

ADAPTATION TO THE (HYPER)REALITY: HAMLET AND HIS VIRTUAL WORLD

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Abstract

In this article I will argue that the film adaptation of the play *Hamlet* by Michael Almereyda (2000) is a reflection on contemporary postmodern society that highlights the tragedy of an individual who is in a constant search for justice and identity through technology. I am particularly interested in the social transformations of a feudal world represented in Shakespeare's play and the values of advanced capitalism visible in this film by Michael Almereyda. I will also analyze how memory is constructed by editing and manipulating the image through the videos recorded by the main character in order to find out the truth and seek revenge for the death of his father. The image favors the evocation of the memories of Hamlet and connects him to the present while it stimulates the expression of past experiences, as well as the capacity for self-recognition, which helps to strengthen his own identity.

Keywords: *technology, postmodern society, adaptation, hyperreality*

Articles about Hamlet's cinematic representations were numerous, but most of them are focused on the problem of losing the consistency of written text in exchange for the cinematic effects. Shakespearean texts offer multiple forms of interpretation, but it is important not to forget that a play has distinct features from the film. In addition to the parts related to the text itself - monologue, dialogue, characters, plot, story - there are implications related to the subject itself, and also the context created in that film.

It is also necessary to point out the film adaptations directed by Laurence Olivier in 1948, the approach offered by Franco Zeffirelli, in 1990, through a poetics of emotions, the one from 1996 in which Kenneth Branagh revitalizes the play through a cast centered on famous actors and Michael Almereyda's postmodern adaptation. I am interested in this latest adaptation, especially in how the relationship between the individual and society is built in a contemporary hyperconnected system and affected by the media technology. I believe that this film version of Hamlet offers a series of ideas in order to analyze the connection between past and present, by observing the existentialist dilemmas in a capitalist society, in continuous transformation through technology, the screen, the interface. In addition, I will take into account the *mise-en-scène* elements in connection with the dystopian perspective created in this film.

The version proposed by Almereyda is one involved in the capitalist structure: Elsinore represents Danmark Corporation, an empire in New York society where technology outweighs everyday life. The dystopian society in which the main character lives marks him on an introspective level, transforming him throughout the action. This film adaptation proposed by Almereyda is postmodern, even the idea of choosing the setting in New York, a city that by definition is a postmodern urban phenomenon. Jean Baudrillard in his famous essay *America* points out that America is a fiction, where "the whole space and

way of life is cinematic” (1988: 101). This postmodern reconstruction shows that the past is not completely eliminated, but it is a fragile balance with the present.

Zygmunt Bauman (2000) reflects in one of his essays about “liquid modernity”, a figure of change, of liberalization that also shows the precariousness of human being in an increasingly individualistic and privatized society, in which relations have a transitory and fragile condition. There is no longer a responsibility to the other, and the relationships are reduced to a continuous connection with technology.

In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard analyzes the crisis of narratives to show the legitimacy of the discontinuity, in which the world is constituted through the plurality of language games, implying as well the struggle for power. The main idea is that in society there are different and multiple struggles and not only one in particular is the most important. In postmodernity everything is possible, because there are no fixed rules. There is no longer a general language, but a multiplicity of languages or discourses. The credibility of a single discourse, consensus, history or progress has been lost, instead a plurality of discourses and narratives have appeared.

Postmodernity can be also understood as a process of discovery, a transformation of consciousness or the way of seeing things or feeling. By discovering the plural dimension, it also involves immersing oneself in multiplicity. This leads to the accentuation of an extreme individualism, which permeates all aspects related to social life and it points out a flexible society based on information and continuous stimulation of needs. In a way, this individualism is accompanied by the lack of a transcendentalism, not necessarily from a religious point of view, but also the disappearance of a secular transcendence of a life in which an ideal appears, whatever it may be.

Therefore, this direction can underline the fact that an individual can associate with others in order to satisfy their own ideas. Gilles Lipovetsky uses the term “hypermodernity” to characterize an impregnating phase of

hyperconsumption and hyperindividualism which leads, as the theorist puts it, to "a paradoxical combination of frivolity and anxiety, euphoria and vulnerability, playfulness and dread". (2005: 40)

Here, too, the concept of "seduction" is interesting, related both to the effect produced by the narrative content and the ideas created around the context. Baudrillard (1990) argues that only the object can seduce, the subject is trapped in the object's desire. Seduction is related to consumption and its objects, although the objects maintain a dose of mystery.

The text in this film production gains strength, although it is less that in the play, because of the mixture of technology and postmodern convention, the oscillation between convention and truth. The atmosphere of the megapolis, emotionally, psychologically, metaphysically is in connection with the tension of the Shakespearean tragedy. The individual's relationship with a universe that by definition represents dislocation produces behavioral traumas. Seduction is liquid, it changes through the contrast between the drama of an individual and the form in which it is exposed with the help of the cameras.

The environment in which the character lives is no longer pre-modern England, but an environment overworked daily by the American capitalism with modern technologies. Almereyda's goal is to show the amplification of individual alignment in a society supersaturated by new technologies. From the first close-ups, the spectrum of the camera is multiplied. Hamlet is invaded by the presence of screens, reminiscent of a double Orwellian perspective: the individual controls everything or is totally controlled.

This production has all the postmodern features: the *mise-en-abyme* technique, the inclusion of quotations from other Shakespearean films (the film ends with reference to Lührman's film, *Romeo + Juliet*), allusions to cultural icons, eclectic aspects from Brahms and Tchaikovsky, Bob Dylan and Morcheeba, and deliberately the self-referentiality that puts everything in quotes. Interesting to watch is the collage that Hamlet makes in the scene "The murder of Gonzago"

from the new frames and pre-existing images that form the game with modern technologies. The representation of the Shakespearean play as a hybrid of the Renaissance and 21st century styles is used to minimize the obvious difference between the old-fashioned Elizabethan language and modern discourse.

The Hamlet-Ofelia couple is a problematic one in the waves of contemporaneity in terms of their representation of social roles. Ethan Hawkes plays the role of an introspective Hamlet, affected by the technological environment, and he seems to be a cyber character. It seems that his role has common features with the one from the famous film *Gattaca*, directed by Andrew Niccol. However, the character is completely solipsistic, constantly looking through the cameras. The camera has here the role of mask, to amplify or eliminate the game of madness. With the help of the cameras, Hamlet records every movement and this fact gives him the right to have any step prepared. The camera is an artifact of evolution.

If in Shakespeare's time madness could be interpreted as a simulated mask, in postmodernity the mask can be contemplated and then remodeled. The camera reveals his alienation, a slow but noticeable process of slipping into dementia. Madness begins as a game and ends as a disease, except Hamlet drags the whole world with him. The prince tends to step very quickly into the role of "mad man" by acting irrationally and upsetting the other characters with his savage speeches. It is very important to mention that Hamlet is also melancholic and dissatisfied with the situation in Denmark and with his own family and even with the whole world.

If the Shakespeare phenomenon of the '90s was fueled by the cultural fantasy of a popular Shakespeare, this fantasy of having the text more accessible for the public was accompanied by the appearance of a counter-discourse on Shakespearean film.

In addition, cameras or photographs that provide a rhythmicity to the film, on the one hand, also mark a moment that must be preserved, recalled, an

act of testimony, while on the other hand they show the desire to capture the murderer, to possess him, to find out the truth that most often is not the expected one. Susan Sontag in *On photography* says:

Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive. [...] The

camera/gun does not kill, so the ominous metaphor seems to be all bluff-like a man's fantasy of having a gun, knife, or tool between his legs. [...] To photograph

people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, but having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. (2005:10)

In addition to the obsession to have something in his possession, in Hamlet's case the emphasis is placed between the desire to take revenge on his father's death and the desire to keep the two women by his side: his mother and Ophelia. The recordings he has with Ophelia or in which his father appears with his mother, articulate moments of nostalgia as Sontag says: "To take a photograph is to anticipate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt" (2005:11).

Walter Benjamin (1969) in his essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" emphasizes the idea that the audience / viewers identify with the actor by identifying with the camera. In fact, the camera is a tool that establishes a relationship between the actor and the audience. Hamlet uses the camera from a double perspective: to tell his own story and to find a solution to his father's death. Additionally, the existence of technology moves between the provocative effect, the accentuation of personal drama, and also to create the space of anxiety by searching for the truth.

This duality that is created with the help of media tools also suggests glimpses of memory, because Hamlet is forced to remember all the injustices that were done to him. From recorded fragments he reconstructs the present actions. According to Katherine Rowe, “the media allegory in Almeriyeda’s Hamlet focuses more narrowly on memory technologies. His preoccupation is the way film and video mediate past experience, both for the individual and the community” (2003: 43).

But this tension is transmitted to the public who should understand the drama of Hamlet, which in fact can be extrapolated to social drama. Hamlet's connection with the other characters is delimited by the presence of recordings, screens, monitors, images, which is increasingly accentuated in the capitalist society. This can be interpreted as a way to find justice by himself, without having a relationship with the other characters because this can create a space for care and intimacy.

Foucault refers to the technology of power when he speaks about a set of practices that are used to control individuals in a society. On the one hand, when Ofelia records the conversations between her brother and her father, when she photographs and exposes those images, she also looks to understand Hamlet. But on the other, following the steps of Hamlet in his personal investigation can also represent the desire to punish, surveillance as a form of control, to hold the power when he knows the truth. Technology has a double meaning: discovery and control, manipulation and revelation, intuition and obsession.

In these circumstances, Hamlet becomes a director of his own life, he watches and is watched, when he records moments from his daily life he uses the camera to break some rules, he thinks that he will be free, without limits. The technology allows him to break some conventions, but the obsession with discovering the murderer of his father actually keeps him in a closed world. This can be seen through the image of his clothing and appearance: he almost all the time wears a cap, he wears glasses that can signify intimacy and self-protection

and he lives in an apartment with transparent glass windows, but in fact, these elements can also represent boundaries. Limits are constructed through this closure. Moreover, Hamlet has a communication issue, he is incapable to vocalize words and he writes letters to Ophelia. On the one hand, writing means not only thinking deeply about something but also hiding what can be seen or revealed to the public. Writing means intimacy, something secret and personal. On the other hand, his office is full of newspaper articles, polaroid photos, cameras and screens. His writing space is visually marked, it is an illusion of freedom, the fact that he has access to information, but it confuses him, makes him feel vulnerable.

In conclusion, I would like to underline that this version of Hamlet emphasizes a transformation not only of the literary text into a filmic one, but also the immersion in a technology-based society, in which an old text becomes more credible through its context, in this case postmodernity, through the connection with the creativity and the power of language. Hamlet is a character who, through his actions, as I showed in this article, he emphasizes not only the vulnerability and drama of a person living in the consumer society but also he shows how the relation with technology makes him unable to relate to what is real because he is constantly immersed in visual representations that pretend to be real.

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