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A Comparison of Various Film Adaptations of William
Shakespeare's Hamlet

Bachelor Thesis

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Declaration:

I declare that I worked on this bachelor thesis, titled A Comparison of Various Film Adaptations of William Shakespeare's Hamlet, independently and that all the sources I used are included in the reference list.

Prague, 11th of April, 2014

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to compare various film adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and to comment on the different style of their adaptation of the original play. A brief description of this Shakespeare masterpiece and of related films and their style followed by a depiction of particular characters and how the movies interpret them will lead to the comparison of the movies within individual motifs. Four film adaptations will be compared: the black-and-white version by Laurence Olivier (1948), Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* starring Mel Gibson (1990), the four-hour *Hamlet* directed by Kenneth Branagh (1996) and modern version directed by Michael Almereyda (2000).

Abstrakt

Cílem této práce je porovnat různé filmové adaptace *Hamleta* od Williama Shakespeara a srovnat jejich odlišné přístupy k adaptaci původní hry. Po krátkém popisu tohoto Shakespearova mistrovského díla, jemu odpovídajících filmů a jejich stylů zpracování, následovaném charakterizací vybraných postav v závislosti na tom, jak je jednotlivé snímky zobrazují, dojde i na srovnání všech filmů v rámci konkrétních motivů. Celkem budou porovnávány čtyři snímky: černobílá verze Laurence Oliviera (1948), *Hamlet* Franca Zeffirelliho s Melem Gibsonem v hlavní roli (1990), čtyřhodinová adaptace Kennetha Branagha (1996) a moderní verze režírovaná Michaelem Almereydou.

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1. Introduction

Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, not only because of its majestic grandeur and wide range of motifs, but also for its dramatic situations, complex characters and great poetry. It has been considered the greatest achievement of the world's best playwright and it is also Shakespeare's longest play. It takes place in medieval Denmark and presents a story of prince Hamlet who takes his revenge by killing his uncle Claudius who killed his brother, Hamlet's father, in order to get possession of the throne and marry the widow and Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude. Killing Claudius brings Hamlet satisfaction, but the story ends also with his own death and the death of Gertrude and many others. The play is full of elaborate intrigues and plotlines, the motifs vary from murder, revenge, madness, melancholy, mother-son relationship, father-son relationship, treason and love, and end with supernatural elements, questions of life and death and sexual and moral corruption. No wonder that it inspired many filmmakers around the world; new adaptations of *Hamlet* are still being released nowadays and many others will probably be created in the future. Some of them are very unique in their style, in the interpretations of *Hamlet's* major motifs and in the attitude of their directors to the subject matter. For every director, and more importantly for every actor, the making of a *Hamlet* film is a huge challenge. Since people are different, even the themes in the movies differ from each other and every important motif, every important character and every important turn of the plot undergoes various interpretations of the directors who had to deal with whether the audience would accept their films and the changes they committed in some cases. That is the thing which is fascinating about it and it is also the reason why I chose to write about it in my thesis – even the most well-known piece of art can be interpreted differently and the actual comparison of these various interpretations does not appear very often in literature. I chose the film adaptations of *Hamlet* rather than a theatre production, because the film versions are generally more accessible.

I picked the films which are the most known, most interesting for analytical purposes and appreciated and accepted by the public audience as the distinctive ones. At first, I will write about the movies in general, about their visual conception, the extent

of the original text and about the concrete realization of the shift of the play to a movie screen. The description, characterization and comparison of the most interesting characters of the play (according to my opinion), particularly Hamlet, the Ghost and Ophelia, will follow. Finally, I will comment on a few main themes from the play and how they are interpreted within the movies. As the main motifs I chose those which are the most significant for the understanding of the play and are the most discussed ones – the motif of revenge, Hamlet's relationship with his mother and Ophelia, the madness of Hamlet and the madness of Ophelia.

The amount of reasons why I picked particularly these four films is considerable. Laurence Olivier's adaptation from 1948 is the oldest one, more than fifty years older than the others I chose. That makes it significantly different from the cinematographic approach – not only it is black-and-white, but also the performance of actors and the way how various scenes are filmed is in an enormous contrast with younger versions. The movie corresponds with the decade in which it was created. Actors are very cultivated, the movie is based on a traditional concept of filming, but yet it is very sophisticated and clever in the manner it adapts the original play. The story takes place in a spacious and austere castle, which emphasizes its stateliness. The reduction of the original text and a big number of changes in the chronological order of concrete scenes are also very interesting from the analytical point of view. And the ultimate reason for choosing this version of *Hamlet* is Sir Laurence Olivier.

I chose the movies directed by Franco Zeffirelli and Kenneth Branagh, because they are very often compared together – they were both filmed within a period of six years only, but yet they are significantly different. Zeffirelli's adaptation from 1990 seems to be partly inspired by Olivier's film, it is rather realistic and it also takes place in a medieval castle. The protagonist of Hamlet is Mel Gibson, an action star who did not have any former experience with Shakespeare and surprisingly accepted the role that demands a great actor. Zeffirelli modified the settings and the production in order to highlight the badness and corruption of the characters. Branagh's version, on the other hand, takes place in a sumptuous palace, Hamlet is played by an experienced Shakespearean actor and the film is incredibly noble and fantastically majestic. The characters might be glossy on the surface, but rotten inside. Unlike the other versions,

Branagh's film from 1996 works with the unabridged form of the text, there is no reduction and none important motif or character is missing.

Almereyda's *Hamlet* was filmed in 2000 and it differs a lot from the other versions in its modern approach. The story is moved to contemporary settings, takes place in New York and deals with modern technologies. This radical change is important for the interpretation – the characters, living in a material and anonymous world, are less able to deal with real emotions and they feel more lost and confused. This film is also the shortest one and in spite of the fact that the text was noticeably reduced the story maintained the majority of its motifs.

From the amount of characters I picked those which I consider being the most important for the story, the most interesting for the analysis and also variously interpreted by the directors. Hamlet is the main character and the most important figure. Laurence Olivier plays him as a wistful and thoughtful man who does not want anybody to hear what he thinks – most of his monologues are spoken via voiceovers only. He is an introvert with soft expressions and rather sad than furious. Mel Gibson's Hamlet is a man of action who expresses his anger and madness directly and maybe too transparently, but who also suffers from depression. Kenneth Branagh is angry more often in his role, his Hamlet is an extrovert who is disgusted by what happens around him and does not hesitate to show his displeasure. It is Branagh's film that puts the biggest emphasis on the character of Hamlet (more than the other films) and thanks to the uncut version of the original text it develops his thought processes from the biggest amount of perspectives. Ethan Hawke in Almereyda's film plays Hamlet as a private and sensitive young man who does not express emotions too frequently and whose intellectual background was partly replaced by a shallow and stylish appearance. Besides Hamlet's behavior and characteristics I focused also on his clothes and on the description of the actors who played him.

I consider Hamlet's relationship with the Ghost very interesting and important, but also very underestimated and not properly discussed in depth in the literature. That is why I included the Ghost of King Hamlet as one of the most crucial characters as well. Almereyda's film is especially remarkable, because it interprets the Ghost as

almost a physical being who shares an intimate relationship with his son, whereas other versions offer the Ghost as a spiritual creature, as a phantom who cannot be undoubtedly described as good or bad. Even the interpretation of the Ghost himself varies a lot from one film to another. Mostly he is shown in a human form and cannot be considered a ghost at first sight, so it emphasizes the realistic approach of the director (Zeffirelli, Almereyda), or is somehow modified in order to look unrealistic (in Branagh's film he has extremely blue eyes and seems rather diabolical, which actually supports the theory that the Ghost only wants to manipulate with Hamlet and exploit him for violent and unholy acts). In Olivier's film the Ghost is revealed nearly as an abstract figure, as something that lives in the form of an unclear contour in the mist. This interpretation of such a character is the closest it can be to the image of a ghost, how a majority of people would probably imagine it.

Ophelia is the last one who I chose for further analysis, because of the extent of the range of her interpretation in different films, which varies from the concept of a naive and childish young girl (in Olivier's and Zeffirelli's films) to a mature woman which is sensitive and easily vulnerable (in Branagh's film, where her madness gets the most naturalistic form). She is even displayed as a rebellious teenager in Almereyda's film, which stresses her depression and loneliness.

I decided to discuss four motifs which cannot be omitted in any adaptation of *Hamlet* and are considered the most significant ones. The motif of revenge is especially rich, since there are actually three men presented who have lost their fathers and wish to avenge them (Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras). Hamlet's relationship with his mother and Ophelia is interesting, since Gertrude and Ophelia are both weak characters and easily manipulated by men. Hamlet's mutual affection towards his mother is stressed particularly in Zeffirelli's film. In Branagh's version, it is revealed that Hamlet and Ophelia are former lovers and their relationship is more intimate than in any other film. The madness of Hamlet and the madness of Ophelia are often compared, since these are two different forms of insanity. Hamlet's lunacy is usually interpreted as pretended, but there is an emphasis on his suicidal thoughts in Olivier's *Hamlet*. Ophelia's madness is generally acceptable as the real one, but there is a detail which reveals that she might have been pretending her strange behavior as well in Branagh's film. Such diversity

really is incredible and I decided to point out the biggest differences not only among the interpretation of the characters, but also among the interpretation of these motifs. The results of the comparison of four different films are summarized at the end of the thesis.

2. The Movies

2. 1. Hamlet (1948), directed by Laurence Olivier

The adaptation from 1948 with Sir Laurence Olivier in the position of director, producer, screenwriter and also actor of the leading role, is the first British film which won the Academy Award for Best Picture. It is also the first sound film of this well-known play in English. It won four Oscars and many other prestigious awards, e.g. one BAFTA Award, two Golden Globe Awards and a Great International Prize of Venice. The movie introduces Laurence Olivier as Hamlet, Basil Sydney as King Claudius, Eileen Herlie as Queen Gertrude, Norman Wooland as Horatio, Felix Aylmer as Polonius, Jean Simmons as Ophelia, and many others including young Christopher Lee as one of the soldiers at the court. The film was widely accepted by its audience despite its unpleasant reception by critics, who called the movie too reductive – Laurence Olivier cut several characters and scenes out of the play entirely in order to save time and to make the film shorter, from four hours only to two and a half hours.

“Olivier wanted to make a similar movie after the success of *Henry V* (1944) and started the preparations for *Hamlet* in 1947” (Olivier, 123). “In *Wuthering Heights* (1939) Olivier mastered the very different form of acting that the medium requires and played also in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940), the film that most influenced his *Hamlet* visually” (Cook, 3). “He preferred black-and-white to color in order to support a depth of field, so the objects in front are focused as well as the objects behind. It also emphasizes the spectacular poetics of the film” (Olivier, 124). There is also one important innovation – “earlier Shakespearean films used simple camera placements and movements to follow characters who simply mouthed their words into the void. Olivier introduces careful choreography and the alternation of voice-over and mouthed speech” (Cook, 31). The atmosphere of despair and melancholy is stressed by the presence of the ubiquitous white fog and humid dark corners and smooth wall of the medieval castle, where the movie takes place, since the story is set in medieval times. The emptiness of rooms and spacious chambers reflect on Hamlet’s emotional gasp after losing his father, the number of long halls and staircases refer to his confusion and unclear feelings. The music and the costumes are made to be period, the text of the

original play is convenient for the characters, the place and the atmosphere. Olivier decided to add a few parts, mostly flashbacks. When the Ghost speaks about the murder (I.5.60-80), we can see how he was killed by Claudius – it helps to understand the monstrosity of such a crime. Polonius’s discussion with Reynaldo (II.I.1-74) is jettisoned as well as is Ophelia’s dialogue with Polonius (II.I.75-121) – in order to save time this sequence is replaced with another scene, in which, instead of reporting a confrontation with Hamlet to her father, Ophelia remembers the event via flashback. Ophelia’s death is present on the screen, it feels more naturalistic and the emotions are deeper when the audience can see it, rather than hear it from some other character. Also, Hamlet’s fight with the pirates appears in a form of flashback. This quick moment of action functions as a refreshing change from the psychological drama that takes place before and after. On the other hand, all political motifs were eliminated from the play. Fortinbras, the ambassadors Voltimand and Cornelius and even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were cut, so the movie was dependent only on the story between the most important characters. The order of a few scenes was changed in the interest of the continuity. The sequence when Polonius gives advice to his descendants (I.III. 52-82) is presented before the passage when Hamlet is told about the Ghost (I.II.160-253). The scene in which Hamlet gives advices to the actors (II.II.427-537) is chronologically put after the scene when Hamlet speaks with Ophelia (III.I.92-151). Right after this scene Hamlet contemplates suicide (III.I.58-90) and not before. The passage that takes place at the Danish coast (IV.V.1-66) is omitted completely. All these changes made by Olivier made the movie conveniently shorter, but the criticism that too much of the play was sacrificed, was huge. However, despite cutting crucial scenes and speeches and many indispensable characters “the film holds a foundational position in the history of Shakespearean adaptations” (Cook, 24).

2. 2. Hamlet (1990), directed by Franco Zeffirelli

Franco Zeffirelli has been a big fan of Shakespeare since he studied English language in Florence. His career of a filmmaker was formed, among other movies, by Laurence Olivier’s adaptations of *Henry V* and *Hamlet*. His work altered films, opera and theatre, but Zeffirelli has always been most passionate about filming the stage

classics – his most famous work from the beginnings of his career includes *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967), where he wanted to combine film with a theatrical approach, and *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), both highly appreciated by the critics and by the audience worldwide. Even the financial success was huge and there was no obstacle for Zeffirelli to finally film long-awaited *Hamlet*, but due to certain circumstances (Zeffirelli's enthusiasm for religious materials and opera projects) the film had to be postponed. The idea of making *Hamlet* came back to Zeffirelli's mind many years later, when he persuaded Mel Gibson to accept the leading role. The film offers also Alan Bates as King Claudius, Glenn Close as Queen Gertrude, Stephen Dillane as Horatio, Ian Holm as Polonius, Helena Bonham Carter as Ophelia and Nathaniel Parker as Laertes.

“Zeffirelli's film was intended to take place in rotten, pre-Christian state of Denmark, where pagan Vikings kill each other and weave intrigues” (Clarkson, 276). The medieval atmosphere was created by historical costumes and by the filming locations – the most significant ones were at Blackness Castle and Dunnottar Castle in Scotland and at Dover Castle in England. Also the language remained. The original text was shortened and a few sequences were cut, but Zeffirelli made up a few details and several new lines that did not come from Shakespeare.

The scene where Laertes speaks with Ophelia and Polonius gives advice to his children (I.III. 1-82) precedes the one where Hamlet meets Horatio with the guards (I.II. 159-258). Just like Olivier, Zeffirelli also moved the “To be or not to be” monologue (III.I. 58-90) behind Hamlet's dialogue with Ophelia (III.I. 92-151). The scene in which Claudius convinces Laertes that Hamlet is the responsible one for killing Polonius (IV.VII. 1-161) is moved behind the passage with the funeral (V.I. 210-294). The absence of Fortinbras leads to the film ending with Hamlet's death.

2. 3. Hamlet (1996), directed by Kenneth Branagh

Kenneth Branagh, an actor and director with Irish origins, is together with Laurence Olivier the most frequently Shakespeare-associated film artist, because of his contribution to the world cinematography and Shakespearean adaptations. “His interest in Shakespeare and theatre was profoundly influenced by his trip to Oxford at age of

fifteen to see Derek Jacobi in the role of Hamlet” (Cook, 6). He applied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and even established his own acting company called Renaissance Theatre Company. His *Hamlet* had to be delayed because of the production of Zeffirelli’s film and there was no point in making two different versions of the same play in such a short interval of time. But that did not prevent Kenneth Branagh from bringing his vision of the film to perfection. “His full-text stage production with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1992 convinced him that a full-text film was not only desirable but also possible. During that time as well, of course, Branagh with *Henry V* and *Much Ado About Nothing* helped restore Shakespearean film to commercial viability” (Cook, 7). The amount of brilliant actors who accepted an offer to participate in *Hamlet* was huge and the result is the most daring and the most ambitious adaptation of Shakespeare ever, which is absolutely epic in its film features. The cast is really exclusive – Kenneth Branagh appears as Hamlet, Derek Jacobi as King Claudius, Julie Christie as Gertrude, Nicholas Farrell as Horatio, Richard Briers as Polonius, Kate Winslet as Ophelia, Michael Maloney as Laertes, Rufus Sewell as Fortinbras, Brian Blessed as the Ghost of Hamlet's father, Timothy Spall as Rosencrantz, Reece Dinsdale as Guildenstern and many more, including such names as Robin Williams, Gérard Depardieu, Billy Crystal, Charlton Heston and Judi Dench in supporting roles.

The atmosphere of the film is incredible, mostly because of its breathtaking production and design, wonderful costumes and brilliant actors. Branagh’s *Hamlet* is the first uncut theatrical film version of the play, it runs four hours and uses whole original Shakespeare’s text. “It is also the last major dramatic motion picture that was filmed on 70 mm film until 2012, when *The Master* directed by Paul Thomas Anderson was released” (McGavin). The film was highly acclaimed by critics and received numerous awards.

Since the original text remained without changes, all characters (and especially Hamlet) speak very fast and their speeches are dense, but still articulated clearly. The story takes place in late 19th century in this version and Branagh modernized it with several elements in the purpose to differentiate it from the previous adaptations and particularly from Zeffirelli’s film. He added also a few flashbacks showing Hamlet’s childhood and Hamlet and Ophelia making love.

2. 4. *Hamlet* (2000), directed by Michael Almereyda

The American director Michael Almereyda did not have the experience with Shakespeare like his predecessors, but most of his films included topics which were similar to those in *Hamlet*, particularly the motifs of parental death, suicide thoughts or dysfunctional family connections. His television version of the play is the least expensive and also the shortest from all the adaptations which were mentioned and the original text is significantly reduced. Nevertheless, it still contains many details and interesting visual ideas that are worth attention.

The story takes place in present New York. Almereyda moved the plot and all the characters to the urban megacity, made Hamlet a student of filmmaking and his father a director of a huge company called Denmark Corporation, since it is a reminiscence of the state of Denmark. The atmosphere of the city with skyscrapers and cold architecture design supports the feeling of anonymity, chaos, madness and sadness. “For Almereyda, perhaps the most potent visualization of late capitalism is found in reflected surfaces. His *Hamlet* is a glasshouse of tinted windows, mirrors, lenses, and screens. The protagonist contemplates his distorted self-image through the bottom of his whiskey tumbler or in the revolving drums of a laundromat, while Polonius is first glimpsed through the see-through floor of his sumptuously appointed apartment” (Burnett, 51). Thanks to this contemporary locality, it was possible for Almereyda to add such a product placement which nobody would probably expect in *Hamlet*. The main characters wear brand clothes, eat in brand restaurants and fast foods, smoke brand cigarettes and use brand technology. Not only the amount of different logos and advertisement is highly significant, but modern technological equipment used in the film actually became one of its most interesting new motifs. It was necessary for the play to adapt to modern times and that was done successfully. The Ghost is often seen on a television or on a security camera, Hamlet watches old videos of his father on a computer and a portable DVD player, he travels in a limousine, calls his friends from a mobile phone and films videos on his camera, whereas Ophelia is rather a photographic fan, since she develops her amateur photos in a dark room. The play within a play called *Mouse trap* is replaced by a film within a film which is, directed by

Hamlet, shown to his relatives and friends on a private screening in a small cinema. The famous “To be, or not to be” monologue (III.I. 58-90) takes place in a video store. The final fight between Hamlet and Laertes is carried out on a roof of the Hotel Elsinore which functions as the headquarters of Denmark Corporation. Apart from these, many other changes were made. All these modern innovations have an effect on the narrative style of the film and they help to form the proper atmosphere. However, the Shakespearean language remained.

Among the actors we can recognize Ethan Hawke as Hamlet, Kyle MacLachlan as Claudius, Diane Venora as Gertrude, Sam Shepard as the Ghost, Julia Stiles as Ophelia, Bill Murray as Polonius and many others.

The sequence of the Ghost’s first revelation (I.I. 128-145) is placed in a form of a flashback which is shown when Horatio meets Hamlet in his residence (I.II. 159-259). The scene where Polonius speaks with Reynaldo and Ophelia (II.I. 1-120) is completely omitted. Polonius speaks with Claudius and Gertrude after he speaks with Hamlet and not vice versa (II.II. 1-219). Since the play within a play is replaced with a film within a film, there is no reason why Hamlet should give any recommendations to the actors, because there are none in his home-made movie. The passage where Hamlet gives advises to the actors (III.II. 1-45) is compensated with the scene in which Hamlet cuts his film. Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” monologue (III.I. 58-90) is performed three times in its alternations. The figure of the guard called Marcellus is changed into a female character called Marcella. The characters of grave-diggers do not appear at all in this version.

3. The characters

3. 1. Hamlet

Hamlet, prince of Denmark, is the main protagonist of the play. He is approximately 30 years old, the son of Queen Gertrude and recently deceased King Hamlet. “As an intellectual with a tendency to question things he must leave his studies at the university in Wittenburg due to the unpleasant events that bring him back to his home in Elsinor Castle. His father’s death makes him embittered, cold and rather cynical” (James). The discovery that his father and former king was murdered by his uncle Claudius awakens in him new feelings, passions and emotions. His anger and fury culminates in bloody revenge.

It was a huge challenge for Sir Laurence Olivier to play Hamlet in his own motion picture, since he was a highly appreciated, famous and popular actor, well-known inter alia for his preceding adaptations of Shakespeare. His performance of Hamlet became easily memorable thanks to his distinctive and amazing voice and thanks to his brilliant acting. Olivier himself describes *Hamlet* as “the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind” (Cook, 26), but the reality is more complicated than that. Hamlet is a complex character and the movie shows him as an unbalanced man haunted by his personal demons. His chaotic and uneasy deliberation is nicely represented by the scene with “To be, or not to be” monologue (III.I. 56-89), in which the raging sea functions as a metaphor for Hamlet’s inner thoughts. His Oedipus complex and psychology are stressed. Olivier’s approach is to make Hamlet a sad and gloomy man, but also brave, intrepid and brisk individual with a strong personality. Hamlet is shown as a modest man in the movie, according to his average and unexceptional clothes, who does not want to be in the middle of attention. He is rather romantic and naive, but he can be cruel and without mercy sometimes. Just like a wolf in sheep’s clothing. He looks pale and weak, but in reality he is strong-spirited and capable of anything. Olivier decided to dye his hair blond, since it is Hamlet’s trademark. Just like Mel Gibson did forty-two years later.

“Mel Gibson agreed with creating a role with an intention that would have a crucial impact on his acting career – more than any other film he had appeared in” (Clarkson, 275). He was one of the most commercial film stars, an action hero, and there was a great risk that film critics from around the world would laugh at him for trying to play a serious dramatic character that many professional actors could not cope with. If he had failed, he would have been mocked by the whole film industry. But Gibson committed himself to the film completely, in spite of the fact that there was some laughing by those who read newspaper headlines saying: “Mad Max will be playing crazy Dane.” (Clarkson, 276). Gibson saw this as an opportunity to show them all his own acting qualities and even the director, Franco Zeffirelli, decided to break the tradition and create a different version of the main protagonist. “He did not like the idea of self-tormenting, blond, infirm, supposedly romantic prince that was meant to be Hamlet. He preferred Hamlet being capable of fighting and being in fact the very opposite of a slightly vulnerable man” (Clarkson, 277). His clear vision was fulfilled (except for the blond hair) and thanks to Mel Gibson Hamlet really became a man of action who is not afraid to move from words to deeds. But, ironically, Hamlet became a melancholic and undermined character as well, close to tears and mired in depression. Zeffirelli decided to highlight his psychological reasoning and the intimacy in the relationship between Hamlet and his mother. Hamlet’s character nicely fits into the atmosphere of the whole movie which is rather realistic and takes place in dirty and cold settings. He is not a noble man and nor are his clothes – he wears an old coat most of the time and merges easily with the ordinary crowds at the castle. The film shows Hamlet as a broken man who undergoes permanent suffering and seems easily vulnerable, despite being obviously a strong and capable manly character. This Zeffirelli’s intention reveals and stresses the significance and true meaning of the tragedy and makes Hamlet’s melancholy an important element of the movie and its atmosphere.

Kenneth Branagh’s prince of Denmark is quirky and definitely less subtle and way more eccentric than Gibson’s Hamlet. His acting is theatrical and epic, just like everything else in the movie. Despite having such a wonderful cast and incredible actors around, Branagh absolutely dominates in his role and draws all attention to himself.

Since the movie was a big budget production and the sets and costumes are first rate, even Hamlet's outfit is richer and more opulent, maybe not as much as other character's clothes. Branagh's Hamlet is incredibly energetic and emphatic, since he never stops and hardly makes any pauses to take a breath. He seems very smart and intelligent and very confident in his words and actions. He has an absolute control over every situation, his own destiny is firmly in his hands and he seldom pities himself for his unfortunate fate. On the other hand, he often demonstrates his disgust over the situations around him. He is a witty intellectual who seems to control well his feelings, but fails in remaining calm sometimes. His performance is as close as possible to the impression that one might have from the character of Hamlet as he is presented in the play – not only because the original text is unabridged in the film, but mostly because Branagh captured precisely and accurately the nature of Hamlet's personality.

Michael Almereyda created a Hamlet who is much less expressive than the others already mentioned by casting Ethan Hawke into the starring role. For this young American actor, known from such movies as *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *Before Sunrise* (1995) or *Gattaca* (1997), there was no challenge in playing Hamlet, the pressure on the filmmakers was not so big and the budget was rather low and so were the expectations. Finally, the film received mixed reviews which were mostly not too optimistic, but critics commented positively on the unusual modern conception. Ethan Hawke's acting was accepted similarly – his performance was rather weak, but interesting in its realization. Hawke's Hamlet is an introvert who escapes from cruel reality into the world of video art. He does not really express his feelings and suffering in other way than through his sad face and cynical, cold behavior. He is desperate and young and since he does not seem to be too sophisticated, the complex psychology of Hamlet's character does not fit him very well. What Ethan Hawk succeeded in is the capturing of sensitiveness and melancholy that overwhelms Hamlet in Almereyda's film.

3. 2. The Ghost

The Ghost is the spirit of deceased King Hamlet. He calls upon his son to avenge his murder by killing Claudius. He might seem as not very important and more likely

a marginal character, since he appears in four scenes only (of a total number of twenty-two) and does not even speak in two of them. But being the most significant supernatural element in the play and also a figure of the dead king, Hamlet's father, makes him a key character that actually functions as the one who sets things in motion and thanks to him Hamlet can realize that a cold-blooded murderer took possession of the throne.

All film versions offer very different portrayals of the character. In Olivier's *Hamlet* the Ghost is surrounded by omnipresent fog and cannot be seen very well. He almost lacks any physical form and seems to exit only temporally, shaped by the murky mist. His helmet covers most of his face, so only mouth and beard are visible. It gives him an appearance of a scary and mysterious phantom. "For the first time the Ghost does not so much enter as pop frightfully into presence (I.I. 128-145), then dissolves back into a proper distance" (Cook, 27). "Olivier's inspired handling of the Ghost's first arrival gives way to an odd decline in intensity. The music disappears and the camera becomes static" (Cook, 27). The second arrival (I.IV. 38-92) is very similar, the music stops playing and is replaced with the sound of a beating heart and creepy noises and as the camera makes some specific shots (with young Hamlet mostly) alternately focused and unfocused, it gives it an interesting effect. As the Ghost speaks slowly and almost whispers, it gives him an impression of a fallen man whose life is drawing to his end. His face can be finally seen, but only in a short fuzzy close-up. During the third appearance (III.IV. 103-138) he reveals himself for a few seconds only and speaks solely through his voiceover, not being present during the speech at all.

In Zeffirelli's film the first arrival of the Ghost is omitted and the first act is replaced with a scene that takes place in a dark and humid basement around the stone coffin revealing the King's dead body. The characters standing around it are mourning for the King and giving him a proper funeral. The Ghost appears for the first time when Hamlet finds him sitting in an empty chamber. He does not seem like a spiritual being at all, since he is played by Paul Scofield and his appearance does not include any special visual effects. He seems pale, tired and old with his white beard and long face, but he speaks normally and does not resemble a man who is speaking from the next world. During his next arrival in act III, scene IV, the spirit comes to presence by walking

through the corridor as a full figure and speaks with Hamlet in a very calm manner, as if he wanted to calm Hamlet and make him less furious in the course of his dialogue with his desperate mother.

Kenneth Branagh made the first act unbelievably dynamic thanks to proper music background and short cuts. The atmosphere of the scene when the spirit appears is very impressive, since he looks like a dark silhouette floating in the air, cannot be clearly recognizable and seems more like a demonic character. His dialogue with Hamlet in act I, scene V, takes place in a dark forest and the Ghost itself is very threatening with his wide opened, incredibly blue, penetrating eyes. The way he acts, the way he stares and speaks, may bring to mind an idea of a devilish figure, an evil spirit who lies to Hamlet and wants him to commit a terrible deed (although the following events rebut this assumption). There is obvious urgency in his voice, he breaths deeply and almost wheezes individual words, but with a perfectly clear pronunciation. He seems formidable and respectful, also a bit frightening, but definitely imposing. The same applies to his scene in act III, where he appears standing between two burning candelabras. He has indeed an impressive appearance of a spiritual and majestic revelation, but his voice is finer and less pressing this time.

Michael Almereyda's vision of the Ghost is much different from the earlier film versions. Old Hamlet's spirit is more physical here, since he does not go through the walls, touches his son and even different objects and acts like a normal living person in general. The physical contact and evident intimacy between both characters highlights their loving father-son relationship. Sam Shepard plays the Ghost as almost a palpable being which is capable of touch and being touched (and touches his son very often in fact). Unlike the preceding films, where any attempt of human contact ends with Hamlet stretching his hand trying to reach the father's spirit, but fails in his effort, in this version Hamlet even hugs his father without any difficulties at the end of their conversation, when the Ghost embraces his son to say goodbye. Thanks to it the passage functions nicely from the emotional perspective, although it might seem strange that a ghost can actually touch anything and cannot pass through a wall, which is the universal view of any ghost in general. He is anxious seeking for justice and rather

urgent in his speech to Hamlet, seems a bit sad, lonely and desperate, but also proud of his son.

The sequence of the first Ghost's revelation (I.I. 128-145) is placed in the form of a flashback in Almereyda's film, where we can see the King Hamlet's spirit on a TV screen which monitors an elevator using a security camera. His second appearance (I.IV. 38-92) takes place in Hamlet's apartment, where the Ghost shows up on his balcony and waits for him to open the door (which is slightly unusual for a spirit, as has been already told). For his final apparition in act III, scene IV, the Ghost takes the position of a wise and caring father with a strict attitude. Plus, in this version the Ghost appears again for a quick moment, right before Hamlet and Horatio enter Horatio's apartment and Hamlet reveals how he sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death (V.II. 38-79), and one more time, when Hamlet receives an invitation to the match from Laertes (V.II 81-179).

3. 3. Ophelia

“Ophelia is young, beautiful, innocent, emotionally sensitive and vulnerable daughter of Polonius, Claudius' chief counselor. She becomes the love interest of Hamlet and possibly falls in love with him easily, until he rejects her” (James). When her father dies by Hamlet's hand she becomes mad and commits suicide. Her brother Laertes then promises to take his revenge on Hamlet.

She does exactly what she is told – when her brother warns her that Hamlet's affection will not be permanent and that she should not fall foolishly into a deep love with him (I.3. 5-53), she agrees with his opinion and then obeys her father, who forbids her to remain in private contact with Hamlet (I.3. 90-136). Even when Polonius uses her as a bait to spy on Hamlet, she submissively acts according to her father's rules. Being absolutely obedient she hardly makes her own choices and becomes a passive puppet that is told to fear relationships.

Ophelia is interpreted differently in the movies. In Olivier's film she is played by Jean Simmons (who was eighteen years old then) and is shown as a delicate flower

which is not able to stand on her own, as a tender princess who is too naive and childish to deal with real issues and cruel reality. She is a lovely and beautiful young lady, but she is like a child rather than an independent adult. Helen Bonham Carter, the protagonist of Ophelia in Zeffirelli's film, is displayed similarly. She reminds one of a grey mouse, an introvert and featureless girl with the appearance of an ordinary and simple woman, which goes hand in hand with the medieval atmosphere of the film in which nobody looks like a movie star, with all the dirt, plain clothes and realistic stylization. She is also dreamy and naive and acts too childishly to be considered a mature woman, she hardly pays attention when somebody speaks to her and she is often shy and diffident. She seems helpless and powerless. The camera often films her from above which creates an effect that she looks smaller than she really is.

Kate Winslet is a completely different Ophelia in Branagh's *Hamlet*. She is much more mature and self-confident and the camera points at her often from the bottom, so it makes her taller (an exact opposite in comparison to Helen Bonham Carter's Ophelia). She does not resemble a little child at all, her character is strong, she acts rather independently and she is angry at how she is being treated. Her appearance and behavior is expressive and distinctive and despite being sensible and easily vulnerable, Ophelia maintains the image of a strong woman, whose intention to commit suicide does not seem like a desperate act of hopelessness, but like an act of a clear decision, done on purpose and in cold blood.

Ophelia in Almereyda's film, as she is played by Julia Stiles, brings to mind an idea of an angry teenager who tends to disobey rebelliously her father's demands. She does not create an image of a little child, nor of an adult and independent woman. With her glum facial expression and behavior of an introvert person she acts like a typical resistant teenage girl. She seems permanently bored and depressed, unhappy in her relationship with Hamlet, and the tragic ending of her character can only be expected. In the film she is presented as an amateur photographer, which is actually an activity that fits her characteristics.

4. The motifs

4. 1. Revenge

Hamlet is a typical protagonist of a “revenge tragedy, which is a specific genre that was very popular in Shakespeare’s days” (James). He takes the law into his own hands in such manner that it necessarily leads not only to his death, but also of many others. Whereas he seems to pretend to be mad, he plans to revenge his father’s murder that was done by Claudius, his uncle. But surprisingly, the motif of revenge doubles in the play – Hamlet inadvertently becomes also a target of Laertes right after he unintentionally kills Polonius, Laertes and Ophelia’s father.

“Another important figure that appears often in the genre of revenge tragedies is the ghost of a murdered family member who requires to be revenged” (James). In *Hamlet*, it is the ghost of Hamlet’s murdered father who commands the revenge. “Whether the Ghost is good or bad is a matter of much concern in the early part of the play” (Jenkins, 154). “Hamlet accepts the Ghost as the spirit of his father which he claims to be and which later events confirm him to be” (Jenkins 155). To make himself sure, Hamlet modifies the play that is to be performed at the court by a group of actors in act III, scene II, in order to awake Claudius’ conscience. He sees the fact that Claudius gets up from his seat during the play and absolutely horrified leaves the room as a proof of his uncle's guilt. In Almereyda’s film this passage takes place in a small cinema, where Hamlet organizes a private screening of his short film which was created as a surrealistic collage from other movies’ pieces. The selected combination of scenes, mixed with abstract animations, is something that Claudius is not able to stand.

“The scenes involving brutal violence and numerous deaths and the motif of madness (does not matter if real or pretended) form another important feature of the genre” (James). *Hamlet* works with both of these elements, in some cases more than once. It is always Hamlet and Ophelia who become mad during the play (or they pretend it at least) and the scenes involving bloody murder appear also at least twice – once when Polonius is killed in act III, scene IV, and for the second time at the end, when several characters die (V.II. 221-365). However, Laurence Olivier’s film does not

contain any blood and all the deaths are rather theatrical, since most of them are caused by a poison. On the contrary, in Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* a trickle of blood comes from Polonius' mouth when he is killed and at the end Laertes causes Hamlet a bloody wound when he cuts him with his sword. The remaining two adaptations offer much more horrifying images. In Kenneth Branagh's version Hamlet stabs Polonius several times and as the blood flows out of his body, it spreads into a large pool. On the other hand, there is lack of blood in the scene with the final battle, since Laertes scratches Hamlet only a little and none of the other deaths include any other bloody wounds. The youngest adaptation is also the bloodiest. Hamlet kills Polonius with a revolver and when his dead body falls on the ground, a bullet hole can be seen in his skull. The final fight takes place on the roof of Denmark Corporation building and despite being adapted to modern settings, the weapons are still rapiers as well as in the previous versions. After two rounds Laertes takes a pistol and shoots Hamlet in his chest. After a quick fight Hamlet points the weapon against his opponent's stomach and shoots. Then Hamlet kills Claudius with the same gun. The deaths are fairly brutal, with spatters of blood across the characters' faces. It is even more effective since Laertes' and Hamlet's fighting costumes are white (just like in Branagh's film, where they, however, were not used to create a contrast with bloodstains).

The fact that the characters lose somebody who they loved and cared about during the play makes them be involved in such acts which they would not normally have to deal with. They turn into immoral beings capable of anything. Hamlet does not hesitate to send his best friends to certain death when he finds out they plotted against him, as he confesses in his letter in act IV, scene VII. Still, he hesitates to kill Claudius during his prayers (III.III. 35-97), because that would have sent him to heaven. (There is a different interpretation in Almereyda's film, since the scene does not take place in a chapel like in the preceding adaptations, but in a limousine. Hamlet is driving it and while listening to what Claudius says, he points his pistol on him at the critical moment. However, he does not shoot and leaves the car instead, because he can see that Claudius regrets his deeds.)

The scene in which Claudius convinces Laertes that Hamlet is the responsible one for killing Polonius and reveals to him his intention to kill Hamlet (IV.VII. 1-161)

is important for Laertes, so he can realize that revenge is the only thing that will bring him peace. There is a strong contrast between Hamlet and Laertes, since Hamlet is able to wait until he is sure that the King is to blame and does not hurry at all with his vengeance, whereas Laertes is too focused on the revenge, wants to act immediately and does not have any patience. That makes him blind to everything else – he becomes an immoral person and does not see that Claudius wants to have Hamlet killed for a different reason. At the end, right before Laertes dies in a fair fight with Hamlet, he reveals the treason he has committed together with Claudius, when they decided to poison the tip of Laertes' sword, so that even a tiny scratch would mean certain death for Hamlet, and to poison also wine as a back-up plan. Unfortunately, it is the Queen who drinks the poisonous wine and dies as well. Before his death, Laertes asks Hamlet for forgiveness and it is given to him. Kenneth Branagh faithful to the original text, but there are some changes in the remaining adaptations. It is Gertrude herself who tells Hamlet about the poisoned wine in Zeffirelli's film. She starts to feel dizzy and realizes she was poisoned, when she looks at the cup and at her husband's guilty face. Laertes only then confesses about his conspiracy with Claudius and confirms Gertrude's words. It makes Gertrude's destiny more tragic, because she realizes the truth about the treason and she dies with the knowledge of what kind of a man is her husband. In spite of the fact that Laertes seems to regret his deeds, he does not ask Hamlet for forgiveness. It is a crucial line that defines his relationship with Hamlet at the end of the play, because of its absence it seems that Hamlet and Laertes die as enemies. In Laurence Olivier's and Almereyda's *Hamlets* Gertrude drinks the wine with obvious urgency, so it might seem like she knew that there was something wrong with the wine and that she wanted to protect her son from drinking it. That would make her a noble-minded and loving mother, but also a foolish creator of her own fate. All characters die very fast in Almereyda's film, since there are revolvers included, and the dialogues are very simplified, but Laertes still informs Hamlet with his last breath that the King is to blame. Still, as well as in Zeffirelli's film, he does not ask Hamlet for forgiveness.

There is one more important figure in the play who seeks for justice and that is Fortinbras, Prince of Norway. His father was killed by King Hamlet and now, when he is dead too, Fortinbras arrives to Elsinor Castle to take his land back and return dignity

to his family name. Since Hamlet, Queen Gertrude, Claudius and even Laertes are dead, Fortinbras becomes the king of Denmark and proves that revenge is not necessary when one wants to avenge somebody and that it is possible to maintain moral values. However, Fortinbras is not present in Olivier's and Zeffirelli's films, so they both end with Hamlet's death. The whole plot might seem unfinished without him, because there is nobody to rule in Denmark at the end of the story. The death of many characters can be interpreted as something absolutely necessary which leads to Fortinbras taking over the throne and getting what he deserves. Without him, all the dying might be seen as senseless. Kenneth Branagh was able to afford a proper ending which corresponds with the play, so the movie includes an impressive scene of Fortinbras' soldiers entering the palace violently across closed windows and mirror doors. Fortinbras then approaches the throne, sits down and a crown is put on his head. The same character is changed from the leader of an army to the leader of a group of lawyers in Almereyda's film. He does not conquer countries, but rather does corporate takeovers. The movie ends with a TV news broadcast informing that Fortinbras is the new leader of Denmark Corporation.

4. 2. Hamlet's relationship with his mother and Ophelia

Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude, his mother, is very important, since it might be one of the sources of Hamlet's anger and distress. Gertrude rapidly married his uncle Claudius, which might be understood as a betrayal of her previous husband, Hamlet's father. She did not hesitate at all and switched mourning and lamentation for wedding celebration and festivity. Hamlet is disgusted by her marriage and inappropriate behavior, considering it an immoral act, worthy of condemnation. On the other hand, she has always been near him and available for him and proved him her love many times. Her love for her son might even seem too passionate sometimes and Hamlet's obvious affection for her can be interpreted as a case of an Oedipus complex, based on Sigmund Freud's psycho-analytic theories. It might actually be the real reason, why Hamlet wants to kill Claudius so desperately, because he wants to have his mother only for himself.

In the scene with the King's speech after the marriage (I.II. 1-128) Hamlet's weakness towards his mother can be seen very well. She steps in between her husband and son. In Laurence Olivier's film, "Hamlet glances repeatedly into the maternal bosom carefully positioned right below his eyes. He is rewarded with a kiss on the mouth that lasts long enough to catch the King's attention" (Cook, 30). The passionate kiss creates certain obscenity in the mother-son relationship and borders upon incest. There is an interesting fact that Eileen Herlie, playing Queen Gertrude, was thirteen years younger than Laurence Olivier, which makes the discussion about Hamlet's fondness for his mother in this film even more confusing. In Zeffirelli's version, Gertrude kisses her son on forehead first and on lips right after, repeatedly and shamelessly. She often touches his shoulders and leans her head on his body during the film, providing an intimacy to their close relationship. Similar gestures can be seen also in the scene where Hamlet has an argument with Gertrude and kills Polonius (III.IV. 7-217), especially passionate kissing on lips. Gertrude even uses kissing in order to make Hamlet silent so he cannot torture her with his words any more in Zeffirelli's film.

The other two film adaptations are different. Branagh's Hamlet seems to have rather a cold and distant relationship with his mother, because the amount of physical contact between them is minimal and limited to several embraces only. Ethan Hawke's Hamlet kisses Gertrude only once and very briefly at the end of the scene with their argument, but besides that their connection is relatively vague and aloof. Both Zeffirelli's and Almereyda's versions share one more feature – a slap that is given by Gertrude to Hamlet for his harsh and vulgar language, which becomes a catalyst of his fury and anger.

Gertrude can be characterized as careless and ostensibly virtuous. She is morally blind (unlike Hamlet and the guards, she is not able to see the ghost of her dead husband, nor the consequences of her actions) and does not realize the strangeness and anomaly of her behavior. She is the cause of Hamlet's melancholy and bad mood and provokes distrust and contempt for women in her son, so subsequently he treats them (and particularly Ophelia) as "breeders of sinners" (III.I. 122). But despite being Hamlet's mother, Gertrude is not a dominant character in the story and seems rather weak and easily manipulated by men. Her general passivity and obedience are the

characteristics that fit the description of Ophelia too, because she also cannot fight back, neither speak for her own defense. That reflects on Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet a lot, since she suffers from necessity to obey male characters as a good girl and listen to them as a submissive figure.

Prince Hamlet's relation with Ophelia is romantic, but on the contrary from *Romeo and Juliet*, never filled with true love. Ophelia used to receive letters and gifts from Hamlet, who was very gentle and tender, and they were drawn together and shared their feelings for each other while Hamlet's father was still alive. Olivier's film offers Ophelia for the first time when she reads a letter from Hamlet in the scene where her brother comes to say goodbye to her and gives her advice that Hamlet's affection will not be permanent and that she should not fall foolishly into a deep love with him (I.III. 1-53). She agrees with him in this film, whereas in Zeffirelli's version she is not pleased to hear his words at all and with a lack of interest she plays with a tapestry instead of careful listening.

In Almereyda's film Ophelia holds a small photograph of Hamlet instead of his letters. While her brother speaks to her, she seems absent-minded and uninterested, but she listens to him passively. But not only Laertes discourages her from her love to Hamlet, her father speaks to her about pitfalls of love as well and eventually forbids her from seeing the prince any more (I.III. 88-136). In Olivier's *Hamlet* Ophelia sees Hamlet's silhouette through a long corridor right after she is forbidden from staying in the contact with him and even in Zeffirelli's film Hamlet watches the whole scenery from a window, being an absolutely unspotted witness of Polonius' reaction to Ophelia's feelings. The biggest difference between these two adaptations is, that Olivier shot the scene with as little people as possible, whereas in Zeffirelli's film the place is very crowded, not only the courtyard, but also Ophelia's chamber, so the dialogues among the characters are not so intimate. In Almereyda's film this scene does not include Polonius' prohibition, since he is completely satisfied with undermining her self-confidence by comparing her to a baby, while he ties her shoelaces in order to support his words. But the bravest and most controversial is Kenneth Branagh, who included in his film long shots picturing Hamlet and Ophelia making love. When Polonius argues with Ophelia and she promises her obedience, she remembers the time

when she shared a bed with prince Hamlet. The play itself does not tell how exactly close their relationship was and it was obviously Shakespeare's intention not to reveal the truth about it and left it undecided. Kenneth Branagh entered the discussion about this topic vigorously and interrupted it unexpectedly with a concretization of prince Hamlet and Ophelia's love.

“But then Hamlet rejects Ophelia. He says nothing of her repelling him; he astonishes her by asking if she is honest and, holding that honesty is incompatible with beauty, implies that she will not be” (Jenkins, 150). During the scene where he tells her to go to a nunnery (III.I. 90-163) he suspects her from helping her father spy on him, acts harshly and treats her cruelly. She offers him to return his remembrances and gifts, upon which Hamlet screams angrily at her. In Olivier's film he violently thrusts her down upon the stone stairs and leaves, when he realizes her dishonesty due to her insecurity and unnatural acting in his presence, since she reveals unintentionally her father and Claudius' hiding place by slight peeks of her eyes. Their dialogue rises in intensity and Hamlet's anger is growing, when he detects Ophelia's lies about her father being at home. Polonius and Claudius then both ignore her lying and crying desperately on the steps. The passage ends with a horrifying scene of Ophelia scratching with her hand towards the place where Hamlet left, which highlights the tragic dimension of her misery. In Zeffirelli's film it is not Ophelia who reveals the location of the King and her father to Hamlet, it is the shadow they cast, standing incautiously behind a corner of a wall. In Branagh's *Hamlet* this conversation takes place in a hall of mirrors and while Hamlet speaks to Ophelia, he pushes her against one mirror after another, because he knows the spying parasites might be hiding behind one of them, but both men, shocked by Hamlet's unexpected behavior, stay hidden. Michael Almereyda made the scene very different from the previous movie adaptations, inasmuch as the dialogue ends with Hamlet and Ophelia kissing each other after he questions her loyalty, but then he discovers a small microphone hidden in her clothes (that was placed there by Polonius so he was able to listen secretly). At the end of the scene Hamlet leaves angrily and desperate Ophelia picks up the letters he has been writing to her and that she wanted to return to him. She goes home, where she burns old photos of Hamlet, which signals that she begins to lose her feelings for him.

Ophelia's inexperience with relationships and her disadvantage of being easily manipulated by men can be seen well in the scene of the play within the play, where Hamlet acts like he forgot about their argument and his exasperation, adheres to Ophelia, leans his head in her lap and behaves rather kindly (in Almereyda's *Hamlet* they only sit next to each other at the cinema) (III.II. 108-133). The biggest shock comes, when Hamlet kills Polonius unintentionally and then leaves to England without saying goodbye, leaving Ophelia in a deep grief and melancholy. She becomes mad and eventually snaps while suffering mental breakdown – she commits suicide and is put into a grave. Hamlet's reaction at the poor funeral consists of expressing his love and sorrow for Ophelia. In Olivier's film he speaks about his love while he is held by the guards so he could not fight with Laertes. From the tone of his speech his words might seem more like an expression of anger against her brother and his act of throwing himself into the grave than of regret over the dead body. Unlike his rather cold and curt performance, Mel Gibson's and Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlets* show some degree of an exposure of warm feelings and emotions of love, especially speaking of Branagh's *Hamlet* who experienced real relationship and even a sexual act with Ophelia and not only a short love infatuation. In Almereyda's film Hamlet even gives his hand to Laertes to help him out from the grave and they fight right after, but everything he says seems more like a gesture against him, like in Olivier's film. Hamlet does not even look at dead Ophelia, lying uncovered in her coffin. However, the discussion whether Hamlet truly loved Ophelia or not is still in progress and both versions appear very often till today.

4. 3. The Madness of Hamlet

The motif of madness is generally used in various plays and films as a tool or excuse for some characters to do things and say things which are not tolerated in average society. For Hamlet, his madness functions as an instrument or a dissimulation he can hide behind while he plans his revenge and intrigues in order to reveal his uncle's guilt. "The problem is that it cannot be precisely said whether he pretends being mad the whole time or rather slips over the edge into real insanity sometimes because of

his unstable state of mind” (James). This issue is constantly in the process of discussion. One group of people prefers to believe that Hamlet fakes his madness till the very end, whereas the other group sees the fact that Hamlet treats those who he loved and who were important to him like he does not care about them any more as a proof of the unfeigned madness that possessed him instead of the pretended one and became his reality. It seems that the film directors prefer to show Hamlet as a sane man who suffers from depression and melancholy and has to deal with self-criticism and pessimistic thoughts, but who never happens to be truly mad. On the other hand, the fact that Hamlet thinks of suicide in his well-known and celebrated speech beginning with famous “To be, or not to be, that is the question.” (III.1.56) does not actually correspond with this image.

This Hamlet’s monologue is relatively ambiguous in the play. “The possible meanings might be, that 1) the “question” concerns the advantages and disadvantages of human existence, the discussion of which includes the recognition of man’s ability to end his existence by suicide. 2) The “question” concerns the choice between life and death and hence focuses on suicide throughout. 3) The “question” is whether Hamlet shall end his own life. 4) It is whether Hamlet shall kill not himself but the King, or 5) the “question” is not simply whether Hamlet shall pursue revenge against the King but whether he shall proceed with the actual scheme (for the performance of a play) which he has already set in motion” (Jenkins, 485). It is not clear whether Hamlet really wants to commit suicide (or if he thinks about committing suicide in general), but it is the most common interpretation. In Olivier’s version Hamlet sits on the top of the tower where he witnesses the sea, raging among the rocks. The fury of the waves can be compared with the storm of emotions and thoughts in Hamlet’s head, which is exactly what the film does. An extreme close-up of Hamlet’s forehead fades into a view at the stormy sea shore and vice versa. Hamlet takes a bodkin, points it against his chest and closes his eyes. His thoughts remain in his voiceover. He takes thought of not killing himself and eventually he drops the bodkin into the sea below. It is obvious from the scene that Olivier interprets the original text as considering suicide.

The message is much less explicitly shown in Zeffirelli’s film, since Hamlet does not point any weapon against his chest in the scene. The monologue takes place in

the underground basement, where his father is buried. As Hamlet observes many of the bones and skulls, walks around the area and bends in front of the tombs during his speech, it might seem like he speaks about human existence in general. This is similar in Branagh's version, where Hamlet speaks in front of a one-way mirror where Claudius and Polonius are hiding and spying on him. Although he holds a knife in his hand, his thoughts might not be suicidal, since he does not intend to hurt himself with it. Michael Almereyda offers more than one version as well, because the famous monologue is here performed three times in its alternations. For the first time it is told by an Asian monk whose interview Hamlet listens to as it goes on TV. His message is clear – "to be" means "to inter-be" (Almereyda), because you cannot be without another beings around yourself, not only family members but also other living creatures and organisms. In another scene, Hamlet is filming himself how he points a gun to his head (and putting it to his mouth) pronouncing the first words of the speech repeatedly. That does not necessarily mean he wants to kill himself since it might be only a pose for his video. The third and the longest version of the monologue comes almost in its original form much later, when Hamlet is wandering across the video store, this time obviously without suicidal thoughts. The point is that even this controversial speech does not necessarily function as a proof of Hamlet being mad, at least according to the mentioned films (apart from Olivier's).

The intention to highlight the fact that Hamlet only pretends his insane behavior varies from one film to another. In Zeffirelli's version, for example, Hamlet comically overacts. In the scene where Polonius speaks with Hamlet in order to reveal the cause of his madness (II.II. 171-219) Hamlet rashly flings Polonius down from a ladder when he is trying to reach the higher platform Hamlet is sitting on. Such an exaggerated and dangerously-looking reaction makes Polonius run away. In a different scene, where Ophelia becomes a witness of Hamlet's bizarre behavior after he saw the Ghost, the only thing which Hamlet does is that he sniffs her hair and leaves without a single word. Similar acting causes a humorous effect and cannot be taken seriously as a behavior of an insane man.

The only characters that consider Hamlet mad are the King and Polonius (Gertrude is informed about him only pretending it since he told her in act III, scene IV,

and Ophelia is herself rather too shallow and inexperienced to question Hamlet's sanity). Polonius thinks the source might be his unrequited love for Ophelia and he tells the same to Claudius who, no matter if he believes it or not, makes it later in the story an excuse for sending Hamlet to England in order to get rid of him. The scene that precedes, in which Hamlet reveals the place where he hid Polonius' body (IV.III. 16-37), is the other example of a passage where Hamlet makes fun of the King and acts like a madman. In the movies it is again rather exaggerated so the audience is sure that Hamlet only pretends his foolery. In Zeffirelli's film, when Hamlet comes forward the King he jumps on the table and seems to make troubles, but he reveals the information of the hiding place freely from his choice and is not really surprised by his uncle's decision to send him abroad. Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet reveals the information after he is slapped by Claudius and even after that he does not stop to make silly jokes. In Almereyda's version the dialogue takes place in a public washroom. Claudius uses violence in order to get proper answers for his questions in this film too, when he punches Hamlet in the stomach. Hamlet's mockery culminates by kissing Claudius on the lips, after he calls him his mother. It is indeed an effective way how to create an impression of a madman, but Hamlet's sophisticated and clever expressions and coherent speech does not correspond with his strange behavior.

4. 4. The Madness of Ophelia

“The essential of her story is that she is the woman Hamlet might have married and did not” (Jenkins, 149). “Unlike Hamlet's madness that might be pretended, Ophelia's madness is indisputable. She loses both dad and lover at one single moment and that is definitely more than she can cope with” (James). Under the pressure and unfortunate circumstances, when Hamlet accidentally kills her father, she loses also her mind. The tragic thing is that she has not done anything wrong, but she still collapses being oppressed by others and manipulated against her will. She has to deal with solitude in her madness and with extreme grief, but she does not blame Hamlet for killing her father and does not speak his name either, almost like she has forgiven him (which makes a clear contrast to her brother who accuses Hamlet of Polonius' death and of his sister's unpleasant condition immediately). She wanders across the castle singing

songs and giving out different flowers to the people who meet her. She sings about a girl who is fooled and loses virginity with a man who falsely promises her a marriage (IV.V. 47-66), like it was her own destiny. When Laertes returns from France, he is absolutely horrified by the unexpected situation and blames Hamlet for being responsible. Then Ophelia ends her misery by killing herself. Gertrude, who presents the information about Ophelia being drowned, describes her as a native, mermaid-like creature in the water (IV.VII. 175). Both Gertrude and Ophelia represent figures that were manipulated into unnatural acting and were oppressed somehow – Ophelia's love and feelings were repressed and Gertrude was not supposed to mourn in a natural way. It is only logical and also symbolical that she is the one who informs the others about her death.

The ways how Ophelia expresses her madness vary in different films. In Olivier's version we can see Ophelia's reflection in the water, how she is reaching for a water-lily. She suddenly stands up and screams, crosses the river on a fallen tree and runs down a path towards the castle into a hall where she finds Horatio and Gertrude. She puts her head on the Queen's arm and she flakes out on the floor and cries from high depression. When Gertrude touches her, she immediately stops crying and starts singing. Claudius orders Horatio to watch her. After a while, she approaches the King and Queen again, who are talking with Laertes. When Laertes spots her, he seems like he saw a ghost. Ophelia, holding different herbs, puts rosemary on a chair and caresses a face of an imaginary man sitting on it. She gives out the rest of herbs to Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes. They all seem very desperate and hopeless. Laertes watches her as she leaves through a corridor. The camera follows her into her chamber, but the place is empty. The next image shows still singing Ophelia floating on the water in a small lake. She leaves the screen, the camera focuses on the floating flowers, but it fails in trying to find Ophelia again, because she has already drowned.

In Zeffirelli's film Gertrude witnesses the scene how Ophelia teases and bothers the guards. They both meet face to face right after. Ophelia sings a song and speaks out loud, talking nonsense. Claudius interferes, in fact, to protect his wife. Ophelia then cries out against the wall. When angry Laertes arrives, he and the King walk into the room where they find Ophelia sitting on the throne, playing with bones and straws. She

gives all these things out like she was giving flowers and leaves. She behaves like a little girl, as she hides behind a wall, tries to avoid other people and creates an impression of a lost and confused child. Laertes is shocked of course. Ophelia then runs to a near beck and stares into the water. In the next scene Gertrude tells her brother about her death and we can see also Ophelia's body floating in the water.

Kate Winslet's performance in Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* is the most suggestive from all four films. There is a scene where she screams in agony while her father's dead body is being removed from the castle by the guards and right after that we see her wearing a straitjacket, bumping into walls and screaming in a padded room. In the next scene she lies on the floor in the hall, being tied up. Gertrude releases her from the straitjacket. When Claudius appears, Ophelia runs around the hall, speaks nonsense and sings (at one point, when she sings about the tricked girl, she exaggeratedly performs the intercourse moves, whereas we can see flashbacks of her making love with Hamlet). Then she runs out of the room, being followed. She returns when Laertes comes to demand justice – and is terrified by his sister's appearance. The flowers she gives away are only imaginary. Seeing her brother she calms down and turns into a depressive, sadly singing derelict. She is put back into the cell where she is hosed down with ice-cold water like she was in a madhouse and locked away. But when Laertes and Claudius leave her, she puts a small key out of her mouth, so she might open the door. (This scene might actually be interpreted as a sign that Ophelia only pretended her madness in order to hide her real intention – to escape without being noticed and commit suicide – but the intensity of such a realistic performance of her mental breakdown tends to refute the argument. Moreover, if she wanted to kill herself, she could have done it easily.) She is then mentioned when Gertrude speaks about her death and her body is shown once again when she is floating submerged under water.

The very same scene, where Ophelia surprises the King and Queen with her mad behavior, takes place in an art gallery in Almereyda's *Hamlet*. Ophelia raises a storm there when she screams at the whole area, so she must be dragged out. Laertes comes a few seconds later, holds Claudius below his neck and demands answers. Ophelia appears again and throws photographs on the floor. Laertes takes her to his arms and she gives him a picture of rosemary. She names other flowers and throws their pictures

around herself. When Gertrude comes to say that Ophelia has drowned, we can see her body floating in a fountain that takes place in the Hotel Elsinor. The security guard drags her out, the letters from Hamlet float in water.

5. Conclusion

Hamlet is a brilliant and complex play. It is one of the most written-about works of art in English literature. It is a fascinating masterpiece in respect of the characters and their psychology, of the sophisticated story, of what it says about Shakespeare and about his view of England. But every play needs to be performed, no matter whether theatrically or cinematically. Every stage adaptation of *Hamlet* might be slightly (or completely) different from the others and the differences among various film adaptations are even much bigger, since it depends on the vision of the director who decides how his movie will look. The results vary in the performance of actors, the conception of the director, the interpretation of the play itself, the extent of the original text, the settings, the costumes, the production and many other factors including the tiniest details.

In the introduction of the thesis I pointed out the reasons why I chose this topic and why I preferred the characters and the motifs I discussed to those which I did not. However, many other motifs were mentioned throughout the thesis – there was a lot said about Hamlet's melancholy, about his relationship with his deceased father, The Ghost was described as a supernatural element and questions of life, death and moral corruption were mentioned as well. In the following chapter the individual movies were discussed and I also commented on their director's attitudes towards the play. It can be beautifully seen how certain directors interpreted the play differently and how they successfully converted their artistic visions into the form of a motion picture. Sir Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* presented a representative and monumental black-and-white film classic, Franco Zeffirelli fulfilled his intention to highlight the dismal and cheerless atmosphere of the Middle Ages, Kenneth Branagh transferred the story into an opulent spectacle which is incredible in its precision and perfectionism and Michael Almereyda was successful in modernizing *Hamlet* by making it a contemporary story that takes place around the year 2000. The extent of reduction of the original text and of the changes which were made in the chronological order of the story was also discussed in the thesis.

In the following chapter I discussed how certain characters are interpreted in various films. It was revealed that different actors can represent Hamlet either as a melancholic and cynical introvert (Laurence Olivier's and Ethan Hawke's performance) or as an expressive and theatrical extrovert who substitutes his anger for his depression (Mel Gibson's and Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet). Ophelia can be described as a naive and childish girl who is too gentle to deal with real emotions (Jean Simons' Ophelia), as an unadventurous and ordinary simple woman who reminds of a child more than of an adult (Helen Bonham Carter's performance), as a mature and self-confident lady who still suffers from being too sensible and vulnerable (Kate Winslet's Ophelia) or as a bored teenager who acts rebelliously against her father (Julia Styles's version). The Ghost might appear as a spiritual creature that exists only in the world of mist and shadows (in Olivier's film) or as a figure with the characteristics of a human being (in the remaining films).

The main part of the thesis is formed by a comparison of particular motifs within the individual scenes of different films. As it turned out, the motif of revenge is partly limited by the absence of Fortinbras in Olivier's and Zeffirelli's film and the absence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (in Olivier's *Hamlet* only) makes Hamlet's moral corruption less intensive, since he does not send them to death during the film. Ethan Hawke's Hamlet is shown as the least certain about his intention to kill Claudius, since the scene of the king's prayers (III.III. 35-97) is modified in order not to take place in a chapel – Hamlet does not kill his uncle only because he sees that he regrets his deeds, not because he would have send him to heaven by killing him. Also, the younger is the movie, the more violent and brutal it gets in the scenes with murders and deaths.

The motif of Hamlet's relationship with his mother and Ophelia undergoes very different interpretations as well. Hamlet acts distantly towards his mother in Almereyda's film, whereas he is very passionate and intimate in the relationship with her in the remaining films. On the other hand, his attitude towards Ophelia is rather cold in Olivier's and Zeffirelli's versions. In Almereyda's *Hamlet* they are shown as unhappy lovers and in Branagh's film there are even flashbacks included which reveal that they actually shared a bed together.

Both cases of madness, Hamlet's and Ophelia's, are presented in very different manners. Olivier's Hamlet is the only one whose thinking of suicide can be understood as a serious attempt to end his life. On the contrary, for instance, Mel Gibson's Hamlet comically overacts his mad behavior, so there is no doubt that he only pretends it. Ophelia's madness is real (but not necessarily, according to Branagh's interpretation) and the manner of her behavior depends on the performance of various actresses. Jean Simmons' Ophelia is rather harmless in her madness, whereas Helen Bonham Carter behavior is dangerous, since she teases people and annoys them. Kate Winslet's performance is very naturalistic, not only because of the way she speaks and moves, but also thanks to her appearance of a patient of a mental hospital. On the contrary, Julia Styles's Ophelia expresses her insanity as an explosion of anger, which might seem more like a protest gesture rather than an expression of a deep sorrow.

The aim of the thesis was to compare various film adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and to comment on the different style of their adaptation of the original play. The extent of a bachelor thesis cannot cover such a topic entirely, but I believe that by the description, characterization and comparison of particular characters and selected motifs, as they are interpreted in the films, the main differences among the films were pointed out well enough. I learned a lot about *Hamlet* and its significance as I was analyzing and comparing the movies and writing the thesis. It truly is an immortal and incredibly extensive play which deserves to be considered as one of the world's most precious treasures.

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