

## Hamlet (2000)

### Major Credits:

Director: Michael Almereyda

Cinematography: John deBorman; additional photography by Brian Pryzpek

Music: Carter Burwell

Cast: Ethan Hawke (Hamlet), Kyle MacLachan (Claudius), Sam Shepard (Ghost), Diane Venora (Gertrude), Bill Murray (Polonius), Liev Schreiber (Laertes), Julia Stiles (Ophelia), Karl Geary (Horatio)

### Background:

By one critic's count, Almereyda's is the 44<sup>th</sup> film version of Hamlet, and certainly one of the shortest in recent memory. It seems inspired not by Olivier's celebrated version (1948) or the more recent "traditional" versions by Franco Zeffirelli (1990) and Kenneth Branagh (1996) but by Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismaki's 1987 spoof, *Hamlet Goes Business* (in which Hamlet is a bumbling entrepreneur who poisons his father himself!). The film was a low-budget production, shot in super 16mm on a very tight schedule, for which all the actors worked for scale. In an interesting choice, Almereyda has radically streamlined the play but retained Shakespeare's language. Reviews of the film were almost uniformly positive, although some questioned the performances of the younger actors, including Ethan Hawke.

### Adaptation Strategies:

As a way of organizing the changes made in adapting the play to the screen, one might consider three main categories, following the method established by Vladimir Propp in his famous study, *The Morphology of the Folk Tale*:

1. *Simplification*, which involves the elimination of sub-plots and consolidation of scenes and speeches. Obviously, this is the strategy Almereyda most often employs, as exemplified by the radical reduction of the Fortinbras sub-plot.
2. *Expansion*, which allows the director to expand upon the unique properties of film or to emphasize a particular theme. Notice, for example, the Ghost's reappearance for a third time, Gertrude's or the conception of Hamlet as a video artist.
3. *Substitution*, which includes simple changes of narrative elements to update the plot (e.g., laptops for written documents, airplane for ship, guns for bated swords, limousine for church) as well as dislocations such as the Guggenheim Museum fountain for the river. One of the subtlest of these substitutions is Jeffrey Wright's cameo role as the Gravedigger singing Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower" for the Clown's song.

### Cinematic Qualities:

1. Editing: Almereyda makes excellent use of montage—rapidly edited pieces of film depicting different scenes—for purposes of exposition and also to provide visual objective correlatives during Hamlet's soliloquies. Combined with an outstanding, eclectic musical score (by Carter Burwell), the editing creates something like the now-familiar style of music videos, though the technique

undoubtedly detracts from the purity and precision of Shakespeare's original language. Other examples of creative editing include:

- Jump cuts as Hamlet composes his love letter
  - Flashbacks to depict Ophelia's death and Hamlet's turning the tables on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
  - The video montage of Hamlet's "story" as his life flashes before his eyes
2. *Mise-en-scène*: The arrangement of objects within the frame often provides an index to Hamlet's moods or suggests the contemporary culture that he confronts. Note, in particular, the almost continuous use of reflecting surfaces—mirrors, glass windows, etc—which create some very original, arresting compositions, as when Hamlet addresses his mother through the half-opened limo window, dividing the frame so that we can watch all three figures in the scene.
  3. Camera angles: Generally employed to convey power relationships, the low angle shots of Hamlet, Claudius, and Gertrude on the street allow us to view the glass skyscrapers of Manhattan. An extreme high angle, usually used to suggest fate, creates a striking image of the drowned Ophelia.

#### Questions for Discussion:

1. How does Almereyda's film address "the Hamlet Problem," i.e., the "spine" of Hamlet's character and the issue of his delay?
2. What is the film's interpretation of Hamlet's "madness"?
3. How does the film present Hamlet's actions towards Ophelia?
4. The New York Times film critic, Elvis Mitchell, writes that Almereyda "has given Shakespeare a distinctively American perspective," but he does not elaborate on this point. Do you think this is a valid observation, and if so, what do you think Mitchell had in mind?
5. To what extent does the film seem to take into consideration the past two decades of feminist criticism of *Hamlet*? Compare the portrayals of Ophelia and Gertrude.
6. What is the aesthetic effect of combining unconventional, even "hip" cinematic techniques with Shakespeare's original language? In particular, what is your response to the "slacker" delivery of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as well as to Ethan Hawke's obvious reversion to a contemporary intonation?
7. What is your favorite moment in the film, and how does it contribute to your understanding of the play/film?