



Shakespeare, Chabrol, and Cinema in the early 1960s: Asymmetric parallels

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- 1 *Ophélie* is the only known approach to Shakespeare made by Claude Chabrol throughout his fifty-year career as a film director, and one of the few examples of the “direct” presence of the Bard in the work of a film director of the *nouvelle vague* in the 1960s, a rich creative decade and a turning point in the history of cinema, in particular in Europe. *Paris nous appartient* (1960), directed by the *nouvelle vague* auteur Jacques Rivette, appeared in France before *Ophélie*, but the two films follow divergent narrative approaches to the use of place and of Shakespeare’s texts. The film was completed in 1962 and premiered in the following year in Europe, but not until 1974 in the USA. The circumstance seems odd, but it is explained by the nature of Chabrol’s film, and also by the conflicting aesthetics of the period, the great process of transformation of film aesthetics which took place during the 1960s. On the other hand, *Ophélie* makes use of a divergent range of cinematographic and aesthetic conventions, taken from several opposing traditions: avant-garde cinema, mainstream forms such as the *film noir* and the suspense thriller — particularly Hitchcock’s, a major reference for Chabrol and the *nouvelle vague* directors — the American melodrama (like the cinema of Douglas Sirk), and the *cinéma de la qualité française* of the 1950s.
- 2 The film typifies already Chabrol’s style and imaginary world, with a focus on an inter-textual exploration of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. *Ophélie* stresses ambiguities, suggestions, coincidences, narrative parallels and mistaken identities, with a freedom of adaptation sometimes reminiscent of Jean François Ducis (1733-1816), famous for his French versions of Shakespeare which he made without direct use of the English language. Broadly speaking, *Ophélie* stands between four thematic-formal worlds: Shakespeare’s, Chabrol’s, the mainstream movie genres, and the early cinema of the French new wave. The convergence of these four sets helps to explain how this film is capable of shedding light on aspects of both Shakespeare and Chabrol, and on the difficult coexistence between different and opposing filmic conventions, when the intention is to break with the preceding tradition. In *Ophélie*, Chabrol adapts and appropriates *Hamlet*, its palimpsest, in order to go beyond it. The relation between the two dramatic texts, one theatrical and the other cinematic, is, therefore, complex and deceiving, for the action of *Ophélie* does “travel in and out” of *Hamlet*. Also, *Ophélie*

goes beyond genre categories in order to establish a productive relationship between texts, the established one and a new one, in a film which interprets, adapts, recreates and explores the puzzling dramatic and contradictory outcomes of *Hamlet* as tragedy.

3 *Ophélie* is a black and white film, shot with a 35mm camera by cinematographer Jean Rabier, a procedure which often makes it look paradoxically experimental, leading our seeing and thoughts into the future. However, at other times, the narration makes the film look “historically” anachronistic, as if the history of cinema, especially that of French cinema, was all contained within it. This black and white code has many other functions in *Ophélie*, namely suggesting the hidden symbolic presence of *Hamlet* and of the *film noir* tradition, while at the same time supporting the realist invocation of rural France in the early 1960s — both the time of the action and of the making of the film — but also signalling a contradictory, if not fragmented, coexistence in *Ophélie* of techniques of the *cinéma français de qualité* and of the French new wave. A low budget production did not allow the use of a Panavision camera in *Ophélie*. In that sense, what seemed at first a weakness contributed largely to the originality of a work which does not point towards *West Side Story* (1961), by Robert Wise, nor to the later historical adaptations of Shakespeare by Franco Zeffirelli, like *Romeo and Juliet* (1968). Exemplary of the rich variety of film forms and Shakespearean adaptations in the early 1960s, *Ophélie* stands nevertheless apart. But black and white cinema, an art all of its own, had many followers in the early 1960s, and it certainly did contribute to the originality of films such as *Ophélie* or *Shakespeare Wallah*, directed by James Ivory, in 1965.¹ In the second half of the decade, the black and white film seems to dwindle.²

4 The black and white in *Ophélie* prompts comparison with other *nouvelle vague* films of the period with an outstanding original use of it, namely the famous *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1960), directed by Alain Resnais. Both films share hazy, foggy effects, geometrical chiaroscuro, black and white night scenes in the woods, and sparse mysterious musical atonal motifs, made with wind and percussion instruments.³ Also, the theme of assuming the identity of another character is shared in both works. But the enigmatic mannerist geometry and movement of *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* does not prevail in *Ophélie*: it is only one of the thematic and formal motifs present in it. Instead, we have brief “demotic” mannerist cameos, as when Yvan (pseudo-Hamlet) appears playing chess alone. The team of Resnais and Robbe-Grillet (the script-writer) has its counterpart in *Ophélie* in the duo of Chabrol and Paul Gégauff (1922-1983). Claude Chabrol’s development as a director from the very beginning was interlaced with literary collaborations with Paul Gégauff, who is obscurely credited in *Ophélie* as Martial Matthieu. Coincidentally, this type of dual collaboration is not absent in Shakespeare, as textual criticism has exhaustively shown, and it was a fairly common form of work in the

¹ Although set in India, *Shakespeare Wallah* also deals with the waning and waxing of dramatic and filmic traditions: the “fall” of the traditional way of acting Shakespeare and the rise of Bollywood.

² The influence of television seems not alien to the black and white tendency during the 1950s and the 1960s in cinema.

³ The music for *Ophélie* was composed by Pierre Jensen, a long collaborator, like Jean Rabier, of Chabrol. The music of both *L'Année dernière* and *Ophélie* was conducted by André Girard.

Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, as attested by the texts of Beaumont and Fletcher, for example. Poetically enigmatic as it is, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* is, in terms of form, a more homogeneous and a less fragmented and conflicted film than *Ophélie*.

5 In *Ophélie*, the main characters are avatars or partial transfers of more archetypal ones: those of *Hamlet*. Thus, in Chabrol's film, the logic of the action/narration is often disrupted by a "to be *and* not to be" effect. In fact, the film sometimes seems to be a realist gloss of a mannerist theme having *Hamlet* as a backdrop, at other times a film where the presence of Shakespeare is secondary and almost negligible. The forms of displacement and dislocation of *Hamlet* to and in *Ophélie* help to stress the elements of discord, of fragment and contradiction, of "the time out of joint," of a hypothetical tragic incestuous action and plot. The sophisticated cosmopolitan world, somewhere in the Central Europe countryside, of *Marienbad* has in *Ophélie* its counterpart in the rural-industrial little imaginary town of Ernelès, located in fact in the area of Villepreux where the film was shot. Ernelès has its local bourgeoisie, peasants and workers (on strike), all of them forming a pastoral decadent micro-society. Here the wealthy Lesurf family lives, whose "head," Adrien (Claude Cerval), is the most important businessman of the region. In the eyes of young Yvan Lesurf, Adrien became the incarnation of *Hamlet's* Claudius. The main cause for this unfortunate and tragic association lies in the meteoric rise to power of Adrien Lesurf, after the unexpected death of his brother (Gabriel Lesurf) and his quick marriage to his sister-in-law, Claudia Lesurf (Alida Valli). This leads the clever and artistically talented Yvan Lesurf (André Jocelyn) to suffer from a deep psychological depression, due to the loss of his father and to the repugnance for what he now sees as an incestuous crime. His decadent poetic talent is also much inspired by those events. The behaviour of Yvan recalls, at first, that of a doomed *poète maudit*, whose poetry is invoked whenever the ravens appear in the narration, heralding death. Yvan does not like these birds, and asks himself, at the end of a long poetic monologue, why he is being "persecuted" by them.⁴ Simultaneously he starts hating mankind, a new Diogenes derided by the people ("the race of the Lesurfs was always crazy," says one worker). In his neurotic crises, he is usually seen as a mad young man by his stepfather and, in his very last fit, a monstrous psychopath by his mother. Enhanced by a misreading of a long chain of coincidences and parallels, this process of self-induced identification is slow and gradual, until the moment Yvan starts to think seriously that he is a new Hamlet, with obvious catastrophic outcomes to his life.

6 The main outcome of Yvan's rejection of their relationship is that the actually happy newlyweds Adrien and Claudia soon fall into a living nightmare under the blows of the persistent masochistic and mad depressive states of Yvan, which are worsened by his ignorance of the circumstances surrounding the death of his father and the quick marriage of his mother to his uncle. It is this unsolved mystery which leads Yvan to impersonate Hamlet in his *folie* for revenge, to use alienation and transfer of identity in order to find truth, which fosters exacerbating, dangerous both to him and to those near

⁴ These necrophilic birds in *Ophélie* remind one of Edgar Allan Poe but also Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). The unpleasant feelings that the ravens instil on Yvan reminds a cameo reference of what happens during the narration of Hitchcock's film.

him. Adrien and Claudia Lesurf, however, are deceptive characters for they are not what they seem to be. Besides the serious and troubled relation with Yvan, Adrien is now facing a serious financial crisis, represented during the narration by the near “invisible” strike at the Lesurf factory. The prevailing atmosphere is one of fear (one important word in the screenplay) and of death. The aristocratic world of *Hamlet* is thus metamorphosed into France in crisis in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But, although we hear of a strike, we do not see any action, only hints in discussions between characters (like the one between three seeming strikers who, while drinking, in an almost Cézanne-like posture, at a table of the local bistro, laugh at the “crazy” Yvan and his family). The strike also appears to be mentioned in an almost unnoticed advertisement placed in the bistro. In order to cope with his fears, Adrien Lesurf has at his service a private security force led by the cynical Sparkos, who resembles a mercenary, and who acutely observes and interprets the behaviour of his boss. The fear felt by the rich is a favourite topic he likes to “explain” to his “uncultured” and abnormal subordinates, one of whom seems physically and mentally malformed while the other personifies blind military zeal and love of subordination. The function of the strikers and of Sparkos’s guards in *Ophélie* parallels, in *Hamlet*, the military resistance to the imminent invasion of Denmark by the Norwegians led by Fortinbras.

7 We may, however, question how much Adrien Lesurf mirrors *Hamlet*’s Claudius, for only Yvan thinks him the perpetrator of fratricide. Adrien’s wife, the silent, self-contained Claudia Lesurf, performed by the Italian actress Alida Valli (1921-2006), the only major film icon present in the narration (already past her prime), supplies a partial answer to the enigma. As a character, she is the mother of Yvan (the pseudo-Hamlet), but she is also one of the several semantic amalgams, fusions and condensations which the film narration shows. As in a Hitchcock thriller, we are, at first, led to follow false clues and to wonder involuntarily whether Claudia is not a travesty of the ambitious Claudius: a female character that has a tragic flaw (*hamartia*), a *claudication*. The film narration does not help in clarifying this point. Claudia’s long silences are not different from those of Lucie, Yvan’s sweetheart and pseudo-Ophelia, and she cannot be simply a new Gertrude, or a female Claudius, or a mixture of both. In fact, André, Claudia and Adrien all *claudicate*, vacillate and fall, in one way or another during the narration.

8 Narration and plot in *Ophélie* were conceived and (re)presented as an (il)logical dramatic game based on social roles and names, whose core is formed by the tragic triangle of characters Hamlet-Gertrude-Claudius. Lucie (Juliette Mayniel) becomes Ophelia in the eyes of Yvan, but this identification seems “out of context” in the prevailing climate of foolery and farce. At the same time, she is essential to the poetry of the film; besides, only Lucie is capable of hindering Yvan from destructive madness. Like Ophelia, who loves Hamlet, Lucie loves Yvan who, in his “madness,” is induced to think that she is (a new) Ophelia. But Lucie, as pastoral as she is, represents the very opposite of Ophelia, mad and dying among the waters and wildflowers: Lucie stands for sanity and reason, in life and in love, avoiding the extremes of irrational passion and barrenness. Lucie stands in fact for the anti-Ophelia. Mostly an introverted character, Lucie has the courage and *lucidity* to face difficult obstacles, in particular when they are hard to bear. The antagonist to her love relationship with Yvan is, of course, her zealous

and jealous father, André Lagrange. As his name suggests, he is a farm-keeper but also the close confidant of Adrien Lesurf. Exploring a little more the network of coincidences he has “found,” or elaborated, Yvan concludes that André Lagrange, Lucie’s father, can only be a new Polonius, an older man who in his turn thinks that Yvan is mad, incompetent to manage efficiently the responsibilities of big business, and above all (in his mind), a serious danger to the chastity of his daughter who should marry a “sane” man.

9 An absolute patriarchal obedience to fatherly love is, however, the main feature shared by Lucie and Ophelia, although Lucie’s physical resemblance to the Shakespearean Ophelia is vague (as Yvan recognizes). Unlike Ophelia, Lucie does not conform to the banal stereotype of the Nordic woman, although her look seems somewhat inspired by Ingmar Bergman’s female characters. At first sight, she is only a French country girl with wide clear eyes (those of young Juliette Mayniel). Like lights in a dark night, her wide eyes seem to reflect the power of lucidity, of vision like Saint Lucia, and of reason, in stark contrast to the emotional imbalance, madness and death-wish of Shakespeare’s Ophelia later in the play. Yet Lucie has dark hair, a colour underlined mostly by the black and white film, for Yvan (who also is and is not Hamlet) feels in Lucie the presence of that fair Ophelia.⁵ Yvan’s last effort after the fulfilment of his revenge instinct will be to dissociate in his mind Ophelia from Lucie, with her help. When Yvan returns to his former self at the end of the film narration, it is she who tells him: “I am not Ophélie, and you are only Yvan, not Hamlet.” Lucie does not only represent Ophelia’s innocence but the lucidity, as her name suggests, the perception of the real which Yvan lacks throughout most of the action.

10 *Ophélie* is a logical game, a charade, and a mystery to be solved by the spectator. Chabrol’s early admiration for Alfred Hitchcock’s thrillers and their puzzling suspense supports, in part, those types of readings. In fact, it is as though sometimes *Ophélie* evolved as a Shakespearean adaptation framed by Hitchcock’s thriller conventions within the French film tradition, where pastoral poetry, symbolism (if not surrealism), and realism merge. Among his several roles, Yvan can also be seen as a neurotic detective looking for the truth (or his truth) in a logical labyrinth where true and scattered false hints are found. One may well ask whether or not there is an affiliation between Alfred Hitchcock and Shakespeare,⁶ even if slight: it is certain that Hitchcock could not have existed as film director without the previous existence of Shakespeare. But Yvan is not a good detective most of the time and fails to find the truth, as he tries to make sense out of hints of the coincidences he collects. He tries to read them as if they were part of a

⁵ Juliette Mayniel became famous as the protagonist of the horror film *Les Yeux sans visage* (1960) directed by Georges Franju. The uncanny eyes of Lucie in *Ophélie* seem to echo the importance of the eyes in Franju’s film. Alida Valli also plays an important role in *Les Yeux sans visage*. I believe that Chabrol was aware of the impact of the performance of Juliette Mayniel in that film, something obliterated by the passage of time, by continuously echoing it in *Ophélie*.

⁶ Douglas Lanier argues that the *film noir* has its roots in *Hamlet*. See Douglas M. Lanier, “Nouveau noir: Claude Chabrol’s *Ophélie*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and the *Nouvelle Vague*.” In *Shakespeare on Screen: Hamlet*. Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (eds.) Publications de l’Université de Rouen et du Havre, 2011. 235-55.

Sphinx's riddle, pointing to an overlapping of his family's tragedy with that of *Hamlet*. An exemplary scene is given in the sequence of Yvan's trip to the local village of Ernelès when he discovers that this local name is but an anagram of Elsinore. In a previous scene, as he passes by the "Cinéma Arc-en-Ciel" (the decadent provincial theatre of Ernelès), Yvan is confronted with another striking coincidence, when he notices that the movie of the week is Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948). Chabrol's protagonist is utterly hypnotized by an overlapping of posters and stills advertising it at the door of the theatre, namely one poster reproducing a still with the famous French kiss between Olivier's Hamlet and his mother, and then is mesmerized again when he overhears the first great and admonishing dialogue between Hamlet and his mother, in overdubbed French. The identification of Yvan with Hamlet/Olivier is immediate. This odd encounter with Olivier's *Hamlet* parallels a message sent by the ghost of Yvan's father (although in fact there are no ghosts in *Ophélie*). Yvan is now again full of false and true clues about the mystery he wants to solve. His wrongly-applied cleverness and instinct for revenge are also now deeply inspired.

- 11 After a difficult talk with Lucie about whether she is or is not Ophelia, in which they also discuss the topic of alienation versus reality and confess their mutual love of acting, Yvan starts thinking about making a short movie that will expose and punish the behaviour of Adrien and Claudia. The development of the action of *Ophélie*, as in *Hamlet*, seems to depend on making a play within the play, or more precisely now, a film within a film, called in both cases "Mousetrap" (the metaphor for the play which will catch the guilty conscience of the king in *Hamlet*). Yvan explains to his best friend François (Horatio), who is a worker in the Lesurf factory, that he wants to shoot a small film that will allegorize the murder of his father and the incestuous marriage of his mother to his uncle, in order to expose them to the local community. While he explains his plan to François sitting at a table in a bistro, we see Yvan literally playing with a dead mouse. Only François/Horatio knows that the film has a punitive function. François also agrees to act in the film, which turns out to be a dark parody of the situation (there is always a woman laughing while the film is being projected), and thus it is ironic that the production of it is supported by Yvan's parents and three humble friends of Yvan: the sexy Ginette (the employee of the bistro who also has a crush on Yvan and who mirrors Claudia), François/Horatio (who mirrors Adrien), and a humorous young grave-digger that Yvan invites to join the crew after a visit to the local graveyard (who mirrors Yvan's father, while being murdered by his wife and his brother). Ironically, in answer to Shakespeare's original, Yvan in the first rehearsal tells his amateur actors that their roles in the film are devoid of meaning and have nothing to do with real life. This is a rather manipulative move from Yvan who, of course, lies to further his plans for revenge. In fact, the amateur actors' roles grow in meaning and establish a connexion, with a subtle *mise en abyme*, between allegory/phantasy, "real life" and *Hamlet*'s play within the play, "The Murder of Gonzago" (II.2.533), whose aim is announced in the monologue ending the second scene of Act II, where the young prince (not Yvan) muses to himself:

[...] I'll have these players
 Play something like the murder of my father
 Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks,

I'll tent him to the quick. If a but blench,
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seen
 May be the devil, and the devil hath power
 T'assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy —
 As he is very potent with such spirits —
 Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
 More relative than this. The play's the thing
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

(*Hamlet*, II.2.596-607, Oxford edition)

- 12 Thus, the short and elliptical advice of Yvan to the amateur player is a mirroring gloss, serious and parodic, of the complex philosophical-critical advice of Hamlet to his professional players, which also conveys his dramatic theory of “the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature” (*Hamlet*, III.2.20-22). This is actually what happens in *Ophélie* but with an unexpected outcome, quite divergent from what happens in *Hamlet*.
- 13 The result of this filmic and dramatic experiment is a comic, grotesque short silent film set in a grocery store facing a financial crisis during the early 20th century, the era of silent cinema, and with props and scenery of the time. In fact, while in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* the “Murder of Gonzago” is preceded by a famous dumb-show⁷ — a very short mimicking silent version of the “Murder of Gonzago” — in *Ophélie* we find only a metonymic cinematic development of the dumb-show. Also, the premiere of Yvan's film at the Lesurf mansion functions as a variation of the impressive two opening sequences of *Ophélie*: one a funeral and the other a marriage.⁸ The same main door of the mansion where a coffin had appeared and then, a few minutes later, a marriage celebration had occurred, now receives the very same bourgeoisie of those two opposing ceremonies, as spectators of Yvan's “Mousetrap.”⁹ During the film, Yvan plays the piano and narrates the odd story of his silent film. The film is received as comic nonsense by the audience, except by Adrien, Claudia and Lucie. Only the faces of the “guilty” couple show true horror, fear and disappointment.
- 14 But Yvan, although mentally deranged, suffering from what seems to be violent neurotic if not paranoid drives, can shoot a camera but not a gun. He does not kill his major antagonists, Adrien and André, who are killed as if by a transcendent power. For example, the zealous and “loyal” André Lagrange/Polonius, ends up dead from a heart attack he experiences when climbing a high tree, and where he remains, Shakespearean like, fantastically suspended from two branches. In the climactic final moments of *Ophélie*, Hitchcock's thriller conventions are again called on: a deranged Adrien decides

⁷ This dumb-show is described in the stage direction between lines 134 and 135 of *Hamlet*, III.2.

⁸ The film aesthetic of this sequence also reminds one strongly of Luis Buñuel's masterpiece *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), which premiered a few months earlier than *Ophélie*.

⁹ “The Mouse-trap” (III.2.232) is a metalepsis used only once by Hamlet to introduce the “Murder of Gonzago” to Polonius, and it is metonymically connected with the maddened expression “A rat!” uttered when the prince kills Polonius (III.4.222), and in reported speech as ““A rat, a rat”” (IV.1.10) when Gertrude explains to Claudius what has happened to Polonius.

to kill Yvan with a revolver. Ironically, it is his Hamletian madness which saves Yvan's life in the end, although he may also be understood as the moral instigator of a crime. After a short night scene, where the main corridor with several doors of the Lesurf mansion amplifies the suspense, morning comes with a moribund Adrien in his last moments before passing away. He has committed suicide by eating poison, like Emma Bovary; he is a "rat," but not for the reasons we were expecting. Claudia and Yvan are summoned to his deathbed. After a final sadomasochistic scene with his mother, Yvan is left alone with Adrien dying, where the shocking revelation of the truth is made: Adrien is Yvan's biological father. The spectator wonders while interpreting the Oedipal scene: who is the criminal, the father or the son? Is the son now taking the place of the father? Despite these ambiguities, with the unexpected revelation of the truth, the "Hamlet effect" starts to disappear from Yvan, who during most of the narration had tried to kill his own father without knowing it. What happens to Claudia and to the Lesurf factory is not told, and becomes unexpectedly irrelevant to the narration. Yvan will have a great journey to make toward his true self, at first still weakened, almost a young boy again, in the arms of Lucie, the light that will bring him back to life. The final struggle of Yvan for lucidity is personified in the love nurtured for Lucie, which seems to win the battle in the end. Yet, we do not know what will happen next: will the pastoral *aurea mediocritas* be restored again? Or will Yvan and Lucie evolve into a new social and cultural pattern?

- 15 *Ophélie* appears in the second decade of the 21st century as exemplary of the variety of forms that the Shakespearean adaptations and appropriations took in the 1960s. Chabrol's film also foreruns film adaptations of *Hamlet* (and of other dramatic works of Shakespeare) made at least since the 1980s, namely that of Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki in the black and white *Hamlet liikemaailmassa* (*Hamlet Goes Business*) in 1986, and that of the of American director Michael Almereyda in his *Hamlet* in 2000. Both films appear, or may be read, as opposing offshoots of *Ophélie*. The main message, formal and conceptual, of Chabrol's film, lies in an art that can transform the Shakespearean "to be *or* not be" into an art of the "to be *and* not to be." In 1974, a critic for the *New York Times* compared *Ophélie* to a dog that successfully emerged from its kennel, where it remained forgotten and neutralized. This aesthetic and "wild thing" would be described, years later, in 2013, by Noël Simsolo as a "chef d'œuvre maudit de la Nouvelle Vague."¹⁰ This seems more than enough evidence that *Ophélie*, despite all its flaws and demerits, still deserves to be screened and studied not only by Shakespeare scholars but also by specialists from other fields, whether filmic or literary.

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Filmography

Ophélie. Dir. Claude Chabrol. 1962. Released on DVD in the Gaumont à la Demande series, 2012.

¹⁰ Noël Simsolo. "Ophélie." *Dictionnaire de la Nouvelle Vague*. Paris: Flammarion, 2013. 326-327.

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