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“The Soul of Wit (Hamlet : remix)”

“The Soul of Wit” is a short video (11 minutes) based on elements of a performance of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” viewed through the synesthesia and fractured logic of a schizophrenic mind (informed by my experiences and observations in New York State mental hospitals during the nineteen-sixties).

The video is, in part, dedicated to the late Professor Hugh Kenner, author, critic, and inventor of Travesty, a software program that generates nonsense texts that maintain the poetic and/or prose rhythms of a given input sample. I have used Kenner’s Travesty on texts from “Hamlet.” In my version, the characters’ speeches start as chaotic Travesty texts – complete nonsense – but still maintain the cadences and music of Shakespeare’s language and eventually evolve into actual quotations from the play.

On top of this abstraction, I put a juxtaposition of ‘acting’ and ‘madness’, also a concern in the original text of “Hamlet”: Hamlet feigning insanity (or not), the play within the play, etc. Each character exemplifies a specific style of acting and, at the same time, a particular variety of schizophrenia.

The framing character of Ophelia is catatonic, helplessly controlled by the whims of others, who does not speak or move under her own will, but must act in that ineffable cinematic style – in close-up, using only tiny movements of her eyes and microscopic twitching of her facial muscles to communicate her fear and confusion over Hamlet’s ranting and her father’s nonsensical chatter.

The “mad” Hamlet character, speaks lines from the Travesty program, but adds pantomime and violent physical movement to show his paranoid symptoms.

Polonius is an example of the verbal aspect of acting, carrying the performance with his voice, even when the words turn to meaningless Travesty nonsense. Growing ever grander in a manifestation of hebephrenic schizophrenia.

To those who are not specialists in English Literature or Clinical Psychology, the video should impart a fleeting uncomfortable experience of what it’s like to be schizophrenic.