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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

ordered scenes is disrupted by a dense network of interconnections and intertexts so it presents

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 Shak

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

Almereyda'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' (Almereyda'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, Almereyda 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 7.92 162.585 27(ns)s(ing)11.7(n)]TJ/F1 1 T

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

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."

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 [illegible].[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 Hamlets 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

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 surroun

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 captalist 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 than 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 [
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*

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." [illegible]

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 th

'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

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 dece

for Almereyda's film, suggesting that Hamlet (as much as Almereyda) seeks directorial control. The claustrophobic spaces of Almereyda's film, and the

Notes

[1] Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray, eds, *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siècle* (London: Mac

[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

Almereyda's *Hamlet*. See Lanier's "*Prospero's Books*