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Hamlet: to be or not to be an action film

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Hamlet is said to have its origins in the Scandinavian legend of the avenger Amleth, reported by Saxo Grammaticus around 1200, a legend that has inspired Robert Eggers' *The Northman* (2022): the film bypasses Shakespeare's text and even opposes it in a rewriting that favours action, violence and gore sequences, recalling series such as *Vikings* (2013-2020) and *The Last Kingdom* (2015-2022). But Shakespeare's play transforms the brutal Amleth into a more complex and hesitant character, bringing critics to wonder: why does Hamlet not act and prefer to delay his revenge? This question conjures the very genre of the story, which has an impact on its screen adaptations. With a ghost, a sword duel, murders, plans for revenge and coups, the play promises action. At the same time, with hesitations in the form of monologues, philosophical reflections on existence, and reminders that all beings eventually die, the play also favours meditation and stasis. This tension between action and inaction can be found in practically all filmic endeavours, which end up being positioned between two poles that appeared from the first silent adaptations. On the one hand, we find the French short feature *Le Duel d'Hamlet* (1900) by Clément Maurice with the actress Sarah Bernhardt in the role of Hamlet, which prefigured, and helped shape, the genre of the cloak-and-dagger film; on the other, the German free adaptation, *Hamlet*, directed by Svend Gade and Heinz Schall in 1921, with Danish star Asta Nielsen, where Hamlet is, in fact, a woman who has disguised herself as a man to protect the Danish throne and who is secretly in love with her friend Horatio. From a woman like Bernhardt, who plays a virile, fighting Hamlet in his most obvious action scene, to a woman like Nielsen, who presents a Hamlet with feminine attributes, the role of the Danish prince has played on gender and genre conventions from the silent era onwards. This contradiction inherent in the play is notably parodied in John McTiernan's *The Last Action Hero* (1999) when a pupil watching a *Hamlet* film imagines Arnold Schwarzenegger as the Danish prince, slaughtering his enemies with a machine gun and giving a scathing and definitive answer to the question 'To be or not to be?': '- Not to be', he pronounces gravely at the end of the sequence, putting an end to any kind of hesitation. Every adaptation, re-appropriation or even simple reference to *Hamlet* negotiates between film noir and action film, between introspective film and cloak-and-dagger film, between gothic film and epic film, between family drama and political tragedy. Moreover, just as Hamlet is haunted by his father, screen adaptations are haunted by the films that preceded them. Cinema in general can be seen as haunted by *Hamlet* films. Without Laurence Olivier's

deep voice dubbing the ghost of his father, there might never have been Darth Vader in George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977).¹ *Hamlet* is also one of the most adapted works in world cinema;² films based on *Hamlet* can be found in Brazil, China, Ghana, France, Spain, India, Italy, Iran, Japan, Scandinavia, Tibet, Turkey, etc., where the different socio-cultural contexts reinvigorate the political stakes of the play and challenge the primacy of the Western canon.

If Coleridge's and Goethe's Romantic theories influenced performances of *Hamlet* in the 19th century, those by Sigmund Freud and his disciple Ernest Jones dominated the 20th century. In *Hamlet and Oedipus*, published in 1949, Jones developed a strong thesis that would influence stage productions and film adaptations for decades.³ For him, Claudius has fulfilled Hamlet's unspoken desire to kill his father and marry his mother. Hamlet's mourning for his father is accompanied by a desire for his mother and an identification with his uncle. Hamlet would therefore delay murdering Claudius because the latter represents his unconscious self. In 1937, Tyrone Guthrie directed Laurence Olivier in the first openly oedipal *Hamlet* in history. In this stage production, a bed appeared for the first time in the closet scene, suggesting a possible incestuous relation between Gertrude and her son. From this date onwards, the bed became an indispensable prop, so much so that the closet scene became better known as the "bedroom scene". Olivier reprised this interpretation on screen in 1948, in a Shakespearean film that marked a whole generation of actors and directors around the world.⁴

Olivier adapts *Hamlet* into a film noir, emphasizing paranoia, surveillance, isolation, frustrated sexuality, doubt and ethical indeterminacy, and even adding a voice-over giving access to the protagonist's interiority as in the detective films of the 1940s. If Olivier could adapt *Hamlet* into a film noir so easily in 1948, it was because film noir had already appropriated the *Hamlet* plot three years earlier with Edgar G. Ulmer's *Strange Illusion*. Released in 1945, the film focuses on the oedipal aspects of the play and mixes them with the conventions of the Hollywood genre. Paul Cartwright (James Lydon) is a young student in law and criminal psychology whose father, a respected judge, has just died. Plagued by recurring nightmares that threaten his sanity, he suspects Brett Curtis, the man his mother is about to marry, of having murdered his father; he thus sets out to investigate, gradually

¹ Victoria Bladen, "The Ghost and the Skull: Rupturing Borders between the Living and the Dead in Filmed *Hamlets*", in Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (eds.), *Shakespeare on Screen: Hamlet*, Rouen, Presses universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2011, p. 156.

² Mark Thornton Burnett, *'Hamlet' and World Cinema*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

³ Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, New York, Londres, W. W. Norton, 1976 [1949], pp. 70, 83, 88.

⁴ Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare's Hamlet: The relationship between Text and Film*, Londres, Bloomsbury, 2014.

uncovering Curtis' (whose real name turns out to be Claude) murderous activities. Filmed in black and white, *Strange Illusion* uses an expressionist chiaroscuro aesthetic that is taken up and intensified by Olivier. The noir genre gives Shakespeare a popular appeal, while Shakespeare brings prestige and cultural authority to noir (often relegated to B-movie productions).⁵

Olivier's adaptation presents Elsinore as an extension of the vengeful hero's psychological state. The camera moves through long corridors as if visiting the convolutions of a disturbed mind. Olivier makes frequent use of sequence shots: the gradual unveiling of the action takes place through camera movements but also through changes in focus. Olivier can thus move the object of our attention without the discontinuity of editing. Spaces are connected both by the moving camera and by the depth of field. Much like in the theatre: the audience is free to focus their attention on the background or the foreground. The setting echoes the twists and turns of the plot, just as the shots of the sea reflect Hamlet's torments. Olivier uses numerous cross-fades, which reflect Hamlet's inability to project himself into a stable world after the death of his father.

In its movements, the camera acquires a distinct point of view, which appears omniscient, tireless, sometimes voyeuristic. It even seems to adopt the subjective perspective of the ghost still haunting the castle corridors. The *mise-en-scène* may remain stagey at times, but the shots are always skilfully constructed: the doors and vaults serve as the frames of pictorial compositions. The mist, which often invades the shots of the battlements, creates dramatic ambiguity, echoing the first line of the play, 'Who's there?'

Hamlet goes to meet his father in an almost spiritual quest: he holds his sword like a cross, then slowly climbs the stairs as if on a pilgrimage and kneels down when he finally sees the ghost, barely visible in the mist. His presence is made impressive by the sound of amplified heartbeats, which belong to both father and son. This staging is based on Jean-Louis Barrault's 1946 French theatre production at the Théâtre Marigny. The voice of the ghost is, in fact, Olivier's own voice, pre-recorded and then slowed down. Olivier thus plays both father and son, reflecting Hamlet's contamination by Old Hamlet's voice. Hamlet must, in fact, take on the mission bequeathed to him by the ghost; he thus becomes his father and is likened to a dead man from the beginning of the play. In Olivier's film, this is again reflected in the graveyard scene: the shadow of Hamlet's head is inscribed exactly on Yorick's skull

⁵ Douglas Lanier, "Nouveau Noir: Claude Chabrol's *Ophélie*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the *Nouvelle Vague*", in *Shakespeare on Screen: Hamlet*, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

lying on the ground. The superimposition of Hamlet and the skull at the same time foreshadows the hero's death and gives a new life to the former jester.

The ghost's tale is visualized in a flashback where the king is assassinated by Claudius. The images are presented as Hamlet's mental representation of the ghost's words. Hamlet closes his eyes; a transition to the flashback takes place via a blurred frame: there is, therefore, no proof that the ghost is telling the truth. At the end of the encounter, Olivier insists on Hamlet's devotion to his father: pain is reflected in the sudden fainting of Hamlet who cannot bear the ghost's departure.

Ophelia, played by a very young Jean Simmons, is an ethereal young woman, dressed in white and submitted to her father. The shots with deep depth of field highlight the distance between Hamlet (in the foreground) and Ophelia (in the background), while showing their potential closeness, because, after all, they still share the same space. A similar tension appears between Hamlet soliloquizing in the foreground and Claudius celebrating in the background: here again, Hamlet marks his distance with the court but does not manage to disassociate himself completely from its corruption. Whatever he does, the shot shows that he is still part of it. However, the camera, which films Hamlet's point of view from above (in high-angle shots), attests to a moral elevation of the character, who looks down on Claudius and Gertrude. This elevated position, from a gallery or staircase, also allows Hamlet to be shown as a perpetually performing actor – playing the fool, mocking Polonius and the court.⁶

Ophelia is the only character in the film associated with nature. In the backgrounds of shots in which she appears, the depth of field often allows us a glimpse of the countryside in the distance. The walls of her room are also decorated with flowers. Her room is the only one with real windows, giving access to natural sunlight and creating a contrast with the usual darkness of the palace. At the end of the film she even manages to escape. Having fallen into madness, Ophelia leaves the palace and enters the natural world. Free in her discourse, Ophelia is also free in her movements. While Ophelia's death takes place offstage in the original play, Olivier's film shows us Ophelia floating on the stream where she drowns, reproducing the famous picture of a romantic girl surrounded by flowers inspired by Pre-Raphaelite painting. Her death is thus presented as a form of liberation.

Unlike in Shakespeare's play, the "To be or not to be" soliloquy does not precede the "nunnery scene", but follows it. This reversal serves to emphasize the fragility of Hamlet,

⁶ Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The adaptations of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Peter Brook, Akira Kurosawa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 40-64.

who, in delivering his speech, seems to react to the suffering and violence of the previous scene, as if he was beginning to feel remorse over his treatment of Ophelia. Hamlet returns to the battlements where he first met his father's ghost and where he can be alone and let his thoughts flow, away from the spying of the court. Again, in Olivier's film, the verticality of the battlements is a testament to Hamlet's moral elevation. His inability to act is reflected in the very performance of the monologue: Hamlet, from the top of the cliff, drops his dagger into the sea, evoking a symbolic castration. Olivier's staging of the monologue takes the audience visually into the brain of the Danish prince: the camera moves quickly to the back of Hamlet's head to probe its convolutions, while he delivers the beginning of the speech with an inner voice. The voice-over literally becomes the voice of the mind.

After several discussions with Ernest Jones, Olivier was convinced that Hamlet's inaction in avenging his father lay in his desire for his mother. The opening of the film is famous for its opening line, which highlights indecision: "This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind". Hamlet and Gertrude are less a son and his mother than a lover and his new conquest. Eileen Herlie, who plays Gertrude, was only twenty-seven at the time of filming, whereas Olivier was forty. The camera dwells on the royal bed, whose draperies take the form of a female sex. Throughout the film, Hamlet seeks the favours of his mother, who is presented as the object of his desire. In the bedroom scene, Hamlet draws his sword while throwing his mother onto the bed. Gertrude's scream is then less an exclamation of terror than an orgasmic cry. Olivier alternates between the role of the rapist, the passionate lover and the child cradled in his mother's arms. However, by making the oedipal theory so explicit, Olivier ends up contradicting it because he contributes to denying its repressed dimension.⁷ Jones advocated a cold behaviour towards Gertrude, since Hamlet's desires remain unconscious.⁸ However, while Olivier emphasizes Hamlet's depressive procrastination, he does not go so far as to turn Hamlet entirely into a film noir hero: there is neither self-deception nor moral compromise on his part. At the end of the film, when Hamlet understands Claudius' trickery during the duel, he lets go of his hesitation and achieves an Errol Flynn-like leap from the upper gallery to stab his uncle.

In 1990, Franco Zeffirelli directed his own *Hamlet* film in the same oedipal vein as Olivier. His adaptation is not filmed in black and white, but the colours are hardly saturated; the space of the castle remains dark and gives rise to a feeling of claustrophobia, again

⁷ Lisa S. Starks, "The Displaced Body of Desire: Sexuality in Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*", in Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (eds.), *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 165.

⁸ Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

reproducing the anguish felt towards the female body. Like Olivier, Zeffirelli cuts the text extensively, focusing on the family tragedy. The meeting between Hamlet and his father is treated in a domestic and sentimental way: the ghost arrives unarmoured, with tears in his eyes and arouses pity rather than fear. In Zeffirelli's work, it is the ghost who reaches out to Hamlet: the film underlines fatherly love and the pressure this love puts on the son.

Zeffirelli's film differs from Olivier's in its interpretation of desire. This time, Hamlet is less seeking his mother's affection; Gertrude, played by Glenn Close, becomes the demander, constantly showering her son with kisses and caresses. In the first court scene, which Zeffirelli sets partly in a private room, she kisses Hamlet on the forehead, eyes and lips. Hamlet receives these overly pronounced signs of affection with an ill-repressed disgust, in line with Jacques Lacan's theory that what is at stake in the play is not so much Hamlet's desire for his mother as Gertrude's desire for other men. From the opening flashback scene, where Hamlet's father's funeral takes place, close-ups of Gertrude's glances at Claudius, and of Hamlet's glances at Gertrude and Claudius, build a triangular economy of desire and surveillance. In the bedroom scene, Hamlet almost rapes his mother on her bed, but it is Gertrude who kisses her son on the mouth to interrupt his flow of insults. Gertrude is thus portrayed as a sexual predator, seeking Claudius' favours as well as her son's. In casting Glenn Close in the role, Zeffirelli echoes *Fatal Attraction* (1987), in which she plays Alex Forest, a neglected mistress who turns murderous to get what she wants from her lover.

However, even though Zeffirelli still follows the oedipal tradition of a domineering Gertrude, he chose Mel Gibson to play Hamlet, an actor known for action films such as the *Mad Max* and the *Lethal Weapon* franchises. Zeffirelli actually decided to give him the role after watching *Lethal Weapon* (1987), where Gibson plays a suicidal policeman, reluctant to pull the trigger. For Zeffirelli, the opening scene echoed "To be or not to be".⁹ Gibson brings heroism and determination to the Danish prince through his spirited acting and, above all, through his filmic persona. He plays a prince who is both intellectual and physical.¹⁰ The stacks of books that surround the character suggest a contemplative and literate mind, but the perspiration on his face, which often appears in close-ups, emphasizes the physical effort of an exhausted hero, running up and down stairs to expose the truth. Hamlet is here both a man of action and a man of meditation, but he evolves little. It is Ophelia who is really transformed

⁹ Ace G. Pilkington, "Zeffirelli's Shakespeare", in Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells (eds.), *Shakespeare and the Moving Image, The Plays on Film and Television*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 174.

¹⁰ Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, "Zeffirelli's Shakespearean Motion Pictures: Living Monuments", in Russell Jackson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 221.

as the plot progresses. Played by Helena Bonham Carter, she appears at first as a young virginal girl, braided and dressed like a child. When she falls into madness, she becomes provocative and dangerous. She re-emerges from behind a low wall on the battlements, as if from a grave, like a living dead. She approaches a young guard and begins to caress concupiscently the belt hanging over his belly. Servants then force her to return to the castle. But in the council chamber, Ophelia repeats her subversive actions by sitting on Gertrude's throne. In her madness, this Ophelia literally takes over the court's power. As in the Olivier film, Ophelia is shown once again outside, running through the fields to the stream where she drowns.

In parallel to the oedipal vein close to film noir, a defiant and disenchanting trend was developed, in which Hamlet revolts against society, echoing the angry protagonists who, from the 1950s onwards, rebelled against their elders, such as James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) or Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956). Hamlet becomes an anti-hero, in the guise of a student or a teenager who finds refuge in apathy and mutism. Richard Burton's 1964 *Hamlet*, directed by John Gielgud on Broadway and filmed live for television in Electronovision, and Tony Richardson's 1969 production (filmed in the London Roundhouse theatre), with Nicol Williamson as a mature student in the middle of a decadent court, belong to this trend. The originality of the latter is that the ghost is never shown. His presence is merely suggested by Hamlet's supernaturally illuminated face. Ophelia and her brother Laertes are portrayed as lovers: they kiss tenderly, and they give each other their last recommendations in bed before Laertes leaves for France. Ophelia is at first played as a sexually liberated woman but, during her mad scenes, she adopts a gentle, calm and virginal attitude. Unlike Zeffirelli's film, there is no sexual or political provocation.

Ethan Hawke is another rebellious Hamlet in Michael Almereyda's 2000 adaptation, whose plot is set in late 20th-century New York. The president of the multimedia company Denmark Corporation has just died and his brother Claudius (Kyle MacLachlan) announces at a press conference that he is marrying Gertrude and taking over the company. In a context of technological rise and media supremacy, Claudius' first speech is delivered in front of journalists' cameras; surveillance cameras capture everyone's moves inside Elsinore; as for Ophelia (Julia Stiles), her father Polonius obliges her to wear a hidden microphone when she goes to talk to Hamlet. Communication between the characters is also mediated by technological tools: Hamlet advises Ophelia to go to a nunnery by leaving messages on her answering machine, and the character of Osric is replaced by a fax machine announcing the duel between Hamlet and Laertes. With his Peruvian cap, Hamlet appears as a young man

displaying his opposition to the suit and tie worn by his uncle, symbolizing the neo-liberal capitalist system. Hamlet's sense of imprisonment is reflected visually in tilted, low-angle shots of the skyscrapers that oppressively surround him.

As an avant-garde artist-videographer, Hawke's Hamlet is at the same time a character, an actor and a director. With his camera he films everything he sees, recording himself when he speaks his thoughts aloud and creating home movies from various materials. Since Hamlet also watches home videos from a happier past, he is also a spectator. He watches a Tibetan monk on television talking about the need not only to 'be' but also to 'inter-be' with one's family and friends and with nature, a show which inspires his soliloquy "To be or not to be", delivered in the very meta-filmic environment of a video store, precisely in the wing where the action films are displayed.

The actor whose speech about Hecuba prompts Hamlet to action is replaced by a film clip of James Dean. Later, we also see the Shakespearean actor John Gielgud in a performance of Hamlet, holding Yorick's skull. These filmic quotations situate Almereyda's version both in the history of Shakespearean performances and in the tradition of teenage films – Hawke himself recalls his role as the introverted and rebellious Todd Anderson in *Dead Poets Society* (1989). In a postmodern way, this Hamlet lives in a world where his story is known and has already been adapted on stage and on screen.

As reflexively as ever, the play within the play is replaced by a film within the film – a video edited by Hamlet himself, shown in a private cinema in front of the court. This experimental video is a collage of heterogeneous extracts from soap operas, soft porn and animated films. When the video begins to unfold before our eyes and those of the fictional audience, a surprising title appears on the screen: "The Mousetrap: a tragedy by Hamlet, Prince of Denmark". While we are used to the title of Shakespeare's play, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, this new title presents Hamlet as author rather than character.

The idea of a rebellious Hamlet has inspired the Italian western Enzo G. Castellari's *Johnny Hamlet (Quella sporca storia nel West, 1968)*, in which Johnny Hamilton resists torture, manages to rid the town of bandits and rides off into the sunset with his best friend Horace (Horatio's equivalent), but it has also nourished a series like *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-14). This television series uses the plot of *Hamlet* to tell the story of how biker Jax Teller intends to avenge the death of his father, John Teller, founder of a Californian biker gang. After John's death, Jax's mother Gemma has an affair with the new club president, Clay Morrow. Jax and Clay face off in a power struggle made all the more brutal by Jax's discovery that his father was killed by Clay. While the series does not follow the exact events

of the play, it does draw on its characters and situations. Clay and Gertrude are reminiscent of Claudius and Gertrude – both are concerned that Jax, sometimes referred to as “the prince”, may challenge Clay’s authority. Moreover, like Hamlet’s ghost, John Teller talks to his son through the diary he left behind. Because the series lasted seven seasons, it gives new meaning to Hamlet’s procrastination – Jax is even slower to take revenge so that the serial narrative can last.¹¹

The adaptation of *Hamlet* has also given rise to a counter-tradition in the form of heterogeneous films, less faithful to the text but carrying a discourse that deconstructs, revisits and sometimes parodies the link between *Hamlet* and film noir. These include Helmut Käutner’s *The Rest Is Silence* (*Der Rest ist Schweigen*, 1959), Akira Kurosawa’s *The Bad Sleep Well* (*Warui yatsu hodo yoku nemuru*, 1960), Josée Dayan’s *L’Embrumé* (1980), Aki Kaurismäki’s *Hamlet Goes Business* (*Hamlet liikemaailmassa*, 1987) and Stacy Title’s *Let the Devil Wear Black* (1999). Kurosawa’s dystopian black-and-white film, set in post-war Tokyo, mobilizes Hamlet’s motifs and noir codes in geometrically composed shots to capture the corruption and criminality within large private corporations. The rhetoric of madness is particularly evident in the scowls of Nishi/Hamlet (Toshirô Mifune) as he struggles with his family obligations. This denunciation of corporate malfeasance is echoed in Kaurismäki’s neo-noir film set in Finland in the 1980s, another black-and-white sardonic satire of the world of money and greed.¹²

So far, we have discussed adaptations that give priority to the family tragedy. However, other films emphasize the political dimension of the play, notably reintroducing the character of Fortinbras, who eventually conquers the Danish throne. The tragedy of one man becomes the tragedy of an entire country.¹³ In 1964, Grigori Kozintsev directed his *Hamlet* in a Scope format, with a Russian translation by Boris Pasternak and an operatic score composed by Dmitri Shostakovich. The film opens with a horseman galloping at high speed across the wilderness: Hamlet (Innokenti Smoktunovski) is returning from Wittenberg to attend his father’s funeral. The sequence ends with his arrival at the palace and an embrace with his mother. Kozintsev constructs a cold, elemental world dominated by water and stone, where human beings are under the sway of social and political forces. Hamlet’s imprisonment is

¹¹ Sylvaine Bataille, “*Hamlet on Harleys*: *Sons of Anarchy*’s Appropriation of *Hamlet*”, in *Shakespeare on Screen: Hamlet*, *op. cit.*, p. 329-343.

¹² Anne-Marie Costantini-Cornède, “Akira Kurosawa’s *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960) and Aki Kaurismäki’s *Hamlet Goes Business* (1987): *Film Noir* or *Neo-Noir* Modern *Hamlets*, or Genre as an Ideological Signifier”, in *Shakespeare on Screen: Hamlet*, *op. cit.*, p. 201-234.

¹³ Douglas M. Lanier, “*Hamlet*: Tragedy and Film Adaptation”, in Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 572-573.

suggested in the opening sequence: the drawbridge closes after his arrival, evoking a giant jaw swallowing its prey. Hamlet is then frequently filmed against the oppressive walls of the castle.

As for Ophelia (Anastasiya Vertinskaya), her dresses and ruffs function as suffocating shackles. A shot of a caged parrot prolongs the metaphor of a young girl trapped by conventions. The sea is, on the contrary, a symbol of liberation. It is on a rocky beach at night that Hamlet meets the ghost of his father – a warrior in full armour and black cloak that again prefigures Darth Vader; it is in front of rough waves that Hamlet resolutely utters his soliloquy “To be or not to be”; and it is over the ocean that we see a seagull rise when Ophelia dies – a sign of deliverance. At the end of the film, the funeral procession that accompanies Hamlet’s body on the orders of Fortinbras also heads for the ocean.

All the prince’s monologues can be heard by the audience in voice-over: Hamlet’s thoughts are all the more subversive since they remain impossible to hear. Even if Claudius surrounds his nephew with spies, he cannot prevent him from thinking freely. The voice-over thus presents the mind as a formidable force in the fight against tyranny. Kozintsev’s *Hamlet* had an important influence on Kenneth Branagh’s 1996 adaptation, which extends and intensifies the play’s political and military dimension. Branagh films *Hamlet* with saturated colours using a 70mm film, a format which had not been used in Britain since David Lean’s *Ryan’s Daughter* (1970). Through extreme backtracking shots, long shots, centrifugal flashbacks and outdoor sequences that make the film breathe, the filmmaker dilates the story, emphasizing action and reducing the impression of tragic fatality. The film conflates the texts of the First Folio and Second Quarto to form, at 238 minutes, the longest commercial film since Joseph Mankiewicz’s *Cleopatra* (1963), with an intermission and even a summary of the first part (a speech by Claudius is made to operate as a “previously on” sequence). Branagh’s *Hamlet* draws on the impressive landscapes of other films by Lean such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965). Some actors are chosen for the epic films they evoke: Julie Christie – Lara in *Doctor Zhivago* – plays Gertrude; Charlton Heston, who recalls both Ben Hur and Moses, plays the First Comedian. The high definition of the image makes it possible to compose shots with deep depth of field: Branagh can shoot vast snowy landscapes in which soldiers can be seen walking in the distance; he can also capture the smallest details on faces in extreme close-ups. The entire field is sometimes occupied by an ear, an eye or a mouth. The face becomes a landscape, and intimacy becomes epic. Even Yorick’s skull is filmed frontally in extreme close-up: dead Yorick stares at us, reminding us of our inevitable death.

The director creates a world dominated by war, discipline, hierarchy, violence and indifference to suffering. The gleaming rooms of Elsinore and the martial uniforms are part of a military aesthetic where excessive order reigns. The ghost (Brian Blessed) appears first as a military statue that comes back to life, Commander-like, and then as an ogre in armour, with steel-blue eyes – those of a creature who knows the secrets of hell – and a voice that is more reminiscent of a diabolical creature than an angelic spirit. Branagh borrows from the thriller and horror film genres that were themselves shaped by *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.

The ghost's account of his murder is shown in flashbacks that are inserted with straight cuts. Unlike Olivier's flashbacks, they do not appear immediately as Hamlet's thoughts, so that we can question their origin. Do the images take us back to an event that actually took place, or not? This ambiguity keeps the question of Claudius' actual guilt open.¹⁴ The flashbacks are less about revealing the murderer's identity than about emphasizing the violence and repulsiveness of the murder. The poisoned ear explodes in blood, and the king is seized with convulsions. After these horrific revelations, Hamlet and the ghost reach out to each other. Filial love and paternal love are placed on the same level and the anguish of separation is felt by both characters at the same time.

Branagh tries to situate his film in a pre-Freudian tradition. Hamlet and Gertrude never kiss. Most of the closet scene takes place on a couch instead of a bed. Lacan's theory seems to be reflected in many of the shots: Hamlet seeks less to be loved by his mother than to kill any desire for Claudius in her. While Hamlet waits for the ghost to appear, one shot shows Gertrude and Claudius (Derek Jacobi) drinking wine and rushing to the bridal bed. Similarly, when the ghost describes the lust of the new king and queen, an image reveals Gertrude's corset being hastily untied by Claudius. By focusing on Gertrude's sexuality and the disgust it arouses in her son, Branagh wishes to remove any hint of Hamlet's desire for his mother. Incestuous desire here gives way to heterosexual love for Ophelia (Kate Winslet), with flashbacks revealing the intimate relationship between the prince and the young woman.¹⁵ Branagh also avoids any sign of homosexual desire that Hamlet might feel towards Horatio. Any overly affectionate gesture between the two men is banned and, when the prince dies, the stage tradition of Horatio embracing his friend is no longer respected. The 'effeminate' interpretation is abandoned in favour of an energetic and vigorous reading of the role. Hamlet is transformed into a man of action and fearless avenger, even swinging from a chandelier to

¹⁴ David Kennedy Sauer, "Suiting the word to the action: Kenneth Branagh's interpolations in *Hamlet*", *Shakespeare Yearbook* (1997), p. 325-348.

¹⁵ Lisa S. Starks, "The Displaced Body of Desire" art. cit., p. 165; 175.

thrust his sword and impale Claudius. The scenes with Fortinbras, a role often suppressed in stage and film productions, offer a mirror image to Hamlet, building the parallel story of a military operation that ends with the armed conquest of Elsinore. Even in his monologue “To be or not to be”, Hamlet resolutely draws a dagger, as if threatening Claudius. The soliloquy is staged in a huge hall of mirrors that reflects the paranoia of an opulent, narcissistic world and echoes the many doppelgänger figures in the play. Hamlet contemplates his reflection in a one-way mirror, while Claudius and Polonius observe him from the other side. The camera gradually moves closer to the reflection until the latter completely invades the field. This shot creates a confusion between the image of Hamlet and that of his double, while at the same time placing Claudius in the same position as the audience in the cinema, since he is watching someone who cannot see him.

While the film attempts to depart from Freudian theory, it ends up reflecting it in perhaps an even more crucial way than previous adaptations, not through desire for the mother but through the relationship to the father, and then to the uncle who has taken his place. The film is framed by two sequences centred on the figure of the father: it opens on the pedestal of Old Hamlet’s statue whose name, engraved in stone, becomes the very title of the film; it closes on the destruction of the statue, symbolizing the father’s final overthrow. Throughout the film, the mourning for the father is also accompanied by a powerful drive to identify with Claudius.¹⁶ Hamlet and his uncle have physical similarities that are unprecedented in other film productions where Claudius is usually portrayed as a portly character. In Branagh’s film, Hamlet and Claudius are the only ones to adopt the same military clothing and bleached, brush cut hair. Noted by several critics and actors on the film set,¹⁷ the uncanny resemblance leads us to wonder about the relationship between Claudius and Gertrude: could their affair have begun long before Old Hamlet’s death? Could Hamlet be Claudius’ son?

In this warlike, masculine world, Kate Winslet plays Ophelia as a mistress neglected by a revenge-obsessed prince-soldier, then as the victim of an oppressive, dictatorial regime that eventually locks her up. The film first presents us with a sensual and rebellious Ophelia. In the scene where Polonius advises his daughter to beware of Hamlet, Branagh introduces flashbacks that remove any ambiguity regarding Ophelia’s virginity. In her scenes of

¹⁶ H. R. Coursen, “Words, words, words: Searching for *Hamlet*”, *Shakespeare Yearbook* (1997), p. 306-324.

¹⁷ Nina da Vinci Nichols, “Branagh’s *Hamlet* Redux”, *Shakespeare Bulletin* 15.3 (1997), p. 39 ; Deborah Cartmell, “Reading and Screening Ophelia”, *Shakespeare Yearbook* (1997), 38; Russell Jackson, “Diary”, in Kenneth Branagh, *‘Hamlet’ by William Shakespeare: Screenplay, Introduction and Film Diary*, Londres, Chatto & Windus, 1996, p. 187 ; Mark Thornton Burnett, “The ‘Very Cunning of the Scene’: Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet*”, *Literature/Film Quarterly* 25.2 (1997), p. 79.

madness, while singing a bawdy song, Ophelia lies on the floor and begins to mimic intercourse, while another flashback reveals Hamlet and Ophelia embracing in bed. First an emancipated woman, Ophelia undergoes a gradual imprisonment as she descends into dementia and bangs against the four walls of a padded prison. She then appears face down on the floor, encased in a straitjacket that prevents her from making any movement. She ends up in a stone cell where she receives cold showers, where her words cannot disturb anyone. Unlike Olivier's and Zeffirelli's films, Branagh's does not show her escaping to the outside world: Ophelia does not run through the fields; she does not float prettily along the stream. The only image is that of Ophelia already drowned, her head under murky water.

In a play where unfinished funeral rites abound, where Polonius's burial takes place in secret, where Ophelia's funeral is interrupted by a fight between brother and lover, where Hamlet's death is immediately followed by the arrival of Fortinbras, Branagh's film ends with the hero's funeral rites, fulfilling the play's need for mourning. Despite Fortinbras' arrival in full force, the loss of the Danish prince is glorified, even resembling Christ's death when his body is carried in the shape of a cross. But just after this cathartic sequence, the film returns to a certain form of nihilism. Fortinbras' soldiers pull down the statue of Hamlet's father and break it into pieces. This shot, which is reminiscent of the destruction of dictators' symbols, closes the film in complete annihilation. The last sequence is in itself a *memento mori*. After all these events, there is nothing left. The end of the film thus oscillates between idealism and cynicism, harmony and discord, glorification of death and fatalistic vanity.

Branagh's colourful geopolitical epic has influenced freer adaptations that have emerged in the early 21st century in a variety of cultural contexts. Xiaogang Feng's *The Banquet* (2006) transposes the plot of Hamlet to tenth-century China, a troubled period marked by struggles within the imperial family. The beauty of the photography, the richness of the interior and natural settings and the choreographed martial-art fights contribute to the epic dimension of the film. The sumptuous opening shot of Empress Wan (Ziyi Zhang) as Gertrude from the back as she advances to the throne is reminiscent of the way Gertrude and Hamlet are shown from the back in Branagh's film during the wedding scene. *The Banquet* appropriates *Hamlet* to address issues specific to Chinese culture, such as female authority and free will. Empress Wan has a love affair with Wu Luan/Hamlet (Daniel Wu), while she is married to Emperor Li/Claudius (You Ge). The latter has taken power by murdering his own

brother, Wu Luan's father. *Hamlet* becomes the instrument with which China reflects on itself at a key moment in its emergence on the international film scene.¹⁸

Another Chinese version, Sherwood Hu's *Prince of the Himalayas*, was released the same year. In medieval times, in the cold, arid steppes of Tibet, young prince Lhamokloda (Purba Rgyal) learns that his father has died under dubious circumstances and returns to the kingdom of Jiabo. Upset by the sudden remarriage of his mother, Queen Nanm (Zomskyid), to his uncle Kulo-ngam (Dobrgyal) and obsessed with revenge, he forgets his love for Odsaluyang (Sonamdolgar). She miscarries and drowns in a lake, the blood that escapes from her forming a horrible stream. The camera gradually rises and presents her, in her long-sleeved white dress, as a dying bird. When Prince Lhamokloda threatens to kill the new king, his mother reveals his uncle's true identity: he is in fact his biological father and was forced to kill his brother when the queen's adultery was discovered. The film recalls both Kozintsev's and Branagh's versions. However, because it takes great liberties with the playtext, it pushes some interpretations to the limit. Whereas Branagh's film imagines that Hamlet and Ophelia have consummated their love, *Prince of the Himalayas* goes further by postulating that Odsaluyang/Ophelia dies pregnant. Similarly, whereas Branagh's version suggested that Hamlet might be Claudius' son, Sherwood Hu's film removes any doubt regarding their filial relationship.

Cultural re-contextualisation also allows for an exacerbated politicization of the plot. Vishal Bhardwaj's 2014 *Haider* constructs a subtext that makes the characters' motivations explicit and intertwines it with the geopolitical situation of a beleaguered Kashmir, grappling with terrorism and insurgency. Haider/Hamlet (Shahid Kapoor) is sent away from Kashmir by his parents so that he can study and not fall into the hands of radicalized activists. When he returns, his father is missing, his house has been destroyed and his mother Ghazala (Tabu) has become close to her brother-in-law Khurram (Kay Kay Menon). Haider starts to look for his father, a quest that reveals the army's surveillance, detention and torture of civilians. The soliloquy "To be or not to be" then echoes the questions that the people of Kashmir ask themselves: does my country exist or not? Should I join the forces of resistance or submit? Is Kashmir to be defended to the end, or is it, like the kingdom of Denmark, a "rotten state" in which the fight for sovereignty only leads to bloodshed?¹⁹

¹⁸ Mark Thornton Burnett, "Hamlet and World Cinema: A Paradigmatic Instance", in *Shakespeare on Screen: Hamlet*, *op. cit.*, p. 191-200.

¹⁹ Poonam Trivedi, "Remaking Shakespeare in India: Vishal Bhardwaj's Films", in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, *op. cit.*, p. 237-248.

Since the advent of Internet 2.0, viewers have taken over Shakespeare-inspired films to comment on and re-edit them in videos posted on different platforms. For instance, a video entitled “Hamlet trailer – Lion King”, released on YouTube in 2010, uses the soundtrack from the official trailer of Branagh’s *Hamlet* and grafts it on images from the animated Disney film *The Lion King* (1994). Shakespearean scholars have already addressed *The Lion King* as Disney’s take on *Hamlet*,²⁰ but the video constitutes criticism *in action*. It not only presents *The Lion King* as an appropriation of the *Hamlet* narrative (with Mufasa/Old Hamlet betrayed and killed by his brother Scar/Claudius and then revenged by Simba/Hamlet) but also parodies the original *Hamlet* trailer. The video reveals, intentionally or not, the discursive and promotional choices of both works: it shows that the promotion of *The Lion King* denied, for commercial reasons, its link to Shakespeare, just as Castle Rock sold, through the trailer, Branagh’s *Hamlet* as an epic thriller. Branagh’s film is poached as if it had become as canonical as Shakespeare’s play, as if it *were* Shakespeare’s play. The elements of the film (characters, music, images, actors) are taken, then re-arranged and recomposed in an inventive, even transgressive way.²¹

As Branagh’s 1996 film is dismembered and recycled, cited and parodied, imitated and disseminated, “original” Shakespeare (in both meanings of the term) continues to be produced through the very acts of iteration, adaptation and mediatization. *Hamlet* is probably the play that has been most quoted in artistic works of all kinds. A project such as HyperHamlet,²² for instance, records the ways in which each line of the playtext is found in world culture. By adapting *Hamlet* or taking inspiration from the play, the films themselves can acquire the status of canonical texts, be inspirational, become quoted and enter in a new cycle of remediation.

²⁰ Richard Finkelstein, “Disney Cites Shakespeare: The Limits of Appropriation”, in *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, *op. cit.*, p. 179-196.

²¹ Sarah Hatchuel, “The Shakespearean films of the 90s: Afterlives in transmedia in the 21st century”, *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* 33, 2015, <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/2945>.

²² See <http://www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch/>.