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Michael Almereyda's Hamlet in the Postmodern Existential Vacuum

The article focuses on Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* as a representative example of postmodern cinema. Moreover, placing his characters in the New York of 2000, the film-maker not only makes the play relevant to modern audience but also introduces a number of new problems: the relationships between a human being and the new technologies as well as between abusive parents and rebellious children. Other issues raised in the article are: problems of adaptation, the fidelity to the original text, conventions of postmodern film and media as 'extensions' of man.

“hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to Nature; to show Virtue her own feature, Scorn her own image,
and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (Hamlet, III.ii.25-29)

In his article *A Note on the Necessity of Shakespeare* David Walsh (2) points out that one of the reasons of *Hamlet's* popularity is the sheer range of themes and problems treated by Shakespeare in the tragedy:

love and hate, in a multitude of forms; the fear of death, the wish for death, death itself, primal psychological relations - between parents and children, between siblings. In passing, there is a devastating critique of a social order which oozes abuse of power, corruption and dishonesty from every pore. The problems of appearance and reality, madness and sanity, passion and reason, free will and determinism are other important issues which add to *Hamlet's* timelessness.

Since the first days of the film era Shakespearian plays have attracted many film-makers, due to the expressivity of narrative and the openness of interpretation determined by the metaphoricity of his texts. For some film-makers Shakespeare is a test of their artistic maturity. Others, fascinated by the archetypical themes considered by the Bard in his plays, exploit film as a medium which enables the broadest possible audience to experience Shakespeare for the first time. Who knows maybe if Shakespeare were writing now, he would become a film-maker himself.

Every time when a new Shakespearian film adaptation is released, both the general public and the academic circles are virtually divided into two 'camps': those who

enthusiastically praise it and those who violently attack it. It goes without saying that Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* is not an exception.

One of the important issues raised by both film and literature critics in relation to adaptation is the so-called 'fidelity' issue - how both the original text as well as the spirit and the ideology of the literary work are transferred to the screen. As it concerns this issue, I completely share Brian McFarlane's opinion (1996: 8-9):

There will often be a distinction between being faithful to the 'letter', an approach which the more sophisticated writer may suggest is no way to ensure a 'successful' adaptation, and to the 'spirit' or 'essence' of the work. The latter is of course very much difficult to determine since it involves not merely a parallelism between novel and film but between two or more readings of a novel, since any given film version is able only to aim at reproducing the film-maker's reading of the original and to hope that it will coincide with that of many other readers/viewers. Since such coincidence is unlikely, the fidelity approach seems a doomed enterprise and fidelity criticism unilluminating.

Some writers have proposed strategies which seek to categorize adaptations so that fidelity to the original loses some of its privileged position. Geoffrey Wagner (1975: 222-26) suggests three possible categories which are open to a film-maker and to a critic assessing his adaptation: (a) 'trasposition', "in which a novel is given directly on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference" ; (b) 'commentary', "where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect. . . . when there has been a different intention on the part of the film-maker, rather than infidelity or outright violation" ; and (c) 'analogy', "which must represent a fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art." Dudley Andrew (1999: 454-55) also reduces the modes of relation between the film and its source novel to three which correspond roughly (but in reverse order of adherence to the original) to Wagner's categories: 'borrowing', 'intersecting', and 'transforming'. Though these categories refer first of all to

novel, they can be equally applied to drama as both genres share most of the basic narrative strategies.

On the basis of the above-mentioned taxonomies Almereyda's *Hamlet* can be considered to be a 'commentary' or 'intersecting', though Almereyda himself claims (2000: xii) that his version is “an attempt at Hamlet - not so much a sketch but a collage, a patchwork of intuitions, images and ideas.” Moreover, in the end credits he modestly accentuates his intention, making a statement that his material is taken 'from the play by William Shakespeare.'

By setting the film deep in the heart of a very real and very modern steel and concrete American jungle like New York City, which is infused with the relics of the mass media and cold capitalistic consumerism, Almereyda powerfully enhances for the audience the sense of the desolation of his characters that result from urban isolation of postmodern society. The film itself, being not only a criticism but also a product of postmodern culture, successfully relies on the conventions of postmodern cinema. As Cristina Degli-Esposti states (1998: 4-6): “It [any postmodern film/text] uses strategies of disruption like self-reflexivity, intertextuality, bricolage, multiplicity, and simulation through parody and pastiche.” She emphasizes the importance of “memory, the archival site of the past, and intertextuality” which work together “to reproduce a collective recollection of the past into the present, calling into question the attention/participation of the spectator.” Only when the spectatorial competence is strong, “then the reinforcement and intertextuality develop into a hypertext able to produce a true pleasure of recognition.” From this point of view, Almereyda's film is a postmodern exploration of interpenetrating

textualities and a puzzle of encoded references where Shakespeare is the key and a signifier of art, history and culture in general.

The citations used by Almereyda can be subdivided in three groups:

1) The idea of the setting in a corrupt corporative world (but today's ruling empires are undeniably not regal or political, but rather technological and corporate) is borrowed from Akira Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well* (a Japan tragedy) and Aki Kaurismaki's *Hamlet Goes Business* (a Finnish slapstick comedy), though unlike Almereyda's version, the above-mentioned ones do not exploit Shakespearian text; in other words, they are 'analogies'/'borrowings'.

2) Almereyda, making his Hamlet an amateur filmmaker, indulges in Dziga Vertov's original idea of a man with a movie camera (from the eponymous 1929 experimental film), and thus the film constructs its own hypertext, using both metacinematic and self-reflective forms.

3) The film-maker acknowledges the significancy of the previous experiences of *Hamlet's* filmic transpositions, combining the legacy of our past with the popular experience of today. Thus, this group includes some citations referring to previous *Hamlet* films: Claudius tears up the newspaper with Fortinbras' portrait (Derek Jacobi in Branagh's film does it with the written message brought by the ambassadors - I.ii); Gertrude in her sexy underwear in bed with Claudius, both in a very amorous mood, welcome Rosencrantz/Guildenstern on the phone (III.i) (in Richardson's version they welcome Polonius and the ambassadors in the same way (I.ii)), Yorick's skull (John Gielgud's recorded theatre performance) appears not in the Gravediggers' scene but on the screen of Hamlet's TV-set while he is preparing a film version of the Mousetrap play/film; the yellow rubber duck which Ophelia has as one of Hamlet's remembrances borrowed from Aki Kaurismaki's film; Ophelia's yell is similar to Kate Winslet's who plays Ophelia

in Branagh's version, though it is more a yell of protest, challenge and rebel than sorrow and despair; the close-up of Claudius' hand ("What if this cursed hand" - III.iii.43 - from Olivier's film); Gertrude slaps Hamlet on the face reacting to his impudent "would it were not so, you are my mother-III.iv.16) as Glenn Close as Gertrude does in Zeffereilli's version); in the same Closet Scene (III.iv) Hamlet presses her face against the mirror door of the wardrobe (Branagh treats Ophelia in a similar way in the Nunnery Scene (III.i)), Hamlet kisses Claudius on the lips in the scene in which he sends Hamlet to England after the murder of Polonius (IV.iii.49 - "and so, my mother" - the citation from Branagh's *Hamlet*); in the finale scene (V.ii) Gertrude takes the poisoned drink knowingly (borrowed from Olivier's version).

Alongside with the citations, forming an intellectual game of intertextuality, Almereyda heavily relies on the symbolism and imagery of contemporary electronic society: security cameras, phones, fax and answering machines, intercoms, computers, video and television literary interfere the frame, giving a limited space to the characters.

Almereyda's *Hamlet* is not just a tribute to the fashion on modernized Shakespeare. Since the first shots it presents a hybrid of the present, the future and the past, the hybrid which releases a new energy and gives the audience insight into new layers of meanings and emotions: the present - as it is set in a modern New York with its familiar skyscrapers and yellow taxis; the future - the palette of cold neon blue and green, disturbing environmental noises and a low angle shot (most probably taken from a car by Hamlet for his video diary) makes Manhattan look slightly futuristic, thrilling and threatening; and finally the past - as the plot of the story is introduced by four intertitles, a typical attribute of silent film. We see Hamlet first on the street from his back, but we never can identify him unless we use the potential of video medium (a medium which, using McLuhan's metaphor (1995: 46), is the 'extention' of Hamlet's body by means of which the Prince both tries to compensate his trauma and to conceptualize the

surrounding world), or, in other words, rewind the film in order to catch his image again as he is disappearing in a crowd of New Yorkers dwelling on the fields of battles where corporative bosses make their 'wars'.

Having severely cut Shakespearian original text in order to meet the coventions of a typical Hollywood two-hour film, Almereyda made just few scene rearrangements and, starting the film with Hamlet's soliloquy "I have of late" (II.ii.315-30), the film-maker both sets the mood and announces the main problems of the tragedy. So, Hamlet is on the screen, slightly tipsy, looking in the camera through a glass and reflecting on the nature of man. What irony is felt in his words underscored by the irony of visual images: pictures with a skeleton of a man standing next to a dinosaur's skeleton, a fresca, a military aircraft, a target for its missile and the follow-up explosion illustrate "the beauty of the world!" , "the paragon of animals!" is contrasted with a cartoon dragon with its long tongue out, preceeding another explosion. In the next shots the viewer finally meets the real Hamlet (but which of the two is the real one?), his distorted image observing himself on the screen: "and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" says the video-taped Hamlet, moving his fingers if as he had some dust on them, sharing his scepticism and nihilism with the screened Hamlet. The clips in this video sequence represent a mixture of the past and the present which signifies history and high technology, art and pop-culture as well as perfectly illustrates Hamlet's disillusionment, his attempts to define modern man's system of values and not to lose his identity in this search.

During the next sequence all the other main characters are introduced to the audience: Claudius in predatory corporatist preening, Gertrude in shameless infidelity, Polonius in syncophatic endorsement, Ophelia in demanding neediness, Laertes in dubious over-fraternity. In this scene (as in the majority of the others) Hamlet acts as an

observer, he is literary excluded from the group, practically falling out of the screen frame. Thus, Almereyda draws the viewers' attention to another new theme of his film: rebellious children/abusive fathers (and father-figures in case of Claudius). Both Hamlet and Ophelia are suffering from abuse of different degrees, and the situation does not depend on Hamlet's indecisiveness or Ophelia's clingy nature as selfish parents are always wrecking their children's lives in Shakespeare's plays. But making "a generational axe to grind" (Fuchs,1), the film-maker intensifies Shakespearian problem of miscommunication and moral (and in Hamlet's case physical) abuse.

When, after the press conference (I.ii) the royal couple is outside, going to their posh limousine, Gertrude and then Claudius make the first (and the last) attempt to talk with their moody and fragmented son, who in his knitted cap, which gives him a look that confers a false sense of invisibility and thus invincibility, looks even younger [Ethan Hawke is 29] and extremely vulnerable. "Seems, Madam! nay, it is; I know not 'seems'," (I.ii.76) responds he, taking off his darkened glasses and looking straight into his mother's shameless eyes. This penetrating look makes her feel uncomfortable, and she turns to Claudius for help. "Tis sweet and commendable in your nature..." (I.ii.87) starts her new husband, catching her blow, showing himself as an excellent top manager promoting team work and coaching strategy, but on the word "stubbornness" (I.ii.94) he loses his self-control and grabs Hamlet's elbow: this guy is a problem, both for him and his wife. After the scene in Polonius' house (I.iii) in which Polonius instructs his children how to live, Almereyda inserts another brilliant scene which compliments Shakespeare: the elegant couple and their duckling Hamlet are shown in the car, going most probably to another press conference. The scene, in which nobody utters a word, is underscored by

Hamlet's musical theme played in low register, reflecting his heavy thoughts and disgust while seeing Gertrude and Claudius, who are comfortable in their affluence, content in their compromises and annoyed as much as disturbed by Hamlet's 'stubbornness'. Displaying their faces in front of numerous cameramen, they ignore Hamlet entirely. Thus, Almereyda's insertion brightly demonstrates Gertrude/Claudius' preoccupation with publicity and their parental neglect. And the culmination of the violent physical abuse is the scene in the laundry (IV.iii) in which Claudius is interrogating Hamlet about Polonius' dead body. In his heavy blow Claudius puts all his hate and inability to deal with the alienated and rebellious adult child.

But what to expect from Claudius who knows that just some hours ago Hamlet was going to kill him, if even the Ghost, Hamlet's real father, is constantly abusing him? "What, look'd he frowningly?" (I.ii.227) Not clear what Hamlet is afraid more - of the Ghost as a possible messenger of the Hell or of his real authoritative father - "Pity me not" (I.v.5) sounds like "Shut up and listen!" And some shots later, with the words "Thy knotted and combined locks to part" (I.v.17), he takes Hamlet's head in his hands, presses his shoulders, and through clenched teeth hisses the truth to his almost crashed son. His "Remember me!" is an order, not a request, of the restless spirit. Only at the end of this sequence the Ghost embraces Hamlet: his natural love to the son, which was most probably not so often demonstrated when he was alive, is unmasked.

Horatio together with his female companion Marcella (a substitute for Shakespearian Marcello) acts in this story more as an informant than a friend. Even their first meeting is not accompanied by a natural hand-shaking, and furthermore, their alienation is emphasized by appropriate textual cuts. Only Rosencranz and Guildenstern

are ready to demonstrate their 'genuine' friendship: these fellows are quite sure that they are doing the right thing spying their friend for the King. "We think not... We think not so, my Lord." (II.ii.260) shouts Rosencranz to Hamlet, trying to be heard among the noises of the music in the scene located in a bar. Making this character to repeat the same phrase, Almereyda puts a stress on the light-mindedness and general attitude to life of these hollow 'twins'.

Hamlet, but it is not Almereyda's innovation, also fails to find comfort in Ophelia's love, but Almereyda's Ophelia is another wretched creature who is experiencing another extreme of parental treatment: overprotectiveness. Her way to integrate her split identity (split long ago before the tragical events in her life - Hamlet's rejection and Father's death) is making photos, which can be interpreted as an attempt to 'extend' her sexuality. Unlike the previous screened Ophelias (especially Olivier's with Jean Simmons), despite her youthfulness, Julia Stiles' Ophelia does not convey the image of a naive and obedient girl. She neither promises Polonius to obey him ("I shall obey, my lord." (I.iii.135)) nor gives him Hamlet's love-letter in "in her duty and obedience" (II.ii) Moreover, when Polonius (II.ii), at her presence, is reading it to Claudius and Gertrude while they dispose themselves by an indoor swimming pool, she commits an imaginary suicide, jumping in the pool. In this way not only her drowning has been prefigured but also her motivation is slightly modified, turning her into another rebellious child of this story. Her transition to madness already starts in the Nunnery Scene (III.i) when, while kissing her, Hamlet discovers the microphone attached to her body by Polonius. She is crashed: her face is twisting and her body is almost collapsing. She starts to die while burning Hamlet's picture in her photo studio, and this mental death is

accelerated by Hamlet's messages (the continuation of the Nunnery Scene) left by him on her answering machine.

In this way devices which stand for the new technologies are intertwined with the human tragedy. But still the central device for understanding the atmosphere of modern estrangement is Hamlet's camera - the 'extension' of his body, senses and consciousness. His video making is a survival strategy in the postmodern existential vacuum which lacks parental and fellow creatures' love. McLuhan (1999: 43-55) interprets the old Greek myth of Narcissus in a new original way: extending himself in his own reflection, Narcissus becomes a closed system.

Principle of numbness comes into play with electric technology, as with any other. We have to numb our central nervous system when it is extended and exposed, or we will die. Thus the age of anxiety and of electronic media is also the age of the unconscious and of apathy. . . . The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses.

Given the free floating narcissism, Hamlet is appropriately image-haunted. It is a movie where it always seems ("seems, Madam?") to be Halloween. With his video camera, one of the DIY media, he not only conceptualizes himself but also tries to compete with Claudius' (and by the way with his father's) world in which corporate media continue to raise the standards of technical perfection, suppressing creativity for sake of the demands of mass consumerism.

Traditionally Hamlet's soliloquy "To be or not to be" (III.i.53-87) is considered to be central for understanding his character. Hamlet contemplates his life options in the section "Action" of a video shop, accompanied by some video images of Eric Draven from Crow Part 2, who also contemplates one of his own vengeful murders (this sequel is all about burdens, history, consumption, and youthful angst, exactly the issues troubling Hamlet). Unlike Draven's options, Hamlet's are very limited: he can choose between suicide or homicide. At the same time Almercyda's Hamlet is the only one among all

screened Hamlets who goes to kill Claudius before the Mousetrap (immediately after a talk with Polonius, with the words “except my life” (II.ii.225) Hamlet is storming into Claudius' office, but the King's throne, the 'Boss' airmchair , is empty...). But when the right moment arrives, he CAN'T do it: the action looks so easy only on the screen. And the rearrangements in another soliloquy “How All Occasions” (IV.iv.42) (Shakespeare - “I have cause, and will, and strength, and means To do 't.” Almereyda - “I have cause, and means, and strength, and will To do 't.”): Hamlet has no will to follow his Father's order.

Almereyda himself considers the best and most representative place of the film to be the Mousetrap with the image of the globe which functions as a triple symbol: 1) our planet; 2) globalization; and 3) Shakespearian theatre. He points out (Fuchs, 1) that the idea to replace the play with the video film exactly “answers what Shakespeare called for in the play (film within the film), in that a mirror is being held up to nature, the audience of the movie is watching an audience watch a movie.” “The very act of looking - from both sides of the screen - has become a central theme of postmodern films.”

Thus, in his postmodern 'collage' Almereyda talks with the audience about the postmodern world which is questioned both by Hamlet and by the viewers. All of us seem (“ seems, Madam?”) to be trapped in our busy, noisy, restless modern lives. And Hamlet is becoming relevant to us not because we share the same status and/or family situation but because we, as human beings, also try to find answers to the same questions. “ Who's there?” shouts Bernardo anxiously on the ramparts, and this first question of Hamlet's becomes “ the large ontological question of a play that contains more questions than any other play in our tragic tradition.” (Berlin 1981: 65)

One of the insertions in the film suggests for man a possible way out from his existential vacuum, and though a Buddhist monk preaches the life philosophy which is hardly comprehended by a modern Western man, it is worth at least thinking about his words:

We have the word 'to be'. But what I propose is the word 'to inter-be'... 'inter-be' because it's not possible to be alone, to be by yourself. You need other people in order to be, you need their beings, not only you need a father, mother, but also uncle or brother, sister, society, but you also need sunshine, river, air, trees, birds, elephants and so on.... And therefore, to be means to inter-be.

We know the finale of Hamlet, even of such a contemporary one who reads Mayakovsky and admires Che Guevara, Nietzsche and Baudelaire (the portraits of which can be seen above his video and computer): “ the rest is silence.” But his story will be told again and again by new film-makers and theatre directors, these modern Horatios, for today's and future generations, helping them to understand the world and themselves.

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