

Film as Text: Reading Hamlet

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An analysis of how different film directors use the language of film to create different interpretations of the same material is a great way to build the skills required for your DP Film Textual Analysis and Comparative Study. Students of DP Language and Literature can apply these ideas to their Visual Literacy comparative analysis.



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One of the great ways to hone your film analysis skills is to examine how different directors handle the same scene, either as an interpretation of a scene from literature or as a re-make of an earlier film. Re-makes often allow you to examine an updating of the original socio-cultural context - something you need to include in your textual analysis and comparative study.

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been adapted for the screen over 40 times, and each interpretation allows film directors, art directors and screenwriters to bring their own creative touches to this classic tragedy. By examining the filmic presentation of a single soliloquy from the play, we can see how different directors use the language of film to bring different meaning to Shakespeare's text. The iconic "To be or not to be" soliloquy contains the lines with which a movie audience is probably most familiar. As a student examining these three adaptations by Lawrence Olivier (1948), Franco Zeffirelli (1990), and Kenneth Branagh (1996), you should focus on "the usual suspects" of film language analysis: camera movement, camera angles, setting, sound design, script, costume and composition.

Lawrence Olivier makes powerful use of **setting** and **camera movement** to mirror the psychological turmoil of an Oedipal Hamlet. He sets the scene high on the castle walls overlooking a turbulent sea, literally a "sea of troubles". We are introduced to this setting by a craning camera that

climbs the steps through a symbolic mist to where Hamlet looks down on the world.



Watch <https://youtu.be/5ks-NbCHUns>

The **camera movement** plays an important role in the creation of meaning here. The scene opens with a medium shot of Ophelia (Jean Simmons) lying at the foot of the castle steps, looking up the stairs, weeping. The camera tracks backward to show a full shot of her and then begins to turn clockwise to show the stairs. As the camera spirals up the stairs, we see Ophelia again, framed by a doorway, and the camera begins to speed up and the same segment of stairs is shown over and over again. Here the editing reflects the protagonist's confusion; something is not right in the state of Denmark. As the camera reaches the top of the stairs, it tilts up towards the sky, then slowly tilts back down to show the roaring sea and the back of Hamlet's head.

The camera dollies in and seems to enter his head. We are inside the mind of a troubled man who must cope not only with his father's death, but also with seeing his incestuous mother and uncle together every day. The editing places the tempestuous sea inside his head as Hamlet's brow is superimposed over the waves. The shot fades to black and then fades in again to show the ocean. Hamlet's "mind" is then superimposed over the waves for a few seconds, before fading again. Like the waves, the camera moves in and out, reflecting Hamlet's sways between decision and indecision. Hamlet's brow is now superimposed, as his "mind" was earlier in the scene. Fade out. The drama of the cinematography foreshadows the struggle that Hamlet will now reveal in his words.

Lighting creates meaning in Lawrence Olivier's black and white rendition. He places Hamlet in strong key lighting though the background is dark and cloudy. This may be more than observing the convention of giving the protagonist centre stage; a strongly-lit Hamlet surrounded by haze and darkness suggest that, as he speaks his soliloquy, he is hiding nothing. His fears and doubts are clearly on display.

Like Branagh, Olivier uses the dagger as a dramatic **prop** but both use it very differently. Olivier's Hamlet pulls out a small dagger and points it at himself as he closes his eyes. The camera zooms in to his forehead, wet with sweat and his eyes closed. Hamlet opens his eyes and we cut back to the medium shot of Hamlet sitting on the castle

wall. He puts the dagger down and looks off into the distance. As the wind rustles his sleeves, he looks off left and then returns his attention to the dagger again. These movements are used to reflect his struggle to decide on whether to use the dagger as the suicide weapon or not. His final (for now) decision is visually signified in the dropping of the dagger into the sea. He has decided against "self-slaughter...with a bare bodkin".

The **costumes** in Olivier's *Hamlet*, designed by an uncredited Elizabeth Hennings, are overtly theatrical (with tunics, robes, tights and heeled shoes) and conform to the audiences' expectations for a Shakespearean drama. For sound design, Olivier's version of the soliloquy makes use of William Walton dramatic **music** typical of the films of that time period. A sweeping dramatic orchestral score leads up to the soliloquy; the music swells, then dissolves so the audience can only hear the sound of the waves crashing into the cliff and allows the audience focus on Hamlet's words. Walton was nominated for Best Score at the Academy Awards for his work on this film.

The choice of **camera angles**, too, play a role in the characterization of the protagonist the characterization. Cinematographer, Desmond Dickenson, put the camera at a low angle, looking up at Hamlet. Here he suggests the prince's moral or intellectual superiority over those around him, especially Claudius.

Franco Zeffirelli's version of *Hamlet* is a star-studded affair, with Mel Gibson in the title role. The setting at Elsinore is similar to Olivier's but less romanticized and with a more authentic feel. The **costumes** are similarly more earthy and authentic. Zeffirelli sets the soliloquy in the catacombs of Elsinore. Hamlet chooses a place of death to ask himself if he wants to live. By descending from the normal world to this place of ancestry and royal lineage, he is paying homage to his dead father, seemingly asking King Hamlet and his ancestors for advice. The choice of **camera placement** at the beginning of the scene ensures that Hamlet is framed by the entrance to the crypt, visually signifying the trap in which he finds himself. He then steps out of this frame as if he is stepping out of his comfort zone and into a world where he will finally take action and kill his uncle.

In terms of **lighting**, Zeffirelli's version of the soliloquy is the darkest of the four, with Hamlet surrounded by deep shadows in the catacombs. This face is often deeply shadowed. One side is lit; one is in shadow. Here is man caught between inaction and revenge.

Like in Oliver's version, Zeffirelli's cinematographer, David Watkin, places the camera at a low angle, possibly for similar reasons as Olivier, but also to include Hamlet's ancestors in the **mise-en-scene**. This choice of **camera angles** suggests that Hamlet feels the pressure of the past generations urging him towards vengeance.

As Hamlet stands to the right of his father's coffin in the catacombs of Elsinore, **light** shines on the right side of

his face, but not the other. He kneels down to be nearly at eye level with the coffin. Cut to a close up of Hamlet with his hands folded as if he is praying. He looks to the face on the coffin as if searching for help. As Hamlet moves to the right, we cut to a wide shot of Hamlet's father's grave. Light shines on part of it. Cut to a full shot of Hamlet. He comes from the back right to approach the coffin, in the left foreground. He steps down and slowly approaches as he points his finger at the coffin. He leans against the coffin. Cut to a close-up of Hamlet's profile with his head against the coffin. As he sits with his back leaning against the coffin we cut to a close-up from another angle of Hamlet. It is difficult to see his face as he is in the dark. He moves to lie down on his side. As he speaks, he somberly looks towards the ground then to the catacombs that surround him. The **choreographed movement** in this segment connects Hamlet with the graves of his father and his ancestors. Whatever action he chooses will not be undertaken in his name alone.

Zeffirelli's film features a beautifully lush **score** by Ennio Morricone but he chooses to leave this scene devoid of music. The focus here is on solitude and on Hamlet's words. This allows Gibson to speak softly, accentuating his loneliness in this time of (yet another) decision.



Kenneth Branagh sets his film in a more modern 19th century. He makes important choices in **set design** and **costume**: there are mirrors on either side of the hall where Hamlet debated whether to be or not to be. Mirrors are a recurring motif throughout the film and are used to emphasize both Hamlet's introspection as well as his indecision. Hamlet wears black clothing throughout the film, contrasting drastically with the bright reds and whites seen in the royal court. This colour also emphasizes Hamlet's dark disposition as well as his isolation from his family and the court. Branagh adds a level of dramatic irony here that is missing in the other versions. Claudius and Polonius are hiding behind the mirror that Hamlet is facing, watching him and listening to his every word. The camera tracks to the right to come to Hamlet's side. His black clothing contrasts with the stark whiteness of the hall. Branagh cuts to a full shot of Hamlet facing the mirror. Then, with great care, Polonius pulls back a panel to reveal a two-way mirror on their

side. Claudius and Hamlet are now face to face. If they can hear his inner thoughts, this gives new meaning to the term "soliloquy". Though some may contest that Hamlet is aware that he is being watched and listened to, Branagh has stated that Hamlet is unaware of his stepfather and his cohort.

The **composition** and **camera placement** of this shot has Hamlet framed by the mirror. As with Gibson's entry to the crypt, this physical entrapment suggests Hamlet's internal conflict. He feels like he is stuck in a world of thinking but not doing, and that he cannot kill his uncle who so brutally murdered his father. When Branagh choose to shoot Hamlet in an over the shoulder shot, we are presented with two Hamlets face to face. As with Shakespeare's soliloquy Hamlet is questioning himself.



Like Olivier, Branagh includes a dagger as a prop during this scene. Here, when we see Hamlet pointing the dagger at his own reflection, he is threatening himself; however, the same dagger is pointing at those hidden behind the mirror. But if one speculates that Hamlet *knows* that Claudius and Polonius are behind the two-way mirror, then he is pointing the dagger at them, challenging the two men to come after him so he can seek his revenge on his father. This can also be seen as foreshadowing Hamlet killing Claudius with the same dagger.

Branagh's version of "Hamlet" has an **original score** by Patrick Doyle, who won the Oscar for Best Score. Doyle's beautifully subtle orchestral music focuses on the strings and begins roughly halfway through Hamlet's soliloquy and ends when Hamlet exits the hall. The music is used to build emotion in the audience to mirror those of Hamlet. Branagh states, "I wanted the music to soar with Hamlet's temporary optimism and hope. And finally, I wanted the audience to leave, not depressed, but shaken by an emotional catharsis that the music would support in the most full-blooded way". (Doyle)

You are expected to address the socio-cultural aspect of film you use for your textual analysis and comparative study. With these versions of Hamlet, you should focus on both the time period the film depicts and the time periods and culture in which the films were produced.

Works Cited:

Doyle, Patrick. "Filmtracks: Shakespeare & Patrick Doyle." *Filmtracks Modern Soundtrack Reviews*. 3 May 2000. Web. 22 Dec. 2010.
<<http://www.filmtracks.com/special/doyle/>>.

Some further exploration:

The Internet Movie Database lists over 40 film versions of Hamlet.

A more recent version of Hamlet uses a contemporary setting and allows you to examine their socio-cultural influences on the film's production and director's intentions.

Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (also called *Hamlet 2000*) is aimed at the MTV generation and some of the choices he made may be seen as hip, cool or just too clever. Starring Ethan Hawke, it is **set** in the headquarters of the Denmark Corporation in contemporary New York with the action taking place in such locations as Times Square, glass skyscrapers, the Guggenheim museum, and other recognizable landmarks. Elsinore is a hotel and the Ghost makes his first appearance on the hotel's security cameras.

Almereyda sets his "to be or not to be" scene in the "Action" aisle of a Blockbuster video store. As Hamlet

walks down the aisle, he is framed by two rows of signs that read "Action." This rather too obviously emphasizes Hamlet's internal struggle and failure to avenge his father. Unlike the characters of these movies Hamlet cannot bring himself to take action. Not only does the setting seem frivolous, but Hamlet is dressed somewhat ridiculously with a colorful "Sherpa" hat and casual dress. He has removed the sunglasses that he has worn throughout much of the film and maybe now has a clearer vision into himself, as he is contemplating why he cannot take action to avenge his father. Almereyda had replaced the traditional knife with a more contemporary handgun but the weapon appears not in Hamlet's hand but on a video recording he has made earlier as an entry in his video-diary. Interestingly, the delivery of the soliloquy is split and the audience does not experience it as a single piece of text, as in Shakespeare's original.



Almerezda is the only director out of these four to use **music** throughout the entire scene. Carter Burwell strips down the orchestra to an ensemble as it delivers his minimalist's score. Despite the contemporary setting, he chooses not to add contemporary instrumentation to the ensemble.

Burwell uses a very dramatic and percussion-led melody for this scene. This adds to the unexpected mood found throughout this version of "Hamlet" and emphasizes the contrast between the setting on the original text and the setting of this film.

Almerezda's cinematographer John de Borman keeps the camera at normal angle (eye-level) as he tracks backward between the aisles so the audience will identify with Hamlet as he is asking himself this simple question, "Should I do this or not?"

The harsh florescent **lighting** in Almerezda's "Hamlet" accentuates the bags under Hamlet's eyes, showing the long hours and sleepless nights Hamlet has spent debating the simple question, "To be, or not to be."

You are expected to address the socio-cultural aspect of film you use for your textual analysis and comparative study. With this version of Hamlet, the time period depicted in the film and the time period in which it was produced are the same. You should think about the intended audience - much younger than the audience targeted in the other three versions. How does this impact the director's

choices? How is pop culture integrated? What about the use of technology as props in the film?

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