Paper #2 topics: Hamlets
Due M 3/7 in class; 5-6 pp.

• For more on the Kozintsev Hamlet, see the material on the Kozintsev Cheat Sheet.
• The flier "A Good Paper in English 2080," available on the website, is part of this assignment.
• Feel free to arrange to see Stuart, Steve, or Sara to talk in advance about this essay.


Kozintsev’s production of Hamlet wants to be more than an individual human tragedy: society and history may be its real protagonists. The director writes:

The conflict between Renaissance ideals and the reality of the epoch of primary accumulation of capital was evident enough. This is the germ that sickened those who had the misfortune to realize the depth of the rift. . . . The society portrayed in Hamlet is frightening neither by its resemblance to the savage existence of beasts of prey nor by the particular cruelty of bloodthirsty fiends, but by its callous emptiness. The noble and the spiritual have vanished from life. It is not bestial crimes that arouse horror; it is normal human relations which have lost their humanity. The screen must convey the enormity of history, and the fate of a man determined to talk with his epoch on equal terms, and not be an extra, with no speaking part, in one of its spectacular crowd scenes. There will be no necessity for emotional little scenes.*

Just how does this staging/filming of the play realize this director’s imperatives? How does the society shown in the Russian Hamlet visibly lack the “humanity” of “normal human relations,” and how is the “enormity of history” embodied in stage action? A subordinate question, of course, is whether Hamlet himself succeeds in being “a man determined to talk with his epoch on equal terms,” but the issue is subordinate to that of how Kozintsev goes about embodying the social and historical actuality he speaks of above. ☛ Strong suggestion: base your essay on two or three closely observed scenes that embody the production’s thematic center as Kozintsev defines it, and use them to talk about other elements of the film.

2. Kozintsev: a Hamlet without Hamletism?

Kozintsev was disdainful of the cult of Hamlet’s character that flourished in nineteenth-century criticism and production of the play: he called it “Hamletism,” and sought to rid his film of it. (See his remarks quoted on the Kozintsev cheat sheet, available on the website.) Margreta de Grazia also tries to banish the “Modern Hamlet” from her view of the play, preferring to regard it as a tragedy of blood, land, inheritance, and dispossession. (See the Introduction to and Chapter 1 of her Hamlet without Hamlet on the Blackboard website.) To what extent do these two visions of the play, Kozintsev’s and de Grazia’s, converge? How successful is Kozintsev in replacing the image of Hamlet as a “soul, beautiful and noble, but by nature incapable of action” (see the cheat sheet) with a more historically robust agent and witness to history and to

material nature? Based on what you read in de Grazia, would she find Kozintsev’s re-imagining of the play and the character true to history?

3. Material reality in the Russian Hamlet: Elsinore

In his production diary, Kozintsev claims that “the basic elements of the plastic arts are formed against a background of nature” — mentioning the stone, iron, fire, sea, and earth that supply much of the mise en scène of his production. (See Scholium 17 on the course website for the whole passage.) But these elements are not static symbols or parts of an allegory: the film is made out of the ways in which they interact among themselves and with the human society that uses and reshapes them to constitute itself. Centrally, they add up to defining the castle at Elsinore and placing it in an environment that is neither entirely natural nor purely human.

So: how does Kozintsev use these elements and other material features to shape his vision of Hamlet? Don’t organize your essay just by listing the elements: look for recurrent patterns of imagery, both those of the “basic elements” and of their use in the locale and constitution of the castle, in its decorations and its utilities, and in the immediate material environment of particular characters.

4. Mousetraps, metatheatre, metacinema (Kozintsev, Almereyda)

For many readers, the play-within-the-play known as "The Mousetrap" (3.2, taken together with the build-up to the production in 3.1) is natural "crossing point" for the action and a thematic center; it is also a crux. The episode brings together key characters catalyzes their relationships (or can, depending on the production), and it offers each film an opportunity to reflect on its proper medium (with Kozintsev, a filmed but still recognizably staged play; with Almereyda, a product of the age of cinema and digital media). Writes Courtney Lehman,

[W]hy doesn't the play end with Hamlet's noir production of "The Mousetrap"? Critics have long wondered why Hamlet fails to seize this "live" opportunity to carry out the Ghost's demands. Such a feat could actually be accomplished during a stage performance . . . . And within the play of Hamlet, the conditions for actualizing the Ghost's demands during "The Mousetrap" are made possible by Hamlet's clever creation of Lucianus, the avenger, as nephew to the king, paralleling Hamlet's own relationship to his murderous uncle... Why does this fail to happen?†

Focus an essay on what does and doesn't happen, with what media and what results, in this episode in Kozintsev’s and in Almereyda's play — and what that says about the nature of “action” (cf. acting in reality and in mimetic forms) in these two productions. Why, at this crucial juncture, is the outer audience’s attention being drawn to action in mimetic media away from the concrete possibilities of acting in reality?

5. Mad Ophelias (Kozintsev, Almereyda)

Ophelia’s madness, writes the critic Elaine Showalter, comes down to us embedded in traditional assumptions associated with women and sexuality. Without endorsing them, she summarizes a few:

Whereas for Hamlet madness is metaphysical, linked with culture, for Ophelia it is a product of the female body and female nature, perhaps that nature’s purest form. On the Elizabethan stage, the conventions of female insanity were sharply defined. Ophelia dresses in white, decks herself with "fantastical garlands" of wild flowers, and enters in the first Quarto "distracted" playing on a lute with her "hair down singing." Her speeches are marked by extravagant metaphors, lyrical free associations, and explosive sexual imagery. She sings wistful and bawdy ballads, and ends her life by drowning.

All of these conventions carry specific messages about femininity and sexuality. Ophelia’s virginal and vacant white is contrasted with Hamlet’s scholar’s garb, his "suits of solemn black." Her flowers suggest the discordant double images of female sexuality as both innocent blossoming and whorish contamination; she is the "green girl" of pastoral, the virginal "Rose of May" and the sexually explicit madwoman who, in giving away her wild flowers and herbs, is symbolically deflowering herself . . . . The mad Ophelia’s bawdy songs and verbal license . . . . seem to be her one sanctioned form of self-assertion as a woman, quickly followed, as if in retribution, by her death.

How do the two stagings of Ophelia (Kozintsev’s, Almereyda’s) come to terms with these traditional associations, and to what extent do they determine and explain her presentation in the two films? Is Anastasiya Vertinskaya the traditional Ophelia Showalter describes, or does she depart from the type? Is Julia Stiles a flat departure from the traditional role, or does she translate elements of it into new terms? And what happens to each in the episodes of madness and suicide?

6. Technology and tragedy (Almereyda)

What we see in Hamlet's and Ophelia's relationship in the Almereyda film is a tragic transformation in the meaning of technology: the very thing they have in common — objects of mechanical reproduction — becomes the thing that tears them apart. Hamlet and Ophelia's private tragedy is that of technology taking over feelings; irrevocable separation, the pain of which no communication device, however sophisticated, can alleviate or reverse.

Test this remark against your understanding of the Almereyda Hamlet. In what sense is the whole film affected by "tragic transformation[s] in the meaning of technology" — to the point where the forces that should bring people together are the things that tear them asunder? Consider other characters as well as Hamlet and Ophelia. To what extent is the whole film a public, not just private, tragedy of "technology taking over feelings" — and, if that is so, to what extent is the outcome "tragic" and not just pathetic or melodramatic?


Allessandro Abbate, "'To Be or Inter-Be': Almereyda's End-of-Millennium Hamlet." Literature/Film Quarterly 32:2 (2004): 82.