

Notes for Viewing Almereyda's *Hamlet*

Raymond Bellour: "The text of a film is unattainable because it is an unquotable text."

A phrase commonly used to describe this film is the "Jazz *Hamlet*" because of the sense of improvisation.

Commercial, consumer, media-dominated society:

Denmark Corporation, with its corporate culture, is a symbol of corruption.

American globalization displaces the nation state.

Ophelia and Hamlet, privileged rich kids who don't have much to do, reject its values.

Paparazzi and a press conference replace the court of Act I, Scene ii.

Luxurious settings and trappings of wealth characterize the lives of corporate officers.

Materialistic values displace spiritual ones.

The ghost disappears into a Pepsi machine.

Product ads are everywhere.

Manhattan:

The setting has been called a character.

The high rise buildings, limousines, ads, glitter, hard surfaces create an impersonal effect.

Globalization is presented as a state of mind and an urban experience.

Shots of looming, angled skyscrapers create a sense of claustrophobia, of being imprisoned.

Do the shots of Manhattan project a sense of fragmentation, which reflects Hamlet's inner state?

Technology:

Fax machines, computers, phones, recorders, video and still cameras, etc. appear in almost every scene.

Technology displaces memory.

- Hamlet watches home videos of loving parents, which he zooms and rewinds.

- Ophelia tosses Polaroids, saying rosemary is for remembrance.

Hamlet seeks, in his videos, connection, understanding of his loss, and control.

- In video, Hamlet's father brushes his hand across his temple and ear; Hamlet adopts the gesture.

Technology mediates communication.

- Hamlet leaves a message to get to a nunnery on Ophelia's answering machine.

- A fax, not Osric, informs Hamlet of Laertes's challenge to a duel.

Video is used in the film and in making the film; Hamlet and Almereyda are both directors.

- Both use a Fisher-Price PLX200 camera (Pixel Vision).¹

Spying is pervasive: surveillance cameras, Ophelia wearing a wire.

Hamlet flees to a laundromat after killing Polonius; claustrophobic, narrow corridors are lined by machines with spinning windows.

The Ghost first appears on a security camera. Horatio and Marcella rush to an elevator to check.

Hamlet speaks his "How weary, flat, stale" soliloquy framed by two monitors and a stack of books.

Intertextuality:

A poster of Che Guevara and the postcard of Malcolm X on the wall of Hamlet's apartment.

The pacifist Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's speaks of "inter-being" or co-existing with family, friends, and nature.

The video of rebel-icon James Dean in *East of Eden* replaces the First Player's Hecuba speech, which moved Hamlet to action with *The Mousetrap*.

In a theater poster of a 1913 production, the actor Forbes Robertson holds Yorick's skull.

¹ This characteristic is also reflexive or self-conscious, being partly a movie about a movie. Hamlet watches himself on video and edits videos; *The Mousetrap* is a film made up clips from other films. We the audience watch an audience in the movie watching Hamlet's film, *The Mousetrap*.

Hamlet's story is already known and filmed, though the event depicted hasn't yet happened. Alan A. Stone calls this "a riff on some previous interpretations of the play."

The rubber duck Ophelia tries to return to Hamlet refers to Aki Kaurismäki's *Hamlet Goes Business*, in which Claudius corners the world market in bath toys.

At the end, the TV anchor's announcement of Fortinbras's takeover combines lines from the First Player, Fortinbras, and the English Ambassador. The anchor is obviously reading from the teleprompter. Ethan Hawke played a shy, hesitant, introverted, tormented student seeking parental approval in *Dead Poet's Society*.

When Claudius confronts Hamlet in the laundromat, he pushes Hamlet from machine 2 to machine 3.

In Shakespeare's play, the confrontation begins in Act IV, scene 2 and continues on to scene 3.

After deciding not to kill Claudius, Hamlet exits the limo at a theater billing the Best Musical of 1998, the live-action stage version of *The Lion King*. *The Lion King* is inspired by *Hamlet*.

In Blockbusters, the film that is playing is *The Crow: City of Angels*, the second installment of the Crow series, in which the protagonists are sent to avenge the dead and set things right

Music (also intertextuality):

Eartha Kitt sings as background in the taxi.

The Grave Digger hums, "All Along the Watchtower" in a ditch.

Tchaikovsky's *Hamlet*, op. 67 plays in the background of *The Mousetrap*.

Hamlet's opening grainy video is accompanied by Morcheebe's music and Niels Gade's orchestral music.

Visual effects:

Visual energy.

Visual glamor versus the ugliness of the action.

Use of mirrors, screens, windows, and natural reflecting surfaces

- Hamlet speaks his "How all occasions do inform against me" soliloquy looking in a mirror in an airplane bathroom. This is a pun in the original scene, which takes place on a "plain."
- After the press conference, Gertrude sits in a limousine while Hamlet and Claudius are reflected in the car window.
- Ophelia sees herself and is seen reflected in water.
- Claudius looks into wardrobe mirror shattered by a bullet from the gun which killed Polonius.

Blue, red, and green predominate.

Hamlet's introspective world in grainy black and white contrasts with the color of the main narrative/active outer world.

The camera: pan and scan; shock cuts; shot/reverse shot; low angle, oblique shots of skyscrapers.

Hamlet's death appears in a grainy, black and white collage.

Characters/actors:

The friendship of Horatio and Hamlet is minimized, increasing the focus on that of Ophelia and Hamlet. Claudius is a hail fellow, well met. A womanizer?

Gertrude has few lines.

Liev Schreiber (Laertes) is the only actor trained in the English tradition.

Is Ophelia a feisty young woman or a victim? Does she go mad with grief at her father's death or rage over how men have used or manipulated her?

Do Gertrude and Ophelia die on their own terms or as victims?

The older generation—Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ghost—have space and time to speak their lines, often in continuous takes. Hamlet, Horatio, and Ophelia have cross-cut and uneven speech.

Costumes:

Hamlet's (Peruvian?) knit hat with ear flaps sets him off from the business attire of the other men.

Ophelia's collar has quivering black feathers in the Guggenheim, which reflect her mental state.

Her baggy parachute pants, tiny t-shirt, and messenger bag (Euro-chic?) are the height of fashion.