

Notes for Viewing Olivier's *Hamlet*

Six basic elements of a film: script, direction, camera, acting, music/sound, editing

German Expressionist Films (1920s-1930s)

Initially, highly symbolic and stylized non-realistic sets, sometimes geometric

Dark human experiences—madness, betrayal

Moody

Extreme camera angles, which often suggest being watched

Repeated imagery of stairs, empty hallways and corridors

Harsh contrast of light and dark (chiaroscuro) reflect disturbed psyches and oppressive world

Shadows and silhouettes express anxiety, uncertainty, and mental instability

Fatalism

Voice-overs common

Distortion created by make-up, camera angles, costumes, strange sets, actors' body language

Examples: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Nosferatu*, *The Last Laugh*, *Metropolis*, *M*

Influenced horror films and film noir



Metropolis (1927)



The Last Laugh (1924)



Nosferatu (1922)

Film Noir (1940s-1950s)

Hostile, threatening world

Difficulty of determining truth or reality

Protagonist must solve a sensational crime, usually murder

The woman is often a mystery, requiring solution

Sexuality a driving force

Expressionist distortion

Expressionist distortion of protagonist's perceptions, state of mind, obsessions, anxieties, desires

Use of shadows and deep focus to express the protagonist's isolation

Extreme tracking shots

Voice overs

Examples: *DOA*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Double Indemnity*, *Touch of Evil*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Maltese Falcon*, *Key Largo*

Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948)

Is Olivier adapting *Hamlet* or staging a play on film?

Political background:

WWII ended in 1945, and the Cold War was in full swing. Individuals felt anxious, powerless, threatened by an oppressive totalitarianism and the atomic bomb.

Olivier focused on Hamlet's psychology, particularly his Oedipus Complex, eliminated most political meanings, downplayed Hamlet's concern with honor, fame, reputation, and deleted much of the humor.

Cuts: Fortinbras (except at the end), Voltimand and Cornelius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Additions: mime of Hamlet in Ophelia's closet, Ophelia's death, and the sea battle with the pirates

Sets:

The castle is vast and imprisoning. Often it is unrealistic, particularly in some long shots.

Shadowy, labyrinth-like hallways and winding stairs reflect Hamlet's confusion and his point of view

Rooms, halls, stairs are generally empty, except for the court scenes.

Hamlet's chair, the King's throne, and the Queen's throne are often empty. The old King and the old order are gone.

Only essential furniture is used; there is a sense of barrenness.

The sets may be unstable; furniture sometimes changes position from one scene to another, as do the huge columns, which are on wheels. Thus perspective is sometimes unclear in the great hall.

Gertrude's bed is a focal point of the play

Camera:

Deep focus shots are used consistently, for example, to show Hamlet's alienation.

Long shots and high angle shots (looking down) reinforce the powerlessness and vulnerability of people in this corrupt court.

The camera moves often, with panning and/or tracking shots. Is it overactive?

Shots tend to be longer than usual in a movie; there are few quick cuts.

Panning from room to another emphasizes the size of the sets.

Lighting:

Shadows reflect Hamlet's disturbed emotions and mind and the corruption of Claudius and his court.

The black dissolves between scenes support the sense of evil, of moral corruption.

The interplay of shadow and light creates a remarkable depth.

Frames:

Closed frames reinforce the sense of a claustrophobic and confining world.

Open frames suggest freedom to act.

Music:

William Walton wrote the music specifically to parallel and express the action and characterization.

Ophelia has a theme, sometimes played by oboes.

Hamlet too has a theme, which is heard in the opening and closing scenes (carrying his body) and as he comes down the steps for the duel.

Costumes:

Gertrude's gowns are low cut, suggesting her sexuality.

Hamlet's perennial black needs no comment.

Ophelia is modestly dressed in white, but when she goes mad, her white gown exposes her breasts.

Claudius's garments are particularly luxurious and complex.