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**Art Scaling Trauma: *The Hamlet Adventure*, directed by Greg
Roach and Ivaylo Dikanski (2008)¹**

In 1999, two years after Bulgaria's economic and political crisis of 1996-97 that saw inflation peak at a staggering 242% per month, at a time when financial "shock therapy" squeezed social and cultural expenditures to levels abysmal even by the standard of transition economies, while unemployment and mass poverty persisted, as the country's fragile economy was buffeted by the effects of the Kosovo war next door and an economic crisis in Russia, a film-making team of seventy attempted to scale an artistic summit.² Led by the Bulgarian screenwriter and producer Stanislav Semerdjiev and the American inventor of Virtual Cinema Greg Roach (creator of *The X-Files Game*), the team defied social, financial, environmental, and artistic challenges as they embarked on a film about Hamlet's spiritual journey and his self-sacrificial effort to counter the course of a time twisted "out of joint" (*Hamlet* 1.5.189).³ Shooting took place over 8,000 feet above sea level, by the side of the seven glacial Rila lakes, just beneath the highest mount on the Balkan Peninsula. The loftiness of the artistic vision matched the location. In the screenplay, the language and dramatic relationships of Shakespeare's play evanesced into nine soliloquies, their number condensed to the magical number seven in the final cut of the film. In them were enfolded twenty-two lines from *Hamlet*. Delivered in voice-over,⁴ this twice-wrought poetry was interwoven with music by composer Mark Snow (*The X-Files*, *Millenium*, *Smallville*), folk-metal guitarist Kiril Yanev, and the experimental string quartet StringS. These interfaced with a host of

¹ This article builds on Boika Sokolova, "The *Hamlet Adventure*: Shakespeare and the Mountain" (unpublished paper, seminar on "Staging the Shakespeare's Myths, 2000-2012," European Shakespeare Research Association Meeting, Montpellier, France, 2013).

² On the 1996-97 crisis and the effects of the currency board introduced by the IMF to staunch the hyperinflation cycle, see Steve H. Hanke, "Bulgaria: Fifteen Years Later," <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/bulgaria-fifteen-years-later>; Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, *OECD Economic Surveys: Bulgaria* (Paris: OECD, 1999), 11-12, https://books.google.com/books?id=1ozWAqAAQBAJ&pg=PA11&lpg=PA11&dq=bulgaria+in+1999&source=bl&ots=eT4HP-8hPa&sig=30c9qdOItHQXrGJLeGkXhbOr_Wk&hl=en&sa=X&ei=QR5IVamNDIfnsAWwlYHoAw&ved=0CF0Q6AEwCw#v=onepage&q=bulgaria%20in%201999&f=false.

³ All quotes from Shakespeare's work in this collection of articles are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt, Jean Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

⁴ Hamlet's lines in the film are read by Vesselin Kalanovski.

other media: dance, shadow theater, computer graphics animation, and, most persistently, stunning photography of mountain vistas, sky, and water.

From the very beginning of the production process, the film, originally entitled *I, Hamlet*, was beleaguered by financial and logistical problems and near-catastrophes. Eventually, it had to be abandoned before the final shoot on location. It is the story of the *failure* to make this film that is the focus of the drama-documentary *The Hamlet Adventure* (dir. Greg Roach and Ivaylo Dikanski) released in 2008, nine years after the project started. It features surviving footage from *I, Hamlet* collaged with interviews with the original cast and crew—an approach reminiscent of the collaging of Shakespeare’s lines with Semerdjiev’s verse in the screenplay, and of theater imagery with multi-media in the unfinished feature film. Largely emptied of Shakespeare’s language, *The Hamlet Adventure* nonetheless takes shape around the well-established cultural myth of *Hamlet*, conjoined with the more recent esoteric mythologizing of the Seven Rila Lakes.⁵ The final cut may be composed out of the shards of crushed artistic aspirations, salvaged film stock, and the memories of a scattered company, yet it is a demonstration not only of the generative power and adaptability of the Hamlet myth, but also of its usefulness in fostering individual and communal creative resistance to the dispiriting social circumstances and mores of the times.

Within the impoverished chaos of the post-communist transition, *The Hamlet Adventure*, announced as a “spiritual documentary” in the DVD credits, may well be viewed as an instance of whimsical escapism. The artistic product, however, offers a candid social commentary, as well as a heartfelt call for reassessing the values of consumerist and materialist mentality. The film is driven by the filmmakers’ creative desire for an act of art that is symbiotic with nature and that precipitates spiritual initiation and social healing. This is, indeed, “vaulting ambition” (*Macbeth* 1.7.27), or in Lacanian terms—a desire whose object (*Das Ding*) is beyond the realm of the symbolic and thus unattainable, barred from the subject. Yet it is precisely its unattainability, Lacan argues, or the vacuum in the symbolic that *Das Ding* (the object of desire) leaves, that drives artistic creation through the process of sublimation. Among the examples of artifacts

⁵ The Seven Rila Lakes are the site of a yearly pilgrimage for thousands of followers of the Bulgarian mystic Petar Dunov (1864-1944), also known by his spiritual name Beinsa Douno, founder of an esoteric movement combining Orthodox Christianity with meditation, sun worship, vegetarianism, and yoga. They come here in early August to mark the divine world’s New Year’s Day chosen by Dunov, which they celebrate with pan-rhythmic dances. The tradition was started by Dunov in the 1930s.

defined by the emptiness within that he lists, are the troubadours' love poetry for the unattainable mistress, vases containing emptiness, the negative space in the walls of buildings.⁶ To those belongs Hamlet's "that within which passeth show" (1.2.85)—the mourning for an unreachable Other, which is the driving force of the play.⁷ What is unique about *The Hamlet Adventure* is that it assigns to *Das Ding* a natural and artistic dimension, posited respectively through the evoked myths of the Seven Rila Lakes and Hamlet's yearning. As cinema scholar Vera Naidenova points out, the film is an example of the correlation of nature and art, and a challenge to think of these elements of creative endeavor as *both* discrete *and* as aspects of a whole, which she terms "universal knowledge."⁸ As the collapse of institutions and value systems, as well as sheer ill luck thwart the multiple attempts of the team to sublimate their desire for "universal knowledge" into a fully fleshed-out artistic product, the film portrays the formation of a "Hamletized" creative tribe, albeit one that, by 2008, has been dispersed across the globe.

Adventure/*aventure*/venture

The "adventure" in the film's title connotes the excitement of the undertaking, as well as the meaning of the French *aventure* as "romantic affair." As multi-faceted and potent symbols, the mountain and Shakespeare's play exert an irresistible pull on the filmmakers, a power referenced

⁶ Lacan develops the concept of art-making as sublimation of desire for *Das Ding* in Seminar VII, chapter XI. See Jacques Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986), 167-84. He defines sublimation as "that which raises an object to the dignity of the Thing"—something that happens through the paths (*les voies*) of the signifier (133). Michael P. Clark, *Jacque Lacan: An Annotated Bibliography*, vol. I, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), 65, clarifies the generative insufficiency of sublimation: "The very substitution of signifier for Thing that makes sublimation possible, however, necessarily separates *Das Ding* from the signifier and so constitutes a "beyond" to both the signifying chain and the pleasure principle. This separation installs the barrier between subject and Thing that insures the insufficiency of any single signifier or object of desire even as it elevates the signifier to the status of a fantasm that can satisfy the desire it evokes." For an explication of the way Lacanian sublimations (not only aesthetic, but also religious and scientific) give a livable form to impossible object relations, see Marc De Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 186.

⁷ In the sections on *Hamlet* in Seminar VI, 38, Lacan suggests that the hole in the real that "mobilizes" signification in *Hamlet* is the experience of the death of an other, the maelstrom of mourning: "This hole provides the place for the projection of the missing signifier, which is essential for the structure of the Other. This is the signifier whose absence leaves the Other incapable of responding to your question, the signifier that can be purchased only with your own flesh and your own blood, the signifier that is essentially the veiled phallus." The Seminar VI sessions for April 15-29, 1959 have been edited from the transcript by Jacques-Alain Miller and translated by James Hilbert as "Desire and the Interpretations of Desire in Hamlet," *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 11-52.

⁸ Vera Naidenova, Kamelia Nikolova et al, "Filmat 'Avantyrurata Hamlet' . . . s produlzhenie [The Film *The Hamlet Adventure* . . . with a continuation]" *Kino* 4 (2008), <http://www.filmmakersbg.org/kino-issue4-2008-bg.htm>.

in both the film narrative and its cinematography. “Ah, Rila! The Lakes in Rila!” exclaims Greg Roach as he begins his story about directing the film. The camerawork delivers a similar sense of adoration, bringing visual expression to the reputation of the mountain as a mysterious place between earth and sky where, dwarfed by the ravishingly beautiful and capricious nature, the individual subconsciously reaches for the beyond.⁹ Extreme long shots caress the rugged mountain landscape and the hypnotic blue waters of the lakes, sometimes gliding by the human figures, even Assen Pavlov’s Hamlet, then returning to them almost unwillingly. The swift light changes in the high mountain, captured in the numerous long-shot scenes, are as cinematically significant as the subtle facial expressions in the close-ups.

As for Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the filmmakers’ strong attraction to the play is part of a larger European phenomenon. In Bulgarian theater history, since *Hamlet*’s first 1906 production, as critic Bozhidara Bozhinova maintains, the play has “provoked a complex self-reflection on the part of contemporary audiences.” Moreover, she continues, “the encounters of Bulgarians with *Hamlet*’s transformations have marked major shifts of belief systems and social attitudes.”¹⁰ Accordingly, we suggest, *Hamlet*’s prominent presence on the cultural scene since 2008 signals a shift in civic awareness. In addition to the widely popular productions and adaptations, discussed later in this article collection, the play was chosen as the topic of the year-long Shakespeare

⁹ This reputation of Rila as a site where one experiences the sublime may have been spoiled, along with the fragile ecosystem of the Seven Rila Lakes, after the opening in the spring of 2009 of a ski lift bringing tourists effortlessly from the Panichishte ski resort below. Before that, however, the mountain’s association with the sublime had been well established in the national imagination. On visiting it for the first time, Bulgarian poet and novelist Ivan Vazov noted that its “mantle of mystery: is so thick that the mountain “rarely appears even in folk songs.” In his travelogue, *The Great Rila Desert* (1892), he suggested that Rila inspired veneration of the sacred. Nestling high up in its folds is the Rila Monastery, home to Bulgarian Christianity for more than a thousand years. Housed there are the relics of the first Bulgarian saint, the tenth century hermit St Ivan of Rila (Ivan Rilski), who lived in a cave nearby. The Rila Monastery has been a site of pilgrimage and a spiritual center of Eastern Orthodoxy, even when Bulgaria had lost sovereignty. With the skepticism of a man of the Enlightenment, Vazov stops short of endowing the mountain with intrinsic transcendental power. Rila’s lakes, too, leave him without much to say, apart from explaining their origin in the ice age. As the co-author of the first Bulgarian *Reader* for the schools of the newly founded state (1884), which made Shakespeare part of the national curriculum, the playwright is often on Vazov’s mind, recalled in the travelogue by a narrator whose frame of reference is pan-European: at the sight of a mad girl, brought to the monastery, he thinks of “poor Ophelia”, on seeing some violets, he is reminded of Perdita’s verses. Bulgarian history, Shakespeare, and Rila are thus connected in Vazov’s authorial voice, but he does not ascribe an intrinsic connection among them.

¹⁰ Bozhidara Bozhinova, *Balgarskiyat Hamlet: XX vek [The Bulgarian Hamlet: 20th Century]* (Sofia: Kralitza Mab, 2009), 184, 187. On how the Hamlet myth has traversed European borders, see *The Hamlet Zone: Reworking Hamlet for European Cultures*, ed. Ruth J. Owen (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

seminar organized by the University of Sofia to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the playwright's birth (2014).¹¹

In both the Bulgarian and the larger European cultural reception, *Hamlet* and its eponymous hero have acquired a mythic status—a concept embraced by Semerdjiev as well. In an interview with Boika Sokolova, he compared the uses of the play with the function of myth in classical drama.¹² The mythological stories reworked in ancient Greek tragedies were so familiar to their original audience that in themselves they were of relatively little interest; what mattered was how individual dramatists presented them in new, locally meaningful ways. Semerdjiev considers Hamlet's story to be similarly malleable, ever open to transformations that resonate with a specific moment in history, yet enduring in its fundamental structure and character set. His original idea of using *Hamlet* to generate new, transformative variables was a performance on a grand scale, where the audience was to be flown by helicopter to the mountain top and seated on the rocks by the highest of the Rila Lakes, the Tear (8,317 ft). The action was to take place both on a stage and around the spectators, making them part of Hamlet's spiritual journey.¹³ Given the aesthetic and physical intensity of the experience, we believe, they would have been undergoing their own personal transformation. The idea was obviously not feasible, but a chance meeting with Greg Roach led to another plan. On his web site, Roach is described as “the Founder and Creative Director at *Spirit Quest World*, which explores the convergence of spirituality, travel and mobile media” and enables arm-chair travelers to share his travels “to the world's most beautiful, exotic and inspiring destinations.”¹⁴ Through the film on which Semerdjiev and Roach eventually decided to collaborate, audiences were to follow the camera's intimate take on Hamlet's journey. The film was to be the foundation for a computer game that was to offer further opportunities to traverse the Hamlet myth through the experiences of various

¹¹ The seminar was convened at one of the most politically prominent sites in the history of Bulgaria's democratic transition, in the year following the birth of a civic movement against what we have termed the political chalgazation of post-communism, a movement that embraced emblems of the cultural canon as part of its political lexicon, as discussed in the opening article. Several of the seminar organizers were active participants in this movement. The University of Sofia has been the site of several politically motivated occupation strikes since the fall of communism in 1989. Its central building forms a triangle of symbolic power in the center of Bulgaria's capital, along with the nearby National Assembly and the Alexander Nevski Cathedral.

¹² Stanislav Semerdjiev, in discussion with Boika Sokolova, Sofia, Bulgaria, 1 May 2013.

¹³ Maya Kisiova, *Slovesni repetitzi* [*Verbal Rehearsals*] (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad), 2008), 9. As Semerdjiev relates in his interview in the book, this idea was inspired by Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982).

¹⁴ Greg Roach: *Designer, Writer, Creative Director, Inventor, Traveler*, <http://www.storyslinder.com>.

characters, similarly to what Roach had already done in *The Ex-Files Game*. These interactions with the play's characters were to result in new versions of the ever-relevant Hamlet story, stimulating not only creativity but also self-knowledge and self-transformation.

The sublimation of the Hamlet myth that eventually materialized as *The Hamlet Adventure* had a considerably smaller reach and press coverage than these projects would have yielded. Although the film has earned awards at several film festivals, its distribution has been limited.¹⁵ It has been screened at Bulgarian cinema reviews in Brussels, Belgium (2008), New York City (2009), Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa, Israel (2012), and has had special screenings in several Bulgarian and other European cities, but no major movie theater distribution.¹⁶ Still, the film is testimony to the enduring magnetism of the Hamlet experience on the mountain top, with performers and film crew functioning as both artists and audience, and reflecting on their own transformation at the crossroads of potent myths. Diana Toshkova (Ophelia) relates how it became imperative for her to go up the mountain “with the clear understanding that one is building something good and positive, and to resist even the slightest hint of doubt or anxiety.” She continues: “I am no longer the same person. I look at things with more wisdom.” Assen Pavlov (Hamlet) describes the long-term effect of the experience: “After I came back home from Rila, these things stayed with me.” Emil Trifonov, director of photography, is upfront about his begrudging amazement when in the course of the *Adventure* he realized he was growing “kinder toward others, more tolerant”—something he also witnessed in relationships among team members up on the mountain and also later, in the city. The transformation experienced by Semerdjiev was spiritual: “For the first time there I saw miracles . . . I realized that there is God, no matter who that is, looks like, or is called.” In the words of theater critic Kamelia Nikolova, what we see “is a deeply personal, existential rehearsal of *Hamlet*.”¹⁷ An indelible part of the exhilaration of this rehearsal must have been the fact that it took place in the gaze of the eye-shaped lakes, understood by Semerdjiev as conduits between the earthly and the cosmic (fig. 1).

¹⁵ *The Hamlet Adventure* received the Year's Prize in Film Making of the City of Sofia (Bulgaria, 2008), the Special Award, “A Bitter Cup at the Varna International Film Festival (Bulgaria, 2008), and the Grand Prize for documentary cinema at the Plovdiv International Film Festival (2009).

¹⁶ Stanislav Semerdjiev, personal correspondence with the authors, 14 July 2015.

¹⁷ Naidenova et al., “Filmat ‘Avanturata Hamlet’.”



Fig. 1. Two of the Seven Rila Lakes. Film still from *The Hamlet Adventure*.

Adventure/hazard

Shooting a feature film in an alpine wilderness is by definition a risky endeavor. With no infrastructure, everything and everybody had to be transported on horseback up and down treacherous trails, including actors and crew, filming equipment, wood for the stage construction (fig. 2). This “daily adventure,” as Pavlov describes the trail ride to and from the lakes, was strenuous and dangerous, but it formed the mindset of the crew and developed a trust as they clambered up the treacherous path tied together on a lead rope. “This was the bridge,” Pavlov summarizes, “between the real world and the upper world, the stage.”



Fig. 2. Transportation of materials for the set. Film photo from the International Movie Database.

Fogs rolling in from the lakes rendered perfectly the otherworldliness of the location, only to make shooting impossible within minutes. Filming some of the scenes entailed anchoring cameras and performing ballet lifts in the rarified air on the edge of precipitous drops (fig. 3). Even after the end of the work day, the psychological endurance of the team was put to the test, as power and water were only intermittently available in the chalet where they were housed.



Fig. 3. Camerawork and ballet lifts on the edge of the rock. Film stills from *The Hamlet Adventure*.

“It is important to know,” declares the assistant director Edmond Scott Lobo in a Skype interview incorporated within *The Hamlet Adventure*, “that this production took place in a time of political instability, economic chaos, and social unrest.” When in the midst of this turmoil the budgeted funding was abruptly cut off, Semerdjiev realized that even with the personal loans he took out, he would be unable to keep up with payments, some of which were delayed by as long as eighteen months. Nonetheless, the team, overtaken by what Lobo calls “the madness of Hamlet,” kept working. Money was at the bottom of their priorities; what mattered was to get this production right. In one of the on-camera interviews, Semerdjiev recalls how actors, far from complaining, worked “till they dropped.” When instead of the light-weight aluminum components for the pyramid topping the stage (a crucial design component), the supplier delivered heavy steel ones, the entire team—dancers, light technicians, camera operators, director, and producer—pulled together on the ropes to hoist the 2.5 ton structure. When it turned out that the ballet slippers imported from Russia were being held in customs for some unfathomable combination of political and bureaucratic reasons, team members took off their socks and gave them to the dancers to fold them over their toes instead of points, so that the shooting could be completed. At the end of the day, Greg Roach washed the women’s feet.

There were setbacks that personal sacrifice and team dedication could not soften. Among them was the last-minute cancelation of an army helicopter that was to fly a generator up the mountain, and the delivery, after Russian pilots were eventually secured to fly the machine, of a faulty generator. The fatal blow to *I, Hamlet* was dealt when, three days before the team was to return for a second filming session, they learned that the stage, built with such an enormous effort, had been vandalized. An official from the regional park agency had given oral authorization to a chalet keeper to cut it up for wood burning.¹⁸ Adding insult to injury, as Semerdjiev was beginning to recover from these blows and started work on *The Hamlet Adventure*, some of the cassettes with the original footage were lost during a multi-leg international flight. This personal and artistic catastrophe resulted, as he confesses on camera, in three years of “cosmic nothingness.”

The stories of these almost bathetic situations, connected in the film with jaunty folk music, offer a bitter commentary about a nation on the brink of social collapse. Thus the near impossibility of creating meaningful logistic provision for the filming is indicative of the general chaos in state and financial institutions and the erratic behavior of a demoralized work force. The need to hire Russian pilots because the two Bulgarian teams were away on a disaster relief mission during the 1999 earthquake in Turkey speaks volumes about the catastrophic national defense policies of a country lacking trained personnel to operate its own drastically reduced flying fleet. As for the authorized plunder of the stage boards for firewood by the locals and the indifference of foreign customs officials and air carriers to the irreparable loss of film footage, each represents a materialistic mindset that cares nothing for the labor and value of art.

The Hamlet Adventure rings with profound disillusionment about the marginalization of artistic endeavor and its search for truths higher than subsistence or profit. Betrayal as an existential theme is central to the film. More specifically, as Nikolova suggests, it is concerned with “the quiet daily betrayal carried out because of moral laziness, going with the flow of things and the unwillingness to consider what takes place around you.”¹⁹ In two memorable dance scenes that echo each other, Gertrude (Denitsa Karabourova) and Ophelia are portrayed as agents of such betrayal, part of the court’s web of naturalized deceit, but also as its victims. Each woman finds her movements circumscribed by a spider-web like skirt, which is pulled tighter

¹⁸ Kissyova, *Slovesni repetitziï*, 15.

¹⁹ Naidenova et al., “Filmat ‘Avantyrata Hamlet’.”

and tighter by obsequious courtiers. Spun like a top in the gathering fog, in the last frame of Gertrude's scene the Queen literally appears to have lost her head, her lifeless stare turned upwards as her costume becomes an extension of the court's cobweb. On her part, Ophelia offers some resistance, the shot/reverse shot sequences capturing her accusatory glances that bring to mind the suggestive critique of the court in the songs of Shakespeare's Ophelia. Yet, she, too, is overpowered—a demise rendered through the cinematic symbolism of the fatal cobweb. At this point, as the camera zooms out in a top shot, we see how the web of perfidy has re-drawn the Egyptian Flower of Life, with which the stage was patterned (fig. 4). Ophelia's submission to the power games of Elsinore has destroyed her, and with this, moral stupor has overpowered the spiritual order of her world.



Fig. 4. Ophelia caught in the cobweb of betrayal. Film still from *The Hamlet Adventure*.

Adventure/aunter (†An extraordinary thing or event; a wonder, a marvel)

While *The Hamlet Adventure* certainly offers pointed social critique of post-communist institutional and moral disintegration, to describe it as a Kottian diagnosis of the political agony of an era would be a disservice to its complexity.²⁰ Certainly, several of the film's narrative lines are suffused by trauma, yet it also dramatizes, consistently, the transcendence of trauma.

The idea of transcendence is first brought forth by the natural setting of the film among clear lakes, soaring rocks, and dazzling light. It is further emphasized by the cinematic framing of the stage positioned on a lakeside behind which two slopes meet, their outlines and reflections

²⁰ For a critique of Jan Kott's notion of Shakespeare's tragedies as embodying historical necessities of cruelty, violence, and corruption, see Leanore Lieblein, "Jan Kott, Peter Brook, and King Lear," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 1:2 (1987): 39-49.

forming an hourglass in the clear waters. Earth, sky, and water touch in this emblematic image, suggesting a conduit between what is here and what is beyond, between the experiential planes of past and present, on the one hand, and a time out of time, on the other. Fondly, the camera captures human figures traversing the tight point of the hourglass, whether as characters in the documentary making their way to the filming site or as characters in the stage play (fig. 5).

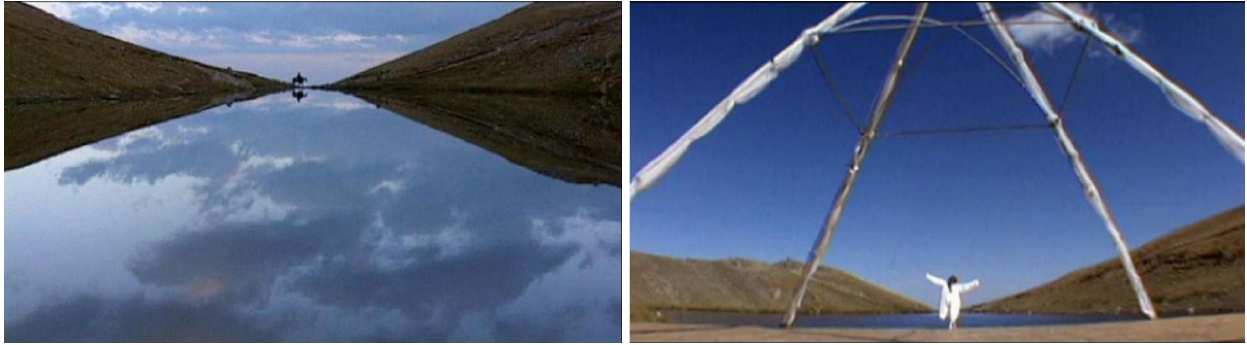


Fig. 5. Traversing the hourglass of the mountain. Film stills from *The Hamlet Adventure*.

The symbolic design of the stage is another geometric expression of the connectedness of the material and the spiritual. Circular, like “the pupil of the human eye” and the “cosmic channel” through which human life runs, in Semerdjiev’s description, the stage is patterned with the overlapping circles of the Egyptian Flower of Life. The metal pyramid above it completes the divine geometry (fig. 6). Even when the stage is engulfed by fog, it is difficult to forget that the betrayals and murders at the court take place in the eye of the cosmos.



Fig. 6. Stage design. Film photo from the International Movie Database.

The action moves effortlessly between the material and the spiritual dimensions mapped in this manner. The Ghost, visualized as an enormous freestanding red object morphing with the human shapes within, malleable yet always aiming towards a perfectly spherical form, takes up a substantial part of the circular stage of the “Danish” world. In one scene Hamlet traverses its membrane twice, emerging from the Ghost’s space in the here-and-now clad head to toe in a leotard of the same red fabric—a visualization of the spiritual dimension of Shakespeare’s character. Ophelia, in spite of her entanglement in the perfidy of the court, is also portrayed as a creature from the beyond when she is alone with Hamlet. Together, they perform a ritualistic dance of love against the background of the mountain’s hourglass of eternity. Their costumes in this scene, tight-fitting leotards worn over their heads that leave the actors faceless, are visually related to the otherworldliness of the Ghost and at the same time outline the tender attraction of the lovers’ *human* bodies (fig. 7). In Ophelia’s last dance, she sheds what looks like the straightjacket that has entangled her in the manipulations of the court for a smooth leotard reminiscent of her costume in the love dance scene. Once again, the camera frames her against the meeting point of the horizons of sky and water.



Fig. 7: Hamlet and Ophelia’s dance of love-in-eternity. Film still from *The Hamlet Adventure*.

Clearly, for the creators of *The Hamlet Adventure*, the transcendence of the trauma of betrayal has to do with the recognition of what they might term the spiritual qualities of humanity, portrayed here as coterminous with cosmic harmony. In the film Hamlet is transformed from revenger to redeemer. Having climbed to the sixth highest of the lakes, the Eye (8,010 ft), he repents his assumption of the divine right to judge and penalize others:

*The time was ripe for me to find
If I had learned humane forgiveness
And tamed my rage into a purpose
Revealing my matured mind.
My Day of Judgement now was due.*²¹

Clutching Ophelia's letters and a dagger for the sacrifice of Narcissistic vanity, Hamlet aligns his introspection with the sightline of The Eye lake. Cinematically, his spiritual transformation is represented by *and* results in an artistic creation of a new kind. After a brief black-out the screen explodes with colorful shapes rendering the two-dimensional patterns on the stage floor as three-dimensional forms, which in turn generate new forms, fireworks-like, in the space above.

Hamlet's transcendence of his personal and socially inflicted trauma may be a unique spiritual and artistic experience, but it does not take place in isolation. From the opening scene, his introspective reflection is framed as also addressing Horatio, the friend who does not need things explained because of what Hamlet describes as "the joint beating of our hearts."²² In the documentary plot line of the film, the bonds among the Shakespearean characters are matched by the bonds within the film team—not unlike the camaraderie of tight-knit performing communities featured in Kenneth Branagh's and Joss Wheldon's Shakespeare films. *The Hamlet Adventure*, however, is driven by an ideology markedly different from what Douglas Lanier identifies as Branagh's "utopian quality of communal amity" or even Wheldon's celebration of "an 'artisanal', indie form of filmmaking . . . that stands apart from the demands of commerce and values the creative freedom of a small community of artists."²³ It is a celebration of artistic stoicism in a world dominated by mindless consumerism.

²¹ "Monologue 7," DVD brochure for *The Hamlet Adventure*, translation from the Bulgarian by Evgenia Pancheva; original layout of the verse; emphasis added.

²² Monologue 1, *ibid.*

²³ Douglas Lanier, "'Good lord, for alliance': Joss Wheldon's *Much Ado about Nothing*" (unpublished paper, International Shakespeare Conference, Stratford upon Avon, 2014), 4, 10.

The Hamlet Adventure is also a declaration that artistic stoicism has a contagious quality. In the film's last scene, even as Semerdjiev somewhat wistfully reflects on the consuming "temptation" of the project, he concludes: "In the end, perhaps all that is left is to ask ourselves, 'Shall we be or not'. And if there is an answer, I think that it is, in spite of everything, to be." It is noteworthy that four years later another director, Javor Gardev, would choose the same version of Hamlet's famous line—as entailing not an individual, but a collective existential question—for his production of *Hamlet*, discussed later in this article collection.²⁴

The Hamlet Adventure closes with the final of Hamlet's soliloquies in the film. It is a reflection delivered both to himself and Horatio. By this time, the significance of the friend has come to include the co-creating spectator. As Semerdjiev's lonely figure slowly retreats across a snowy plane under a pyramid of refracted sunrays, Hamlet's voice/Horatio's voice/the voice of the film crew on the mountain affirms "Hamletization"—the capacity to create, sacrifice, reflect, and inspire others to create—as the definition of liberty.

²⁴ The wording is that of Alexander Shurbanov's translation of *Hamlet*, published in 2006.