

**QUESTIONNAIRE ON MICHAEL ALMEREYDA'S HAMLET (2000)**

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- 1) In Michael Almereyda's film version of *Hamlet*, at every turn, the director reads Shakespeare's play through the lens of a late-capitalist mindset. How is Elsinore re-imagined in a postmodern way?

As a postmodern version, Almereyda's *Hamlet* film reflects in a very complex way the main important features of this period such as the development of technologies, the post-industrialisation, consumerism and 'life style niche' advertising. Of course, Shakespeare wrote a play to be represented on an Elizabethan stage, but, as we well know, and that's why *Hamlet* is such a valuable play, it can be represented and considered in many different historical moments. For this reason, the greatest thing that we can find through this play is that each generation emphasises and takes into account the characters, roles and purposes that represent it better. As Susanne L. Wofford mentions in her criticism book *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism* 'This sense that Shakespeare somehow transcends the boundaries of any determined historical moment is perhaps the most characteristic quality. (...) Everyone recognizes that there are aspects of the plays that are distinctly Elizabethan or Jacobean, and yet playgoers and readers tend to feel that the plays rise above these differences and reach out a hand to us today'.

So in this 2000 version, Almereyda has chosen a very particular way to perform the Shakespeare's text because even though the original language has remained almost intact, he has tackled the fact of portraying an Elizabethan text within a postmodernist stage. Denmark, the play's original stage, is set in the 21<sup>st</sup> century's New York City, a post-industrialized city where the authentic capitalism takes place: skyscrapers, media transport, digital advertising, huge avenues, hotels, business, video stores... That means, and that's what we can really see through this version, that the court is not a court, but a Corporation whose main manager is the King Claudius.

The corporate world that is set in New York City gives the film a today's reliable fact. Kyle MacLahnan, who performs the character of the brother's dead King Hamlet, shows a perfect businessman that has reached the top of the Denmark Corporation.

It is important to mention the huge amount of technology that this *Hamlet*'s version uses. Almost all the scenes show at least one electronic device. For example, before the Ghost's scene, Hamlet dead father is first seen on the screen, and thanks to this device, Hamlet can meet his 'father' in his bedroom. Moreover, in the Hamlet's 'go to a nunnery' speech, (act 3, scene 1), Ophelia has been installed a recorder so that King Hamlet and Polonius can hear the Hamlet-Ophelia's conversation. Finally, I can perceive the postmodern change made in Ophelia's madness scene (act 4, scene 5), where the flowers she gives out, have been replaced by Polaroids and are thrown by her as if flower petals were falling down.

So cameras, recorders, microphones, television, washing machines (in Hamlet's laundry scene after the Polonius death), limousines, listening devices, guns, projector (in the play-with-in-the-play scene)... among others, play an important role when showing *Hamlet* as a postmodernist work.

In addition, Elsinore highly changes when using postmodernist features over an Elizabethan play. It makes us notice, on the one hand, a very different feeling to the original work, but, on the other hand, we realize that it is truly linked with the Shakespeare's original *Hamlet*. Why does it happen? The answer could be very short: the text remains intact. Through a brief

explanation I am going to look into a deeper answer where many differences can be seen easily.

The fact of representing Elsinore as a Hotel and Denmark as a business company or even the Ophelia's independence condition (she lives by her own in an apartment dabbling in photography), makes the spectator feel as if watching a different play, but yet very near to *Hamlet's* original work. As a postmodern work, Almereyda's *Hamlet* version shows the main characteristics of this period. For instance, pastiche can be found when mixing multiple elements that are often taken from High and Popular culture, for instance, in the film adaptation, we notice the combination between Elsinore's Hotel where Hamlet lives, and Ophelia's house (Hamlet goes to Ophelia's flat to hand her the letter in). Ophelia's flat is portrayed in the suburbs; it is narrow and dark, completely careless; very opposite to Hamlet's apartment. Furthermore, looking at the 'to be or not to be' soliloquy, the scene is portrayed in a very postmodern way; it is represented in the Blockbuster video store with the word 'action' strongly emphasised at both sides of the corridor and the logo's company in blue. The fact of representing the most important Shakespeare's soliloquy in a film store breaks down the traditional conception of Hamlet speaking to himself in a cave inside the castle with the Elizabethan court context.

To conclude, I would say this film version imagines Elsinore in a truly postmodern way; it makes Shakespeare's work an approach to the 21<sup>st</sup> century society, and it also shows the human being as a contradictory mind-thinker, enigmatic and fragmented. The being with a continuously internal fight hindering it to be stable and firm. It could be considered a new way of making feel *Hamlet* nearer to us, as a present day humanity that perceives the world mixed, constantly changing, and bombarded by technology and with a global spread of information.

- 2) Reflections are a constant motif in the film. Consider the types of surface where the characters are reflected. What do they say about the postmodern landscape and context? What do they say about the postmodern "consumption" of the individual? Why would New York be the location of choice for the adaptation?**

'[...] Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000) (is) spectacularly postmodern, placing Shakespeare's plays in disorienting, sometimes post-apocalyptic, urban landscapes which warn us of some sort of impending destruction in our own world, whether that destruction in our own world, whether that destruction be textual, relational, or material.' (Melissa CroteauCarolynJess-Cooke9th April 2009)

This version has been set in a grey scenery where Hamlet is surrounded by buildings (skyscrapers), glass walls, metal structures..., but if we focus on the light and colour-scenes, as Elvis Mitchell points out in one of his film reviews, we will perceive that all them are surpassed by red, green or blue; 'the use of colors (...) is a visual manifestation of the streamlining'. What Almereyda tries to show us through this technique, is the connection between the characters and the stage; depending on who is on scene, we will perceive a particular manner of designing and decoration.

Besides, the fact of using some famous buildings as places in which the film is shot such as the Guggenheim Museum, gives some scenes the power of a today's recent work such as the one when Ophelia turns mad and starts screaming, or the drawing scene where Ophelia appears floating in the fountain's water surrounded by the Hamlet's letters that she kept in her box.

We can also notice, that 'reflections' are strongly used while the Buddhist monk ThichNhatHanh is speaking through television and Hamlet is sitting on his bed staring at the computer screen watching a video where Ophelia appears in her bed trying to hide herself

with a book. Here, in this scene Almercyda is mixing the images through the screen within the screen, where there is a trilinear relation between ThichNhatHanh, Hamlet and Ophelia. Everytime Hanh is talking, Hamlet stares at Ophelia with a strong expression of desire.

Through technology, screens, television and cameras, Hamlet tries to evade himself and to establish a relation with the rest of the characters. He struggles remembering his father and Ophelia by editing images and videos. That could be related with what Warhol mentions when he links the modification of images with the manufacture of persons through society as if they were products.

Everything in this film adaptation strengthens the relationship between the characters and clarifies the Almercyda's interest on defining Hamlet's personality: an infantilized, melancholic and despondent 21<sup>st</sup> century teenager.

To sum up, I would like to comment that the choice of New York as a *Hamlet's* scenery has been not because of its importance as a city, but because it portrays one of the main characteristics of the postmodern period: the lost of the autonomy. New York is chosen as a representation of capitalism and consumerism, and consequently, I would say, a perfect choice to perform such a postmodern version.

As capitalism shows, the 'subject' is managed and manipulated through the advertised commodity world, the image prevalence, the body's aesthetics and, as a consequence, the 'self' is replaced by a 'subject-ed' and controlled entity. That's why, the image and the 'commodification' of art explained by Warhol, gain as much priority as in the late capitalism.

**3) According to postmodern theories, the subject is constructed as disoriented, at the mercy of floating signifiers, simulations and imitations. How is this portrayed in the film? Are actual commodities seen?**

As a postmodern version set in the most important city of capitalism, characters are strongly influenced by society, and as a consequence, by consumerism, technology, media... This 21<sup>st</sup> century world's representation could be perceived right after the first scenes where Fortimbras' action is showed through the media (newspaper). I cannot see the presence of this character too much emphasised in the film, but it really plays an important role in the Denmark Corporation.

However, we can realize from the very beginning of this version that the relationship between Hamlet and the rest of the characters is not so much important because of the use of technology. The constant use of recorders, screens, monitors, videos, images..., play an important and essential role as it happens in the late capitalist society.

In fact, as mentioned before, actual commodities are seen through the hole film.

**4) Remember the leitmotif that "Denmark is a prison" and the constant friction between what things seem and what things are. In *Hamlet*, "espionage" and deceit between characters is constant. How is Shakespeare's textual reflection of such surveillance reflected in the film? (In other words, consider the channels and mediums through which characters watch and listen to each other or themselves.) Do you think Almercyda is celebrating postmodern technology or do you think that he is being critical about it? How is the characters' language and ability to express themselves "ventriloquized" by modern technology?**

Shakespeare's textual reflection of the expression 'Denmark is a prison' is very well portrayed through this film version. First of all, it could be said that the setting in a city with such an amount of buildings, high and so close one to each other, is similar to a physical prison. However, there are some other evidences that reflect a psychological prison; for instance, the

few relation between the characters and the external world (except the tv-buddhist monk intervention and Fortimbra's appearance in the newspaper). This makes the court look like a non-related group with any external facts.

Nevertheless, the 'prison' that Hamlet feels to be living in is portrayed in many different ways. For example, in the nunnery scene, he finds Ophelia's recorder through which Polonius and King Claudius are hearing the conversation. At that moment Hamlet feels Ophelia's betrayal as a suspicion from the court. Here the surveillance is very well represented; it makes perceive Hamlet's character as a surrounded and controlled individual that cannot escape from Elsinore anymore.

The prison is also represented in a scene where Hamlet is looking at Ophelia's video while the Buddhist monk is talking about the 'to be' and 'inter-be' relation. This moment reflects how Hamlet cannot have a direct relationship with the other characters and though needs to use technology in order to reaffirm his desires: Ophelia's love.

Consequently, as I have said before, Hamlet cannot escape from Denmark prison, but he is certainly able to take revenge from his uncle by creating a film representation. Through the play within the play, I would say, Hamlet shows his inner feelings of revenge: depression, loneliness, solitude, disappointment... He cannot escape from the decisions that are planned against himself, but can avenge all his uncle's secrets.

Referring to the second question, I personally agree that Almereyda's version shows both intentions. On the one hand, he celebrates postmodern technology through the huge intervention of electrical devices, but, on the other hand, he is critical with it because the characters, especially Hamlet, are submerged in a technological world that makes them feel oppressed and submitted. In this world, characters as Polonius or King Claudius, can control those who surround themselves, but at the same time, characters such as Hamlet or Ophelia are really dependent and sometimes conditioned by this technological world.

Finally, answering to the last question about the character's language, it is possible to find many linguistic evidences such as the way Hamlet expresses his loneliness through the screens while he is filmed with a gun. It is important to notice that his voice does not appear, but the images represent how sad he feels, his hesitation about life and death... Moreover, something that took my attention is the Buddhist Monk's speech. It is a prelude about what the 'to be or not to be soliloquy' will later be.

We could also say that Hamlet's voice is ventriloquized through the play within the play, because he cannot speak anymore to the others or explain his uncle's betrayal, but he creates the film representation in order to make feel his uncle an embarrassing situation.

- 5) **The 'To be or not to be' soliloquy is anticipated and preceded by a speech on the relational notion of "inter-be" which the Vietnamese Buddhist guru ThichNhatHanh explains in a television program. This notion is associated with the realization that there is no independent self - that the perception of self, of "me", of "mine" is an illusion. Awareness that "I" am made of "non-I" elements leads to the understanding of non-self and it is the realization of non-self that brings an end to suffering. However, this scene seems to be more related to the variety of communicative equipment shown in the film and with fact that narration seems to be constantly interrupted by a frenzied portrayal of what Jean Baudrillard calls "the ecstasy of communication". How does it affect our perception of the most famous soliloquy in Shakespeare's play?**

Almereyda's *Hamlet* film version shows a philosophical representation about the 'to be or not to be' soliloquy. As I have explained in some previous questions, even though the Buddhist

monk's scene is not yet the 'to be or not to be' scene, it makes the spectator feel that it influences Hamlet's later monologue.

The scene is shot in Hamlet's bedroom while Hamlet is staring at Ophelia's images and the Buddhist monk is talking about the 'inter-be'. In the screen within the screen, Ophelia is looking at the camera and trying to hide herself, but Hamlet still continues looking at her where he expresses his strong sexualised desire: to own Ophelia. In this case, the inter-be interacts as a link between the two characters. The monk remarks: 'so it is impossible to be alone. You have to inter-be with everyone and everything else', at this moment, Hamlet starts feeling nearer Ophelia despite the fact of her absent presence.

Even though the images and the gazes are related to what Hanh is saying, if we pay attention to Hamlet, he never looks at the television screen where Hanh is talking and explaining the philosophical ideas. For me, it seems that his Buddhist discourse is only to be heard by the spectators, something to be learnt by the crowd.

Due to this, I could also say, that Almereyda wanted to criticise the mediated world which our society is every time more dependent. We use it as a way of being nearer to people we like; what media, cameras, photographs and images offer is taken as if real, but they are only lights, screens, paper, colours... So that, Almereyda uses this guru's message in order to show the audience how we behave and react to this mass-media world.

- 6) **Think about the space where the "To be or not to be" soliloquy is presented. How does this allude to the postmodern tendency to blur the boundaries between high art and popular culture? In which ways can we reinterpret the meaning of the soliloquy within this context?**

Hamlet soliloquy has been always highly considered as a valuable literary piece of work.

In this version the monologue is represented in a Blockbuster video store where Hamlet is amazed by the huge amount of action films that surround him. If we look at the shelves, Hamlet is only walking through the Action corridor, where well-decorated posters call the attention with its name ACTION.

This manner of mixing a literary hero, Hamlet, with the popular heroes, action film heroes, makes us perceive a 'blur of boundaries', because, not as the film heroes, Hamlet, despite of being such an acclaimed cultural hero, is alone, dispossessed, controlled, managed and alone just with the power of his voice and language.

This message is very postmodern because it changes general conceptions: the ones who triumph, those who really succeed in this 21<sup>st</sup> century stage are the action-men represented in the shelves; not as Hamlet, who being caught by the Denmark Corporation feels as a prisoner continuously managed without any kind of freedom.

So, high culture: Shakespeare's text and a metaphysical message, is combined with popular 21<sup>st</sup> culture: action films, heroes, strength, violence... In fact, the background that surrounds the Blockbuster video store is, as Melissa Croteau comments on one of her critic essays of her book (*Apocalyptic Shakespeare*), a projection of the gothic film: *The crow: City of Angels*, a group of adapted comic book series. It could also be related to the different versions of *Hamlet*, the opposite manners of performing this famous monologue, and overall, the mood of Hamlet so changed in this postmodern version.

- 7) **How is the “play-within-the play” reinterpreted in this version of *Hamlet*? In which way is it a typically postmodernist narrative? Do you think that the conventions of parody or pastiche simply recreate the postmodern (dystopian) landscape or can they be interpreted as enacting potentialities of dissent? (Because postmodernism relies so much on fragmentation and relativism, consider the extent to which, in the film, Hamlet’s montage of “The Mousetrap” may or may not be unequivocal in terms of interpretation. In other words, provide your own interpretation of the multiple images presented in “The Mousetrap” and why you think they would be included in the montage.)**

‘The Mousetrap’, is the voice of Hamlet. Even though it is not too much similar to the ‘Moustrap’ original one, Hamlet’s ventriloquized voice empowers through this projection. Hamlet creates a story by his own and through the edition of his father, mother and uncle’s images he represents the real story of his dead Father. He tries to reflect as cruel and violent as possible; he takes real images and makes a collage that scares Claudius a lot, film; he stands up when he sees the poison scene and he finally leaves the auditory when the representation of the wedding and the coronation appears on screen.

As a postmodern work, there is a strong use of different techniques such as pastiche or parody. There is a mixture of images that makes feel the audience confused. But the message Hamlet wants to transmit is inside the representation. Claudius, to whom has been created the film really realizes Hamlet’s main purpose as much as he leaves the cinema and orders to stop the projection.

So the conventions of these main features: pastiche and parody are used as a double meaning. They recreate the postmodern landscape, as they are part of a postmodern film version, and they also represent the potentialities of dissent, Hamlet employs this method to take revenge of his uncle and make him suffer the disgrace right before the public audience does.

- 8) **Analyze the figure of Ophelia as presented in the film and consider the following questions. How is her relationship to male figures portrayed (in particular in relation to Polonius and Laertes)? What does her style (her clothing, hair) say about her character? To what sort of iconography does Almereyda associate her? The flowers she gives away in her state of madness are mediated in the film and presented in a different format; what does this say about feminist critique and postmodern theory?**

Julia Stiles is the actress of Ophelia’s character in this film version. Clearly, when we see this 21<sup>st</sup> century Ophelia for the first time, we realize that she is an immature girl whose father yet takes care of her, innocent...

Her relation with male characters is very subordinate. For instance, Polonius still laces up her sneakers and addresses her; he also controls or at least wants to control the relationship between Hamlet and her daughter. If we look carefully at the scene in which Polonius goes to the King’s swimming pool to show him the Hamlet’s love letter, while Polonius is reading it aloud, Ophelia moves closer to the water and imagines herself as if plunging and drowning herself. This scene shows us a manipulated Ophelia whose feelings are totally ripped where the only way she can escape is through death.

Referring to her relationship with Laertes, she behaves in a much infantilized way. She shows him her inner feelings, she trusts him, however he also manages her, he tells her not to love Hamlet in order to agree with his father desires.

When we look at the Ophelia’s character we realize that Almereyda has chosen a weak girl’s style, she wears a red dress and her hairstyle is very innocent: two chignons on his head and a pair of trainers as footwear. So she somehow is associated with the innocence. However, at the last point she could be also associated with rebellion because she finally drowns herself.

Something that has also caught my attention is the way her natural is shown on screen ; she always acts next to beautiful fountains, the swimming pool and water spouts in New York, as if Almercyda wanted to tell us the very end just at the beginning of the film.

If we focus on her madness, she gets really mad; but there is something on Ophelia that reveals a lot as a postmodern version: the change Almercyda has done with the 'flowers' she originally gives to the characters. In the film she lives in her own apartment and works in photography, so when she is walking in the Guggenheim Museum she is distraught and dissolves into sobs and starts giving away Polaroids inspite of beautiful flowers.

Paying attention to what feminist critique focuses on and what postmodernism tries to show, we cannot confuse how the female character of Ophelia is taken into account and how a postmodern version tries to change the character's mood in an artistic way. As we can clearly see, the character of Ophelia has not almost an independent voice, but what seems more painful is that she is managed without any compassion. She doesn't speak, but we can see at her image that she is lonely, controlled and used as a subject that gives benefits to the power men. On the other hand, we can see that the postmodern version shows us a change of the Ophelia's lifestyle, she lives on her own and she 'works' in photography, something that she has chosen, so in this aspect, she is 'free'. Finally the way of drowning: in a fountain and the swimming pool prelude that is shown in the letter's scene. It prepares us to think of Ophelia's end.

- 9) **Recall that in very broad terms, feminist critique aims at advocating women's agency and subjectivity, at the same time that critics take the opportunity to "rewrite" the story of female archetypes. Compare the two versions of Ophelia that you have seen in both films. In your opinion, which is more victimized? Which is more infantilized? Which is more independent? Do you believe the directors provide them with a story of their own or, as Showalter points out regarding traditional criticism and adaptations of the character, they only "exist" because of and "through" Hamlet?**

I strongly believe that Zeffirelli's Ophelia is a character that only exists because of Hamlet. He falls in love with her and consequently she does it too. But in Almercyda's Ophelia case, it seems to me that she is more independent because she lives on her own, but it cannot be denied that she is still managed and controlled.; she cannot love Hamlet because of her father and her brother's ideas that do not allow her to do it.

I would say that both Ophelias are infantilized. Zeffirelli's one dresses and behaves innocent, she is dressed in white and wears a simple dress that mainly reflects her purity, but Almercyda's Ophelia, even though her way of dressing is modernized, she still behaves scared, innocent and without a firm personality.

Both are victimized, no one of them can choose who they love or who they not. They have a barrier that limits their freedom and can only be broken through killing themselves.