Metatheatricality and postmodern media pastiche in *Hamlet* (2000)

Pradipta Mukherjee
Vidyasagar College for Women, Kolkata, India

Abstract

 In Michael Almereyda's low-budget *Hamlet* (2000) the modernisation is ingenious and stylish. The film is a commentary on earlier film versions as well as an attempt to produce a distinctly contemporary or even postmodern version of the Shakespearean play. Almereyda presents a radical shift of period and milieu, offering a broadly allusive and richly reimagined retelling of its source material. Events of the play are translated into the world of big business in New York City, scenes take place in the skyscraper Head Quarter of the Denmark Corporation. The urban setting, saturated with the vacant images of late capitalism leaves Hamlet in an Un-Shakespearean universe. The aesthetic strategies, frame of reference and experimental modes of Almereyda's film offer interesting challenges.

Keywords: cityscape, technology, experimental, alienation, visual narrative, self-referentiality, self-reflexivity.

Michael Almereyda's millennial film of *Hamlet* (2000) offers a stunning contemporary vision of the Shakespearean playtext. In screenplay, style, setting, film score, and casting, Almereyda's film, like Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo +Juliet* (1996) foregrounds a postmodern aesthetics. Almereyda's is equally radical and interesting in his use of the Shakespearean material. Fragmentation, alienation and discontinuity characterize Almereyda's audacious attempt to appropriate the Shakespearean play for a twenty-first century culture. The film repeatedly highlights issues about alienation, paranoia, spying, self-absorption, communication and generational conflict that are alive in Shakespeare's text.

Both Almereyda and Luhrmann's films are dominated by landscapes and/or modern cityscapes with images from consumer culture. If Luhrmann's film projects a virtual city which can be either Miami, Los Angeles or Mexico City, Almereyda gives us a glittering, corporate Manhattan. A rich life and familial claustrophobia tend to choke the protagonists of both films.[1] For his inventive retelling of *Hamlet,* Almereyda credits Orson Welles as inspiration. In the preface to his *Hamlet* screenplay, Almereyda recalls that Orson Welles's description of *Macbeth* as "a rough charcoal sketch of Shakespeare's play provoked in [him] a sharp suspicion that you don't need lavish production values to make a Shakespeare movie that's accessible and alive" (Almereyda vii). He shot the film

"fast and cheap" in Manhattan in Super 16mm (later blown up to 35mm format for theatrical distribution) "to make everything as urgent and immediate as possible." (Almereyda ix).

In comparison to Kenneth Branagh's epic version of *Hamlet* (1996), the Almereyda film is a relatively low-budget, abbreviated version of the play, running for only 106 minutes. This techno-thriller *Hamlet* stars the young Ethan Hawke and Julia Stiles (who appears incidentally, in two other Shakespeare appropriations: *10 Things I Hate About You* and *O*). In his film, Almereyda was determined to maintain "a parallel visual language that might hold a candle to Shakespeare's poetry" (Almereyda x). As Shakespeare's play is itself interesting for its metatheatrical features, Almereyda refashions his Hamlet as an amateur filmmaker glued to the making of his own home movie of his complex emotions. Ophelia similarly is a photographer. *Hamlet* here has an urban and contemporary setting, a modern Manhattan, surprisingly lacking an identity of its own. This lack is similar to films like *Macbeth in Manhattan* (1999). In Almereyda's film Manhattan gradually evolves as a symbol of globalised corporate capitalism.

The setting of *Hamlet* is shifted from the coast of Elsinore in Shakespeare's play to a glossy high-rise Elsinore Hotel in New York City. Recontextualised in the cityscape of twenty-first century Denmark Corporation, the inhabitants and major characters are scattered among anonymous urban apartments and hotel rooms. Inspired by Akira Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well*, Almereyda's *Hamlet* is set in the corridors of corporate power in the present day world. Denmark has become Denmark Corporation, with Kyle MacLachlan as CEO Claudius, a multimedia corporate giant challenged by renegade upstart Fortinbras. The action clusters around a self-enclosed world, with the majority of the characters living within the insularity of global business. The business is never specified and like its landscape, the logo "both replaces and negates a finer sense of place" (Burnett, *Filming Shakespeare* 51). The characters here utter the Shakespearean cadences in flat modern tone and this renders the new *Hamlet* the flavour of innovation. The director retains the anachronistic frame of reference: Claudius is referred to as 'the King', Hamlet studies in 'Wittenberg' and Ophelia passes out 'rosemary', 'pansies', 'fenenel' and 'columbines' in the form of Polaroid snapshots. The urban cityscape, saturated by empty images of late capitalism, leaves Hamlet, his family, and his friends in a distinctly UnShakespearean world with a sense of meaninglessness at its core.[2]

Hamlet takes its inspiration from Orson Welles's idiosyncratic approach to translating Shakespeare into the language of film. Almereyda radically edits and rearranges the literary text to produce a particular version of the play so that it may appeal to college students and cineastes.[3] Like Baz Luhrmann, Almereyda senses that modern media holds the key to make Shakespeare's language work in contemporary setting. Technology acts as a mediating force in human relationships depicted in the film. This is a world of digital cameras, Pixelvision cameras, Quicktime and Adobe Photoshop, walkmen, floppy disks as well as

mobile phones, fax machines, mobile, DVD players and in-car entertainment systems. All this together render cultural relevance to the Shakespearean text at the turn of the millennium.

In the unfathomable chaos of urban world, Hamlet clutches his camcorder trying to make sense in an individualist society. This allows Hawke's Hamlet to incorporate an enormous range of visual images as he edits, re-edits, plays, and replays snippets from his life shot on a Pixelvision video recorder (a toy made by Fisher-Price). These images include shots of burning oil fields, stealth bombers, James Dean in *East of Eden*, John Gielgud as Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude ice-skating, Ophelia in a variety of settings, and endless head-shots of Hamlet himself (including one in which he holds a gun to his temple).[4] As an experimental filmmaker, Hamlet mobilizes a filmic bricolage, which involves footage of his own childhood, a greedy cartoon dragon, a skeleton of a dinosaur and a Da Vinci drawing. With its own logic this sequence presents a Hamlet who is caught in a 'time' that is 'out of joint.' (1.5.189).

Hamlet's alienation is defined by his intimate relationship to his camcorder and in the company of others he feels like an outsider. Hamlet's room, with its antique furniture, baroque fabrics and black and white photographs, appears as a "dissident cell" and "personal refuge" (Burnett, *Filming Shakespeare* 53). General social fragmentation is evoked when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's friends, who are spying on him, report back on a speakerphone while Gertrude and Claudius indulge in ugly sexual foreplay.

Therefore, Crowl observes, "Though Almereyda's setting is contemporary Manhattan, the inspiration for the film's *Hamlet* seems to emanate from the 1950s...a soulmate of such 1950s icons as James Dean and Holden Caulfield."(*Norton Guide* 93). Hamlet's use of film's technologies and images are significant. The director repeatedly fractures the visual narrative of his film. Ethan Hawke's Hamlet is a melancholy, brooding and pensive character. He appears sad and morose and he desperately tries to conceal his pain beneath a Peruvian knit cap and sunglass. He is full of angst and alienation. Hindle notes "For this postmodern Hamlet with a conscience, Manhattan is a prison-house of ruthless commercialism---and it's personal." (199). Crowl observes, "He's [Hamlet] trapped in a corporate world of surveillance images and sounds controlled by Claudius and Polonius, and his attempt to find and define himself and his world is doomed to failure." (*Norton* 105). The setting in a glass and steel Manhattan universe helps to reflect the character's sense of imprisonment. A key idea in the film seems to be that the sensitive, creative young people are trapped in a prison which thwarts their creativity and individuality. Almereyda follows Hamlet's opinion that 'Denmark's a prison' (2. 2. 243) and sees 'contemporary consumer culture' as a powerful restraint upon us all: 'the bars of the cage are defined by advertising, by all the hectic distractions, brand names, announcements and ads that crowd our waking hours' (Almereyda xi).

The director even breaks up Hamlet's soliloquies and makes them a part of Hamlet's home movie. This interrupts the spontaneous overflow of Hamlet's emotional rhetoric. Crowl notes, " Luhrmann and Almereyda both see Shakespeare as our contemporary and find in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* narratives that not only speak powerfully over time to our own age but, even more important, seem to spring naturally from our own cultural milieu." (Crowl, *Cineplex* 125). The film is postmodern in several aspects: the *mise en abime* of images[5] within images, including "quotations" from other Shakespeare films; allusions to cultural icons, high and low (John Gielgud, James Dean); an eclectic score that cites Brahms and Tchaikovsky as well as Bob Dylan and Morcheeba; and, in general, a deliberate self-referentiality and self-reflexivity. Designed to reduce the meditative and philosophical aspects of the text, Almereyda's *Hamlet* assumes the shape of a modern thriller. Yet the postmodern "surface" does not conceal Almereyda's intertextuality with Shakespeare's play.

Ethan Hawke plays Hamlet in a more solipsistic manner. He is more than simply introspective. He constantly looks at images of himself and listens to his own recorded voice. Critics have called him a true "cyber" Hamlet. (Burnett, *Filming Shakespeare* 48-69). Hamlet's habit of watching himself on screen suggests his sense of displacement from reality, his sense of self. Therefore the film makes constant use of voice-over that works in unison with Hamlet's narcissistic habit. Hamlet roams the 'Action" aisles of a Blockbuster video rental store while reciting the 'to be or not to be' soliloquy. In the background we have the fiery climax from Tim Pope's *The Crow II: City of Angels* (1996) playing on the overhead monitor.

The 'to be or not to be' soliloquy is anticipated earlier, by Hamlet's recitation of the first lines several times on the Pixelvision monitor: during this scene we see Hamlet pointing a gun to his head while he experiments with various positionings of the gun before pulling the trigger. The film opens with Hamlet's film of himself expressing his grief ("I have of late lost all my mirth") and his disenchantment with the world around him ("A sterile promontory"). In other film clips he rehearses suicide or compulsively replays images of his parents and Ophelia. Again in some other clips, there are alternative images of Hamlet, as in the clip of John Gielgud, the great British actor with Yorick's skull. The ghost of Hamlet's father is first seen on CCTV security monitors at Hotel Elsinore. Polonius 'wires up' Ophelia so that the king can overhear her conversation with Hamlet. Hamlet has a pixelvision portable television on which he can play back his thoughts himself.

Hamlet replays several short sequences in which Ophelia appears in seductive close-up. The poignancy and vulnerability of Ophelia's situation are most evident in scenes where she remains tacit, for most of the time. Having Ophelia "wired" is the director's style of handling the nunnery scene. She is, here as in Shakespeare's play, the bait employed to entrap Hamlet. Again, Hamlet and Ophelia's desire for escape is depicted by the occasional insertion of shots of a plane in the sky throughout the film. Ophelia is frequently seen in reflected images

in the water: that of Claudius's penthouse pool, and especially in the Guggenheim Museum where she will drown.

Shortly before that Almereyda interpolates a video clip in which the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, a preacher of non-violence, proposes that the verb 'to be' should be replaced by 'inter-be'. The text is vital to Hamlet's dilemma: "it is not possible to be alone. To be yourself. You need other people in order to be...father, mother...uncle, brother, sister, society...therefore to be means to interbe." (Almereyda x).

Due to Hamlet's solitary video-editing and viewing habits, the film, as I have discussed, is media-referential. It makes us aware of the process of filming and the look of the camera. Almereyda's film inhabits a world where human communication is constantly mediated and monitored through technology. The director himself remarks: 'images currently keep pace with words, or outstrip them, creating a kind of overwhelming alternate reality. So nearly every scene features a photograph, a TV monitor, an electronic recording device of some kind.' (Almereyda x). It is because of the complex foregrounding of media technologies, that Donaldson notes, a specific thematic and stylistic resonance of Almereyda's *Hamlet* with works of James Benning and Kyle Cassidy. ("Hamlet among the Pixelvisionaries" 219-222). By creating a web of cross media that has roots in Shakespearean metatheatricality as well as in postmodern media pastiche, Courteney Lehmann has argued, Almereyda reads Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as prefiguring cinematic and videographic ways of seeing, remembering, and constructing meaning (Lehmann, *Shakespeare Remains* 89-129).

Hamlet's POV is shown in *The Mousetrap: a Tragedy by Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.* This is Hamlet's device of inciting Claudius to 'unkennel' his 'occulted guilt' (3.2. 74, 73) and make his uncle face a re-enactment of the murder. The play-within-the-play becomes a montage in film-within-the-film---"the audience of the movie is watching an audience watch a movie. It's a hall of mirrors." (Almereyda xii). *The Mousetrap* is Hamlet's weapon to unfold the conscience of Claudius. Significant elements that make up the sequence intelligently conceal Claudius as murderer. The villain is presented as a silhouetted figure and is never shown to the viewer as Claudius. That the villain stands for Claudius is only implied. In *The Mousetrap* video, Hamlet seeks to do more than trap Claudius. For here Hamlet reaches the culmination of his experience as a maker of films. While showing the film he attempts to revive the memory of Gertrude's affection for Old Hamlet from behind the counter memory of her lust for Claudius. There are sequences from silent films, stop-motion footage, advertising footage, and film pornography. The involvement of Gertrude and Claudius is shown through pornographic images played by porn actors. The sight is so detestable and vulgar that even Gertrude shudders as she gets a glimpse of it. It is indicative of adultery, of the death of innocence and love. This is followed by a cut to an audience applauding within the film. Hamlet's film poignantly stresses his grief for his lost father and expresses his disgust for his mother's and uncle's conduct.

This is a film that successfully achieves its director's aim, "to see how thoroughly Shakespeare can speak to the present moment" and how the present moment informs our understanding of Shakespeare (Almereyda ix). Almereyda's *Hamlet* intentionally presents itself as "alternative Shakespeare"---especially to the accessible model established by directors like Zeffirelli and Branagh---and it succeeds. This is a *Hamlet* that is "jagged, daring, American, and brief". (Crowl, *Norton Guide* 93) and reconstructed consciously for an arthouse audience. With retroactive effect if we compare it to the Mel Gibson starring Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990) we see that while Zeffirelli gave us an "historical" film, Almereyda gives us a *Hamlet* that gives real evidence of its postmodern intertextuality. It captures much of the dramatic essence of the source text, comes alive because of its intelligent self-reflexivity, metacinematic awareness, and a romantic reading of Shakespeare's play. It is perhaps because of this that the film reached the youthful audience and became a successful Shakespeare film of the new millennium.

Notes

1. How Luhrmann and Almereyda layer technologies in a way that regularly feels anachronistic, altering the viewer's sense of distance from the modern *mise en scene* and from the Shakespearean text, see discussions in Cartelli and Rowe 57-58.
2. For the different legacy of Almereyda's film as distinguished from Luhrmann's film, discussions are available in Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex* 188-89.
3. For elaborations of the issue, see Samuel Crowl, *Norton Guide* 92.
4. For how film and video technologies become the focus of an allegory of recording media in Almereyda's *Hamlet,* see Cartelli and Rowe 56-57.
5. *Mise en abime* occurs within a text (here film text) when there is a reduplication of images or concepts referring to the textual whole. *Mise en abime* is a play of signifiers within a text, of sub-texts mirroring each other. A film-within- a-film is an example of *mise en abime.*

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Pradipta Mukherjee is Assistant Professor and Head, Dept. of English, Vidyasagar
College for Women, Kolkata. Her M. Phil dissertation was on *Fiction into Film*
from the University of Calcutta. A Ph.D in English on *Shakespeare on Screen* from
the same University, she is the author of the book, *Studies in John Fowles's The
French Lieutenant's Woman.* She has presented papers on Shakespearean Cinema
in international conferences held in Amsterdam, The Netherlands and Brussels,
Belgium. She has also presented papers in many national seminars and published
several articles in literary journals of repute. She is a member of the Regional Film
Selection Committee, Doordarshan Kendra, Kolkata, Govt. of India.