

# The Survival of the Poetic Mode in Postmodern Filmic Language: Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*

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In discussing Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000) I am mostly concerned with the relationship between the Shakespearean text/language and the visual image as it manifests itself in the filmic language this adaptation uses. I intend to point out that unlike, for example, Kenneth Branagh's screen versions of Shakespeare, which are characterized by an essentially realistic approach aimed at easing the translation of the Shakespearean text into the language of the cinema, Almereyda's *Hamlet*, like the other postmodern filmic reinterpretations of the nineties, foregrounds the clash between the early modern text and postmodern *mise-en-scène*. By employing a kind of non-illusionistic, eclectic visual style these postmodern productions call our attention to the incongruities and defy conventional expectations of location, character and narrative. By virtue of their extensive use of anti-realist techniques and their penchant for formal experimentation, they belong to the tradition of the poetic mode—one of the prevailing trends in the 1950s and 1960s; I will therefore examine the four films mentioned above in view of the aesthetic impact of this filmic mode on these adaptations. I further intend to draw attention to the unquestionable differences between the modernist Shakespeare film adaptations made in the traditional poetic mode as well as the screen versions of the 1990s, which, I believe, demand a new category, that of the *postmodern* poetic mode.

Before discussing the similarities and differences between the postmodern and traditional poetic modes, I intend to highlight a constitutive feature of these postmodern screen versions of Shakespeare, which, interestingly, links them to realist Shakespeare films: their overwhelming emphasis on the sensual image. That notwithstanding, the way these adaptations, based on anti-realist cinematic aesthetics, relate to spectacle is entirely different from the way Shakespeare films, grounded on Hollywood-inflected realism, employ the visual image. Realist Shakespeare films—like Branagh's movies or Hoffmann's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, which are content to remain within classic Hollywood conventions—use the flashy technical resources of contemporary cinema to offer some kind of sophisticated illusionism. As narrative films made in the realist mode, they can be considered the descendants of the elaborate theatrical productions of the nineteenth century, which reflected the contemporary audience's demand for visual realism.<sup>1</sup> The spectacle these films offer follows the traditions associated with the classical era of Hollywood, and differs, in some respects, from the spectacle mobilized in contemporary blockbusters. These products of New Hollywood Cinema excel in

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<sup>1</sup> Beerbohm Tree's elaborate mechanical scenery, forests and thunderclouds, which he used in his theatrical productions, are good examples of this tendency in nineteenth-century theatre.

technological effects and are riddled with “big chase sequences, big explosions, big outbursts of special effects” (King 184).

In view of their employment of spectacle, what mostly distinguishes postmodern Shakespeare films—which also revel in visual flair and sensational gimmicks—from New Hollywood blockbusters, is their emphasis on the artificiality of the visual image. In this respect they share a lot with earlier Shakespeare films made in the traditional poetic mode. Innovative filmmakers of the middle era of Shakespearean filmmaking up to 1971—Grigori Kozintsev, Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa or Peter Brook, for instance—also refused the illusion of transparency, and favoured strategies and techniques subverting the “straightforward” representation associated with the realist mode.

According to Jack Jorgens, in the poetic mode “unlike the other modes, there is emphasis on the *artifice* of film, on the expressive possibilities of distorting the surfaces of reality” (Jorgens 20). For him this mode represents a poetic approach to reality in the same way as a poem does in its relation to ordinary language, and although Jorgens acknowledges “the dangers of dazzling technique for its own sake,” he believes, that “it is the mode of the ‘film poet’ who is able to produce a work which, by being authentically cinematic, is paradoxically truest to the effect of Shakespeare’s dramatic verse” (21). The filmmaker whose approach exemplifies for Jorgens the most exciting attempts in the filmic/poetic mode at Shakespeare on film is Orson Welles. As Kenneth Rothwell puts it, “[i]f Laurence Olivier’s work is Apollonian, reasonable, comfortably mainstream, and commodified, Welles’s is Dionysian and passionate, rough-hewn and unpredictable, and uncommodified. Put reductively, Olivier’s work remains theatrical and English; Welles’s, cinematic and American” (69). I do not wholly agree with Rothwell here, as I believe that Olivier’s Shakespeare film adaptations are all cinematically inventive as well. His *Hamlet* (1948), for example, which relies heavily upon the techniques and styles of both the earlier Expressionist cinema of the 1920s foreshadowing the horror genre of the 1930s, and the *Film noir* genre, popular in the late 1940s and early 1950s, aptly illustrates his ambition to find new, exciting ways of translating Shakespeare into the language of the cinema. Furthermore, Welles’s movies are not typically American either; he prefers the European film over the commercial Hollywood film as his model. His first and best-known film, *Citizen Kane* (1941), which is often recognized as “the great American film,” already has more affinities in style and structure with the European than with the Hollywood film tradition (Rothwell 70). In this movie he offers a whole array of antirealist techniques—skewed camera angles, dissolves, long tracking shots, and deep focus, which was his trademark—calling our attention to the artificiality of the image.

Welles undoubtedly had his own unmistakable style and vision shaped by his belief that film is an independent art; hence, he believed, his task as a filmmaker was to explore the artistic possibilities of the cinema, and to accentuate film as an artifice. Commenting on his own way of adapting Shakespeare’s *Othello* on screen he said, for example: “I think Verdi and Boito were perfectly entitled to change Shakespeare in adapting him to another art form; and, assuming that the film is an art form, I took the line that you can adapt a classic freely and vigorously for the cinema” (qtd. in Manvell 61). No doubt it is his *Othello* where his predilection for experimenting with different film techniques is at its most pronounced, the most “Wellesian” (Hindle 79).

He employs stunningly lit architectural shots, awkwardly tilted portraits and surrealist reflections, which all serve “to pictorialise the unstable and claustrophobic world of destructive emotions and behaviours set in motion by the devilish Iago” (Hindle 79). Welles captures entrapment, one of the key themes of the play, by creating a *mise-en-scène* rife with vertical lines—stony vaults and iron bars—and using the image of the cage itself at the beginning of the film, when we can see Iago trapped in a cage hoisted up against a high wall. The filmic language Welles employs in his *Othello* is very much in line with the tradition of *film noir*, which can be defined, as András Kiséry aptly observes, by its otherness, its oppositional character, its difference from the mainstream, classical Hollywood genres. Welles himself was being American by not being American (40).

While his striving to find visually symbolic equivalents for Shakespeare’s meanings brings him close to Kozintsev and Kurosawa—who also invested their Shakespeare adaptations with symbolic rather than realistic value—his delivery of the images in quick succession, which results in the fragmentation of the dramatic experience, foreshadows the postmodern cinematic aesthetics of the 1990s. As Kenneth Rothwell aptly observes, “[w]ith *Othello*, Welles invented the MTV style decades before it was invented. ... He assembled bits and pieces from Shakespeare’s most domestic tragedy, brought together fragments from all corners of the play, reworked them into a mosaic and then shattered them as a talisman to Othello’s chaotic search for beauty and love” (74-75).

Welles’s directorial approach to Shakespeare, marked by his penchant for fragmentation, aesthetic excess and experiment in cinematic style and technique in general, did not meet the expectations of the critics of the 1950s, who preferred “seamless narrative” and less self-consciously cinematic productions (Rothwell 77). Consequently, while Olivier’s *Henry V* and his further Shakespeare adaptations—*Hamlet* (1948), and *Richard III* (1955)—were both critical and commercial successes, Welles’s more experimental Shakespeare movies—*Macbeth* (1948), *Othello* (1952) and *Chimes at Midnight* (1966)—provoked controversy among critics and were not successful at the box-office either.<sup>2</sup> Actually, after a while Welles got “virtually blacklisted as an unreliable genius” (Rothwell 79) in Hollywood, and so it is no wonder that in the 1950s he left America for Europe. Finally it was in the reckless 1990s, favouring a taste for a kind of bricolage aesthetic, that Welles came into his own. In 1992 his *Othello* was re-released, and it was welcomed as the worthy counterpart of his much acclaimed *Citizen Kane*, becoming at the same time “the poster child for the chaotic Nineties” (175).

Although postmodern Shakespeare films of the 1990s, by virtue of their ways of employing anti-realist techniques and their penchant for formal experimentation, can be viewed as productions made in the tradition of the great “forefathers,” there are significant differences between what is known as the “postmodern” poetic mode and the traditional one prevailing during the great international phase of Shakespearean filmmaking. While the scenography in Kurosawa, Kozintsev, Welles, or Brook’s filmic adaptations reflected an underlying metaphorical meaning, where the visual and the

2 While, for example, Welles’s *Macbeth* opened to a hostile reception, though nominated for an award in the 1948 Venice Film Festival, Olivier’s *Hamlet* of the same year won the Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Actor, (five Oscars altogether), and the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. Welles’s *Othello* likewise evoked mixed emotions.

verbal are inextricably interwoven—postmodern *mise-en-scène* is characterized by the “detachable image” (Kennedy 266). As Dennis Kennedy points out, in postmodern Shakespeare films visuals “have been detached from verbal meaning,” and in most cases they carry “the burden of the event” (276). Besides their tendency towards fragmentation it is their accentuation of this clash between the visual and the verbal which significantly differentiates the Shakespeare films made in the postmodern poetic mode from their predecessors made in the traditional poetic mode.

The clash between the Shakespearean language (delivered flatly) and a hyper-modern urban setting (delivered with visual energy) is also a characteristic feature of Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet*. Although it is a typical postmodern poetic adaptation made in the techno-thriller genre, by virtue of its appropriation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* it is in the unusual company of such monumental greats as Olivier’s gloomy adaptation made in the *film noir* genre, Zeffirelli’s version, which is based on action-adventure conventions, or Branagh’s adaptation drawing on the epic tradition. The greatest contrast it shows, I believe, is with Branagh’s glamorous, majestically-paced movie. There are substantial differences between the two films not only in the feel and texture but most conspicuously in their sheer length: while Branagh’s film used the complete 1623 First Folio text as well as some unique passages from the 1604/5 Second Quarto—running 242 minutes (just over four hours) and enjoying a massive studio budget—Almereyda’s screen version was a low-budget film, which utilises only about 40% of the play’s lines and runs only 106 minutes. As Almereyda himself puts it, it is “the most condensed straight film adaptation in English” (Almereyda xii). The fact that Almereyda’s *Hamlet* is obviously less ambitious than Branagh’s is in part due to his targeting an art house rather than a mainstream audience. In this respect Almereyda’s film is markedly different from Luhrmann’s production as well. Although both his *Hamlet* and Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet* are teen films, Almereyda’s movie is a cult hit using film technique and codes with subtlety while Luhrmann’s adaptation is a box-office hit featuring flashy filmic language.

Nevertheless, Almereyda’s Shakespeare follows in the footsteps of Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet* in several respects: not only does it locate Elsinore in a media-saturated big city (New York), make Hamlet (Ethan Hawkes) a disaffected teenager, or employ the figure of a newscaster to summarize Fortinbras’s speech at the end of the film, but it also uses a metaphorical language in the postmodern poetic mode, which is a constitutive feature of *Romeo+Juliet* as well. In Luhrmann’s film this language draws heavily upon pop culture icons, religious and other high culture symbols, whereas in Almereyda’s movie we are offered a media allegory focusing on contemporary technologies of recording: photography, film, video and digital video. A wide variety of electronic communication gadgetry finds its way into nearly every scene, and these high-tech gadgets are employed by Almereyda as the only effective means of expressing the self and its relationship with others. Hamlet himself is a budding amateur filmmaker filming and editing throughout the film, but it is not only this character/persona who experiments with different forms of film and video technologies—we often see him absorbed in viewing video records in reverse, reviewing them at different speeds, or freeze-framing them on his palm top computer—the movie itself, which foregrounds competing visual representations of the on-screen world, is also all about experimentation. In my view Almereyda’s creative

playfulness with different cinematic styles—black and white images of shimmery quality alternate with glitzy colour shots—and his inventive metaphorical imagination brings him close to such ingenious filmmakers as Welles, whose Shakespeare movies are also highly experimental and replete with metaphoric imagery.

That modern technology has an underlying metaphorical meaning in this screen version of *Hamlet* is apparent, as I have mentioned above, in Almereyda's rendering Hamlet's inner life in terms of electronic media. All but one of Hamlet's soliloquies, which allow us a glimpse into his inner self, are rendered as video diaries that he has composed. A fine example of this is Hamlet's first soliloquy in the film, which starts with the line, "I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth" (2.261-62). It comes before the opening credit, as if to set the melancholic tone characterizing Hamlet's mood throughout the movie. This monologue containing the line "What a piece of work is a man!" (2.2.269) is accompanied by a video collage, which functions as a visual expression of Hamlet's cynical outlook on man, who may be "noble in reason, ... infinite in faculties" (2.2.270)—at this point, we see the majestic head of a man on a Renaissance painting—yet is capable of creating immense devastation—we are shown a piece of military footage in which a Stealth bomber destroys everything, and then a cartoon in which a monster devours a smaller animal.

Hamlet's tortured view of man and the surrounding world is revealed to us in the agonized black and white disjointed sequences produced by his pixelvision video camera, which he is obsessively attached to. His approach presented through the lens of his work as amateur film-maker is understated and fragmented, reflecting his futile attempt "to impose shape and purpose on the myriad images by which he finds himself assailed in corporate Manhattan" (Buchanan 240). This "edgy, narratively obtuse style" (245) which is meant to articulate Hamlet's emotional plight, his "profound sense of dis-ease" (243), is in sharp contrast with the glimmering colour shots representing corporate Elsinore's radically different kind of viewpoint. Actually it is this more conventional cinematic style which provides the dominant visual and narrative structure of the film, "displaying the glitzy but controlling modern terrains of Claudius's Manhattan business empire" (Hindle 199). The clash between Hamlet's visual world and that of Denmark Corporation with Claudius as CEO is introduced by Almereyda right at the beginning of the film, even before the title. As Claudius is advancing in his luxurious car toward Elsinore Hotel in the heart of the Manhattan night to announce his new position to his shareholders, from his rear-window we can see a gleaming collage of neon-lit buildings looming high, street corners flooded by the bright colours of advertisements. Then we are shown Hamlet's face in close-up grainy black and white pictures as he recites the lines of his first soliloquy in the film "What a piece of work is a man." The introduction of the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius as stylistic tension, as two competing cinematic modes, could not be more effective. I agree with Maurice Hindle, who argues that Almereyda's *Hamlet* gains much of its dramatic power from setting these two counterpointed visual discourses against each other (204).

The theme of technology is used by Almereyda not only to call attention to the mediated character of Hamlet's interiority, but also to "highlight the high degree to which all our interactions and communications are now mediated by machines" (Greer 111). Technologies of modern communication are employed in the film as mediating

forces in human relationships—inhabitants of corporate Elsinore typically avoid real encounters, as if they preferred the mediated versions of each other. As Judith Buchanan aptly observes, they “adhere to photographic images” (240). Julia Stiles’s Ophelia, for example, who is a young photographer herself, distributes polaroid photographs as “herbs” in her distraction. Faxes and answering machines also serve as proxies of real communications in the film: Hamlet, for example, delivers his “get thee to a nunnery” (3.1.120) speech to Ophelia via her answering machine.

Devices of modern recording media also function as visual metaphors to highlight the “spying” theme, which is a basic motif in Shakespeare’s play, too. Denmark Corporation is marked by a taste for surveillance systems, and even the ghost (Sam Shepard as Old Hamlet) first appears as a shadowy figure on a security screen. Mirrors and other glistening surfaces occur as pervasively as video surveillance cameras and generate a feeling of unease at the lack of privacy. In the closet scene, for example, Polonius (Bill Murray) hides behind a wardrobe mirror while Hamlet instructs Gertrude to repent the past and to assume virtue in the future, even if she does not possess it. Later Claudius (Kyle MacLachlan) confides his plot to kill Hamlet to Laertes also in front of a wardrobe mirror, which is suddenly shattered by the bullet from Hamlet’s gun. The excessive use of mirrors links Almereyda’s movie to Kenneth Branagh’s screen version of *Hamlet*, in which the vast throne room of Elsinore is turned into a world of mirrors: there are thirty two-way mirrors placed on each side of the hall, behind which there are secret doors leading into small, dark rooms (Hatchuel 106). A crucial scene in Branagh’s adaptation is when Hamlet delivers his “To be or not to be” (3.1.55) soliloquy in front of one of these mirrors while Claudius is spying on the other side. In my view, in Almereyda’s *Hamlet* the abundance of gleaming reflective surfaces draws our attention to the ‘seeming’ nature of corporate Manhattan as well, and is asserted over the “to be” quality of “real” communications, interactions, and feelings that have some measure of profundity. After the press conference, for example, Gertrude, Hamlet and Claudius walk toward their limousine and Hamlet tells his mother that he has “that within which passes show; / These but the trappings and the suits of woe” (1.2.85-86). Then Gertrude gets into the car, winds the window halfway down and asks Hamlet not to return to Wittenberg. We can see Gertrude sitting in the car and Hamlet and Claudius, reflected in the car window wound halfway down, standing side by side against the Manhattan skyscrapers, and the question naturally arises: does Gertrude *really* want Hamlet to stay, does she *really* care for her son, or does her lust/love for Claudius overwhelm any kind of feeling directed toward other people. Another scene which is devoid of any “real,” sincere communication is when Hamlet, having shot Polonius dead, takes his blood-stained clothes to a Laundromat, and Rosencrantz, following him there, asks him where Polonius’s dead body is. When Hamlet gives a “knavish” answer Rosencrantz does not understand. Their images are reflected on the glass door of a washing machine, then Hamlet is shown alone merely gazing at the clothes going round and round behind the glass door.

Another typical postmodern poetic feature of Almereyda’s *Hamlet* is its revelling in self-reflective gestures. Like Prospero in Greenaway’s adaptation, for example, Almereyda’s Hamlet also becomes a character/persona of the Shakespeare-based product. He does not write his own story with a quill pen, but rather edits his memories of the past and his feelings in present on a palm top computer. Hamlet is introduced as

an author figure in the press conference scene set in the Elsinore hotel, where Claudius announces his takeover of Denmark Corporation and his marriage to Gertrude. Hamlet, with his Pixel camera and clamshell monitor in his hands, moves about conspicuously filming the event that press photographers are also recording. Hamlet arrives in the hotel wearing a knit cap and carrying a shoulder bag full of camera gear, and his “quietly ‘alternative’ and vulnerable-seeming” figure slouching in the alien world of Elsinore is as emblematic as his image sitting at the editing desk absorbed in fitting together shots (Buchanan 240). Not only his major soliloquies but several scenes and speech snippets from the play are also rendered as video sequences which he edits on his computer screen. The emphasis in these scenes is on Hamlet’s editorial process, his experimentation with the video records, which are meant to express his inner life. His second soliloquy in the film, “O that this too too solid flesh would melt” (1.2.129) is one of the most effective metacinematic statements of the film. It is performed by Hawke in voice-over while his Hamlet replays a home video of his parents, recalling idyllic moments of the past when his mother and father’s affection for each other was still so evident. Tellingly enough, Hamlet, who has got two personal computers and a clamshell camera on his desk, is watching Gertrude and Old Hamlet’s grainy black and white images both on a computer and on his clamshell monitor. He is manipulating the sequence: he plays, replays, stops, rewinds and forwards the images as if to incite his pain. Then we are shown a close shot of his eyes reflecting his angst-ridden state, after which the camera cuts to the video record again, and finally reverts to Hamlet, showing his hand editing the sequence. In these alternating shots we can see how Hamlet is manipulating the video, his reaction to it and then again how the video player responds to Hamlet’s manipulation.

Undoubtedly Hamlet’s most effective product as an amateur filmmaker is *The Mousetrap* film/video. It advertises cinema as the medium within which Almereyda works in two ways. First, while *The Mousetrap* in all previous *Hamlet* films is performed on a stage (within the given film world), *The Mousetrap* of Almereyda’s Hamlet is rendered exclusively within the frames of the motion picture: here “the play within the play” becomes a “film within the film,” which is viewed in a screening room. Secondly, it is a montage of film clips representing different film genres ranging from silent film, to Golden age matinée, to cartoon and to film pornography. In this respect it is set apart from Hamlet’s other video records, which he the amateur filmmaker made of his parents, Ophelia and himself. Concerning this second aspect of Almereyda’s self-reflective gesture, I find Elsie Walker’s insight worthy of attention. She asserts:

This *Mousetrap*, made from a pile of Bockbuster videos, is perhaps also a meditation on the Hollywood filmmaking industry as a network of endlessly recyclable material, an industry in which the same stories are told/adapted ... where it is difficult for individual voices – the “voice” of Almereyda the independent director, the voice of Hamlet, of Ethan Hawke in the lead – to make themselves heard. (26)

Almereyda’s *Hamlet*, I believe, is an eloquent example of the approach to translating Shakespeare to the screen which I have dubbed the postmodern poetic mode. It is

marked by an emphasis on the visuals, and consequently it fully exploits the possibilities offered by contemporary technology; it has a predilection for symbolic equivalents used for Shakespeare's meanings; it heavily accentuates the artificiality of the visual image, as a result of which it employs a plethora of anti-realist film techniques. All the features of the postmodern poetic mode I have listed so far are shared by the adaptations made in the traditional poetic mode, as well. What differentiates a postmodern screen version of Shakespeare from its great predecessors is that although it is an example of using ongoing metaphors, the emphasis in most cases is not on a unifying system of a metaphorical language aimed at creating an experience of immersion, but on the heterogeneity and fragmentation of images, which rather produce a sense of distance from what is going on the screen. The play with cinematic distance, which is a signature feature of these adaptations, is further enhanced by visual excesses—based on provocative editing, skewed camera angles and unnatural colouring—by setting the verbal against the visual, and by embracing anachronism, which is the product of incongruities of time and space. The conception behind this postmodern poetic world is that “Shakespeare's plays serve as robust compendia of traces of the past, to be recycled” (Rowe 44) and that the very fact of borrowing should be emphasized, as it is exactly the ‘belatedness’ of the Shakespearean source, and “the engaging dissonance such belatedness can generate” (46) which constitute the appeal of these Shakespeare film adaptations. Finally we should highlight self-reflexivity as an effective means postmodern products use to create a kind of detached playfulness. Almereyda's *Hamlet* is also typically self-referential: it draws our attention to the cinematic terms in which it is told, to the devices of its own medium. Although this self-reflexivity, I concede, can be considered a “sign of interpretive exhaustion,” I agree with Judith Buchanan, who argues that “[s]uch ludic attempts to identify themselves in playful competition with other cultural forms in which such stories are peddled suggests an excess of energy rather than a lack of it”; they are not the symptoms of “endism” but rather an appeal to create, to debate, to revise, and to renew the Shakespearean material (260).

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