

ELSIE WALKER

A “Harsh World” of Soundbite Shakespeare:

Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000)

There has been an explosion of Shakespearean films since the mid-1990s: Richard Loncraine’s *Richard III* (1995), Oliver Parker’s *Othello* (1995), Adrian Noble’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1996), Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1997), Michael Hoffman’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1999), Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet* (1997) and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (2000), Julie Taymor’s *Titus* (2000) and Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000) to name a few. Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray attribute this phenomenon in part to *fin-de-siècle* nostalgia.¹ Some of these adaptations of ‘classic’ works are an antidote for the anxieties of the present: thus, many of the films (such as Hoffman’s *Dream*, Kenneth Branagh’s films) take place in an unspecified, romanticised past. However Luhrmann’s

Romeo + Juliet and Almereyda's *Hamlet* both feature a modern mise-en-scène, and they are more self-conscious re-evaluations of and dialogues with the past in the light of the present.²

In Luhrmann's film, there is a central conflict between postmodernism and Romanticism. Luhrmann's setting for *Romeo + Juliet* is an antagonistic, voracious city in which different cultures, texts, architectures, and personalities clash and jostle for supremacy. Romantic, metaphysical absolutes, like the love Romeo and Juliet seek to create and preserve, can not endure in this cinematic world. There is seemingly no possibility of an absolute, enduring 'positive' to counteract all the 'negatives' Luhrmann presents in his collage city of gangs, drugs, violence, oppressive media, intergenerational conflict, warring corporate owners, faithlessness, fragmentation, chaos and despair.³ Within Almereyda's *Hamlet* there is a similar tension: Shakespeare's words embody the kind of idealism and integrity that is impermissible or unbelievable in a broken, postmodern world. There is some room for Romanticism (without irony) in Luhrmann's modern and 'mythical', contemporary but stylised mise-en-scène. In Almereyda's more mundane, resolutely 'unpoetic', specifically modern-Manhattan setting, Romantic idealism is much more tentatively expressed.

The only 'grand narrative' in Almereyda's film is the homogenising impulse of the consumer society of late capitalism. This homogenising impulse is a paradoxical aspect of what Linda Hutcheon calls "the postmodern phenomenon" in which all other grand narratives or totalising/homogenising systems are questioned, or entirely undermined.⁴ Also, Almereyda's film of sequentially

ordered scenes is disrupted by a dense network of interconnections and intertexts so it presents, in Hutcheon's words, the "paradoxes of continuity and disconnection, of totalising interpretation and the impossibility of final meaning."⁵ Indeed Almereyda's film could be a prototype for a postmodern work as described by Hutcheon. The film is a manifestation of the heterogeneity, irreconcilable fragmentation, depersonalisation, and the rejection of the "real" (whether that be an original text, a true statement, an unmediated image⁶) that we have come to associate with postmodernism. But, within Almereyda's decidedly postmodern, "dingy and destructible" film, Shakespeare's words are a 'grand narrative' of Romantic idealism, his words encapsulate the power of individual expression that Hamlet (Ethan Hawke) desires to reclaim.⁷ Almereyda eschewed the "lavish production values" of previous *Hamlet* productions (such as Kenneth Branagh's film) because he felt that "Shakespeare's language...is lavish enough", that is, he pits the subtlety and expressiveness of Shakespeare's text in contradistinction to his corporate, cluttered, 'nothing new' mise-en-scène.⁸ Although all the Shakespeare films mentioned (excepting Branagh's *Hamlet*) use pared-down texts, Almereyda's script is the most cut-down and fractured of them all, highlighting the difficulty of preserving the idealism embedded in that text.

Almereyda sets *Hamlet* in a "postliterate", late capitalist world in which "faceless" or depersonalised masters (such as the mannequin-like Kyle MacLachlan as Claudius, head of Denmark Corporation) use economic strategies to constrain others without needing to impose their speech.⁹ The speeches of this film are paired down for ruthless efficiency and the act of speaking Shakespeare's

lines, in a world where words are consistently drowned out, seems inordinately difficult (more difficult than killing a king). Instead of separating action from speech as Hamlet does (his failure to act versus his verbal virtuosity), Almereyda discusses Shakespeare's lines themselves as action-packed, attempting to defend the power of Shakespeare's words, even in a "postliterate" world. In the world that Almereyda presents, where speeches are repeatedly cut short or visually displaced/dominated by corporate imagery, Hamlet's emotional eloquence, his 'poetry' has subversive potential. But the meanings of Shakespeare's words are often sent-up or off-set by contradictory images—when Hamlet speaks of "the beauty of the world" we see a jet fighter plane, when he speaks of "man" as the "paragon of animals" we see a cartoon close-up on a monster's mouth.

I shall consider how Almereyda's film points to what it cannot say. First, I will focus on the intertextual form of the film—Almereyda borrows from many previous adaptations of Shakespeare, pointing to the difficulty as well as the enduring importance of adapting the overly-familiar *Hamlet*. I will then focus on the repression of individual expression, emphasised in Almereyda's corporate, claustrophobic mise-en-scène, the rhythmic rapidity of the film, the pared-down text and broken speeches, and the way Almereyda frames individual characters so their bodies and faces are seldom wholly seen (even when they are speaking). Finally I argue that, paradoxically, the director both seems to confirm and critique the notion that film itself is antagonistic to the rhythm and subject matter of Shakespeare's verse. There is tension between the typically postmodern form of the film and Almereyda/Hawke/Hamlet's desire to deliver Shakespeare's words in

an original way, without a sense of loss, irony, or embarrassment—this tension remains unresolved at the end of the film.

Almeryda's *Hamlet* includes a multiplicity of popular quotations and referents: excerpts from cult films *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Crow II*, ubiquitous advertising and logos which explicitly foreground the commodity fetishism of late capitalism and what Frederick Jameson calls the extreme, insidiously threatening “superficiality” of a postmodern world.¹⁰ Such ‘popular’ elements are combined with ‘high culture’ allusions (references to past, canonised performances of the canonised *Hamlet*), and avant-garde film ‘conventions’ (Almeryda's avant-garde camerawork is inspired by the likes of Jean-Luc Godard, Wim Wenders, Ingmar Bergman, and David Lynch).¹¹

As John Collick writes, “Most people have been brought up to equate Shakespeare with great British actresses and actors dressed in period costumes and speaking in mellifluous accents.”¹² Laurence Olivier's and Kenneth Branagh's films of *Hamlet* are mostly associated with the British Shakespeare of the theatre (the Old Vic associated with Olivier and the RSC with Branagh), insofar as their films grew from stage productions and “from the iconography of the classical British acting fraternity.”¹³ Conversely, Almeryda and Ethan Hawke worked collaboratively to construct a vision in response to other Shakespeare *films*, and in relation to the wider Hollywood and European arthouse ‘intertexts’. Hawke builds on his trademark gen-x screen persona: as Hamlet he evokes, in particular, his break-through role in *Dead Poet's Society* (1989)—in that film his character moves from inertia and compromise, from subjugation and polite silence to

improvising a speech that surprises everyone, a speech about the pain of admitting that there is no safety in “truth” (“like a blanket that’ll never be big enough”).

Like Leonardo DiCaprio who played Romeo in Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1997), Hawke was inspired by figures like James Dean and Kurt Cobain in his performance. He was also influenced by the Peter Brook version of *King Lear* (1971) starring Paul Scofield, aiming for a kind of simplicity and directness over “histrionics”.¹⁴ Inspired by Jan Kott’s *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (Peter Brook’s chief critical inspiration for his stage and film version of *Lear*), both Hawke and Almereyda speak with urgency about the need to recontextualise *Hamlet* in terms of contemporary social problems.

The heterogeneity of Almereyda’s *Hamlet* does not mask some underlying, hidden unity—this will be unsatisfying for those in search of “What Happens in *Hamlet*” in final terms. Almereyda’s heterogeneous, intertextual film can be usefully considered in relation to the recent work of adaptation theorists. Recent discussions of filmic adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays have moved from “a moralistic discourse of fidelity and betrayal to a less judgmental discourse of intertextuality”¹⁵, deconstructing the hierarchy of original and copy.¹⁶ Where adaptation theorists once measured how filmmakers translate the meaning of a stable, definitive, original Shakespearean text, they now explore how different filmmakers “mean by” a given Shakespearean text, the process of ‘reactivating’ that text as a contemporary social event.¹⁷ Consequently, there is less emphasis on each film’s relative success as a ‘translation’ of a Shakespearean play from the stage to the screen than on how the adaptation works in filmic terms. Adaptations

are also now considered as part of an ongoing process of intertextual transformation, as Robert Stam puts it, “texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin.”¹⁸

Instead of searching for single meanings, or offering a ‘definitive’ *Hamlet*, Almereyda self-consciously offers a contribution to the anthology of different performances that is *Hamlet*, and to the wider, Shakespearean film intertext. As Almereyda says:

[T]here is no definitive *Hamlet*, there’s variance, different versions...it wasn’t published in Shakespeare’s lifetime. It’s an unruly play, an unwieldy play, part of the challenge and excitement about taking it on is that you have to make cuts. You have to decide what means the most...The way you can respect Shakespeare the most is not being too precious, not being too reverent because these plays were always done as popular entertainment.¹⁹

Taking his cue from Orson Welles’ 1948 “rough charcoal sketch” *Macbeth* (filmed in 21 days on an RKO sound-stage with a shoe-string budget), Almereyda offers his two million dollar *Hamlet*, “not so much a sketch but a collage”, alluding to many other film interpretations of Shakespeare (in part homage, part parody). When Ophelia (Julia Stiles) contemplates suicide by an indoor pool, Almereyda shows her crash into the water in slow-motion, into a place of silence and escape from the prattling of Polonius (Bill Murray). Here, he alludes to the slow-motion underwater shots in the balcony scene of Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*—in Luhrmann’s film, underwater is the ultimate place of seclusion, baptismal purity, and, paradoxically, staying underwater equals *safety* from the ‘noise’ of the

outside world. Almereyda also pays homage to the end of Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* in the final moments of *Hamlet*: a moving montage recapitulation of the most intimate moments in each film is followed by a television newscaster's summary. In *Hamlet* an anchorman (PBS' Robert MacNeil) delivers an 'epilogue' concluding with the Player King's lines: "Our will and fates do so contrary run that our devices still are our overthrown; our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own." However, MacNeil's thoughts are not his own because he reads from a teleprompter (a close-up of the teleprompter is the final image of the film). Like Luhrmann, Almereyda explores the American media's association with glamour, superficiality, and corporate sponsorship.

The "remembrances" which Ophelia returns to Hamlet, letters and a yellow rubber duck, include another filmic allusion. The childish memento duck, funny and strangely affecting in context, is Almereyda's homage to Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki whose 1987 satire *Hamlet Goes Business* has Claudius "intent on overtaking the world market for rubber ducks."²⁰ There is also an oblique reference to Julie Taymor's Broadway version of Disney's *The Lion King*: Hamlet rushes from a limousine towards a sidewalk advertisement for the "best musical of the year", widely-known as derived from the story of *Hamlet*. Almereyda's camerawork, frequently circling whispering characters, evoking an atmosphere of claustrophobia and conspiracy whilst suggesting an invisible subjective presence (perhaps of Old Hamlet) surely derives from Olivier's camerawork in his film of *Hamlet* (1948). Almereyda also includes a clip of Sir John Gielgud delivering Hamlet's "alas poor Yorick" speech. In the context of Almereyda's film, the

image of Gielgud looks ancient, Romantic, choreographed. Almereyda offers part homage, part ridicule of a ‘classic’ performance. In Almereyda’s film it seems there simply isn’t time for the contemplation allowed Gielgud as Hamlet. The most famous image of Hamlet holding the skull (and the accompanying speech) is missed out in Hawke’s performance.²¹

The many quotations and allusions to other films in Almereyda’s *Hamlet* creates generic confusion, problematising any talk of original sources. Hamlet’s own *film* (instead of play) within Almereyda’s *Hamlet*, “The Mousetrap”, is a montage of different film clips. “The Mousetrap” opens with a rose unfurling with sped-up photography (as in Martin Scorsese’s *The Age of Innocence*), cuts to “Happy Days” television images of a boy with his parents, to cartoon images of the ear poisoning à la Monty Python, to porn clips, to a shot of an audience emphatically clapping, to images of death. In this climactic film within the film, words are dispensed with altogether. Almereyda makes an overly-familiar scene a ‘new’ experience by demanding that the audience ‘make’ the scene from the montage of cinematic quotations (the images evoke the text rather than the other way around). In all previously filmed adaptations of *Hamlet*, “the Mousetrap” takes place on a stage, whereas this “Mousetrap” can only be understood in filmic terms. Paradoxically, the sequence of quotations that is “the Mousetrap” in Almereyda’s film is therein original. This “Mousetrap”, made entirely of quotations from a pile of Blockbuster videos, is perhaps also a meditation on filming Shakespeare and on the filmmaking industry generally (especially in

Hollywood) as a network of endlessly recyclable material, an industry in which the same stories are told/adapted with regulated difference.

Hamlet is desperate to tell his own story but this proves enormously difficult. Well before he gives the “To be or not to be” speech, we see Hamlet watching himself on a laptop screen delivering the isolated line “To be or not to be” with a gun pointed to his head. He immediately rewinds the tape to listen to the line again, and again. The most famous Shakespearean ‘soundbite’ sounds trite, then haunting when it is repeated [video clip 1].²² In the world of this film, such famous lines and whole speeches apparently cannot be delivered ‘whole’ without a sense of embarrassment or loss (whether metaphysical or temporal). In Ethan Hawke’s words (explaining the exclusion of the “alas, poor Yorick” speech), “How do you find a skull in a modern day cemetery?”²³

In Jean-Luc Godard’s film of *King Lear* (1987) the word “nothing” is repeated in dialogue and captions, frequently interrupting/disrupting the narrative of the film, suggesting the difficulty of delivering the Shakespearean text at all. Ethan Hawke as Hamlet and Almereyda’s film seem haunted by the ghosts of Hamlet’s past, the struggle to breathe life into lines deadened through repetition (Gielgud, feeling similarly straitjacketed, wryly observed that in no other role does one hear members of the audience loudly whispering your lines).²⁴ One reviewer expressed relief that many of Hamlet’s lines are spoken in voiceover, “so we do not actually often have the potentially painful experience of watching Ethan Hawke in the act of speaking Hamlet’s lines.”²⁵ Hamlet’s lines are often delivered at ‘one remove’, either played in short films within the film or delivered in

voiceover. The delivery of his lines straight to camera seems uncomfortable in Almereyda's film in a way that it was not for Olivier, Branagh, or Innokenti Smokhtunovski as Hamlet in Grigori Kozintsev's film version (1964).

Almereyda films Hamlet walking through many aisles of Blockbuster action movies during Hawke's delivery of the "To be or not to be" speech. In comparison to the epic action movies displayed in the videostore, and Branagh's film of *Hamlet* shot in 70mm wide-screen format, this *Hamlet* is filmed mostly in close-up with a 16mm (comparatively low-definition) camera and includes homevideos made by Hamlet with a cheap 'pixelvision 2000' camera (recorded by Hawke himself, edited by Almereyda). The 70mm film, often used for 'epic' or 'spectacle-centred' features, has four times the definition of ordinary film, giving Branagh's *Hamlet* a particularly vivid style.²⁶ By contrast, Almereyda says that with pixelvision, "You have the sense that you're watching something intensely fragile and secret, on the threshold of visibility."²⁷ The 2000 pixels that give the now defunct Fisher-price pixelvision its name are oversized versions of the rectangular dots that make up the picture on a standard black-and-white television set. Almereyda's filming, unlike Branagh's wide format filming and long 'seamless' takes, is 'messy' with discontinuous editing, key lines spliced and repeated as in Godard's *Lear*. And Hamlet's pixelvision video diaries within the film are pictures of disintegration to match a broken text.

The rhythm of Almereyda's 'disintegrating' *Hamlet* is rapid – like Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* it is less than "two hours traffic". However, unlike Luhrmann, Almereyda does not balance rhythmically quick scenes with long

scenes of comparative stillness (like the balcony scene in *Romeo + Juliet*). The rapidity of Almereyda's production makes Claudius' words to Laertes, "Time be thine", seem particularly ironic. There is no time, no scope in this film for uninterrupted contemplation: telephones, fax machines, door buzzers, and a bombardment of visual information (surveillance cameras, television screens showing explosions and rapidly edited montages) cut short almost every key speech. The frequently whispered and cut-off dialogue, the absence of non-musical sounds except for voices which suggests spaces in a vacuum (also a feature of Almereyda's *Nadja* [1994]) evoke a world closing in.

Throughout *Hamlet*, Almereyda films claustrophobic spaces—Hamlet's apartment building is surrounded by taller skyscrapers in close proximity, there are no trees and open spaces, and characters, usually filmed indoors, are often surrounded by windows looking out onto yet more skyscrapers. After Laertes departs for France, Ophelia sits before a wall of windows—the cityscape 'closes in' around her whilst Polonius dictates her speech *and* thoughts concerning Hamlet. During Polonius' speech, Ophelia contemplates a diorama picture of a pre-Raphaelite woodland scene. The 'natural' setting and the Romanticism of the scene (evocative of the woodland setting where Jean Simmons dies in painterly pre-Raphaelite fashion in Olivier's *Hamlet*) appears quaint, like a fairy-tale vision in the steel city *mise-en-scène* of Almereyda's film. Polonius decisively takes the diorama, a childish and Romantic vision, out of Ophelia's hands.

Almereyda says "Global corporate power seems at least as treacherous as anything going on in the well-oiled feudal empire of Shakespeare's day....But I

intended the whole corporate media angle to go deeper than just that easy correspondence. It relates to the whole look and scope of the film.”²⁸ The frequent low-angle shots of skyscrapers convey the icy power of big business and the characters often seem small and insignificant in comparison (*American Psycho* production and set designers Gideon Ponte and Jeanne Develle again feature metallic surfaces, windows and sterile, cold spaces). Denmark becomes the multinational Denmark Corporation headquartered in New York City, Elsinore becomes a ritzy apartment hotel. These ‘translations’ are self-consciously ‘announced’ at the beginning of the film (close-up on the Denmark Corporation logo on a huge Panasonic screen in Times Square, close-up on the Elsinore Hotel sign) in the manner of Luhrmann’s billboard in *Romeo + Juliet* for “Prospero’s Finest Whiskey” or his use of Shakespeare’s words “sword” and “longsword” as gun trademarks [video clip 2]. In the first scene of *Hamlet*, when Claudius speaks of the threat from “Young Fortinbras” he holds up a USA today paper with the headline “Fortinbras makes bid on Denmark Corporation”—the moment echoes a shot in Baz Luhrmann’s film of Paris on the cover of *TIME* Magazine, or when the young Lucius in Julie Taymor’s film of *Titus* (1999) reads about the death of Caesar from a newspaper. In such moments, the directors call attention to their use of Shakespearean textual details in modern textual contexts, marking each film’s relationship to an ‘original’ text and, simultaneously, marking our temporal distance from the original circumstances in which Shakespeare’s words were understood.²⁹ In *Hamlet*, Claudius gleefully rips the USA today paper apart, prompting applause. The flutter of torn newspaper pages around him is perhaps a

reworking of the confetti which fills the room in Branagh's first scene for his *Hamlet*—in Branagh's film, the thick storm of confetti, punctuating the end of Claudius' speech, marks the end of the public scene in a carnivalesque and grand way. In Almereyda's film, the flutter of a single newspaper in slow-motion over a boardroom table is no less sinister, but it is a somehow colder, more desperate ceremonious gesture. The gorgeous costumes and ornate sets of Branagh's Elsinore palace become business suits and steel surfaces in Almereyda's production. The grand hall of gilt-framed mirrored doors in Branagh's *Hamlet* becomes a single mirrored wardrobe door in an expensive but seedy apartment hotel in Almereyda's film.³⁰

In his late capitalist *mise-en-scène* Almereyda features (and paid some companies for including) many trademarks and logos which reviewers mistook for genuine product placement: Hamlet's friends smoke Marlboro, Ophelia calls Movie-Fone (sponsored by the New York Times and American Express) to get away from it all (perhaps to engage with another movie, a different kind of story of her own choice), Claudius sports a Hugo Boss sports bag, Hamlet and friends drink the Danish Carlsberg beer. There is an exceptionally long list of credits at the end of the film, thanking companies who allowed their trademarks and products to be featured. Almereyda writes that "all the hectic distractions, brand names, announcements and ads that crowd our waking hours" are the bars of his Denmark prison, part of recognising "the frailty of spiritual values in a material world, and to get a whiff of something rotten in Denmark on the threshold of our self-congratulatory new century."³¹ As Hamlet rehearses his love poem for

Ophelia (in voiceover), he passes a “Key Food” store, and the line “but never doubt I love” is visually accompanied by large signs like “redpack tomatoes 59¢”, “rice \$4.99”. After the screening of “The Mousetrap” Hamlet excitedly hails a cab across the street from a shoestore with the giant neon name “MANIA”. The “Key Food” and “MANIA” stores are not major labels like Marlboro or Hugo Boss—rather than featuring only standard, big-name product placement, Almereyda makes a theme of ubiquitous advertising, logos, prices, commodities at every turn, the displacement of the human with signs of money. Given the commercial imperatives and expectations of filmmaking today, the use of logos and brand names is undeniably powerful product placement (despite Almereyda’s arguably naïve assertion that he can subvert such practices). These bold and easily decoded ‘signs’ threaten to ‘drown out’ the more ‘difficult’ and, in this film, potentially subversive Shakespearean text.

When Horatio and friends confront the ghost of old Hamlet, an image of Sam Shepard walking is superimposed on a corridor dominated by a Pepsi machine. On Horatio’s cry “stay illusion” the ghost initially ‘materialises’ but then dissolves—the body of Old Hamlet merges into the machine picture of a giant Pepsi can; the Pepsi can appears, momentarily, larger than human. The high-key lighting and absence of music, aspects which drain the scene of Wellesian expressionism, paradoxically heighten the strangeness of this occurrence in a mundane setting. The message of what happens to human beings in this *Hamlet*, scaled down to the size of edible/disposable products, displaced by product

placement is conveyed in a devastatingly succinct, ‘undramatic’ way [video clip 3].

While such details might seem too neat, even unoriginal, ironies without substance, Almereyda is taking the consumerism and fierce glamour of Luhrmann’s film to another extreme. And in a world of technology and visual effects, the scenes involving the ghost of old Hamlet are especially moving—eschewing special effects and ‘clutter’, the melodramatic ground-splitting, bolts of flame, zooming-in, and full orchestral accompaniment featured in Branagh’s *Hamlet*, Almereyda films old Hamlet simply standing in a room. Shepard delivers his lines with the quiet agony that recalls Paul Scofield as Old Hamlet in Franco Zeffirelli’s film version of *Hamlet* (1990). Moments of emotional intimacy are poignant in Almereyda’s *Hamlet* because they are fleeting and without melodramatic punctuation: consider when Polonius absent-mindedly ties Ophelia’s sneaker, Polonius hugging Laertes farewell after his “to thine own self be true” statement, the tight two-shots of Hamlet and Ophelia, as well as the scenes involving old Hamlet.

We are often denied a view of characters’ faces at the most intimate, emotional moments which, paradoxically, heightens the impact of these moments: when old Hamlet’s voice breaks as he speaks of Hamlet’s mother (“leave her to heaven”) his face is turned away from the camera, we do not see Ophelia’s face when Laertes implores her to guard her heart from Hamlet, Hamlet himself is often viewed from behind or at the edges of the frame with his face partially cut off (even when he speaks). The human body is not only manipulated into various

shapes and forms—as tall as a skyscraper (a low-angle shot of Hamlet creates that illusion) or as small as a Pepsi can (old Hamlet) but it is also fragmented, seldom wholly seen. Also, we often do not see the mouth of a character speaking – we first hear Claudius (in the first scene of the film) several lines before the camera finds him. The comparatively few moments when a full face or body is viewed, along with the corresponding voice, are arresting in the context of this film: a full facial close-up on Ophelia, and a complete vision of her body reflected in the pool as she silently contemplates suicide, take precedence as Polonius prattles to Gertrude and Claudius about “this hot love on the wing.” **[video clip 4]**

The fragmentary style and rapid rhythm of the film, the disjointed editing and the eclectic musical choices which draw attention to its construction, the way many of the key speeches are interrupted and/or separated from their bodily sources, the cacophony of surround-sound, and the dominance of advertising signs (visual and verbal) pushes the Shakespearean text “towards [the film’s] margins”.³² Michael Anderegg argues that Welles’ Shakespearean films reveal “through [their] absence of gloss or finish, the fragmentary and tentative authority of the original.”³³ I argue that Almereyda goes further in destabilising the notion of an original, stable text of *Hamlet*. As Anderegg writes, “Shakespeare’s plays themselves, as they have come down to us, can be defined as extremely unstable texts, never entirely ‘finished’, works in progress, playhouse documents, even sketchy blueprints for an edifice that we can never satisfactorily reconstruct.”³⁴ Similarly, Andrew Murphy argues that centralising *the* ‘original’ text “as a sacrosanct ideal against which film must measure itself” is anachronistic when

applied to Renaissance texts since they are collaborative social entities, devised according to the principle of “theatrical plunder”, subject to alteration by scribes, theatrical annotators, adapters and revisers, censors, and composers, not to mention theatre personnel (“the notion of an author holding proprietorial ‘copyright’ was entirely unknown in this period”).³⁵ Viewing the Shakespearean text as the product of a “singular, centralized author” does not square with Renaissance textual practice, nor does it square with the intertextual and collaborative nature of film production.³⁶

But, as Anderegg points out, Shakespearean plays are widely understood in “the larger culture” as stable, singularly-authored artefacts.³⁷ In Branagh’s publicity for his “bookish” *Hamlet*, for example, he emphasised, without irony, that he was “bring[ing] to the screen for the first time, the full unabridged text” of Shakespeare’s play.³⁸ Branagh attempts to provide ‘authoritative access’ to Shakespeare’s work by centralising *the* ‘whole’ text. Each of Branagh’s Shakespeare films are bound together, scene shifts and changes smoothed over by Patrick Doyle’s nineteenth-century pastiche music. Conversely, the notion of ‘access’ to *the* ‘whole’ text is problematised in Almereyda’s film: first, because the film is explicitly intertextual and, second, because of its fragmentary style. The fragmentation of the Shakespearean text is underscored by his incorporation of both classical and popular music by various artists that changes from scene to scene (as in his earlier films *Nadja* and *The Eternal*[1998]). Almereyda’s musical choices emphasise temporal and ideological differences, cultural eclecticism and collaboration, rather than binding scenes and Shakespeare’s speeches together or

‘smoothing out’ the construction of the film.³⁹ Further, like Orson Welles before him, Almereyda presents a Shakespeare from hunger rather than an opulent, period Shakespeare, what Anderegg calls a “poor Shakespeare”.⁴⁰ When Anderegg speaks of a “poor Shakespeare” he speaks of a “poverty effect” rather like Roland Barthes’ notion of the “reality effect”—in Almereyda’s film, the effect is achieved through disjointed editing, jump-cuts, washed-out palettes, and the omission of music at points where it is conventionally used to ‘hide’ the construction of the film (especially editing cuts).

In his ‘broken’ vision using an extremely pared-down text, Almereyda also implicitly explores how film itself may be antagonistic to the rhythm and subject matter of Shakespeare’s verse (and vice versa). Shakespeare’s words are not only decentralised but may be incommensurate with the film medium. By setting the “to be or not to be” speech in the action aisles of a Blockbuster videostore, Almereyda plays with clichéd notions of the limitations of film as set out, for example, by Pauline Kael. In *Deeper into Movies*, Kael discusses the ‘natural’ propensities of the film medium:

Movies are good at *action*; they’re not good at reflective or conceptual thinking. They’re good at immediate stimulus, but they’re not a good means of involving people in the other arts or in learning about a subject. The film techniques themselves seem to stand in the way of the development of curiosity.⁴¹

If we accept Kael’s general description of film based on aspects of the action movie, the medium is inherently antagonistic to the character of Hamlet as well as to the play of *Hamlet* shaped by contemplative, lengthy speeches and delayed

action. Almereyda implicitly suggests (and then challenges) this notion when he shoots the “to be or not to be” speech in a blockbuster videostore, in which *all* the films displayed (excepting new releases) are classified as action movies. As Hamlet walks through the video store, clichéd action sequences are displayed on television screens: explosions and bodies thrown in the air, guns firing, the invincible hero of *Crow II* walking through flames and waving at the camera, visually mocking Hamlet’s indecision. Hamlet begins the speech in voiceover and then begins speaking out loud in the videostore, as if addressing his words to the stories of mainstream Hollywood heroism and action that surround him.⁴²

Almereyda’s film points to what it cannot say. As Pierre Macherey wrote: “In its every particle, the work *manifests*, uncovers, what it cannot say. This silence gives it life”. Further, Macherey says:

What is important in the work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notation ‘what it refuses to say’, although that would in itself be interesting....But rather than this, what the work *cannot say* is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is acted out, in a sort of journey to silence.⁴³

This silence is the only meaning that Macherey refers to as being “latent” in a given text. Instead of the Romantic notion that Shakespeare anticipates all readings with words that seem to contain all humanity, Almereyda’s *Hamlet* points to the silences, moments when the words are cut off, ways in which the words by Shakespeare must be ingeniously adapted so that they will mean *now*. In *Hamlet*, Almereyda emphasises the difficulty of speaking Shakespeare’s well-worn lines with life, of speaking lines that explore the inmost part of Shakespeare’s

characters, lines that record subtle shifts in contemplation, lines that encapsulate the kind of humanity, thought, and subtlety that are unwelcome in the ruthless, capitalist, dehumanised world of the film.

In Almereyda's *Hamlet*, film images are presented as the dominant, coercive, manipulative (and manipulated) popular form. Hamlet obsessively plays back his own pixelvision home-video images of Gertrude and old Hamlet, pulling in to such extreme close-ups that their facial features become distorted indistinct shapes. He also replays a short clip of Ophelia in which she holds up a picture of an old man which she moves to reveal her own face—the picture of a face and the real face look almost equally 'real' at first glance on this black and white grainy video. The subjective act of decoding images (the various ways in which Hamlet can manipulate and reconfigure images like this on his computer to match his own speeches) and the deceptive power of images—a picture of a face may seem as real as flesh and blood—is explored in a film built around images of consumer culture, signs of wealth and fashion, logos and trademarks, a film in which everyone is image-conscious and Hamlet can only convey "that within" in private whispers or at 'one remove'.

While words and speeches are broken or interrupted, images are more difficult to destroy—Ophelia attempts, several times, to set fire to a Polaroid of Hamlet that burns painfully slowly. Hamlet attempts to harness the power of film images and take control of the film's direction with his disturbing experimental film of "The Mousetrap". The pamphlet announcing "The Mousetrap" film features the same font and colours (red and white) of the opening "Hamlet" title

for Almereyda's film, suggesting that Hamlet (as much as Almereyda) seeks directorial control. The claustrophobic spaces of Almereyda's film, and the disturbing assault that is "The Mousetrap" might make us, like Claudius, cry for light. But where is the light, what kind of ideology does this film offer to counter the aspects of late capitalism presented—ruthless, ubiquitous marketing, corporate ideology without humanity, consumerism stronger than love?

Several scenes before Hawke's delivery of the "to be or not to be" speech, Almereyda includes a short speech on television by the Buddhist guru, Thich Nhat Hanh. Hanh speaks about how we must "interbe" with others rather than simply being as individuals, he speaks about the need to coexist with other beings in the natural world because "you need others to be." The guru offers his ideology with charm and humility but his words sound empty because they are at odds with everything we have seen as possible—even the simplest and kindest words can sound satirical in the context of this film. The only sense of release is in Hamlet's maniacal multiple shooting of Claudius in the final scene—swords are replaced by a gun, drama becomes action movie, Hamlet is finally more like Jules from *Pulp Fiction* than Olivier or Branagh's sweet Prince [video clip 5]. And "the rest is silence" is a profound relief—Hamlet no longer has to speak, nor does he give his dying voice to Fortinbras (who is not included in the final sequence). Hamlet's escape to silence is a relief because the loudest speech in this film, that which is not whispered or cut-off, is dangerous and powerful like the newscaster's final, glib summary of *Hamlet* in words that are not his own [video clip 6].

Notes

¹ Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray, eds, *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siècle* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 3.

² I am here paraphrasing Linda Hutcheon's description of postmodern representations of the past in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London/New York: Routledge, 1989), 19.

³ I offer a fuller discussion of postmodernism versus Romanticism in Luhrmann's film in "Pop Goes the Shakespeare: Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*", *Literature Film Quarterly*, 28:2 (2000), 132-39.

⁴ Hutcheon, 12.

⁵ Hutcheon, 14-15.

⁶ To adapt Hutcheon's words, Almereyda self-consciously presents images "shown to be highly filtered by the discursive and aesthetic assumptions of the camera-holder" (7). Almereyda seldom uses 'objective' shots or establishing shots: almost every shot in his films appears subjective (for example, he often shows characters or objects out-of-focus or partially cut off by the frame rather than arranged in orderly tableau before the 'all-seeing' camera) even if the viewer within the film is not revealed. Rather than attempting to shoot unmediated 'reality', Almereyda says "It's a key thing in any movie that the locations are a manifestation of the way your characters are feeling." Almereyda qtd. in "Interview with Michael Almereyda: writer-director of *Hamlet*" by Cynthia Fuchs, *Popmatters Film Interviews*, 2001, <http://www.popmatters.com/film/interviews/almereyda-michael.html>, 3.

⁷ Almereyda, *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Screenplay Adaptation by Michael Almereyda*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), 133.

⁸ When designing his mise-en-scène, Almereyda was partly inspired by Akira Kurosawa's corporate-world adaptation of *Hamlet*, *The Bad Sleep Well* (1961). See *A Screenplay Adaptation by Michael Almereyda*, i.

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 17.

¹⁰ Jameson, 9.

¹¹ Almereyda is notably connected with these directors in these ways: for his first feature, *Twister* (1989), Almereyda collaborated with Swiss/Italian director of photography Renato Berto who had previously worked with Jean-Luc Godard, Almereyda collaborated with Wim Wenders in *Until the End of the World*, David Lynch produced Almereyda's vampire movie *Nadja* (1994), and Almereyda mentions Bergman's minimalist Swedish stage production of *Hamlet* (performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1990) as a key influence for his own version (see his appendix to *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Screenplay Adaptation by Michael Almereyda*, 133).

¹² John Collick, *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 60.

¹³ Michael Anderegg, "Welles/Shakespeare/Film: An Overview" in *Film Adaptation*, ed. and intro by James Naremore (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 162.

¹⁴ Michael Dequina, Review of Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*, December 2000, <http://www.eyepiece.com>, 1.

¹⁵ Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000), 209.

¹⁶ See Dudley Andrew, "Adaptation" from *Concepts of Film Theory* (Oxford University Press, 1984), reprinted in *Film Adaptation*, 28-37.

¹⁷ I borrow Terence Hawkes's phrase from *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1992). Beginning with reference to the 'The Murder of Gonzago' which becomes 'The Mousetrap' in *Hamlet* (whatever meaning the play originally had is changed for the purposes of *Hamlet* in Elsinore), Hawkes investigates the ways in which we "mean by Shakespeare". He puts the case that Shakespeare's plays have no essential meanings but function as resources which we use to generate meaning for our own purposes. Hawkes offers readings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *Coriolanus*, and *King Lear* as concrete instances of the process whereby, in the twentieth century, "Shakespeare doesn't mean: we mean by Shakespeare."

¹⁸ Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 210.

¹⁹ Almereyda qtd. in “Interview with Michael Almereyda” by Ross Anthony, Dec. 2000, <http://www.film.com>, 2.

²⁰ Almereyda, *William Shakespeare’s Hamlet: A Screenplay Adaptation by Michael Almereyda*, appendix, xi.

²¹ The scene where Hamlet confronts the skull is left out altogether except for a single shot of the gravedigger making graves *during* Ophelia’s funeral (such ruthless compression is typical in the film).

²² This scene is followed immediately by a low-angle shot of skyscrapers, connecting Hamlet’s metaphysical isolation with the power of corporations.

²³ Qtd in “Brushing Up Shakespeare: A Conversation with Michael Almereyda and Ethan Hawke” by Jeffrey M. Anderson, 4 May 2000, <http://www.combustiblecelluloid.com/inthawke.shtml>, 5.

²⁴ In preparation for adapting *Hamlet*, Almereyda watched “every version of *Hamlet* available in New York” in the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Television and Radio and the Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Centre, as detailed in his introduction to the screenplay. The director seems plagued, not by the desire to somehow ‘outdo’ past productions, but to make an “attempt” at *Hamlet* for his own generation. Conversely, in his *Hamlet*, Branagh apparently aimed (in Julie Sander’s words) to provide a *Hamlet* “for the twentieth century, a self-conscious summation of what preceded it”, featuring (to outdo?) several former Hamlet’s including Derek Jacobi (whose stage performance first inspired Branagh’s film), Michael Maloney as Laertes (a successful stage Prince and also Hamlet in Branagh’s film about an amateur production of the play, *In the Bleak Midwinter*), and Sir John Gielgud playing the silent role of King Priam in an inserted flashback. See Julie Sanders, “The End of History and the Last Man: Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet*” in *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siècle*, 160-61.

²⁵ Alan A. Stone, “The Fresh Prince”, *Boston Review*, Dec. 2000, <http://www.bostonreview.mit.edu/BR25.5/stone.html>, 7.

²⁶ As Julie Sanders argues, Branagh’s method of filming points to ideological contradictions within his production: “however critical a stance the film might wish to take on the glamorous [spectacularly shot] Elsinore court and the power-politics it represents, the camera is enamoured by the epic grandeur of that court’s self-representations” (160). Sanders says that although Branagh presents an Elsinore that has “eaten itself apart with corruption and betrayal” it is also a world which “Branagh’s film seems inexplicably nostalgic for and sentimental towards” (154).

²⁷ Qtd in “The Citizen Kane of PXL filmmaking” by Shawn Low, 27 Sept. 2000, <http://www.artscentral.mediacorpvtv.com/feature/michael/main.html>, 2.

²⁸ Almereyda qtd in *Shakespeare Magazine*, Dec. 2000, <http://www.shakespearemag.com/html,1>.

²⁹ W. B. Worthen makes a similar point in relation to Luhrmann’s film: Luhrmann “invokes and displaces a textual ‘origin’” because Shakespeare’s words are self-consciously adapted/recontextualized in modern terms, emphasising early modern to modern social differences rather than representing Shakespeare’s text as “timeless”, as part of a fantasy of cultural homogeneity that transcends time. See Worthen’s “Drama, Performativity, and Performance”, *PMLA*, 113:5 (1998): 1104.

³⁰ Branagh as Hamlet presses Ophelia’s face against one gilt-framed mirrored door, Hawke as Hamlet presses Gertrude’s face against a mirrored wardrobe. Motifs from other films of Hamlet are echoed or ‘updated’ in similarly less Romantic ways: the birds flying high into the sky from Grigori Kozintsev’s film of *Hamlet*, signifying the physical and spiritual escape of Ophelia, are translated by Almereyda into jets that shoot into the sky (prefiguring Ophelia’s ‘escape’ into madness, marking Hamlet’s death in the final scene).

³¹ *William Shakespeare’s Hamlet: A Screenplay Adaptation by Michael Almereyda*, xi.

³² Anderegg, 161.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. Similarly, Douglas Lanier writes about how the authority of *the* Shakespearean text has been destabilized despite “late capitalist nostalgia for the ‘uniqueness’ of hand-produced artifacts, a nostalgia particularly acute in an age of electronic reproduction” (177-178). Lanier’s description (192) of Jean-Luc Godard’s *King Lear* and Peter Greenaway’s *Prospero’s Books* (1991) as attempts to “confront [the] onus of a textual Shakespeare”, the perceived “authority” of that text as a stable artefact (rather than a “contingent, unstable, ephemeral” experience) also applies to

Almeryda's *Hamlet*. See Lanier's "Prospero's Books and the Textual Shakespeare" in *Shakespeare on Film: Contemporary Critical Essays* ed. by Robert Shaughnessy, New Casebooks Ser. (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), 173-195.

³⁵ Andrew Murphy, "The Book on the Screen" in *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siècle*, 19, 13, 13.

Murphy's argument draws on the work of Jeffrey Masten, Timothy Murray, and Paul Werstine.

See Jeffrey Masten's *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), Timothy Murray's "From Foul Sheets to Legitimate Model: Antitheatre, Text, Ben Jonson", *New Literary History*, 14 (1983), 641-64, and Paul Werstine's "Narratives About Printed Shakespeare Texts: 'Foul Papers' and 'Bad Quartos'", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 41 (1990), 86.

³⁶ Murphy, 13.

³⁷ Anderegg, 161.

³⁸ Branagh qtd in Murphy, 11. Murphy (after Mark Thornton Bennett) refers to Branagh's film as "bookish" (11).

³⁹ The film includes an original orchestral score by Carter Burwell, previously composed classical cues, and a mixture of contemporary pop music and heavy metal. Much of the music was either written specifically for this film (such as the Nick Cave song "Hamlet (Pow Pow Pow)", ironically included in the scene of Hamlet's failed attempt to kill Claudius, or the popgroup Morcheeba's song "Hamlet" with the line "Papa was a rolling stone"!), or was written for previous adaptations of *Hamlet* (such as the excerpt of Tchaikovsky's music for "The Mousetrap", or the pieces by Liszt and Gade). The combination of classical and popular music suggests a conflict between romanticism and contemporary concerns.

⁴⁰ Anderegg, 161.

⁴¹ Kael qtd in Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation" in *Film Adaptation*, 59 (my emphasis).

⁴² In a similar kind of 'confrontation', during the later "oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I" speech (delivered in voiceover), Hamlet is watching the most action-packed clips from *Rebel Without a Cause* (the shooting, the car race). On "what would he do had he the motive and the cue for passion that I have" the television screen is filled with an extreme close-up of James Dean smoking with attitude—Hamlet delivers his speech 'to' Dean, figure of effortless cool and action, the kind of figure this Hamlet aspires to be.

⁴³ Pierre Macherey, "The Text Says What it Does Not Say" (1966) reprinted in *Literature in the Modern World* ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 217-18 (original emphases).