The “New” Ophelia in Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet*

Ophelia is arguably the most identifiable and resonant of all Shakespeare’s heroines. Her iconic status is evidenced in the proliferation of Ophelia images found in the visual, literary, and performing arts worlds. The ideological function performed by Ophelia representation has been the focus of various studies seeking to explain the persistent fascination with this character that has seen her somehow transcend the original play-script. Yet while Ophelia has commonly been critiqued as a cultural signifier, changing according to cultural and historical contexts of production and reception, there appears to be a surprisingly strong and enduring thematic consistency of representation extending to a number of more contemporary enactments of this character. Although numerous radical and decidedly disruptive stagings of Ophelia have been performed in theater productions over the last half-century or more, renderings of Ophelia in modern film, by contrast, seem distinctively less subversive in nature. Popular films such as those directed by Laurence Olivier (1947), Franco Zeffirelli (1990), and Kenneth Branagh (1996) perpetuate what Kaara Peterson refers to as the “visual cliche” of Ophelia (1), an image inevitably accompanying characterizations of this character that focus on her beauty, innocence, eroticized madness, and victim status. Martha C. Ronk deconstructs the iconic image of Ophelia perpetuated in such films:

... her wild hair depicts madness or the victim of rape; her blank white dress stands in contrast to Hamlet’s inky and scholarly black; the emblematic flowers which she gives away and which surround her at death signal her participation in deflowering; her snatches of song suggest fragmentation of character. (22)

Richard Paul Knowles has illuminated the implications of these “artful and aesthetically beautiful appropriations of Ophelia,” highlighting the significance of their alignment with the “high” cultural authority of Shakespeare and of old-world culture with romanticized validations of feminine passivity, victimization, and service to masculinist artistic, cultural, and social goals” (23). Certainly, the majority of modern filmic renditions of Ophelia expose the enduring influence of the ideological alignment among femininity, docility, weakness, and hysteria that underpins far earlier representations of this character. I argue, however, that a far more progressive and innovative interpretation of the play in terms of Ophelia representation can be found in the most recent film adaptation, *Hamlet* (2000), directed by Michael Almereyda. Here, Hollywood finally affords Ophelia a level of ideological potency that would appear to rival Hamlet himself.

While some critics have focused on the propensity for various *Hamlet* adaptations to destabilize conventional gender roles and to expose internalized patriarchal hegemonies via the mere portrayal of “instances of patriarchal domination” (Evans 1), the characterization of Ophelia and the mise-en-scène established in many film adaptations continue to deny this character any function beyond mere object and spectacle. Gulsen Sayin Teker’s contribution draws upon Laura Mulvey’s influential work on the Lacanian male gaze, alluding to Ophelia’s objectification in its contention that various film adaptations since (and despite) the sexual revolution of the 1960s continue to focus on “the lyricism of her beauty, madness and death” (115).
According to Carol Chillington Rutter, many films "use Ophelia's scripted role—and her body—to serve what each constructs as a resolutely masculinist Hamlet" (299). Certainly the romanticization of Ophelia's disturbed emotional state and subsequent suicide found in various film adaptations ultimately serves to emphasize Hamlet's condition as having been wronged. Here, Ophelia's tragedy is exploited as one piece of evidence among many of the heinous crimes committed against Hamlet.

Interestingly, and despite the dramatic contrast Almereyda's adaptation strikes against its filmic predecessors in terms of Ophelia representation, the tendency to reduce Ophelia to the status of tragic prop (to read her madness and death in particular as symbolic vindications of Hamlet's frustrations) appears to have transferred into much of the critical commentary surrounding this film. While the studies of Patrick J. Cook (167, 181), Carolyn Jess (93), and Mark Thornton Burnett (55-56) convincingly acknowledge the numerous parallels the film constructs between Hamlet and Ophelia (their shared familial pressures, their obsessive engagement with images/technology, even their mutual suicidal intentions), these studies, like numerous others, tend to privilege Hamlet's experience (sometimes at the expense of providing an adequate context for Ophelia's behaviors) and allow the implications of the undeniably distinctive nature of Almereyda's portrayal of Ophelia to go unacknowledged. In presenting Ophelia's fate as just another byproduct of the corrupt corporate world against which Hamlet struggles in this modernized adaptation, much of the existing commentary on the film (with the exception of Burnett's) tends to ignore the ways in which Almereyda emphasizes Hamlet and Ophelia's romantic union as it exists in antithetical relation to the cruel environment in which they find themselves. Almereyda's accent on the theme of the ill-fated lovers, alongside his positioning of Ophelia as Hamlet's double, arguably serves to situate Ophelia at the center of the narrative alongside Hamlet. In this regard the dearth of criticism focusing on Ophelia's representation in Almereyda's adaptation appears somewhat surprising. In this essay I explore some of the implications of Almereyda's portrayal of Ophelia that have been thus far largely neglected in critical commentary.

In particular, I argue that Almereyda's adaptation avoids the unabashed sublimation of Ophelia's appearance, madness, and death found in the likes of the popularized films of Olivier, Zeffirelli, and Branagh. In so doing, I contend that Almereyda's adaptation constitutes a shift away from the implicit and explicit pre-Raphaelite or nineteenth-century connections that have persistently inspired revisions of Ophelia in modern film. Sassiness and defiance are the most conspicuous personality traits of Almereyda's Ophelia, played by the youthful Julia Stiles. Here, Ophelia is a young woman struggling against the alienation, imprisonment, and hypocrisy associated with what Yu Jin Ko aptly describes as the "cultural landscape of hostile corporate takeovers, Blockbuster Videos, and the commercial products of
relentless digitization” (19) characteristic of New York in the year 2000. While Stiles’s Ophelia does subscribe to some familiar and potentially limiting representational conventions evident in previous adaptations (her defiance often resembles a distinctly childlike impertinence and the film clearly implicates an association between her disempowerment and her sexual appeal), Almereyda’s film repudiates the tendency to focus on the aesthetic import of Ophelia’s beauty, death, and madness, as well as the inclination to position these elements as central to her characterization. Rather, the film’s representation of Ophelia seems to engage a more decisive and astute transmission of protest and resistance against this character’s objectification than can be distinguished in other films.

In terms of costuming, make-up, and general characterization, Almereyda’s staging of Ophelia works to expose previously limiting and predictable portrayals of this character that have placed her in a romanticized medieval setting and have denied her potency as a repressed figure. Such renditions have frequently exploited Ophelia’s outward appearance to insist on her subservience, dependence, and inherent feminine weakness while often neglecting to attribute such qualities to the assertion of a self-possessed, resolute patriarchal order. Stiles’s autonomous Ophelia is flat-chested, bare of make-up, and often inexpressive. She sports tightly-wound buns in her hair and can be found in decidedly androgynous attire, including bulky, square jackets worn over skirts and sneakers. She lives alone, is unaccompanied by a male more often than not, and has her own interests (particularly photography) independent of other characters. While she is noticeably infantilized by her father and brother (Polonius ties her shoelaces and brings balloons to her apartment while Laertes covets her butterfly hair clip after an extended lecturing session on the dangers of sex and love), viewers are given the distinct impression that Ophelia is not only misunderstood by the men in her life, but grossly underestimated by them. Undoubtedly, it is not the film’s mise-en-scène that serves to deny Ophelia subjectivity, but an avaricious corporate world ruled by a determined patriarchy that sanctions her constant surveillance as well as the possessive involvement of the men around her.

Unlike Almereyda’s Hamlet, other popular film adaptations keep Ophelia largely confined within the ramparts of Elsinore and outfit her in distinctly feminine and often sexually suggestive costuming. Zefferrelli’s Ophelia, played by Helena Bonham Carter, is reminiscent of Olivier’s earlier rendering of the character, played by Jean Simmons, in that she is simultaneously both childish and sexualized. Both actresses are outfitted in a
distinctly Victorian style, costuming that Chillington Rutter associates with “straitlaced values and sexual repression” as well as a “sentimental nostalgia for an invincible empire, [and] a self confident patriarchy” (302). Bonham Carter is depicted as a young girl in her early teens who wears an infantile bonnet and, like Simmons, has long, flowing hair in childish plaits to her waist. Chillington Rutter has noted the significance of Simmons's hair color, which she describes as “pure Hollywood[,] ... the platinum blond of cult and cliche and which, in combination with her heavily lined, kohl black eyebrows, denotes her undeniable sex appeal (303). Meanwhile, Branagh’s Botticelli-like Ophelia, played by Kate Winslet, with her tousled, red hair, heaving bosoms, and continual flashbacks of love-making sessions with Hamlet, has been accused of being the “dumbed down Ophelia-for-our-times[,] ... the obligatory tits-and-bum in a mass market ‘erotic thriller’” (Chillington Rutter 253). Overall, Simmons, Bonham-Carter, and Winslet all employ a markedly “romantic” or “star-acting” style of performance (pioneered by early twentieth-century actresses, perhaps most notably by Greta Garbo) that, again, promotes Ophelia’s objectification and ultimately denies the radical potential of representations of this character.

Ophelia’s madness has been variously exploited as a voyeuristic opportunity in a number of film adaptations. Her antic disposition is frequently rendered picturesque and is attributed to her over-sensitivity, erotomania, and general hysteria. Simmons’s mad Ophelia is surely one of the most ornamental. Her insanity brings about a barely perceptible dishevelment of either character or appearance. This Ophelia becomes bare-shouldered and shrouded in flowers that cling appealingly to her loose hair; she sings sweetly and her wide-eyed expression and persistently pouting lips ensure that a certain level of aesthetic composure is maintained as her world apparently falls apart. When Simmons’s Ophelia intones that her father “came a good end,” the inflection and tone in her voice betrays a genuine hopefulness: this Ophelia suffers a disturbingly pitiful ignorance. Although the characterizations of the “mad” Ophelia by Bonham-Carter and Winslet are not as decoratively rendered nor attributed the level of naivety of some of their filmic counterparts, their characterizations both find madness impenitently linked to sexual frustration. The insanity of Winslet’s Ophelia is again intimated by her
conventionally unruly hair and white underdress. Central to her madness is the suggestion that it is “blasted with ecstasy.” Here, Ophelia suffers a severe form of erotomania evidenced not only in her tousled and half-dressed appearance, but also in her hip- gyrating on the checkered floor as viewers witness her compunctions misgivings over her maiden-status. Branagh is clearly determined on a sexually experienced Ophelia in his film, a representation that Chillington Rutter claims denies the role’s “anxiety-provoking” potential for contemporary audiences through its rendering of Ophelia as “recognizable and therefore containable” (318).

While a sexual relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is not necessarily implied in Zeffirelli’s film, Bonham-Carter’s mad Ophelia suffers an even worse case of erotically inspired insanity than Winslet’s. This “mad” Ophelia roams the castle battlements barefoot and dirty. She attempts to plant an aggressive kiss on the mouth of a sentry whose sword sheath she takes in her hands and strokes in a distinctively masturbatory fashion. Bonham-Carter’s repetition of the words “and now is not come to my bed,” filmed using a low-angle mid-shot, indicates the immense significance of her sexual frustration to her mad state. The onlookers present at Elsinore can be seen shaking their heads, wearing disenfranchised expressions and even crying as they witness Ophelia’s seemingly insensible diatribe. Interestingly, Ophelia’s madness does not seem to elicit a great deal of alarm (other than from Gertrude), nor does it represent as a threat; rather, the bystanders are merely saddened and moved to pity as Claudius sorrowfully observes that she is “divided from herself and her fair judgment.” Rather than focusing on the political menace embodied in Ophelia’s infringement of restrictive gender conventions, the films of Zeffirelli and Branagh both tend to attribute her madness to an unsatisfied and “inappropriate” sexual voraciousness. While Carol Thomas Neely’s essay “Feminist Modes of Shakespearean Criticism” perceptively highlights the opportunity for Ophelia to actively oppose her object position via her madness, the insistence of this character’s aesthetic appeal, internal weakness, and sexual motivation found in a variety of film adaptations serves to seriously undermine this subversive potential.

Stiles’s enacted madness, by contrast, is not designed to titillate the viewers’ sense of an erotic aesthetic, nor does it explicitly seek to expose Ophelia’s internal weaknesses or the impact of her sexual agency. Consequently, Almereyda’s film is arguably able to more successfully tap into the possibilities for dissidence evident in this character’s madness, which it more obviously associates with her experience of a wider form of oppression. Stiles’s madness is at its most striking inside New York’s
Guggenheim Museum where an extreme long, low-angle shot captures her struggle against Claudius's violent grip as her blood-curdling shriek reverberates through the crowded building. This Ophelia demands acknowledgement: she struggles violently against a security guard, glares defiantly at Claudius, attempting to lash out at him, and eyeballs Gertrude as she screams her order, “pray you mark[!]” Unlike other film versions, Almereyda generally avoids close-ups of Ophelia's agitated facial expressions, preferring instead to include the perpetrators of her affliction present in the scene in frame. Viewers are actually encouraged to be stunned more by Claudius's aggressive stifling of Ophelia's voice as he covers her mouth with his hand, as well as Gertrude's smiling response in her attempt to avoid public embarrassment, than they are with Ophelia's piercing, insistent screams. Here, Ophelia's madness is not sexualized, nor is it attributed to Hamlet's alleged rejection of her as Cook would have it (209), and certainly not to a feminine predisposition to hysteria. Ophelia is “mad” because she, like Hamlet, understands (and fervently resists) her lack of options. The film employs Ophelia’s “madness” in a way that highlights the parallelism between the narratives of Hamlet and Ophelia, thereby implicating their shared existential dilemma (usually reserved only for Hamlet). In this way, Almereyda’s Hamlet avoids what Mary Floyd-Wilson critiques as the tendency to “decontextualize” Ophelia, to render her “romanticized [and] objectified” which, particularly in madness, frequently sees her “transformed into Other” (403).

While adaptations of Hamlet on screen have consistently attributed great significance to Ophelia's lyrical madness, it is inarguably her death that has become her most frequently invoked and defining image. Significantly, Ophelia's death is not actually “shown” in Shakespeare's text, but relayed by Gertrude. Despite this omission in the play, Ophelia's drowning scene has been depicted time and again in a variety of visual modes, most of which render her dead body serene and beautiful, artfully surrounded by garlands and flowers. Elaine Showalter's analysis examines what is perhaps the archetypal representation of this picturesque death: Millais's 1852 painting titled “Ophelia.” Showalter's claims highlight the gross objectification inherent in this depiction:

While Millais's Ophelia is sensuous siren as well as victim, the artist rather than the subject dominates the scene. The division of space between Ophelia and the natural details Millais had so painstakingly pursued reduces her to one more visual object... (qtd. in Chillington Rutter 308)
Olivier surely sought inspiration from Millais, or at least from various other visual artists who have also sublimated Ophelia’s death by focusing on its beauty and splendor. Olivier’s (about-to-be) dead Ophelia is part of nature, her visual depiction highlights Gertrude’s description of her as “... a creature native and indued / Unto the element.” Here, Ophelia is again reduced “to one more visual object” as Olivier foregrounds the beauty of the “natural details” surrounding the fall of his heroine. The camera peers through the leafy trees to spy the picturesque brook and pans along the shore, focusing on the lush, natural surroundings before finally coming to rest on the floating, angelic figure of Ophelia whose saccharine song continues as she drifts, flanked by white lilies.

Zeffirelli’s Ophelia, incidentally, does not seem to fare much better. Viewers are offered ample voyeuristic opportunity via a series of close-up shots of Ophelia’s tranquil, comely face as she lies on her funeral carriage awaiting burial. The image of Bonham-Carter’s dead Ophelia is redemptive. It would seem that only via death can her former glory (foregoing her madness) be restored. Her serene expression, white funeral dress, and intricately plaited hair acutely belie the suffering she has recently endured, presenting a stark contrast with her sullied and unkempt appearance in the scenes immediately preceding her death. Branagh too resorts to the voyeuristic use of the close-up shot in his representation of Ophelia’s death.

While Winslet’s dead Ophelia is shown only very briefly, she is perhaps the most reminiscent of Millais’s painting. Winslet is shown submerged under calm, clear water, her facial expression suggesting an aesthetic quietude, her wide-eyed death stare vacant yet strangely provocative. According to Magda Romanska, various staged representations of this character tend to demonstrate how “Ophelia, dying, [has] become an art,” how her dead body has become “both a source of visual production and an identificatory beauty model of desirable femininity” (486). This necro-aesthetic surely undermines the powerful opportunity for sedition presented through Ophelia’s death. The opportunity to foreground Ophelia’s existential dilemma, which runs parallel to that of the narrative’s major protagonist, is surrendered for the sake of artistic celebration and audience titillation as Ophelia becomes, in the words of Romanska, the “corpus delicti[,] ... well preserved but intellectually disconnected”(498).

Almereyda’s direction of Ophelia’s death confers a more convincing subject position on this character than its filmic predecessors. This is achieved not only via the film’s avoidance of the barefaced aestheticism of previous representations, but also through its powerful suggestion that Ophelia shares Hamlet’s complexity in thought and emotion and that her actions are in fact carefully calculated and deliberate. A panning overshot reveals Stiles’s dead Ophelia lying in a large, semi-circular urban
fountain. The tragedy of the scene is signaled by the grim, bass-heavy and thunderous score overlaying the overhead shot that allows viewers a brief glimpse of Ophelia's body from afar. Unlike many renditions, this Ophelia is fully clothed and even mobile in death. The fountain's surprisingly fierce flow of moving water splashes over her, obscuring her face as the audience (fleeting) inspects her in medium-long shot. Viewers are not permitted to linger on the spectacle of Ophelia's death for long, however, as she is quickly joined in this scene by a faceless stranger who retrieves her body from the fountain. Significantly, Gertrude's reportage of Ophelia's fate is mostly omitted from the film. She merely intones "drowned, drowned" in voiceover, thereby avoiding the tendency to connect Ophelia (who is usually "Pull'd .... / To muddy death") with arbitrary nature and to render her "incapable of her own distress." It is clear that Ophelia's death in Almereyda's film is not only deliberate, but also undoubtedly premeditated. Ophelia's reading taste indicates her conscious existential considerations long before the onset of her manifest madness: Hamlet's earlier vision of Ophelia spied through his amateur, black-and-white video footage sees her place aside a copy of the Eastern Spiritualist text On Living and Dying as she stares defiantly into the camera lens. Here, Almereyda provides a self-conscious allusion to the ways in which cinema popularly exploits female characters as spectacle in order to provide viewers with "moments of erotic contemplation," as outlined by Mulvey (837). Hamlet too seems to be seeking stimulus for his own "erotic contemplation[s]," but Ophelia overtly rejects the object position to which her lover would have her resigned; instead, she challenges the pervasive male gaze via a characteristically defiant refusal to avert her eyes from the camera lens that Hamlet imposes upon her.

Ophelia's suicidal intention is most patently suggested in the poolside scene where Polonius informs Claudius and Gertrude of the alleged cause of Hamlet's distress. Here, Ophelia attempts to snatch the "remembrances" from her father and then deliberately absents herself from company by moving to the water's edge where she balances precariously on tiptoes. The camera focuses on Ophelia's face in close-up as she performs a sly, sideways glance toward her father and then returns her attentions to the depths of the pool, which she eyes conspiratorially. The subsequent shot has her plunge into the water, which loudly envelopes her body; however, viewers soon recognize this as a fantasy sequence as the next shot restores her to her former position outside the pool. What is perhaps most significant about Ophelia's daydream drowning sequence is that it is immediately offset by Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy, editing that provides a clear link between the existential
dilemma that besets both characters. In Almereyda’s film Ophelia and Hamlet both contend with complex intellectual and emotional crises. In this case, it may be said that Ophelia is able to transcend the craveness that prevents Hamlet from taking assertive action in terms of his own mortality. Overall, the subjectivity allowed Ophelia in Almereyda’s film ensures that she, like Hamlet, is able to, as Romanska would have it, transform “with the times to reflect the concurrent dilemmas,” rather than remaining “the same: pale, fragile, silent, and dead” (501).

Overall, Almereyda’s Hamlet compels audiences to reflect on the history and form of Ophelia’s representation over time and across texts. The film’s interrogation of “seeing” and “looking” is evident in its extensive use of video surveillance, a motif that works to offer an implicit challenge to the object position commonly afforded Ophelia who, in this case, has a distinct awareness of herself as an image. Almereyda’s self-conscious exploration of this character’s past ideological efficacy calls into question various cultural constructions of gender, which insist upon the dependence, weakness, and irrationality of women and girls more generally. Remarkably, such reasoning continues to inform popular representations of Ophelia as evidenced in the films of Olivier, Zeffirelli, and Branagh. The portrayals of Ophelia found in these films arguably deny the vast possibilities for representation offered by this character and constitute what Knowles would consider a distinctly “masculine appropriation of representation” that functions to “reinscribe [the] authority of patriarchy” (30). Despite the inherent difficulty of enacting a feminist re-visioning of a text as recognizable and mythologized as Hamlet, Almereyda manages to avoid what Chillington Rutter sees as the tendency to deliver the story as a “one-man-show[,] ... a celebration of heroic masculinity” (299). Rather than trivializing Ophelia by means of focusing exclusively on her beauty, purity, hysteria, or sexuality, Almereyda highlights the complexities and contradictions in her character that render her, much like Hamlet, elusive yet “real,” conflicted yet politically potent.

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