

The Rub: Anti-Immersive Techniques in Almereyda's Hamlet

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If you go to IMDB.com and type in the name "Hamlet," 73 exact title matches are returned of film and television adaptations of what is widely considered Shakespeare's masterpiece. The filmic adaptations stretch back literally to the year 1900 when a French adaptation called *Le duel d'Hamlet* became the first filmic adaptation of *Hamlet* on record. Since then, such great actors as Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Derek Jacobi, Kenneth Branagh, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mel Gibson, David Tennant, and Ethan Hawke have taken on the role of the prince of Denmark. These adaptations exist in English, French, Swedish, German, Italian, and even Indian. Even more impressive is that each of these various reproductions was made with a purpose in mind. Each of the directors sat down and considered the question of what they could bring to the table that had never been done before. For example, Zeffirelli saw himself as a "popularizer" of Shakespeare, and to that end he cast recognizable stars as the main characters and rearranged the dialogue to make it more accessible to a modern audience (qtd. in Haggood 80). Olivier's thesis and purpose was to emphasize the idea that *Hamlet* "...is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind," and brought about his purpose in part by making the set a series of precarious ledges and banisters without edges (*Hamlet* Dir. Olivier). Branagh showed Hamlet's indecision by using the hidden doors in Elsinore castle as a metaphor for the many possible and occult decisions he could make (Shawver 4).

While each of these productions is interesting in its own right, one of the most interesting and provocative adaptations of *Hamlet* was directed by Michael Almereyda and released in the year 2000 (a type of poetic symmetry to be released 100 years after the first adaptation). The thesis of Almereyda's *Hamlet* is the very last spoken line in the film. A news anchor, ostensibly covering the bloody multiple homicide in the upper echelons of the Denmark corporation and its effects in the corporate world, ends his broadcast by saying, "Our wills and fates do so contrary run that our devices still are overthrown, our thoughts are ours; their ends none of our own." In short, Almereyda's thesis is, despite our greatest efforts and plans, in the end, we are not in control of our own fate. Typically the goal of a filmmaker is immersion. They want to create an experience that draws the viewer into the universe of the film and makes them forget they are watching a movie. But in order to convey the lack of control that Almereyda considers so crucial, he constantly reminds the audience that they are watching a movie. By reminding them of that simple fact, he also reminds them that the ending of the movie is fixed and out of the protagonist's control.

One way that Almereyda reminds the viewer that his film is a film is in the very way that he transplants Hamlet into the 20th century. He could have used any number of situations as a backdrop for the action of the film, but he chose to transform the state of Denmark into a massive corporation, and the prince of Denmark into an independent film maker. The result of these two decisions is that there is video equipment all over the place; Hamlet, in fact, is rarely seen without a video camera or a portable video player. He is not the only one with cameras or surveillance equipment however. In an essay written about the technology in Almereyda's *Hamlet*, Mark Thornton Burnett says,

An overriding preoccupation in Almereyda's *Hamlet* is the variety of communicative equipment available at the present historical juncture. The director's Manhattan environment is overwhelmed by listening devices, laptops, cell phones and recording instruments. At pertinent instances, one can cite the bugging of Ophelia with a wiretap and the duel between Hamlet and Leartes...in which every movement is tabulated on an electronic score counter. (53)

All of this technology gives the feeling that everything the characters do is being watched; but on occasion, as is the case with Ophelia's wire tap, it also shows that there are things going on that are outside of the character's control.

A scene that shows off the theme of unexpected surveillance is the scene where Polonius confronts Hamlet to find the source of his madness. While the dialogue is not greatly changed (they do of course include the famous "you are a fishmonger" line), twice during this scene the camera flashes briefly to a closed circuit security (CCS) monitor. The first time it just shows Polonius and Hamlet talking, but as they enter the frame it is as Hamlet is saying the end of this line: "To be honest as this world goes is to be one man picked out of ten thousand" (Ham. 2.2.178-179). This does not necessarily mean that either of them are honest (in fact they are both being deceitful), but it does compliment the idea of the security camera picking individuals out of a crowd. The second time the shot changes to the CCS monitor is much more interesting, however. The shot changes as Hamlet walks away from Polonius. In other versions of the play and in other film adaptations, Hamlet walking away simply triggers an aside by Polonius. In this adaptation however, his aside is delivered to the security camera. This simple action makes the audience aware that Polonius knew of the security camera and very likely set up this little conversation for the benefit of someone watching on the monitor (maybe Claudius or Gertrude). In any case, it shows that Hamlet, for all his careful planning, is not in control of the situation. The simple fact that there are so many cameras and other means of surveillance is a constant reminder to the audience that this is a film; and because it is a film Hamlet's actions and the actions of every character are scripted and they have no control over the eventual outcome.

Maintaining the Shakespearean language is another way Almereyda breaks immersion and reminds the audience that *Hamlet* is a film. Watching the Olivier version of *Hamlet*, it is easy to get lost in the language and the setting because they match so perfectly. On the other side of the coin, it is easy to get lost in the setting and language of *Fight Club*, once again, because the language and the setting match so perfectly. Almereyda mixes the sides of the coin by taking a modern setting and applying Shakespearean language. It is important to note that this had been done before. In 1996, Baz Luhrmann provided a model by releasing *Romeo + Juliet*, which mixed a modern setting with Shakespearean text. This adaptation was still quite immersive despite this juxtaposition because effort was made to reconcile the language and the setting. The most notable change was making the "swords" and "daggers" the brand names of the different pistols they were using. As a result of these updates to the modern setting, the Shakespearean language is more potable. In contrast, Almereyda's *Hamlet* makes a few accommodations, but leaves many anachronistic terms in place for no other purpose than to jar the viewer. The Claudius figure is the new CEO of the Denmark Corporation, but he is constantly referred to as "King" and "Lord," just as Gertrude is referred to as "Queen." This anachronistic juxtaposition jars the viewer out of immersion almost every time. Another anachronism that is not really related to the language is the duel at the end of the film (as if anyone fences anymore). These anachronisms are left unchanged, partially to maintain the purity of the text I am sure, but largely for the effect of jarring and dislodging the audience from the fiction of the universe and reminding them once again that they are watching a film.

Maintaining the Shakespearean language also works in reverse. While Almereyda makes a point of maintaining the anachronisms of Shakespearean text, he also makes it a point to confuse the matter even more, by inserting bits of modern English from time to time. The first place we see this is in the opening shots of the film while the text is explaining the background of the story. Each caption is in modern English. It is confusing for first time viewers who are expecting Shakespearean language, and that confusion breaks immersion (in the very first scene). There are other parts of the film where characters speaking in Shakespearean English interact with diegetic sound spoken in modern English. There is a scene in which Ophelia calls "moviefone" and interacts with the menus. Also, in a short segment preceding the first iteration of the "To be, or not to be" speech, there is an Asian man on

television that delivers a speech that could be titled "To be, or inter-be," but does so in modern English. The recorded voice in the taxi after the screening of *The Mousetrap* is in modern English as well. It is odd that aspects of Shakespearean English and every occurrence of the modern English are also jarring and anti-immersive. They both serve as reminders that what the audience is watching, is a film and hence out of the control of Hamlet or any other character.

In a chapter entitled "Wide Angle" from *Shakespeare and Film*, Samuel Crowl finds the beginnings of the next anti-immersive technique used by Almereyda:

Almereyda traps Hawke's Hamlet in the prison of Manhattan's glass and steel skyscrapers and the city's ubiquitous neon jungle. Almereyda's Manhattan is soundless and sinister. It is a looming presence, from the film's opening frames...to the final duel...Almereyda's camera catches the cold blues and grays of those glass towers and transforms them into one vast glittering mirror, refracting light and reflecting images. (93)

In this passage, Crowl calls attention to two aspects of the film: the camera angles and the color palette of the film. He suggests that the city "is a looming presence" and makes reference to the cold blues and grays. While this is important, and he is correct in asserting that the stark environment and the color palette create a prison-like atmosphere, it falls short of the true import of these cinematic elements, which is to draw attention to the fact that they are cinematic elements. In Almereyda's *Hamlet* these two elements are taken to such extremes that they draw attention to the fact that they are exaggerated conventions of filmmaking.

First, the vast majority of the film is shot in tight interior spaces from slightly low angles so you can very often see the ceiling. Being able to see the ceiling in films has a tendency to create a sense of entrapment and oppression, but these are shots that are commonplace in films. What are really important for the idea of anti-immersion are the exterior shots. The most iconic exterior moment comes immediately after Claudius gives Leartes leave to return to France. This sequence features low angle shots that juxtapose Hamlet against skyscrapers, making obvious the size difference and calling attention to the cinematic technique that was used to create the shot. A similar shot can be seen in the very opening shots of the film looking through the moon roof of a limousine while driving under the hulk-like buildings.

The color palette is another way Almereyda draws attention to the cinematic techniques used to create the film and by doing so reminding the audience of the futility of Hamlet's and other characters's desire to control the events of the play. As Crowl pointed out, the color palette for the film is largely gray and blue. The dominant grays and blues, likely the result of a filter over the lens, are done in such a way that it appears stylistic, but not distracting (like Jerry Bruckheimer films). Clothes are black, gray, or dark. Vehicles are mostly black (except for taxis). Buildings are gray. Water is blue. There are very few places that vivid color is used, but when it is, it is distracting and breaks immersion. There are a few examples of exceptions to this rule: the press room at the beginning of the film, Claudius and Gertrude's bedroom, the bar that Hamlet visits with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but the most significant divergence from the muted color palette is Ophelia. The reason Ophelia stands out as an exception is the rest of the examples are places and they break the rule as a whole, it is different and breaks immersion for a moment, but it goes away quickly. Ophelia, in her red outfits, stands out because she exists in contrast to the dreary color palette (it is also interesting to note that the title screen of the film is just "HAMLET" in big white block letters on a red background).

The last anti-immersive trick that we are going to look at is perhaps one of the more subtle, but one of the most effective ones that Almereyda uses: casting Bill Murray as Polonius. He does a great job. There are moments of such intense believability that it is easy to forget how Bill Murray made his career. Bill Murray has starred in movies like *Ghost Busters*, *What About Bob*, *Groundhog Days*, *Stripes*, and (of course) *Caddyshack*. The last thing someone would think of when they see Bill Murray is "Shakespeare." I can only speak for myself, but every time Bill Murray came on screen, one of the characters from one of the movies listed above jumped into my head for just a second. Bill Murray is the ultimate anti-immersive device because he is the last person the audience expects to see.

Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* is a piece of art. Like the film, television, and stage versions before it (and after it), it had a thesis. Almereyda created a version of Hamlet that emphasized the fact that, despite his planning and scheming, Hamlet has no control over the outcome of his situation. He did this by ignoring one of the primary rules of cinema and breaking immersion on purpose in order to make the audience aware that, as a movie, the story is written in stone (or at least plastic discs) and the characters have no control. Almereyda's *Hamlet* has a compelling vision. It has great actors. It is beautifully presented. It is a worthy addition to the collection of 72 other filmic adaptations of Hamlet and the hundreds of other film versions of Shakespeare's plays.

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