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Chapter 11

REMEDIATION

Hamlet among the Pixelvisionaries: Video Art, Authenticity, and "Wisdom" in Almereyda's *Hamlet*

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Recent Shakespeare films, including Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996), Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995), and Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000), have presented a wide range of contemporary media on screen, reframing or "remediating" them as elements of cinema and thus creating a multi-leveled idiom that recalls Shakespeare's habit of drawing metaphors from book and manuscript production as well as from the theater. In the case of Almereyda's *Hamlet*, the media landscape is wide indeed – we hear recorded safety reminders in taxis, watch characters (including the ghost) on surveillance cameras, observe the use of miniature audio transmission devices (Ophelia wears a "wire" in the nunnery scene), see faxes, word processing documents, floppy discs, photographs (Ophelia's medium), recorded videocassettes, live news broadcast, a teleprompter, and, especially, amateur video. In this adaptation Hamlet is an amateur videographer, and *The Mousetrap* is not a play within a play, but, as the desktop-published flyer Hamlet sends Gertrude and Claudius to announce it proclaims, "A Film/Video by Hamlet."

Like other films in which remediation and Shakespearean adaptation join forces, Almereyda's *Hamlet* uses its complex array of media technologies, genres, and practices not merely to fill in the details of a contemporary setting in which media are ubiquitous, but in more nuanced ways that are central to the meaning of the film and to its interpretation of *Hamlet*. By creating a web of cross-media self-reference that has roots in Shakespearean metatheatricality as well as in postmodern media pastiche, Courtney Lehmann has recently argued, Almereyda reads Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as prefiguring cinematic and videographic ways of seeing, remembering, and constructing meaning (Lehmann 2002a).

Douglas Lanier (2002a) has offered a reading of the film's media landscape that emphasizes the opposition between Hamlet as an alternative or independent filmmaker and the corporate media system associated with "The Denmark Corporation." Lanier is persuasive concerning the "difficulty of imagining a specifically filmic mode of resistance" (2002a: 177) to corporate power, since both Hamlet's gestures of resistance and Almereyda's are entwined with the system they resist. The present essay is congruent with Lanier's account of the political double binds facing alternative cinema, but approaches the film's video forms and practices from a somewhat different perspective, focusing on the interplay of video art, authenticity, and "wisdom." I provide a short account of Pixelvision (Hamlet's own medium of expression in the film), offer a close reading of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's videotaped discourse on "interbeing" (which plays on a monitor in Hamlet's room in a key scene), and discuss the relation between Almereyda's work and that of the video theorist and installation artist Bill Viola, whose "Slowly Turning Narrative" was to have been the setting for the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. While plans for the inclusion of this scene had to be canceled, the published screenplay offers evidence that it was central to Almereyda's original design, and the influence of Viola's career-long project of elevating video art to the status of a sacred text can be traced in the film as we have it.

Pixel This: Hamlet as Video Visionary

Before the credits, Ethan Hawke delivers an out-of-sequence version of Hamlet's speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ("I have of late

. . . lost all my mirth . . . and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" [2.2.296–309]), speaking directly to the camera, his image rendered in a grainy and distorted black-and-white close-up.[1] As the sequence proceeds, the camera pulls back to reveal that Hamlet, now seen sitting at his desk, is watching himself on the screen of a portable tape deck. Almereyda's version of the speech is more resolutely and literally depressive than Shakespeare's. He is alone in the image and faces the camera in direct address, with no Rosencrantz or Guildenstern present to make us wonder how much of his speech is an act put on for them. In the text his tribute to the beauty of the cosmos and the human species almost leads him away from the intended emphasis on his melancholy; in the film those lines are undercut by a montage of images of black batwing bombers hitting their targets in Bosnia, and, cued by the text's reference to man as "the paragon of animals," closely framed samplings of the malicious eyes and predatory teeth of a cartoon dragon. Hamlet's "mirth" vanishes like the empty glass he holds so close to the lens that its image breaks into shimmering reflections or the bright keys that disappear as he opens and closes his hand in a cheap cinematic version of a parlor trick, followed by video static. This brief snippet of Hamlet's black-and-white video diary contrasts with the brief vivid color sequence of New York at night just preceding (with Hamlet walking through a neon-lit square to the bright reflections in the lobby glass of "Hotel Elsinore") and with the sequence that follows, in which Claudius, the new "king and CEO" of the Denmark Corporation, brashly announces his succession in the glare of press conference lighting. Hamlet appears here too, in sunglasses (his "nighted color" accessorized here and associated with his mode of vision), "covering" the event with the help of a complex array of video gear, camera held high and miniature monitor/recorder, cords and adapters at waist level.

The camera is a Fisher Price PXL 2000, made for several years in the late 1980s as a children's toy (see Revkin 2000). Its images were recorded not on standard videocassettes but on ordinary audiotape and could only be played back by using the camera as a player. The medium, which Fisher Price called "Pixelvision," was later adopted by alternative and experimental filmmakers precisely because of the special quality of its grainy image, its peculiar and unpredictable rendition of contrast, and its shimmering distortions of direct light or highly reflective surfaces. Hamlet, like Almereyda himself, is one of these advanced users, his PXL having been obviously "modded" or modified for recording directly onto videotape.

The double history of Pixelvision as both children's toy and avant-garde instrument offers a context for Almereyda's decision to "reveal the apparatus" by putting Hamlet's camera on screen. As a children's toy it is appropriate for Hamlet's family memories; at the center of a sophisticated suite of recording and editing tools it links Hamlet to the director's own work in alternative cinema. Michael Almereyda directed the first Pixelvision "near full-length featurette," *Another Girl, Another Planet*, in 1992, and Pixelvision sequences appear in his other films, including *Nadja* (1994) and *Eternal Kiss of the Mummy* (1998). Pixelvision was in fact an avant-garde instrument masquerading as a children's toy from the beginning. When its inventor, James Wickstead, a gifted and exceptionally idiosyncratic industrial designer, agreed to create a camera for children that would be inexpensive (about $100 in 1987) and easy to use, his reference point in cinematic tradition was Bergman rather than Disney:

> Mr. Wickstead said one of the biggest challenges was convincing his engineers and the toy company to keep the device simple and crude. He said he was determined that it should record stark monochrome images in the style of Ingmar Bergman by having each pixel – the tiniest, most basic piece of a video image – recorded as black, white or a few intervening shades of gray. In early prototypes, when the sensors detected an intermediate level of light, they would flicker back and forth between shades of gray, he said. "My people were spending all this overtime trying to solve that, and I was saying, 'No, this is great! Stop!'" (Revkin 2000)

Pixelvision films can indeed seem distant, kiddy cousins of the cinematography of the early work of Sven Nyqvist (*Persona*) or Gunnar Fischer (*Seventh Seal*). But if soul-searching visual ambiguities were latent in the technology, the marketing of the system largely ignored these subversive possibilities. For example, the manual for the system (see Pixelvision homepage: elvis.rowan.edu/~cassidy/pixel/manual) is illustrated with close-up photos of a singularly bright-eyed and unalienated young man and reads a bit like the *Boy Scout Manual*. Because the product was marketed in this way, it took several years for Pixelvision to be "discovered" as an artistic medium. In 1988 James Benning, himself an experimental filmmaker, gave his daughter Sadie, then 15, a PXL 2000 as a gift (Morris 1999). She ignored it for some months, then took it out of the box on New Year's Day 1989 and produced her historic first piece, a four-minute film entitled "A New Year." Benning's early work took the form of video diaries and

autobiographical meditations, always narrated in the first person and centering at first on her somewhat confused sexual identity and gradually on her coming out, over the following two years, as a lesbian. Her work between 1989 and 1998 is now collected as volumes 1–3 of *The Work of Sadie Benning*, available from Video Data Bank at the Art Institute of Chicago. Within a year, Benning's films were at least partly supported by grants and in 1991 she won a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship. Her work is often featured at Pixelvision and other alternative film/video festivals such as Pixel This held annually in Venice, California (now past its thirteenth year), the multi-city Flicker events, as well as at gay, lesbian, and queer film series (including those at MIT), and her films are included in the syllabi of a number of video art courses around the country. Her work is hard-edged, gritty, dreamily surreal, and romantic by turns. She shares a stylistic vocabulary and, in large measure, an aesthetic of authenticity and rebellious self-disclosure with Almereyda and hence with his Hamlet. Aspects of this shared style may be regarded as a common inheritance of youth culture in the 1990s, and some can be traced to the stylistic "push" designed into the camera, but the link between Almereyda and Benning owes something, as well, to the emergence of conventions of representation within the Pixelvision community as it emerged in the 1990s.

Benning's work is insistently first person. Pixelvision makes it extremely easy to fall into video self-contemplation because of the inclusion of a well-designed "bipod" (a simple cradle to hold the camera still on a table) included as standard equipment. Young videomakers need not find either friend or tripod to get started, but can immediately set up the rig on a table, set the camera going, and, using the live video feed to the tiny television/monitor (also provided with the camera) as a viewfinder, experiment in real time with the interesting effects produced by the system. Indeed, given the limitations of the camera – only two light settings, no focus mechanism, unpredictable flare, pixelation, and loss of tonal range at close quarters – it is advisable to practice on yourself with the tiny monitor as a reference before trying out other subjects. Pixelvision could also provide an unusual degree of privacy because of its incompatibility with other media. Unless an adapter is used, playback is limited to your own equipment – audiotape won't yield a video image on any other player, so video diaries made in Pixelvision are likely to remain private and unlikely to cross over into network, cable, and VCR-dominated family viewing spaces.

The qualities of the image, discussed above, lend themselves to existential self-examination: narratives of identity are intensified by the sudden high contrast and other estrangement effects, as the image passes from crude-but-normal in tonal range to stark black on white or to pulsating reflection. In one film, as Benning ponders her self-worth and gender identity, she approaches the camera so closely that first one eye then another appears as a black spot against a white background before, gradually, a more graded image of her face reappears. In another, she describes, in a bitter tone, how a neighbor, a boy of 7, pulled her hair out in clumps in a fight. The accompanying image is not of hair falling out but of a shimmering play of light, difficult to identify at first, which resolves itself into a stunning ultra close-up of a comb catching light as it passes through the (undamaged) hair of the narrator, now older and tougher. With such effects not "special" but unavoidable in Pixelvision, the medium is well suited to portray oscillations in identity and self-valuation. Benning also uses text in her work, handwritten on paper, glass, the knuckles of her hands, and other surfaces as counterpoint to image, and, like Hamlet, samples televised movies and animation (*The Bad Seed* is intercut with her story of running away with a lover in Benning's *It Wasn't Love* [1992]) as well as home movie and video footage (especially of childhood scenes) originally captured on other media.

In Benning's work as in Almereyda's *Hamlet*, the image and the processes of video self-portraiture are often eroticized, though in different ways. Ethan Hawke plays Hamlet as a young man who is notably isolated (even compared with other Hamlets) and as one who is compulsive in his solitary video-editing and viewing habits, replaying, for example, several short sequences in which Ophelia appears in seductive close-up. In Benning's work the narrating voice plays a larger role in the rehearsal of erotic or intimate moments and there is less compulsive looping of the image; but, filming her memories usually (like Hamlet) in solitude, she too finds ways of making video self-portraiture suggest self-and-other encounters.[2] Benning's work is also insistently media-referential, incorporating samples of recorded music, television, and other video media, displaying handwriting on paper, cardboard, or window glass as intertitles and transitions, showing print text, graphics, and photographs as part of the narration, and revealing (or at least registering traces of) the filming apparatus through self-conscious alienating and extreme close-up effects that make us aware of the process of filming and the presence of the camera.

I want to give one further example of such cross-media effects from the work of Kyle Cassidy, another Pixelvision videomaker. *Toy Soldiers* (1996) is, like Benning's work, one of the celebrated early pixel films. It is also a first-person narration, but the image track takes the form of autobiographical fiction rather than diary, with a child actor reenacting the scenes described from the narrator's childhood experience. It is a five-minute film about a boy who plays with toy soldiers on a hill behind his house during the Vietnam war. Some of the soldiers are maimed, damaged by the neighbor's lawnmower (we see them in close-up, in charge configuration, and afterward close-ups of those who have lost limbs to the mower). The narrator and his mother also receive letters from the soldier-father, on duty in Vietnam, and "have dinner with Walter Cronkite" every night, viewing battle footage on television. One day the father sends home a grenade pin – exactly like those seen on television held by soldiers who are afterward blown up. One of the toy soldiers is a grenade thrower in a stance precisely like those seen on television, and the boy takes this figure out of the action, out of the range of the lawnmower, and protects it by taking it to bed each night. In this simple, intentionally naive story, strong parallels link action-figure play, the realities of war (only just becoming comprehensible to the boy), and the coverage of those realities on television. This piece thus tells a story about the child's experience of the distant war that is also a story of its replay in several media, each of which is given added resonance by the fact that an adult has filmed this story in a child's medium. The implication is that the sorrows of the war – plainly audible in the narrator's adult but still childlike voice – remain painful, though partly managed in the past through play and television viewing, and in the present by representation in an artistic medium that retains a powerful link to childhood. In this work, as in Benning's, the ephemeral (and now obsolescing) character of the medium plays a role in enhancing a sense of poignant vulnerability. As one practitioner, Erik Saks (cited on the Pixelvision homepage), puts it, "Pixelvision is an aberrant art form, underscored by the fact that since the cameras wear out quickly, and are no longer being manufactured, it holds within itself authorized obsolescence. Each time an artist uses a PXL 2000, the whole form edges closer to extinction."

In addition to specific thematic and stylistic resonances of these works with Almereyda's *Hamlet*, there are more general lessons to be learned by placing Almereyda's film in the context of Pixelvision's mixed status as child's toy and avant-garde instrument. One of these

concerns the way in which many contemporary filmmakers are, like Benning, Cassidy, and Almereyda, now making films that are more direct extensions and continuations of childhood and amateur media experiences. Spike Jonze (who was a skateboard videographer) and Peter Jackson (who was an action-figure horror and slasher filmmaker from age 12) fall into this category. In the work of such filmmakers, self-reflexive modes do not necessarily derive from New Wave precedent or film school aesthetics, but develop out of media practices going back to childhood. It may also sharpen our perception of Almereyda's intentions to note that Pixelvision as a subcultural practice balances isolation and community. In addition to festival and special event screenings, Pixelvision filmmakers are frequently part of an avant-garde art scene and/or alternative music community, or maintain a fitful online presence through various channels.[3] Almereyda's Hamlet may seem even more isolated against the slightly more sociable norm of the Pixelvision subculture, but in such a context his isolation will not seem a necessary consequence of making films in this medium.

This review may also support a reading of Hamlet's preoccupation with authenticity in the film that stresses its always-already sophisticated and artful character. Pixelvision was designed for authenticity effects and its history serves as one more reminder of the role of social and technological construction in narratives of artistic naiveté.

Hamlet's "grainy" medium, then, not only marks him as "independent," identifying with opposition to the corporate media spectacle; it also suggests that in "remembering" his father and his childhood by replaying video he has shot, he is continuing a childhood practice, cherishing a childhood toy, and rehearsing the unresolved and perhaps now unresolvable issues of childhood. Even his recent footage of his father and mother ("why she would hang on him") positions him as child voyeur, grabbing images of them on the fly as they walk along (and as, in voiceover, Hamlet celebrates their union and the superiority of his father to Claudius). Though these are images of what has been lost, and is now mourned for and even idealized, the sequence ends abruptly with Sam Shepard as Old Hamlet noticing the camera and covering the lens with his hand. The gesture will be closely echoed later in the film when Claudius, meditating on his guilt ("What if this hand were thicker than it is with brother's blood?") covers the image on the small-screen TV in his limousine.[4]

Michael Almereyda began to use Pixelvision as an adult filmmaker, but, like Benning and Kyle Cassidy, his adoption of this medium had

a psychologically regressive side. He discovered Pixelvision in the aftermath of his failure to find a distributor for a "real" film, his 1990 35mm feature *Twister*, with Harry Dean Stanton in the lead role (Almereyda 1996, liner notes). Despite the critical acclaim for *Hamlet* and, to a lesser extent, for *Nadja* and *At Sundance* (1995), Almereyda's career is still oscillating between subculture and mainstream. His most recent film, *Happy Here and Now*, won the *Village Voice* award for best undistributed film of 2002. *Another Girl, Another Planet* is a fiction film shot entirely in Pixelvision, centering on a young East Village-dwelling semi-bohemian young man's failures in relationships with women. Almereyda, having apparently missed his "big chance" (if indeed he thought of it this way), reverts, in a sense, to a medium with associations to what Richard Burt calls "loserdom." The film's title conveys the main character's sense of estrangement, and in context suggests not so much that each woman he encounters is in fact or even metaphorically a different species of alien, but rather that women, in general and as individuals, are aliens *to him*. Ramona, the final "girl" in the series, makes this explicit, explaining with striking candor that the reason for the failure of Bill's relationships is his own emptiness.

While each of the protagonist's relationships do in fact fail, the film is poignant and painful, as if an early Woody Allen character suddenly forgot how to wisecrack, its gritty world suffused with unanswerable questions and a profound sense of unbelonging. The associations of this state with childhood are emphasized by Bill's ritual of screening Tex Avery's animated short *Dancing on the Moon* for new visitors. The title song celebrates "Dancing on the moon / With a girl in my arms," but the childish cartoon animal protagonist is so preoccupied with catching the moon rocket that he leaves his girlfriend behind. Though it is permeated with a sense of the incapacity for "adjustment to adult life," the world Almereyda constructs in the film out of East Village staircases and rooftops, candles, bare electric bulbs, and reflections in the polished wood of the local bar, is also touched by an occasional sense of wonder and beauty rendered in the shimmering, out of focus light-show effects of the Pixelvision medium.

The characters, especially the main character, keep looking: not only for partners but also for the radiance that is momentarily present in the world, for some grounding in their lives. This aspect of the film – in which a quest for meaning and connectedness on the narrative level and abstract visual shimmer on the visual level combine – finds a center in the scenes of meandering talk in the local bar about a seer and healer (who never appears on screen) called Mother Mira. She is

first mentioned as someone to consult when one of Bill's girlfriends talks about wanting "more spirituality in her life." Mother Mira can answer difficult questions such as "which is true, that God is eternal presence or the Buddhist awareness of God as emptiness." Mother Mira is said to have answered (somewhat predictably) that "both are true: God is everything and nothing." In addition to her vatic utterances and ability to heal her visitors spiritually, Mother Mira is a transfigured, literally refulgent being: "suddenly light starts streaming from her face and whole body; lights dripping from the ceiling like a waterfall" (Almereyda 1996, sequence beginning 00:10:30 [my transcription]). A bit later, Ramona herself (though she has not visited the seer) is seen combing her hair with a fork with the ceiling light behind her, and in Pixelvision distortion we see what may be taken as a replay of one of Sadie Benning's *motifs* as well as a pale, perhaps mocking, analogue of Mother Mira's transfiguration. As the film unfolds, the inability of the characters to sustain more than a momentary contact with such fleeting images of radiance becomes clear, and it ends with Bill accepting the fact by recalling a film seen in childhood, *Nabu*, in which a visitor to India admires a maharaja's elephant and on his return home finds an elephant in his apartment, sent as a gift – one that doesn't quite fit in with the furniture. Both the philosophical/spiritual vocabulary of *Another Girl*, its sense of missed contact with sources of spiritual fulfillment or wisdom, and the uneasy mingling of credible anguish and sophomoric intellectual meandering are present in Almereyda's *Hamlet* as well. Indeed, these elements are not entirely absent in Shakespeare's text.

Being and Interbeing: Hamlet's Multitasking Medi(t)ation

Sophomoric or not, the posing of ontological and metaphysical questions in drama is certainly Hamletic. Philosophical language occurs in many places in the text, with "To be or not to be" only the most notable instance. "To be or not to be" is "the question" in the Folio and Second Quarto, while in the First Quarto reading it is "the point" – perhaps registering an actor-reporter's impatient hankering after certainty. But even in Q1, metaphysical questions abound in the soliloquy, and shape our hearing of the rest of the play, inviting us to listen for possible answers and to wonder when and if Hamlet has found them. Later passages take on a metaphysical shading from

their echoing of "to be or not to be": "let be" and "let it be" may be heard as responses to "the question" that is posed so abstractly and starkly in Q2 and F. Hamlet's words to Horatio in response to the invitation to fence with Laertes hazard, in addition, a direct citation of the Sermon on the Mount, suggesting the possibility that with the words "let be" Hamlet has come into possession of a specifically scriptural Christian wisdom in regard to "being."

Almereyda's *Hamlet* extends this echoing pattern beyond the text. The soliloquy itself is anticipated by Hamlet's recitation of the first lines several times on the Pixelvision monitor: during this scene he holds a gun to his head, experiments with various positions for pulling the trigger – with the barrel in his mouth, at the side of his head, etc. It is also anticipated by a sequence that seems to offer a kind of answer (before the question is asked), when Thich Nhat Hanh's videotaped discourse on being and interbeing plays on one of the video monitors in Hamlet's room while he watches his own pixel footage of Ophelia on another. I will cite the screenplay version and then fill in additional details of the sequence as it appears on film.

> THICH NHAT HANH
>
> We have the word to "be," but what I propose is the word to "interbe." Because it's not possible to be alone, to be by yourself. You need other people in order to be.
>
> *Hamlet, holding the clamshell monitor, crosses to his unmade bed.*
>
> Not only do you need mother, father, but also uncle, brother, sister, society. But you also need sunshine, river, air, birds, trees, birds, elephants, and so on.
>
> *Hamlet studies the monitor: a repeated pixel image of Ophelia in bed, a book covering her face. She lifts the book, looks into the camera.*
>
> So it is impossible to be by yourself; alone. You have to interbe with every one and every thing else. And therefore "to be" means "to interbe."
> (Almereyda 2000: 37)[5]

The screenplay makes it clear that Hamlet's attention is divided and that he processes Thich Nhat Hanh's words in counterpoint with his "study" of Ophelia's image (an equivalent in the text might be Ophelia's description of Hamlet's distracted visit to her chamber, and his "perusal" of her face). The sequence is preceded by a lingering shot of Ophelia waiting for Hamlet at the fountain, and followed by a sequence in which he feverishly composes poetry for her in a nearby diner ("Doubt that the stars are fire"). What he takes from the discourse of "interbeing," then, is a sense of the importance, indeed the

urgency, of breaking out of his solitude and "interbeing" with one person, whereas Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of relationship to immediate family, society, "elephants" (a touch of Buddhist humor that might provoke Goneril's objection, "what need one?"), and, indeed, with "everything and everyone else."

If Hamlet responds to this teaching in the sequence, he narrows its context to romantic/erotic relationships. The interplay of videotaped wisdom and Hamlet's reaction to it is precise. Our attention is directed to Thich Nhat Hanh's image through a slow camera movement that closes in on the monitor until the video image is literally reframed by the 35mm film frame. Hamlet sits in his chair, listening to (but not watching) the tape. Then a shift of attention is cued by the voiceover's inclusion of "mother . . . father . . . *uncle*" among the beings with whom one has to interbe, and Hamlet crosses to the bed and focuses intently on the pixel monitor. As he does so, that image too is reframed for our close attention by a slow movement of Almereyda's camera. Ophelia is seen on the small screen, her face at first hidden behind a book on whose cover we can see a photograph of an elderly man while the voice of Thich Nhat Hanh – "It is impossible to be by YOURSELF, alone . . . you have to interbe with other people" – continues, now heard as if Hamlet were considering it as a possible soundtrack to his video diary. As Ophelia "unmasks" to his camera's gaze, the sequence suggests that she is the "other person" Hamlet needs to relate to; but her appearing from behind the face of another relates the shot to other moments in the film and play in which Hamlet has doubts concerning the doubleness of female self-presentation. Indeed, his replaying of the sequence suggests continuing hesitation. Yet Ophelia is shown here not only as an object of Hamlet's gaze but also as herself, one for whom "being" is a question, even a subject of inquiry. The portion of the book's title (. . . *Living/. . . Dying*) that is visible in the Pixelvision frame connects her to Hamlet's persistent meditations on mortality, and, if one recognizes the book's cover portrait as that of Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986), to this Hamlet's interest in Eastern spirituality.

Ophelia's time-shifted, virtual interaction with Hamlet in the sequence also instances the shading of memory into autoeroticism. The footage of Ophelia records an intimate moment (a prelude to love-making may be suggested) in which two people took part, though only one appears on screen since Hamlet was holding the camera. In a double movement, Almereyda's camera moves in for a closer framing of the pixel monitor as Hamlet's shot moves closer to Ophelia's

face, drawing the film audience into the dynamics of foreplay and replay. If it is impossible to "be" by yourself, ontologically, as the Buddhist teachings insist, it is now almost impossible to "be by yourself" in another way, since one is surrounded by hypermediated simulacra (see Lehmann 2000a: 96–100). Read along this axis, both the reframing of a romantic and sexual moment as video replay and the remediation of ancient wisdom as videotape background noise may be taken as instances of the fragmenting effects of contemporary media.

But Hamlet's half-heeding of the doctrine of interbeing does produce a change in him: hearing it in the context of reviewing his memories of Ophelia, he foregoes the isolation of his video-suffused bedroom/editing suite and moves towards sociability, abandoning for the moment the simulacra of electronic media for pen, paper, and a solitary table in an all-night diner where he writes poetry intended to be delivered to Ophelia face to face. This suggests a more positive reading of the now common practice of splitting attention among several media forms: the combined effect of the Buddhist discourse and the revival of Hamlet's memories of Ophelia is to make the project of reconnecting with her look like Hamlet's first step towards "interbeing." However, this project fails when Polonius interrupts Hamlet's visit to Ophelia's apartment, intercepts the poem, and later brings it to Gertrude and Claudius, and its failure cues the sequence in which the words "to be or not to be" are first heard in the film as the soundtrack to Hamlet's anguished, replayed suicide gesture. Thich Nhat Hanh's gentle and expansive teaching first narrows in Hamlet's mind to Ophelia as a kind of test case, and then, when the test fails dismally, produces the starker opposition in which not being rather than interbeing is the alternative to being. Hamlet has misheard, misrecognized the message.

"Slowly Turning Narrative": Video Art versus Action Blockbuster

If the two video monitors in Hamlet's room signal an opposition between meditative equilibrium and media as distraction and fetish, the screenplay of Almereyda's *Hamlet* suggests a more powerful fusion of ancient wisdom and contemporary media by counterpointing the full version of "To be or not to be" with the Bill Viola retrospective at the Whitney Museum.

In the film as released, "To be or not to be" takes place in the "Action" aisles of a Blockbuster video rental store. This setting – along with the ghost's disappearance into a Pepsi machine in the opening sequences – was widely criticized, despite Amereyda's ironic intentions, as inappropriately commercial and even a betrayal of the claims the film seems to make to authenticity as an "independent" production (see Lanier 2002a: 175–7). But, as the screenplay makes clear, the speech was intended to be divided between locations, beginning at the Whitney Museum, where Hamlet wanders into the Bill Viola retrospective and begins the soliloquy in counterpoint to the soundtrack of one of Viola's most ambitious installations, "Slowly Turning Narrative." Then the location shifts: "the idea was to then balance the Viola video with its nemesis, a Blockbuster store with mass-market images flooding in from the store's monitors" (Almereyda 2000: 137). A conflict arose when Ethan Hawke and Uma Thurman's wedding was set for the day scheduled for shooting the sequence and another opportunity could not be found before the exhibition moved on. Plans for following the Viola show to Amsterdam were discussed but there were insufficient funds to move the crew to the Netherlands. As a result, Blockbuster became the setting for the whole speech. While Almereyda claims to have gradually become satisfied with this unavoidable change, the omission of "Slowly Turning Narrative" leaves frayed edges. The structure and meaning of the film were changed in major ways by the substitution. The sequence of scenes had to be altered; the metastory of Hamlet as a video artist is compromised; the range of media references is drastically narrowed, leaving video as surveillance, mass medium, and amateur practice, but eliminating the potentially powerful presence of video as fine art. Examining how Almereyda recoups, accepts, and rationalizes this breach in his design may not repair the damage, but perhaps it can provide a useful context for understanding the several ways in which the film as we have it engages the question of Hamlet's catastrophic loss.

"Slowly Turning Narrative," the centerpiece of the Whitney Viola retrospective of 1998 (see online excerpt at www.sfmoma.org/espace/viola/dhtml/content/viola_gallery/BV07.html) is a major piece in Viola's career-long project, which might be described as turning video art into a sacred text on themes congruent with Thich Nhat Hanh's discourse on "interbeing": the ephemerality of the self, its connectedness to the world, its persistence as a center of meaning. The exhibition was installed in a large room, most of which was filled by a large revolving screen in the center, on which were projected images of

birth, accident, celebration, amusement parks, fire, accompanied by a voiceover mantra-like chant: "The one who lives, the one who strives, the one who despairs, the one who sees, the one who enjoys, the one who feels." The catalogue for an earlier exhibition describes the piece:

> A large screen (9 × 12 feet wide) is slowly rotating on a central axis in the center of a large dark room. Two video projectors are facing it from opposite sides of the space. One side of the screen is a mirrored surface, the other side a normal projection screen. One projector shows a constant black-and-white image of a man's face in close-up, in harsh light, appearing distracted and at times straining. The other projector shows a series of changing color images (young children moving by on a carousel, a house on fire, people at a carnival at night, kids playing with fireworks, etc.) characterized by continuous motion and swirling light and color. On the black-and-white side, a voice can be heard reciting a rhythmic repetitive chant of a long list of phrases descriptive of states of being and individual actions. On the color image side, the ambient sounds associated with each image are heard. The beams from the two projectors distort and spill out images across the shifting screen surfaces and onto the walls as the angle of the screen alternately widens and narrows during the course of its rotations. The mirrored side sends distorted reflections continually cascading across the surrounding walls – indistinct gossamer forms that travel around the perimeter of the room. In addition, viewers in the space see themselves and the space around them reflected in the mirror as it slowly moves past.
>
> The work is concerned with the enclosing nature of self-image and the external circulation of potentially infinite (and therefore unattainable) states of being, all revolving around the still point of the central self. The room and all persons within it become a continually shifting projection screen, enclosing the image and its reflections, all locked into the regular cadence of the chanting voice and the rotating screen. The entire space becomes an interior for the revelations of a constantly turning mind absorbed with itself. The confluences and conflicts of image, intent, content, and emotion perpetually circulate as the screen slowly turns in the space. (Rose and Sellars, 1997: 106–7)

Caught up – as many viewers are – by being at once in the midst of the spectacle and apart from it, Hamlet begins the soliloquy, "To be or not to be," blending with and counterpointing "The one who finds, the one who meets, the who waits, the one who dives" mantra (Almereyda 2000: 49–50). His voice joins the chant for the first eight lines of "To be," ending with "and by a sleep to say we end / The heartache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to." At

this point the screenplay indicates that here "Hamlet stops following the mirror, letting his reflection slide away, consumed in video flame" (Almereyda 2000: 50).

Like the Thich Nhat Hanh sequence, this moment can be read as both quest for and misrecognition of a source of wisdom. Bill Viola's own description of "Slowly Turning Narrative" is worth citing as it makes clear the origins of the piece in Buddhist meditative practices as well as affording insight into the convergence of the themes of this work with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Almereyda's adaptation. He begins: "The work concerns the enclosing nature of self-image and the external circulation of potentially infinite (and therefore unattainable) states of being all revolving around the still point of the central self" (Viola 1995: 226). By reflecting the observer's image in a revolving mirrored surface that also displays and scatters video images of birth, disaster, and celebration, and alternately presenting and scattering both, Viola's work evokes ("evokes" is a weak word for the startling experience of being in the midst of this remarkable piece) Buddhist notions of the ephemeral nature of self (that is, self as self-image) and world, while the observer's body and gaze are made to enact the idea of "self" in Viola's second sense, that of a detached but aware meditating consciousness. As Viola explains, charting the interplay of self and its reflection, projection and its image in the turning mirror, and the spinning image of the room itself in which the installation is set, "the entire space becomes an interior for the revelations of a constantly turning mind absorbed with itself."

Viola began his career in video art in the early 1970s as assistant to Peter Campus and Nam June Paik. By 1980, his work had become (and remains) closely connected to the serious study of Asian religious art and ritual. He traveled to Indonesia, Java, and Bali in the late 1970s to record traditional music, studied with Zen masters in Japan, and began a long-term artistic partnership with Zen painter and priest Daien Tanaka in 1980. Extended trips to study at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh (1982) and to observe and record the Hindu firewalk ritual in Fiji (1984) and Native American art (1987) followed (Viola 1995: 288–9). Viola's interest in non-Western religion and ritual has been especially focused on the connections between spirituality and memory systems, which he sees as posing questions concerning time and experience that provide insight into the nature of modern technologies of record and memory such as video. In his formative period in the late 1970s and early 1980s he also became interested in the writings of Christian visionaries such as St. John

of the Cross, Hildegarde von Bingen, and Meister Eckhart. Many of Viola's major works are influenced by and even "versions" of Christian religious painting, including *Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983); *The Nantes Triptych* (1992); *The Greeting* (1995; a monumental ultra-slow motion video based on Pontormo's *Visitation* [1529]); *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001), recently purchased jointly by the Pompidou, the Whitney, and the Tate Modern for the highest price ever paid for a work of video art (Vogel 2002); *Going Forth By Day* (inspired by Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua; Viola 2002); and *The Passions* (2003).

While religious themes are not infrequent in contemporary art, they are often presented (for example by Serrano) in an idiom that can seem provocative or inappropriate to the uninitiated, generating controversy. Viola's work is sometimes misconstrued in an opposite way, his reach towards the status of sacred art being so direct that new viewers look in vain for postmodern irony. Viola is also a major theorist of video. As might be expected given the nature of his work, many of his writings concern video and time, video and the sacred, and related themes. His best known theoretical piece, "Video Black: The Mortality of the Image" (Viola 1994, repr. Viola 1995: 197–209), understands video as the most recent development in a movement of the arts away from "timelessness" towards expression of temporal limitation that he sees as beginning with Brunelleschi and Renaissance perspective. Video, in this scheme, is one of the most ephemeral of the arts, and, as such, offers possibilities for representing mortality. In "Video Black" Viola is interested in subject matter – a video camera can be on hand to record the most impromptu of events and, unlike still photography, does so by means of images that move through time themselves – but also in video's dependence on equipment, electric current, freedom from electrical interference or static, vicissitudes of the image in a medium that can bring about one of the three stages of video fatality: a static-filled screen, a blank "on" one, or a "dead" black one.

When Hamlet stands in the midst of "Slowly Turning Narrative" and begins his soliloquy, then, he does so in a different mood and in a different context from his first "rehearsals" of the lines in his Pixelvision suicide attempts. As media allegory, the Whitney sequence relates Almereyda's search for a philosophical video idiom to that of the major, now canonical artist working in that vein, and does so at an exhibition of historic importance – one at which Viola's work, already successful, achieved enhanced status in the art world.[6] "The piece," Almereyda writes, "seemed almost ready made for Hamlet's state of mind, for Shakespeare's hypnotic words" (Almereyda 2000: 137). The metanarrative changes substantially if the traces, survivals, and renewals of ancient "wisdom" traditions in Viola's work are felt as reinforcements of Almereyda's attempt to replay *Hamlet* in the mixed medium of Pixelvision and 35mm.

The scene in the Whitney was to have been followed by a continuation of the soliloquy in the video store: as indicated above, the idea was to "balance the Viola video with its nemesis, a Blockbuster store with mass-market images flooding in from the store's monitors" (Almereyda 2000: 137). But Blockbuster also provides, in the screenplay, raw material for Hamlet's renewed filmmaking, as the scene shifts to his apartment/editing studio where he finishes the last words of the speech while feverishly juxtaposing images of "sex and death," including footage from an Elizabethan-dress Shakespeare porn and from a silent *Hamlet*. In the release version the entire speech takes place in Blockbuster, the nemesis environment, and we do not see Hamlet renting tapes at the end of the sequence.[7] The "To be or not to be" speech is therefore more bitter, less connected to his own filmmaking, and unconnected to video installation art. Instead, Hamlet is more despairingly absorbed in lamenting the injustices of the world (of which our Blockbuster-inflected culture is one, no doubt, along with the law's delay and the whips and scorns of time).

Perhaps for a Hamlet to make a film (or put on a play) is just another evasion, another failure to act effectively in opposition to the corrupt court of Denmark or the corporate-media system. Indeed, the planned editing sequence ended, like Shakespeare's text, with the reflection that "enterprises of great pith and moment / With this regard their currents turn awry / And lose the name of action" (Almereyda 2000: 52). But at least in the screenplay we see that Hamlet's work on his film/video, however little it may accomplish in the realm of "action," has been inspired by a major work of art and is connected to a tradition.

The Whitney sequence is – or rather could have been – central not only to the media allegory of Almereyda's *Hamlet*, but also to the story it tells about Hamlet and the ghost of his father. The ghost is present on screen at several key moments at the end of the film as released. I suggest that these moments, which define the film's take on Hamlet's acceptance of death and his hopes for the telling of his story, would have a slightly different effect in a narrative that included the Viola exhibition.

The first of these moments occurs before the fencing match. Somewhat unaccountably, the ghost appears here first seated by the bedside of Horatio's sleeping girlfriend ("Marcella"), in an attitude of concern, more guardian angel, perhaps, than ghost, or like a parent worried over a child's illness. Hamlet spots him and turns away, rejoining Horatio for the exchange concerning the hazard of the proposed fencing match. Hamlet's delivery of the lines is anxious and hurried until, at "the readiness is all," he looks up, sees the ghost again, acknowledges his presence with a nod, and offers the words "let be" in a calmer tone of settled acceptance, looking up once more to his father as he concludes on a fade to black followed by a close-up of the poison being put into the cup.

The final return of the ghost comes during Hamlet's dying request to Horatio to "tell my story." The camera tracks in to Hamlet, from medium shot to close-up as he stands bloodied in combat in his fencing whites. The "story" he imagines is shown in Pixelvision, and is a complex reprise (with a difference) of several moments previously seen. There is Ophelia at intimate distance, recalling the shots of her in the Thich Nhat Hanh sequence – but now, in a shot divided into three short sequences separated by other material, the intended kiss is completed. The intercut shots include one of Gertrude, her hands to her face in grief; then a return to the main color sequence, which is now an extreme close-up of Hamlet's bloodied eye "watching" the imagined video story; and then replays of Hamlet being punched by Laertes and by Claudius' thugs. But the ghost is present too, virtually and briefly, moving left and out of the image after the shot of Gertrude, turning away from the sequence in which Hamlet is beaten ("more in sorrow than in anger") to look into the Pixelvision camera. The camera point of view is third person, no longer that of the intimate self-address of Pixelvision autobiography, but is nonetheless closely associated with Hamlet's "mind's eye" and with the ghost's presence as witness to the events of Hamlet's life (see Lehmann 2002a: 99 on the convergence of the cinematic "mind's eye" and Shakespeare's; see also Viola's theorization of the video as "mind's eye" [1995: 101]).

The final moments of the film also resonate with the structure marked out by the intertwining of Hamlet's videomaking and his efforts to find release from the anguished question of "being." Here Robert MacNeil reports on the carnage at Elsinore as if in a public television news report, borrowing Fortinbras' words and concluding with the First Ambassador's half-line: "The sight is dismal." But MacNeil then continues with lines from the player king:

> Our wills and fates do so contrary run
> That our devices still are overthrown;
> Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own. (3.3.209–11)

The effort to "restore" the film by imagining it as originally planned may perhaps only help us to see what is already there: Almereyda himself was at first distraught at having to leave out the Whitney scene, then slowly came to the conclusion that "the lonely Blockbuster aisles, with their in-house 'action' signs and 'Go home happy' wall placards, just might be sufficient" (Almereyda 2000: 127). But as we watch his Hamlet struggle in the last moments of the film to "let it be," to come to terms with the collapse of his hopes and his failure to alter through action or through art, it would have been good to be able to remember the beginning of the "To be or not to be" sequence as it stands in the screenplay where Hamlet, having joined his voice, reciting the first eight lines of the soliloquy, to the recorded chant that accompanies the surge of images that fill the screen and spill out over the walls of the room, *"stops following the mirror, letting his image slide away, consumed in video flame"* (Almereyda 2000: 50).

Notes

1 Shakespeare citations refer to David Bevington (ed.), *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 4th edn (New York: Longman, 1997).

2 Through devices as diverse as playing to the camera and suggesting sexual activities through out-of-focus thumbsucking (all but unidentifiable as such at close range), Benning's more recent fictional work contains some "hardcore" scenes. At the outer edge of Pixelvision eroticism, one website reviews a no-longer-online "pixelporn" competition on the "Art is Dead" website. The reviewer (Amzen 1997) confides that "what I liked about the films is that most of the time you couldn't tell exactly what was going on, due to the poor resolution and framerate of the medium."

3 See, for example, the Flicker New York City at oakshire.ionestudios.com/~flickernyc/PastFlickerPixel.htm; Indiespace at indiespace.com/pxlthis/.

4 The father's interdiction of the son as voyeur or competitor is of course a part of the normative resolution of the Oedipus complex in Freud's reading. In Almereyda's film there is an implication that, with his father gone, Hamlet's filming and his viewing and reviewing of what he has filmed may become unhealthy and compulsive, his poignant reveries shading into "unmanly grief."

5 Versions of this speech occur throughout Thich Nhat Hanh's voluminous writings (e.g., 1999: 6), where the first words the Buddha utters after

achieving enlightenment are said to have been "Dear friends, I have seen that nothing can be by itself alone, that everything has to interbe with everything else." Hanh's words are so apt as one answer to Hamlet's famous question that one might think that they were written and spoken with *Hamlet* in mind, but of course they are core Buddhist teachings. Hamlet's "to be" vocabulary corresponds to the Buddhist terms *Brava* (being) and *abhava* (not being).

6 Viola had received one honorary doctorate before, from his alma mater, four afterward, in rapid succession.

7 We do see Hamlet piling tapes onto the Blockbuster counter ten minutes earlier in the film, where the shot plays as just one more index of Hamlet's obsession with video.

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