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From Text to Image: Cinematic Strategies and Narrative Transformations in Modern and Postmodern Adaptations of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

Abstract

My article aims to critically analyze alterations and variations in four film adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. This study explores the different techniques used by various directors in adapting Shakespeare's iconic play *Hamlet* from theatre to screen productions. The four film adaptations explored in this article are the academy award-winning *Hamlet* by Laurence Olivier (1948), *Hamlet* directed by Franco Zeffirelli (1990), the 1996 *Hamlet* directed by Kenneth Branagh, and a technologically charged *Hamlet* version directed by Michael Almereyda in 2000. The thesis discusses how the four directors interpreted the play into screen productions, using various filmic techniques to speak to a modern audience. The four directors have emphasized different thematic elements, with most of them altering the text to redefine the play's plot. The thesis also explores how the various adaptations were successful and how they were received by the audiences, as some versions enthralled the audiences more than others.

Keywords: *Hamlet, adaptations, filmic techniques, alterations, audience-response.*

Introduction

This article deals with film adaptations of the iconic play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. It aims to investigate the various filmic techniques used and demonstrate how each of the filmic techniques contributed to the success of the individual screen adaptations. In addition, it will explore film semiotics in general, the media theory, and explain why the application of a system of gazes and perspectives can exert a powerful impact on the spectator's psychosomatic complexity. It will also explore the techniques that are used to represent Hamlet's complex personality in each movie. The primary source for the article is the original version of the play *Hamlet* by Shakespeare. Several filmmakers have tried to reproduce this tragic play in movie versions. I will analyze four English adaptations directed by Olivier, Zeffirelli, Branagh, and Almereyda, as they offer various filmic techniques that enthralled audiences in their unique way. The first part will explore the filmic techniques used in the 1948 screen adaption by Lawrence Olivier and the techniques used to represent Hamlet's multifaceted personality. It will describe the dramatic and filmic techniques used in the respective forms in the world of cinema. The second part is concerned with *Hamlet* by Franco Zeffirelli in 1990. The third part will explore *Hamlet* (1996) by Kenneth Branagh, the fourth part will explore Michael Almereyda's film *Hamlet* (2000), and the fifth will be a conclusion.

Literature review

Linda Charnes (2006) revealed that the theory of adaptation in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* could be grouped into numerous criteria. According to Charnes, -there is a need to differentiate between classical adaptations of *Hamlet* that concentrated on the theatrical action like, -Olivier's version in 1948, and Zeffirelli's, Branagh's and Almereyda's rearranged the actions of the play to different time periods, such as Almereyda's more modern style. Olivier's traditional adaptation imitates the film noir; Zeffirelli's film was an action exploit film, while Branagh's version follows the cinematic classic of a film epic. The complex nature of Hamlet character makes it easier for film directors to reproduce the play in diverse adaptations. According to Burnett (2003), Almereyda's adaptation

rearranges the play into the contemporary world. For example, he chooses current urban locations, and the characters use modern technological gadgets. The four film adaptations fall into two theoretical groupings: psychological personality studies and radical studies. The psychological theory of Hamlet stresses the oedipal complex, while the political perspective depicts the prince as a disobedient advocate against fraud. Olivier's adaptation is a psychological adaptation, while Branagh, Zeffirelli, and Almereyda's films are examples of political adaptations. These two theories of adapting Hamlet on Screen have restructured Shakespeare's tragic play by reacting to certain chronological and social contexts, the movie demands as a medium, and former versions of the play.

Research by Dawson (1996) established that film adaptations of Hamlet, in most cases, embrace the form of ambiguous production techniques to make the play relevant to the audience and validate the languages enduring nature. These movie adaptations can lead to a loss of profundity in thematic characteristics like in Almereyda's adaptation. Branagh's version emphasizes more the original thematic elements of the play. Research literature by Fattouh (2020) revealed that the four directors used unique filmic techniques that interpreted the play differently from the audiences, turning the play into cinematic success. Olivier used the camera as a character to discover Elsinore Castle and illuminate Hamlet's insanity to the audience. Zeffirelli's vibrant action filming techniques thrilled the audiences.

Research literature by Joiner (2009) defines the drama of consciousness as the conscious experiences of the characters on stage with unconscious emotional actions compared to the unseen audience. The character of Hamlet in Shakespeare is so self-conscious, and in most film adaptations, while Olivier's depiction of Hamlet is not categorized as extreme selfconsciousness. All of the film's motions are even and flowing, and Hamlet's speech is given with expressiveness and ease. In Zeffirelli's film, the drama of unconsciousness is apparent in the closet scene. Hamlet is unconscious of his spatial journey. As Joiner (2009) asserts, the film uses images to arouse the connection between an external consciousness and those feelings concealed from consciousness. This gives Gertrude a figurative role in Hamlet's complex and undecided wish to journey back. The play has continued to advance logical, social, political, and mental debates among scholars who question its profound infiltration into the mindset of humanity. This is because it touches upon a conscious side every spectator may experience.

Research literature by Fattouh (2020) and Cook (2011) revealed that most literary scholars refer to Hamlet as the "drama of vengeance" (Fattouh 91). For instance, Cook postulates that "Hamlet's resolve to seek more horrid vengeance is supported viscerally by an inset of his father's death agony" (Cook 135). Moreover, there are the elements of procrastination existing in the both original and screen adaptations, as there is no revenge taken place until the final scenes. Taking revenge takes more time and within the time frame from beginning till the end, some unexpected deaths occur, such as Laertes, Polonius. "Along with the revenge, there were the traces of other forces to fuel the main theme in the form of suspense, climax and the catastrophe and all these things became visible especially to accomplish the revenge for Hamlet's father's murder case" (Haque, 56)

Screen adaptations of Hamlet present some complications and prospects. As Cook (2011) asserts, length is a vital film convention, and Hamlet play being adapted to the screen has to be cut by almost half to run the typical time of regular films, which is one and a half to two hours. "To fit within a commercially viable feature-film length, Shakespeare's longest play must be substantially shortened. "Yielding to this necessity, all of the films except Branagh's full-text version delete, divide, and transpose Shakespeare's text to move, in varying degrees, in the 9 direction of this "global Hollywood" paradigm, as well as to readjust emphases to suit modern values" (Cook 18). In the process of altering the text, the audience is expected to criticize what has been left out than what has been preserved. Thus, many viewers fail to comprehend how the alterations made by the directors outline the interpretation of the play. Directors must maintain a tantalizing balance when directing the film adaptation and comprehending the dialogues between the play and the film. The four film directors had to maintain a subtle balance between the background, cast, and language while preserving the play's genuineness and attracting many viewers.

Hamlet by Lawrence Olivier (1948)

Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*, an academy award-winning production, was filmed in black and white to emphasize the effect of his remote camera tricks and deep shooting techniques (Fattouh 94; Cook 62). According to Cook, "Hamlet's deep-focus cinematography, enabled by the lower lighting requirements of black and white, brought out details that distracted some early viewers, but for most of its original audience these details were so effectively subordinated to an exciting ongoing narrative that the film achieved unprecedented popular and critical success, effectively establishing the genre of filmed Shakespeare with mass appeal" (Cook 62). It is undoubtedly one of the most influential versions of the play.

Lawrence Olivier no doubt transformed Shakespeare's play into successful motion pictures. His adaptation served as a benchmark for Zeffirelli, Branagh, and Almereyda, whose later cinematic adaptations received reasonable success. Imperatively, Olivier's "conscious adoption of the conventions of film noir Hollywood crime dramas, and of German Expressionist cinema which emphasized the play's themes most akin to the murder mystery genre – the investigation of a suspicious death, and the on-going effort to bring the murderer to justice, and reflecting Hamlet's somber mood, and the dark preoccupations of his allegedly melancholic temperament" helped achieve the successes in this filmic version (Fattouh 94).

Olivier's use of cinematic language was similar to the one used in Shakespeare's original text, and it perfected the emotional poetry of Shakespeare's text. "Olivier's text has long been considered a formal hybrid (Cook 23, para 1). According to Cook, "Olivier creates additional opportunities for masterful cinematic storytelling" (Cook 59). The viewers can relate to the disconcerted inner conflict of Hamlet, which Olivier portrays using an unconcealed, expressionistic set design, film noir illuminations, and camera techniques (Davis 164). The melancholic score illustrates the oedipal relationship between Hamlet and his mother. Oliver used narrative techniques to show the mental state of the characters. "In part Olivier's choice to thus focus the film production is due to his insistence on the Oedipus Complex as a means to understanding Hamlet's character and his relations with Ophelia, Gertrude, the ghost, and Claudius" (Zlatkin 35 para 2).

Many scholars agree that Olivier's techniques portray Hamlet as a chaotic and somehow lost character in his famed speech in act 3 "To be or not to be" (III.i.56)".

The manner in which the main characters are portrayed listening to the soliloquies leaves the audience yearning for more action. Olivier's use of the Oedipus complex was to make the audience understand the character of Hamlet and his defining relations with Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius, and the ghost. In my view, Olivier depicts Hamlet as a psychologically fragile character through his proclamation at the opening of the production when he claims "the film is about a man who could not make up his mind" (Olivier 1). The audience can relate to the tragedy of what will become of a man who cannot make up his mind. This is a reductive technique because the original play depicted a versatile Hamlet capable of making independent decisions.

Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990)

The film techniques in Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* accentuated the sexual tension between Hamlet and his mother, Gertrude, disregarding Hamlet's psychological state of mind as the cause of conflict in the play. "Unlike Olivier, Zeffirelli's film has fully replaced the play's Renaissance mystique of kinship and power with the more accessible values of oedipal attraction and evolved it." (Prace, 29 para1). Unlike Olivier, Zeffirelli's film used more relatable themes of the oedipal attraction. "Zeffirelli follows Olivier in pointing up Hamlet's Oedipal fixation on his mother, played in this production with considerable charm by Glenn Close. The director purposely chose an actor only nine years older than Gibson for the part of Gertrude, and the relative closeness in ages between mother and son gives a highly sensual quality to the bedchamber scene.

Zeffirelli engages sets and costumes that are historically precise to the time and set of Shakespeare's work. Unlike his fellow director Branagh, he used Elizabethan costumes to ensure the audience related to the happenings during that ancient era. "Throughout the film, Zeffirelli aimed for social realism, deploying a large cast of extras to evoke a medieval world filled with convincing historical detail, from the scrolls and leather-bound books in Elsinore's library, to the nun-like wimples of the female extras. Much of the set design serves purposes beyond that of convincing

decoration” (Fattou 97, para 6). Zeffirelli’s inaugural pictures of Hamlet and background settings were arranged in a manner that thrilled audiences (Dawson 197). He used filmic techniques that were prevalent among movie directors of the era. For example, camera techniques were slanted to construct an Elsinore that the audience would perceive as a controlling environment.

Zeffirelli used close-ups intermingled with scenic external setting shots allowing the spectators to scrutinize Hamlet’s characters thoroughly to evaluate the persona being represented. In the film, Hamlet’s inner mayhem is exposed with the help of the ‘gaze’. For instance, “A close-up of Gertrude’s face covered in tears, cuts to the fiercely lustful gaze of Claudius that holds her spellbound, as the latter stares at her down the length of the tomb. In this dramatic visual image, the director gives us the central conflicts of Shakespeare’s play – the dead warrior king in his tomb; the living adulterous usurper; the outraged son, whose unenviable mission will be to avenge his murdered father – the three men who, with very different kinds of desire, vie for the love of the same woman” (Fattouh 97). In so doing, the director wants his spectators to see rather than listen to what the characters are saying.

Franco Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* (1990) modifies much of Shakespeare’s novel discourse to acclimatize it to a more contemporary filmic style. In so doing, he depicted another facet of Hamlet that is often ignored in typical productions. For instance, “Zeffirelli begins distinguishing his Hamlet from Olivier’s by eliminating, already in the shooting script (cowritten with Christopher DeVore), the first appearance of the ghost. This deletion begins the process of shortening the film to a more standard feature length and segmentation” (Cook 66). His heavily cut text, including the entire elimination of “the Fortinbras material”, presented a visual Hamlet and variations in the arrangement of the play (Cook 66). Franco Zeffirelli’s film also added some scenes. For example, he incorporated the funeral act at the film’s opening. Cook reveals that, “Like Olivier’s film, this *Hamlet* opens with a royal funeral. Before a word is spoken” (Cook 67). He also uses a dissimilar direction with the acts and parts of scenes. Many of the original lengthy speeches are expunged, and he occasionally assigns characters’ scripts to another. The movie is indisputably enjoyable, as Zeffirelli’s remote interpretation, though deviating in some ways from the original version, rests a superior representation due to the continuity of the screenplay (Lehmann, Starks and Estes, 183). This version is a robust intelligent performance full of life, and it turns the movie into an astonishingly vigorous Hamlet.

Kenneth Branagh *Hamlet* (1996)

The design set of Branagh’s *Hamlet* is symbolic of the Victorian era, comprehensive with adorned martial attires and sumptuous robes. Branagh visually altered the characters while maintaining the original text. This is the only version to open without a prologue to hook the audience into the visual storytelling technique. According to Cook, “Branagh met it by combining in the film five crucial ingredients: landscape, cast, camera, editing, and music” (Cook 106). The film’s interior landscape is distinguished by the great hall trimmed white and gold and lined with mirrored doors. The dark secrets lie hidden behind the mirrored doors. This filmic technique enables Branagh to dispel the gothic gloom associated with Olivier and previous adaptations. He was clever in orchestrating the cast and camera to keep the audience’s eyes alert and alive as Shakespeare’s dense verbal images came flooding in. According to Cook, Kenneth Branagh “unusually employed a 70mm high-resolution film gauge means that every shot includes more space from left to right than in the earlier films”, with the “ultra-wide-screen format ... giving a greater range for gradation of emphasis” (Cook 106).

Branagh’s techniques explore in-depth Hamlet’s psyche. His portrayal of Hamlet is comprehensive, and the audience is able to relate to a protagonist with conflicting emotions whose life was tragically cut in his quest for revenge (Cook 106-107). To be more specific, Cook elucidates that “Such closer reading of faces allows for longer takes, which in turn allow for increased closely followed motion of characters and continuous camera movement” (Cook 107). Hamlet is first presented in a martial uniform. He is portrayed as someone who takes an intense interest in fencing, with proper mannerisms as illustrated by his courteous nature to Horatio and Marcellus. In my view, his techniques of strong voice, gestures, and overall appearance effectively conveyed Hamlet’s complex personality (Hindle 137). He constructed the neurotic psyche of Hamlet differently than

Olivier and Zeffirelli. His immature use of expressive imagery gives us intuitions about Hamlet's irrationalism. He draws on the traditions of "horror flicks" and the motion picture classic to depict Hamlet's vengeance with a ferociousness that had never been seen on-screen (Crowl 70). This is evident during the stabbing of Claudius with a poisoned Javelin blade that cuts through the chord of a chandelier towards the King. Branagh utilized shots and color arrangements, comprehensive flashbacks, and a passionately charged musical score to illustrate Hamlet's inner battles on to his setting, constructing a palpable film for spectators.

His version was unique because it incorporated Shakespeare's entire text into the bard, eliminating only a few descriptive texts. His adaptation is considered the most accurate of all Hamlet adaptations. His resolution to use the whole text of Hamlet stimulated his filmic mind to construct a style and setting vast enough to encompass it. He changed the sequence in which the lines were said to suit the flow of the film genre (Crowl 17). For example, in the first act, when King Claudius and Queen Gertrude enter the hall after they were wed, Claudius is supposed to address Hamlet before he speaks to the lord's attendants and before he gives Laertes permission to go to France. In Branagh's version, the King addresses the lord attendants first, sending them to Norway, after which he talks to Laertes. Finally, the King addresses Hamlet, who slowly enters the hall from the sidelines giving the cameras enough time to focus on Hamlet alone. Although he used the full text, his adaptation focused on the family catastrophe rather than its greater communal and partisan contexts.

Almeryda's Hamlet (2000)

Almeryda's film embodies the postmodern notion of satire in its background settings. Fattouh contends that "in a modern representation of the usurper king, this Claudius comes across as a calmly self-possessed, impeccably well-mannered, and utterly ruthless combination of legitimate corporate CEO and mafia don" (Fattouh 97-98). His filmic techniques are more advanced than the techniques used by Olivier, Zeffirelli, and Branagh. As evidenced by Cieslak "Almeryda centres the film around Hamlet more clearly and intensely than any other recent film director, brings out the father-son relationship and focuses on father figures (old Hamlet and Polonius), and casts a comparatively young actor for the role. Moreover, moving the action of the film to New York 2000, he saturates the film with media and technology, thus creating alternative worlds that enable him to develop the plot on various levels of cinematic reality" (Cieslak 109). The audience cannot fully relate to the play with its ancient history, and Shakespeare lovers questioned its relevance in modern culture.

This version has been labeled the "American Hamlet." The director's techniques make the film exciting while leaving Shakespeare's language and themes unchanged (Burnett 48). Virtually every moment of the film incorporates electric gadgets like mobile phones, computers, and answering machines. The film's color palette is grey, red, and blue, a visual expression of rationalization. These colors lure attention to the filmic techniques used to make the film, prompting the audience to understand the vainness of Hamlet and other characters' longing to regulate the proceedings of the play. For example, most costumes are black, grey, or obscure. The buildings are grey, and most vehicles are black. The limited places in the film where bright color is used cause diversions and break immersions. "Almeryda's usage of technology is captivating and well planned" (Fattou 99). For example, Hamlet's "get thee to a nunnery" dialogue to Ophelia becomes an inexorable outburst; it trails her home and assaults her when she switches on the answering machine.

Almeryda's subconscious use of media systems to disrupt the film's historic orientation further complicates Hamlet's personality. In addition, he guides the film's emphasis away from the protagonist's personality and his historical task and on to Hamlet's moods of setup in an unimaginative postmodern background of unbreakable surfaces, glasses, screens, and ciphers. These surfaces create innovative, eye-catching alignments, such as when Hamlet talks to his mother over a half-opened limousine window, apportioning the frame so that the audience can watch all the three figures in the act. His filmic narration technique resourcefully constructs space shredding the elements out of their three-dimensional fitting, and conveys them from their universal background onto a metonymical ground (Joiner 30).

Like Olivier and Zeffirelli, Almeryda cut nearly half of the original text while restructuring some scenes and combining lines from diverse parts of the play. He cut much of the text because of

his powerlessness to interpret them in his postmodern background. For example, the actors are completely cut from the movie to highlight Hamlet's isolation. The audience was left to ponder why he chose to omit major scenes and dialogues like the opening scene where Ophelia reports Hamlet had visited her (2.1) and the dialogue in Act 3 Scene 2. Most of the themes do transfer into the postmodern setting. He also added silent scenes that do not ensue in Shakespeare's novel to prolong the plot. In my view, he removed acts and scenes he thought were irrelevant to the contemporary audience (Joiner 30). Is Almeredya's choice to expunge more than half of the original text and swap it with equipment an appropriate substitute for the archaic yet significant text? In my view, while he succeeded in depicting his contemporary, technology-ruled image of Shakespeare's famed tragedy, cutting much of the original text allowed him the freedom to 46 reconstruct Hamlet the way he wanted his audience to perceive the protagonist.

Despite its weaknesses, Almeredya's Hamlet offers a stimulating re-imaging of Shakespeare's play, and updating the play to modern life resonates well with modern audiences. "Moreover, moving the action of the film to New York 2000, he saturates the film with media and technology, thus creating alternative worlds that enable him to develop the plot on various levels of cinematic reality" (Cieslak 109). Nevertheless, some Shakespeare lovers have argued that this version needed a sense of fun.

Conclusion

The Four Hamlets all clasp a viewership that ranges from those unacquainted with the play to the Hamlet elite. Franco Zeffirelli, Kenneth Branagh, and Michael Almeredya's adaptations have failed to erase the critical applause and strength of thematic imageries that continued to be engraved upon Olivier's ever-increasing audience and the status of Olivier's presentation (Albanese 185). Olivier's film was used as a visual teaching aid until Zeffirelli 48 substituted it in 1996. Olivier opened himself to psychoanalytic vilification by guiding and showcasing in his production that applied Jones's Freudian interpretation of the play. By analyzing how the four films and their filmic techniques portray the complex personality of Hamlet, the audience realizes the significance of vengeance in the plot (Fattou 93). Branagh and Almeredya's adaptations portrayed Hamlet as unbalanced and reasonably reserved, further complicating the intrigues of Hamlet's character to so many researchers who have continued to dispute the nature and the mental state of Hamlet in Shakespeare's most celebrated tragedy (Joiner 37). In my view, Branagh, Zeffirelli, and Almeredya subconsciously demarcated their place in a dynamically evolving custom of Hamlet films. The creativity of each film was in response to its predecessor. Nevertheless, Olivier, Branagh, Zeffirelli, and Almeredya's films received critical attention.

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