets.

Aiming to decenter, deconstruct, and re-evaluate the established historical cannon, this inherent focus on narrative multiplicity completely informs CFRP's approach to theatre history. Bringing together academics, technologists, and artists from France, Canada, and the United States, the CFRP aims to present a revitalized view of French theatre history through diversity of perspectives, both historical and modern.

A Tradition of Scholarship

The CFRP team are [not the first](#) to have attempted a data driven exploration of the history of the Comédie-Française.

Between 1752 and 1758, Charles de Fieux, Chevalier de Mouhy published his '[tablettes dramatiques](#)' which are essentially a dictionary of all the plays performed at the CF, with titles accompanied by basic information—author, premiere date, genre— as well as occasional subjective commentary. In 1901, Alexandre Joannidès published [La Comédie-Française de 1680 à 1900: Dictionnaire général des pièces et des auteurs](#), which likewise listed the company's repertory and authors, but notably expanded the scope of Mouhy's work to include a tabular summary of performances. As Joannidès demonstrated, these rudimentary statistics allowed for the identification of trends in author and play popularity. Finally, in a number of works published between 1941 and 1951, American academic Henry Carrington Lancaster, compiled further tabular data, his notably being the first work to include data relating to the troupe's finances. In light of this legacy of scholarship, the CFRP's digital datafication of the registers is not an innovation so much as the next logical step.

In 1988, theatre historian Martine de Rougemont described the ability to carry out computer-mediated analyses of audience and repertory as being akin to prognostication for horse racing—an unattainable dream.

In 2015, upon completion of the first of the CFRP's databases, Rougemont's pipe dream became a reality, and, since then, the addition of further data sources has only increased the scope and complexity of possible interrogations.

The Data

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guittari coined the term *media assemblage* to designate a collection of sources analysable in isolation but which together “do not form a seamless whole”, and when considered in conjunction with one another, “have irreducible properties, properties that emerge from the interactions between parts”. This diversity and plurality of sources and perspectives is at the heart of Latour and Lowe's notion of ‘trajectory’, which, as seen, informs the CFRP's approach.

Since its inception in 2009, the project has gradually amassed a collection of data, proceeding source by source, prioritizing completeness above all—a notably different approach from similar projects whose data collection relied from the start on an abundance of patchy sources.

However, having now reached the point of including a number of datasets, the term ‘assemblage’ aptly applies to the project's data in that, while each individual source offers insight into a distinct facet of the company's history and into the broader history of 18th century French *vie théâtrale* as a whole, the dialogue between them is equally—if not more—telling.

The following sections describe the three main sources which currently make up the CFRP assemblage.

The Registers (the nitty gritty details)

Though we have thus far referred to them as a monolithic data source, there are in reality four distinct types of registers:

1. **Receipts registers:** these recount for each evening, which plays were performed (there were typically two each session) and how many tickets were sold, of what types, and at what prices. They inform not only on the troupe's finances, but also on the composition of the audience. The most complete set of registers, they span from 1680-1793.
2. **Expense registers:** this register set shows the breakdown of the company's expenses. Though initially appended to the revenue information, after expenses were recorded in their own distinct volumes from 1750 onward.
3. **Casting registers:** *Feux* in french, named for the candles or firewood given to each actor performing on a given evening to light and/or heat their dressing room, these registers are a record for every performance of which actors played which roles. Though

casting information can informally be found in early receipts registers, the *feux* registers proper only span from 1765 to 1793.

4. **Administrative registers:** the *registres de l'assemblée* are essentially the minutes from the actors' weekly administrative meetings, in which they made important decisions about the troupe's finances, management, and repertory.

Periodical Press (more data!)

The CFRP's media assemblage is not limited to sources from inside the institution. So as to both diversify (and multiply) perspectives and source types, it also integrates contemporary press relating to the Comédie-Française from ten different periodicals.

Covering together the period between 1711 and 1793, though with significant overlap, each of the ten publications has a unique editorial style. Without being exhaustive, the selected periodicals are representative of the diversity of the contemporary media landscape. In addition to offering distinct perspectives on the goings on of the CF, in documenting the emergence of theatrical criticism, this archive examines the various different—even antithetical—approaches to thinking about live performance.

The periodicals currently under study are as follows:

1. [Le Mercure de France](#)

Founded in 1672 by Donneau de Visé and initially known as the *Mercure Galant*, the *Mercure* is the longest running of the periodicals. The *Mercure* has the particularity of claiming neutrality despite the promotion of a highly institutional cultural discourse born of its close ties to the monarchy.

2. [Le Nouvelliste du Parnasse](#)

This letter-based publication published between 1730 and 1732 strongly argues in favour of a more literary approach to theatrical criticism.

3. [Le Pour et le Contre](#)

This publication, which appeared between 1733 and 1740, revolves around comparisons between the Parisian stage and the London theatre scene.

4. [La Correspondance Littéraire](#)

This subscription-only publication was exclusively devoted to theatre and is a crucially important source by virtue of the fact that it was not subject to any form of censorship.

5. [Observations sur les écrits modernes](#)

Published between 1735 and 1743 by Pierre-François Guyot Desfontaines, the *Observations sur les écrits modernes* is essentially a continuation of the *Nouvelliste du Parnasse*, both in content and in tone.

6. [Observations sur la littérature moderne](#)

Published semi-monthly between 1749-1752, this publication—authored by theatre enthusiast Abbot de la Porte—had a broad scope but focused in particular on theatrical authors, most notably Voltaire.

7. [L'Observateur Littéraire](#)

Also authored by de la Porte and published five times per year between 1758 and 1761 in the form of books of Letters, *l'Observateur Littéraire* took a particular interest in the Parisian stage.

8. [L'Année Littéraire](#)

This publication, which appeared every ten days between 1754 and 1776, is distinguished by the frank, often bordering on acerbic, prose of its author, Élie-Catherine Fréron

9. [Lettres de Madame la comtesse de *** sur quelques écrits modernes](#)

A forerunner to *l'Année littéraire*, this publication sees Fréron adopt a female penname and play at being a 'femme de lettres'.

10. [L'Observateur des Spectacles](#)

Highly critical, verging on cruel, Antoine Chevrier provides blunt, unvarnished, commentary on plays and performances alike.

Archival Documents (even more data!)

As was also the case with the press, documents from the actors' personal archives additionally help to flesh out the 'trajectories' of the subjects under study.

These archival documents preserved at the *Bibliothèque Musée de la Comédie-Française* inform on an array of different aspects of the CF as an institution: namely, the financial, the political, the administrative, and the personal

Records of actors' raises and pensions and speak to the financial state of the company. Monsieur Bellecour's letter from September 3rd, 1777, for example, lists the pensions of a number of the full members of the troupe ([sociétaires](#)).

Documents supplementing the *assemblée* registers add nuance to knowledge of the inner workings of the troupe and highlight important power dynamics. An extra document from administrative meeting minutes from March 10th 1782, for example, records a debate with eerily contemporary echoes over whether or not Mademoiselle Contat should be required to pay a pregnancy tax. Responses range from assertions that she should, just as others had before her, to expressions of the unjustness of the regulation and calls for it to be removed, to a questioning of whether it was their place to question a rule created by their superiors

A combination of official documents enforcing strict rules and regulations and carefully worded interpersonal communications speak to the precarious political position of the CF. This notably includes documents which highlight the ways in which the CF was implicated in the Revolution. Always a venue of political expression—many plays having been censored or daringly played despite attempts at censorship—the *Comédie Française* did not remain passive during the revolution, despite being under royal patronage. One of those polemical plays—Marie-Joseph Chenier's *Charles IX*, which had been suppressed by censors for over two years before being finally performed for the first time the 4th of november 1789—ended up serving as a catalyst for revolutionary action, leaving the audience, according to author Charles-Élie de Ferrières “ivre de vengeance et tourmenté d'une soif de sang”; it also was the cause of a splintering within the troupe itself, leading to the creation of two opposing theatre companies: the republican *Théâtre de la République*, led by Talma, who had played the titular Charles IX, and the monarchist *Théâtre de la Nation*. The members of the latter were later imprisoned in 1793, following a staging of another controversial play, *Pamela*, which the Committee of Public Safety felt was too Royalist. Among Mademoiselle Joly's papers, there is a letter—dated October 7th 1793—written from prison in St. Pélagie, where she had already been imprisoned for five weeks, in which she pleads for freedom, invoking her true devotion to the republic and her four young children.

Finally, intimate communications give insight into the influence of the personal and serve to humanize the data. In light of Bellecour's distraught letter about the death of his friend and colleague Lekain, Prévile's jovial recounting of the time he almost lost an eye in Senlis, and Contat's pressed flowers with the inscription '*pour mes enfants*', there is no forgetting (and rightly so) the people behind the numbers.

Bringing It All Together

The result of this multiplication of sources is the ability to explore any given event via a myriad of discrete, sometimes contradictory, documents each recounting it from a distinct perspective. There is no fixed point of entry, imposed position, or documentary hierarchy; as established by Katherine Hayles, "subjectivity is produced by the assemblage and not assumed in its construction".

Take as an example January 18th 1773:

The [receipts registers](#) tell us it was a fairly profitable evening, perhaps unsurprising given that Racine's tragedy *Mithridate* was performed. There is a special note indicating that Mlle Raucourt played the leading female role. There was a fairly sizable crowd, with 450 people in the *parterre* (groundlings) alone, which might explain the presence of the...

... 12 soldiers mentioned in that day's [expenses](#). Here too there is a note about Raucourt, though in this case it was clearly added later by a researcher; evidently something worthy of note—what, precisely, we learn from the...

...periodical press, in this case the [Mercure de France](#), which explains that Mademoiselle Raucourt is currently in the middle of her debut period. As told by the press, her debut is going exceedingly well, thanks in no small part to her teacher Brizard who we learn from the

... [casting registers](#) played opposite his student in *Mithridate*, taking on the titular role. They also show us that the only actor to jump between genres, performing in both plays that evening, was Monsieur Molé. Monsieur Bellecour was notably absent— odd, given that he typically had at least one role every performance during that period—an absence that equally crops up in the ...

... [administrative registers](#), in the record of that morning's meeting. Since actors had to explain their absence or be fined, there's a little note that he wrote a ...

... letter explaining his absence. Despite having taken ill, he dutifully offers his input on the day's deliberations, and kindly requests that he not be scheduled to perform the next day.

A Few Technical Details

With (fairly) consistent formatting and an already tabular structure, relational databases were the obvious choice when it came to the digitization of the receipts, casting, and expense registers. Bespoke transcription interfaces were used to collect and verify the data.

Between the casting and receipts, we've collected data pertaining to:

- 34537 dates
- 64655 performances
- 1059 plays
- 312 authors
- 566 actors
- 12 locations

The expense registers are still a work in progress, but we currently have expense data for 23516 distinct dates.

An admittedly haphazard approach saw the press transcribed and highlight-encoded in Microsoft Word, automatically XML encoded and entity (actors, authors, plays, roles etc.) tagged, and the tags altered, verified and added to using a custom interface.

The administrative registers have yet to be treated, but will likely also be XML encoded. We are also currently working on releasing the core project data as an RDF archive, and on the transcription of the 19th century registers.

Theoretical Underpinning

In addition to facilitating research, the digital plays a role in shaping the project's approach.

Not only increasing the flexibility and scope of possible inquiries, the database as a medium additionally compounds the CFRP's focus on narrative multiplicity. As Lev Manovich argues in his essay '[Database as a Symbolic Form](#)', the database as a new media object serves to invert the traditional relationship between the *syntagm*, a single realization of narrative possibilities, and the *paradigm*, the collection of all possible choices, dematerializing the former while concretizing the latter.

While careful to maintain a keen awareness of the privilege and elitism inherent to the CF data, we nonetheless want to interrogate the complex power structures at play; in light of this, we also look to ground our approach in the principles of [feminist data analysis](#), as defined by Lauren Klein and Catherine D'Ignazio.

Through the introduction of counter narratives, we *challenge power structures* by revealing their oppressive influences.

Through the reconstruction of a more complete vision of 18th century *vie théâtrale* by way of the dialogue between the registers and the press, we *consider context* and *embrace pluralism*.

Through a renewed focus on traditionally overlooked figures, we *rethink hierarchies* and *make labour visible*.

Through research-creation and artistic productions we *elevate embodiment and emotion*.

New Discoveries and Re-discoveries

As previously mentioned, central to the notion of the media assemblage is that it is through the combination and confrontation of the various constituents of the assemblage that the most complex and complete narratives emerge; let's take a look at a few.

Plutus and the Power of the Press

As one might expect, there exists a clear correlation between the number of times a play was performed and its global revenue. However, performed a mere 16 times, exclusively in 1720, but with a global revenue rivaling that of plays performed four times as frequently, Marc-Antoine Legrand's play *Plutus* is a clear anomaly. Additionally, despite enormous apparent success, it is almost completely absent from the press. Notably, not a word is said in the *Mercure de France*—the period's premiere cultural journal, which had a section exclusively devoted to theatrical criticism—despite its supposed aim of objectively reflecting public opinion.

As it transpires, the *Mercure's* silence is the key to understanding how such a huge box office success managed to fall into relative obscurity. Despite its claims of neutrality, the *Mercure* was under royal patronage and could therefore not be seen to be promoting any discourse which went against the official position of the monarchy. In February of 1720, when *Plutus* premiered, Paris was in the midst of a financial crisis caused by the speculative financial system put in place by Scottish banker John Law with, crucially, the full support of the then regent Phillippe D'Orléans. Bucking the trend of effusively positive representations dominating mainstream cultural productions at the time, *Plutus* was a thinly veiled critique of Law's system, something which the *Mercure*, given its political affiliation, could not support.

Though lacking official confirmation, the sudden disappearance of the play after only 16 performances strongly hints at censorship; be that as it may, censorship alone does not justify the fact that *Plutus* was not retained by history with a capital 'H'. Shortly after *Plutus*, Legrand wrote another play dramatizing current events—*Cartouche et les Voleurs*—which, while eventually censored, was nonetheless praised at length by the press, and is retained by theatre history as a notable success, despite earning significantly less than *Plutus*. Why the disparate treatment? [Politics, yes, but interestingly, also artistic choices.](#) While *Cartouche*, glorified a Robin-Hood esque vagabond, the denouncing of Law's government-supported system in *Plutus* was much more politically dangerous; the former was all witty banter, charming comedy, while the latter used completely unironic noble/tragic style declamation—striking in the middle of a comedic play—to emphasize the serious and important nature of its anti-Law discourse.

Forcibly disappeared from the public record and consequently overlooked by retrospective studies of the company's repertoire, the significance of the play's trajectory only emerged by way of digital interrogations.

Poor Forgotten Monsieur Bellemont

Like *Plutus*, comedic actor Jean-Baptiste Colbert de Beaulieu, dit Bellemont was also neglected by the press—mentioned a grand total of 17 in the *Mercure* times in the course of his 38 year career. Unlike *Plutus* however, it was certainly not for lack of presence on stage.

Though the *feux* registers, which provide data relating to the actors, only span from 1765 to 1793, during that period, Monsieur Bellmont is the actor who, in the absolute, [performs the most](#). Even allowing for normalization by the number of active years during the period, he is still the third most productive member of the company. To give a sense of scale, full company members—sociétaires—like Bellemont performed, on average, 138 times per season; Bellemont averaged 240. In different terms, while Monsieur Molé, one of Bellemont's contemporaries, was mentioned ~9.82 times per year during that same period, Bellemont's average was a grand total of ... ~0.214.

Given his extraordinary contributions to the CF, it would be reasonable to expect him to be well remembered; yet, up until the creation of the casting database, theatre historians hadn't spared him a passing thought. Outside of the registers, the press is the primary source of information about the actors and, what with the emergence of the concept of 'stardom' in the 18th century, the narrative it weaves tends towards hagiography of a few iconic figures, while largely neglecting the bulk of the troupe. Still, that begs the question - how did someone who performed as much as Bellemont fail to capture the attention of the public and by extension the press? It appears that Monsieur Bellemont's problem may have been that he was quite simply ... not a particularly good actor.

His roster of roles tells us that he was not playing main roles but rather mostly valets, but this alone does not explain his conspicuous absence as, historically, particularly good portrayals of more minor roles were still lauded in the press, if to a lesser degree. A document found in his personal archives, however, reveals he was subject to rather unique restrictions when it came to the roles he could play—restrictions whose nature was to make him as unworthy of note as possible.

Essentially, by official order, Bellemont was forbidden from appearing at all when the troupe performed at court, which has interesting political implications as it symbolically stripped him of status, though he nonetheless remained a demonstrably a contributing member of the company. Additionally, even under regular conditions, he was not to be entrusted with any important roles unless there was absolutely no other option.

Poor Monsieur Bellemont, indeed.

Challenging 'Known' Histories

The CF as an institution is a cultural touchstone, profoundly linked to France's national cultural identity; this iconic status facilitates the erasure of complex and contradictory narratives which are reflective of the realities of a dynamic political and artistic organization, in favour of those matching the dominant (projected) image of the institution. In addition to new revelations, the register data also provides a lens through which to re-evaluate 'known' truths.

Molière: popular but not profitable

Sometimes called the *Maison de Molière*, the CF has become, in the eyes of many, near synonymous with its most celebrated playwright; a perception which the institution itself does nothing to counter-indicate—his bust in its place of pride, armchair preserved under glass, and annual celebration of his birth rather point to the contrary.

While Molière was undeniably, the CF's most popular author. Performances of his plays comprising an average of 17% of all performances between 1680 and 1793 and with a total of 12, 083 performances of his plays during that period, no other author comes close to Molière's popularity; the works of Dancourt, the next most popular author, were comparatively only performed 5785 times.

However, the notion that Molière was by any stretch the CF's most *profitable* author is a complete misconception. Molière sold tickets, sure, but not at premium prices. Even removing all free performances and discounting authors whose works were performed fewer than ten times, Molière does not even crack the top 150 most profitable authors (and there are fewer than 200). To give a sense of scale, an evening during the course of which one of his plays was performed brought it an average of ~664 livres; his fellow iconic playwright Voltaire's average is ~1732.

This notable statistical departure from the collective imaginings surrounding Molière highlights the sorts of distortions born of the CF's dual status as an institution—with a concrete financial agenda— and a cultural icon.

Partie de Chasse: rethinking censorship

Though less well known than the works of Moliere, Charles Collé's play *Partie de Chasse d'Henri IV* likewise provides an example of the institution as a symbol being at odds with the CF as an artistic body.

The receipts registers are complete in that they cover all performances at the Paris theatres, but they do not record the plays performed by the troupe when they had engagements in the country, at the houses of wealthy nobility, or at court. The casting registers, however, do. Charles Collé's *Partie de Chasse d'Henri IV* is among the most popular plays performed outside of the regular venues— though still by the actors of the Comédie Française—and, startlingly, the records show that it was regularly performed more than eight years before its official (and crucially, public) début, which had been delayed (censored) by the direct intervention of Louis XV's war council.

The play appears, taken out of context, to be fairly innocuous: a simple story of Henri IV getting lost on a hunting expedition, being found by a peasant who invites the king (posing as a lowly officer) home for dinner, where he shows towards the peasants, even after they discover his true identity, “a jovial and democratic attitude”. The play ends with the King gifting a large dowry to two pairs of lovers soon to be married. While it is claimed that Collé did not intend for the play to be politically subversive, it nonetheless had a complicated history with censorship. Though the reason given was that it was undignified for a king to be portrayed “*en désabillé*”, it is more widely accepted that its censorship was an attempt to avoid the negative comparisons that could be drawn between the current (widely unpopular) reign, and that of Henri IV, who was known for his democratic concern for the welfare of all of his subjects; the democratic spirit of the play aligned perfectly with the societal trends of the time, but was equally sorely lacking under the regime of Louis XV.

This ban remained in place for 12 years, only being lifted following the death of Louis XV, after which point it was frequently performed, becoming especially popular during the revolution, where its orléanist leanings and representation of a democratic leader were no doubt appreciated.

Given this complex relationship with the Crown, the performances of *Partie de Chasse* that occurred while the ban was still in place are politically significant, particularly in light of the fact that they were in front of important nobility— including, on one occasion, the King of Denmark— and more than once at Versailles, in the presence of the Dauphin.

These early performances of *Partie de Chasse* at the apparent behest of the very régime which prohibited it being disseminated to the larger public challenge our contemporary interpretation of censorship, highlighting the friction between the CF's artistic and political histories. We may never be sure of how to interpret these performances, but it is certain that we would have known nothing of them at all were it not for the juxtaposition of data sources.

Challenges and Future Directions

DH work comes with interesting challenges with respect to knowledge transmission. You can never assume that an audience has both domain expertise and technical know-how, and the

detail oriented and subjective tendencies of 'traditional' humanities are in constant conflict with computation's love of abstraction and (at least the premise of) objectivity.

In our case, we have found these tensions weigh most heavily on our minds when it comes to

- 1) creating data interfaces
- 2) striking a balance between the objective and the affective.

Mediation and Transparency

The interface issue is twofold.

Firstly, data interfaces are [inherently interpretive, despite the seeming of objectivity leant to them by their ties to computation](#). There is an underlying narrative—an implicit rhetoric—to each interface; consciously or not, the creator(s) at some point decided which measurements and points of entry into the data were important, and which were not. This approach is fundamentally at odds with the CFRP's core tenant of valorizing plurality and narrative multiplicity, so we are faced with the question: in engaging in our own form of historical storytelling, how can we best communicate these revitalized narratives while avoiding replicating the monumentalist patterns we set out to disrupt? In interface terms, how can we provide access to the data in a way which, true to the notion of assemblage, does not impose any hierarchy or fixed entry point, while still creating something *usable*?

Part two of the problem comes back to the notion of 'trajectory'. Humanities data is highly contextual; behind every datapoint is a collection of circumstances, a series of (subjective, if informed) decisions, and a degree of uncertainty. Yet, as Johanna Drucker explains, these complexities are rarely reflected in 'typical' data visualizations, since they are "*coming from a place in which engineering values dominat[e] their approach to design*" and as such, they tend to favour abstraction and high level analyses of trends which obfuscate nuance and singularity. What's more, the erasure of the way in which the data was treated and transformed in order to fit into the paradigm of visualization calqued from engineering is highly problematic as "*rendering observation (the act of creating a statistical, empirical, or subjective account or image) as if it were the same as the phenomena observed collapses the critical distance between the phenomenal world and its interpretation, undoing the basis of interpretation on which humanistic knowledge production is based*", which completely dovetails with the issue of implicit storytelling.

As a solution, Drucker proposes to add more levels of mediation, duplicating and mutating visualization channels to demarcate nuance. Unfortunately, this can very quickly yield an unreadable result.

In line with Drucker, design theorist [Anthony Masure](#) argues that "the paradox is that the products of digital humanities projects are rarely reflective, in their design, of [the] epistemological tensions [between the intrinsic rationality of formal programming languages and

the inherent uncertainty of (traditional) humanities]”, but conversely goes on to suggest a model that highlights this friction and more accurately represents the complex realities data through *reduced* mediation. Per Measure, humanities interfaces should aim for increased transparency and fewer layers of abstraction. This model, however, which supposes a more direct manipulation of the data, comes with its own set of problems; notably it requires a higher level of technical proficiency, and relies on the ability of the user to explicitly transform their questions to fit computational logics, and to understand the implications of that process—more flexible than Drucker’s approach, perhaps, but no less prone to potential misinterpretation.

The existing CFRP interfaces fall prey to both these issues. Nearly all of the tools introduce the data by way of authors and plays. The [cross-tab browser](#) imposes, from the start, a focus on the most successful authors. Neither the [feux graph](#) nor the [discovery tool](#), though they somewhat circumvent hierarchies, are particularly good at highlighting singularity and nuance, falling back on aggregations. We have also tried variations of both solutions. The additional visual channels worked to some degree, but ended up requiring the addition of ample contextual help. While some people took to the use of more direct database queries, they were the minority. Striking a balance between the two is still a work in progress.

The Affective and the Objective

As D’Ignazio and Klein point out, there exists a [false binary between emotion and rationality](#). As a project that exists at the crossroads of the objective and the affective—data driven yet anchored in an intrinsically emotional theatrical context—the CFRP is well placed to challenge it. In the context of our explorations, their relationship has not been conflictual so much as reciprocal. Bellecour’s incredible work ethic as told by the statistics, for example, takes on an added level of meaning when examined alongside a slew of letters detailing his near constant illness, which testify to the enormous physical toll of the work. Conversely, while scholars tell us that Clairon was famous, the concrete magnitude of the skew in the press throws her hitherto abstract celebrity into new relief.

The difficulty lies in the harmonization of any number of micro level affective artifacts strewn throughout the data with the project’s macro level statistical approach. How can we highlight these singular human histories without falling into a positivist reading of the data? How can we consistently integrate them with data-driven modes of knowledge transmission? And the inverse?

Some first steps have been made in this direction through recent research-creation seminars, wherein unique artistic expressions grew from data interrogations, but we are constantly looking for new ways to humanize and situate the project data while still maintaining the focus on narrative multiplicity that is at its core.

Final Reflections

Since 2009, the Comédie-Française Registers Project has leveraged diverse technologies to present a modern re-interrogation and revitalization of French theatrical history as it relates to the CF, without, however, limiting itself to a single 'correct' approach. While the project has evolved in tandem with developments in cultural history research and in digital humanities, at its core, it remains anchored in the study of the performative and ephemeral aspects of theatre. Ultimately, the CFRP aims not only to make the data underlying it more accessible, but to make it come alive!

Given the project's focus on the deconstruction and reevaluation of monumental history made possible via the combination and confrontation of a rich and diverse array of digitally transformed archival sources, concerns around data transparency remain at the forefront; our approach centers reflections around data contextualization, particularly as related to interfaces and their capacity to communicate context in light of the conflicting humanistic and computational logics inherent to their design. The project additionally seeks to explore new data exploration and exploitation techniques, which privilege singular narratives frequently overlooked by high level aggregations, and the fundamentally human stories told by qualitative sources: letters, administrative records, and register annotations.

A collection of meta traces, the project's data viewed holistically constitutes not only a new object of study but a paradoxically concrete representation of the ephemeral—of unique performances, the artistic efforts of a plurality of actors, moments in time—which we do not look to recapture or reconstruct but rather to contrast with our theories, interpretations, and imaginings.