Hamlet: Both Sides Of The Pond

Have you ever left a movie theatre feeling contented or unsettled? Have you ever waited in the movie house, long after everyone else has gone, still looking at the credits to find out where the film was shot? The screenplay must be meaningful and the music in perfect harmony with it, but the look and feel of the film is paramount. Conceptualizing that look and feel is the purview of the set director and the property (props) master. This, ‘in front of the camera’ collaborative results, falls under the production term: mise-en-scène. Film is a visual medium, so it is the composition of a scene, what it visually reveals or suggests, that will convey the director’s vision and give the story a physical home to occupy. The Hamlet productions of Michael Almereyda and Zeffirelli, although different in their styles, are distinct examples of visual syntactic mise-en-scène.

Franco Zeffirelli’s production is a Shakespearean-centric restoration work, and as such its mise-en-scène has specific needs to effectively portray the Middle Ages. For Zeffirelli’s medieval Elsinore castle the set director chose several Scottish locations. The stunning setting of Dunnottar Castle, in Aberdeenshire, which sits perched upon a rocky headland looks dramatic, formidable and evocative, suggesting bloodlines, strength and deadly conflicts. It was used for the opening long shots¹ where we are introduced to Hamlet’s home, with its battlements. It was

¹ Martha W. Driver, Shakespeare and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Performance and Adaption of the Plays with Medieval Sources or Settings; Part II The Tragedies (2009):110, Note 40.
also used in the outside scenes where Ophelia runs through its cavernous valley, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”\textsuperscript{2} on her way to her suicide. Or when Hamlet, on its steep hillside that is exposed to the elements, first meets the returning Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The remote, lonely, perilous landscape with its hints of ancient mysticism alludes to Hamlet’s state of mind. The Dover Castle, in Kent was used for the interior scenes. It is a thick-walled fieldstone fortress with a labyrinth of walkways, stairs, bridges and doors that implies the many levels of political and familial subterfuge, plots and alliances at play. The entrance to the castle has steps barely carved out of the rock, and a massive Gryphon sentinel at its base. The look reinforces an ancient time still undefined, with its mystical influences. The Blackness Castle was used for the courtyard scenes,\textsuperscript{3} with its high walls that declare and cast both safety and shadows over the people.

For Michael Almereyda’s eccentric adaptation, the set director chose New York City. Its towering mirror-like steel skyscrapers, reflect a modern domineering Orwellian surveillance state. Times Square with its bombardment of advertisements conveys a materialistic, oppressive environment. Patrick Cook alludes to what one recent book on Times Square calls “the center spot not only of New York but of the country, and even, not so fancifully, of the world.”\textsuperscript{4} The setting puts the film in the present and is a visual allegory of Hamlet’s state of mind. This introspective element is reinforced by the numerous interior scenes with reflective surfaces in them, such as Ophelia looking in the pool, or the mirrored door behind which Polonius dies. The family business, the Denmark Corporation, Hamlet’s family home, and the ultra modern Elsinore Hotel are in the same towering skyscraper, near Times Square. Their apartment walls are curved, a nod to a castle, but also alluding to nothing being straight forward. The apartment of Polonius,

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
Ophelia and Laertes is white, multiple leveled with straight walls, see-through floors and low ceilings. The look expresses different levels of experience, intelligence and agendas with the whiteness suggesting innocence and honesty. The low ceilings and see-through floor hint at Polonius’ position, ethics and his interloping character. Park Avenue was used in several shots, particularly the limousine scene, to enforce the power balance, or struggle, between Hamlet and Claudius and Gertrude. The Guggenheim Museum was chosen for its sleek, spiral, white minimalistic architecture that gives the audience a shock of stark modernism, and an unsettling and hypnotic feeling of being caught in an eddy. The feeling is enforced in Ophelia’s ‘madness’ scene at the museum. The oblique camera angle makes the massive white spiral balconies dominant in the shot, with the people seeming small and black, like flotsam being carried along, inconsequential.

However, the seemingly unimportant items placed in each scene are indeed essential to the mise-en-scène and to the story as a whole. They are part of the prop master’s department, who is responsible for ‘dressing’ the set. The items placed in each scene are visual expositions that help the audience understand the character and his world, connect to the characters by learning about their interests, fears or skills, and inform the audience about a specific element that will foreshadow or reveal its later importance. In Zeffirelli’s Hamlet, the props demonstrate the period. Carol Rutter says of Hamlet’s apartment, “it is cluttered with the apparatus both of chivalry – an upright stone effigy of an armed knight - and of learning - books, writing implements, manuscripts, a telescope, a classical sculpture in white marble, an astrolabe.”

This also holds true for the present medieval sextant that implies heavenly bodies, and the telescope suggesting far reaching discoveries. Hamlet is seen sitting upon a bench that looks like a church pew, evoking a religious element to his personality. The armed knight effigy suggests

---

that Hamlet may be in danger. It is seen over Claudius’ shoulder as he speaks to Hamlet, appearing to be keeping a watchful eye on Claudius. Gertrude hugs the knight as the men talk, implying that she too needs guarding and foreshadowing the deadly event when she lets her guard down. The windows in Hamlet’s room are always open suggesting open-mindedness, honesty and renewal. Props are ripe with meaning in Zeffirelli’s film. The sword lying on the ground after the Ghost leaves shows that Hamlet has surrendered to his path. The large tapestry of a dog in the Queen’s bedroom, behind which Polonius dies, reveals the earlier foreshadowing scene when Hamlet insinuated Polonius was a dead dog. Ophelia needing two hands to drink the wine, the food of life, from an over sized banquet goblet enforces the feeling that Ophelia is overwhelmed. An art form particular to Northern Europe is the faded wood panel painting of the crucifixion scene in the chapel, which gives the room longevity and lends an authentic feel.

Almereyda’s film is dependent upon the faithful use of props. They are the ‘soul’ of his vision. He uses technology in all its forms. Hamlet’s profession is a filmmaker, employing video cameras and computers. In numerous scenes people are being observed looking at, or talking to closed circuit television (CCTV) surveillance cameras. The Ghost is first seen on the CCTV security cameras for the building. There are televisions, fax machines, recorders and message machines. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s spying is reported over the telephone. A multitude of technological props represent a prolific and invasive need to deal with reality through an intermediate medium. To show a contrast between the untainted and the corrupted perspective we see Ophelia only with non-technological items, a bike, film that needs developing, polaroids, and books. However, with Ophelia’s suicide, she is vanquished leaving society to just click forward, and should we choose to, we can even rewind and delete her and her values altogether, as Hamlet shows us several times throughout the film. Reality is skewed and warped in this
production. To balance the perception, props are placed in Hamlet’s room, like the pictures of Che Guevara and Malcolm X. Burnett says, “Almereyda offers alternatives to this dystopian perspective by investing in images of countermovements that throw into relief the seeming dominance of a soulless metropolis.”

Throughout the film are items in rich vibrant red, to denote power, such as Claudius’s necktie, and blood, suggested in Gertrude’s bedroom carpet on which Polonius dies, or her bedsheets and headboard that she shares with Claudius. The chairs are gold in the baroque style, as are the pictures frames of the major artworks by the masters, all denoting wealth and indulgence. To show the mainstream materialism there are numerous product placement items: the Pepsi machine, the Carlsberg beer, the Panasonic and Samsung televisions, and the advertisements on the Jumbotrons in Times Square. The juxtaposition of the classical and the progressive, the opulent and the mundane, in the props used only enhances the unsettled feeling the audience experiences while watching Almereyda’s vision of *Hamlet*.

The decisions on where to film, at which locations, what props to include, and what to feature in each scene, all depend on the director’s vision. If the set director and property master are true to their perspective, then the film works. The audience feels that cohesiveness; it looks right. Whether the actual production is to the taste of the audience is apart from the actual integrity of the project. These two productions of *Hamlet* leave the audience with completely different reactions. Almereyda leaves his audience stunned and unsettled in cold reality. Zeffirelli’s audience, having been transported to an ideal world, leaves the movie theatre in a state of reverie, contented.

---

Works Cited


