Cinematic Hamlet arose from two convictions. The first was a belief, confirmed by the responses of hundreds of university students with whom I have studied the films, that the Hamlets of Laurence Olivier, Franco Zeffirelli, Kenneth Branagh, and Michael Almereyda are remarkably successful films. Numerous film Hamlets have been made using Shakespeare’s language, but only the four included in this book represent for me outstanding successes. One might admire the fine acting of Nicol Williamson in Tony Richardson’s 1969 production, or the creative use of extreme close-ups of Ian McKellen in Peter Wood’s Hallmark Hall of Fame television production of
1971, but only four English-language films have thoroughly transformed Shakespeare’s theatrical text into truly effective moving pictures. All four succeed as popularizing treatments accessible to what Olivier’s collaborator Alan Dent called “un-Shakespeare-minded audiences.” They succeed as highly intelligent and original interpretations of the play capable of delighting any audience. Most of all, they are innovative and eloquent translations from the Elizabethan dramatic to the modern cinematic medium. It is clear that these directors have approached adapting _Hamlet_ much as actors have long approached playing the title role, as the ultimate challenge that allows, as Almereyda observes, one’s “reflexes as a film-maker” to be “tested, battered and bettered.”

An essential factor in the success of the films after Olivier’s is the challenge of tradition. The three films that followed the groundbreaking 1948 version are what a scholar of film remakes labels “true remakes”: works that pay respectful tribute to their predecessors while laboring to surpass them. As each has acknowledged explicitly and as my analyses demonstrate, the three later filmmakers self-consciously defined their places in a vigorously evolving tradition of _Hamlet_ films. The creativity of each film’s response to its predecessors has resulted in a series of remakes unprecedented not only in the history of Shakespearean film but also in the larger history of film. Paradoxically, it seems, the very originality of these remakes has been a significant factor in their decidedly mixed reception among scholars. Each of the films has received significant critical attention, but the fact that each film after Olivier’s defines itself more through emphatic difference than through similarity has contributed to severe disagreements about their relative success. Many critics who admire one film’s approach find the calculatedly different approach of another to be a source or symptom of failure. I argue, to the contrary, that each filmmaker creatively establishes differences with his predecessors and develops a new, highly distinctive, and remarkably effective fusion of the Shakespearean text and the film medium.

A second conviction motivating the current work concerns methodology. This book responds to what I consider to be a general reluctance in the scholarship on Shakespeare on film to focus closely on the complex ways in which film as a distinctive medium engages, controls, and provokes the viewer. Scholars working in the field have been much more inclined to praise and blame Shakespearean adaptations, and to point out their broader ideological implications, than to analyze the cinematic art and craft by which they create meaning. As a result, most existing criticism differs little from treatments of
theatrical productions, focusing on acting performance, thematic interpretation, and cultural context and significance. This book is in part a response to my belief that the field today is out of balance, filled with informed and sometimes brilliant discussion on such important issues as ideology, gender, and psychoanalysis, for which all can be thankful. Existing criticism contains, however, few detailed and sustained analyses of the techniques of storytelling and signification that are distinctive to cinema. My analyses present ways in which closer attention to these techniques allows one to understand how writer-directors of very different backgrounds and sensibilities have each forged a unique synergy of Shakespeare’s endlessly interpretable play-text and film’s unprecedented expressive resources, creating a *Hamlet* that speaks powerfully to modern audiences.

**Four Roads to Hamlet**

A crucial reason why the four films succeed is the fact that Shakespeare’s play exerted an early and a profound influence on the artistic development of all four directors. In return, each, by a fortuitous combination of chance and plan, found an especially opportune moment in his career to adapt the play to film. Stimulated by long personal investment in Shakespeare’s character and story, each approached *Hamlet* at the height of his filmmaking powers, producing, I believe, his finest work.

Laurence Olivier’s recorded experience with *Hamlet* began in 1925 at the age of eighteen, when he was greatly impressed by John Barrymore in the title role at London’s Haymarket Theatre. Several features of the performance appear to have influenced Olivier’s overall approach to Shakespeare. Foremost was Barrymore’s “natural” style of acting, which brought him both acclaim and condemnation. Conservative critics complained of the lack of poetry, as they would later complain about Olivier in comparison with the more mellifluous John Gielgud. The pursuit of naturalness did not, however, keep Barrymore from indulging in expressive postures and bouts of athleticism. He knelt with his back to the audience to hear the ghost’s narrative, as Olivier would do in the film, and was thought to “sprawl a little ludicrously” in the languid pose that Olivier too would adopt. He pursued the final swordfight with Laertes with great vigor, stabbing Claudius after what was described as a ten-foot leap through the air.

Barrymore played up the sexual relation of Hamlet and Gertrude in the closet scene, inevitably eliciting references to Sigmund Freud and the Oedipus
complex. It is generally assumed that the famous oedipal inflection of Olivier's Hamlet began when his 1937 producer, Tyrone Guthrie, introduced him to the work of Ernest Jones, Freud’s disciple and biographer. But if the articulated theory was lacking until that point, the underlying psychological appeal that it explained seems to have begun much earlier. Peter Donaldson argues for the influence of a sexual assault “on a staircase at All Saints School at age nine” on Olivier’s use of staircases in his film as settings for violence, culminating in the fourteen-foot leap onto Claudius at the end. The presence of a vast staircase at the center of the stage and a similarly dangerous leap by Barrymore’s Hamlet may help to explain young Olivier’s enthusiastic response to the production. Olivier found his first opportunity to imitate this influential performance in 1934. In Theatre Royal, he played a character who, as his most recent biographer, Terry Coleman, observes, was a “thinly disguised John Barrymore,” fighting a duel and making “a Fairbanks-style leap from a balcony,” the “first of many athletic and dangerous stunts for which he became notorious.”

Coleman’s research reveals that in 1936 “Olivier decided to become a Shakespearean actor.” He had already had success on stage in Romeo and Juliet as both Romeo and Mercutio and had played Orlando in the hapless film As You Like It directed by Paul Czinner, released in 1936. But becoming a Shakespearean actor for Olivier meant starring in Hamlet, which he proceeded to do at London’s Old Vic in 1937. As is well known, a visit to Jones by Olivier and Guthrie was instrumental in developing their Freudian approach. Too few details of the 1937 production were recorded to determine how closely it resembled the 1948 film, although the few available are suggestive. In the first soliloquy, Hamlet described his flesh as too “sullied,” a reading that had become popular only in 1934. As he spoke it, Hamlet “wiped his mother’s parting kiss from his face as though defiled by it.” The set for the duel scene resembles the film set in its raised platform reached by a stairway on the left. The rest, unfortunately, is silence.

The 1937–38 season at the Old Vic launched with Hamlet made Olivier the star Shakespearean actor he aspired to be. He returned to film for William Wyler’s Wuthering Heights, in which he finally mastered the very different form of acting that the medium requires, and Alfred Hitchcock’s Rebecca, the film that most influenced his Hamlet visually. These films not only established him as a movie star but also restored his faith in the expressive power of cinema that Czinner’s As You Like It appears to have undermined. Observing such talented directors changed his mind as well on the more specific subject of filming Shakespeare. In 1933 he turned down the role of Romeo in George
Cukor’s adaptation, claiming that Shakespeare would never succeed as film. In 1935 he was seduced by a generous salary to suppress his conviction for the Czinner film, to his ultimate disappointment, and the following year he would proclaim, “I don’t really like Shakespeare on the screen at all.” While working with Wyler and his pioneering cinematographer Gregg Toland in 1938–39, Olivier finally came to understand the capacities of the medium. Wyler told him, “There’s nothing you can’t do on film. You tell me you can’t do Hamlet on film. You can do Hamlet on it.” Olivier came to believe him, and when a film of Henry V was proposed in 1943, he insisted on total control, claiming, “I had the advantage of knowing more about the medium than anyone else.” In 1947 Olivier yielded to a request to make a second Shakespearean film. His confident mastery of the medium, the challenge implicit in his conversations with Wyler, and the meaning that the play had held for him since at least 1925 came together to make Hamlet the only possible choice. The sheer success of Olivier’s Hamlet—artistic, critical, and popular—helps to explain why four decades intervened before the next major film adaptation of the play in English.

For Franco Zeffirelli, theater, film, and Shakespeare were dominant and intertwined components of his imaginative life from childhood. He grew enamored of Shakespeare at around the age of twelve in the mid-1930s, when language lessons with a Scottish expatriate in Florence enabled him to study the plays and enact scenes with his tutor. His principal toys were miniature theaters that he constructed himself for this purpose. At the same time, he was viewing films almost daily and developing what he describes as a great vulnerability to the medium that he never outgrew. He wrote in 1986, “[E]ven today I laugh and cry openly and believe quite passionately in what is taking place on the screen.” Given his passions, it is not surprising that a 1945 screening of Olivier’s Henry V determined his career path, providing “the clearest idea of my future, the road to follow: theater, cinema.” We do not know when he first saw Olivier’s Hamlet, but it must have been soon after its release, for he writes that Olivier became “the Hamlet and Henry V of my youth.” In the years after the war, he studied the British theater from afar. He recalls that Olivier’s 1937 director, Tyrone Guthrie, “was one of those avant-garde stars of the London theatre whom I knew about from the magazines my wartime British friends sent me.”

Zeffirelli mastered the art and craft of both theater and film as an assistant to Luchino Visconti during the postwar revival of Italian cinema. He began his career-long alternation among projects in theater, film, and opera at this
time but declared that films were always his “ultimate goal,” especially “filming a stage classic,” by which he always seems to have meant Shakespeare. On forming his own theater company in 1964, he staged an Italian-language version of *Hamlet* that toured European capitals during the Shakespeare quadricentennial. Discussing this production, he claims that “always I wanted to bring it to the cinema. Either the actor wasn’t ready or I was not, or the money was not. . . . Every project has its own season.” All three elements were ready for his first major film, *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967), which exploited the popularity of its stars, the recently scandalous and then more recently married Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. Its success enabled him to develop his previous biggest hit in the English theater, the 1960 *Romeo and Juliet* staged at the Old Vic, which he had been invited to direct, into one of the most popular and profitable Shakespeare films of all time. With such box office successes, all would have been ready for the long-awaited filmed *Hamlet*, but a nearly fatal automobile accident soon after the completion of *Romeo and Juliet* provoked something of a religious conversion, diverting the cinematic side of Zeffirelli’s creativity into projects with Christian subject matter. This was followed by a decade of concentration in the 1980s on opera and operatic films, a genre in which Zeffirelli proved himself a considerable innovator. His attempted swing back to nonoperatic film with *Young Toscanini* was a debacle. Amidst charges that he uttered anti-Semitic remarks at the 1988 Venice Film Festival, where a rough cut was shown, the film was never completed. In his Italian autobiography, he describes the period as one of life crisis, using language resembling his description of the effect of Olivier’s first film: “Now I found myself in a sort of void, in a desert land, and I no longer saw clearly in what direction I could go.” At that moment he returned to Shakespeare, and at last to *Hamlet*. Believing that the work would allow an empowering return to his “deepest cultural roots,” he felt that he “could offer a version probably superior to any other.”

Like Zeffirelli, Kenneth Branagh is an artist who was destined to add filmmaking to his notable theatrical accomplishments. In his autobiography, he recounts on adjacent pages his early fascination with movies watched on television, which seemed uncannily “real” to him, and his first experience of the “magic” of theater. It would eventually become predictable that these two passions would converge in *Hamlet*. “Hamlet is a part that obsesses me,” he confessed to a journalist in 1992. If anything, that is an understatement. The stages of Branagh’s road to a filmed *Hamlet* have been repeatedly told. His interest in Shakespeare and theater was profoundly influenced by his trip to Oxford at age fifteen to see Derek Jacobi in the role. Reflecting in the
introduction to his screenplay, Branagh writes, “I believe that much of what has followed in my life was affected by that experience.”  He auditioned at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts using a passage from the play. At the academy, he recited the “rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy to a visiting John Gielgud and subsequently starred in the play, winning the school’s highest prize. He played Laertes for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Derek Jacobi directed him as Hamlet for the Renaissance Theatre Company in 1988. By 1987 he had begun planning for a project that had percolated in his mind for a long time, a film version of Shakespeare’s greatest play.

That was not yet to be. Negotiations were already under way to finance the Zeffirelli film, eliminating the possibility for another version of the same play. As a result, Branagh’s dream project was delayed eight years. During that time, the Hamlet film being storyboarded in Branagh’s imagination would significantly change. 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. Given the slumping interest in Shakespeare films, the latter, at least, would not have been true in 1988. During that time as well, of course, Branagh with Henry V and Much Ado About Nothing helped restore Shakespearean film to commercial viability. Branagh in the interim continued mastering the process of filmmaking and collected around him a group of artists ever more capable of translating Shakespeare into film. One can see across his career the acquisition of techniques that would find their way into his Hamlet: the explanatory insets and long tracking shot of Henry V; the montage of clips that opens Peter’s Friends; the long and complicated take that ends Much Ado; the circling camera of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. No one could have been better prepared in 1996 to undertake what Samuel Crowl rightly calls “the most ambitious and audacious Shakespeare film ever made.”

Michael Almereyda did not pursue a career in theater, but filming Hamlet was an aspiration no less natural for him than for Olivier, Zeffirelli, and Branagh. Blessed with a talent for visual arts, his ambitions began turning toward film following his family’s move from Kansas to southern California in 1972, when Almereyda was twelve. In the next few years, he became fascinated with European films, especially those of the New German Cinema and Jean-Luc Godard. This new interest coincided with an interest in Hamlet. In the screenplay preface, he recalls, “I found myself thinking back to my first impressions of the play, remembering its adolescence-primed impact and meaning for me—the rampant parallels between the melancholy Dane and my many doomed and damaged heroes and imaginary friends: James Agee, Holden
Introduction

Caulfield, James Dean, Egon Schiele, Robert Johnson, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Jean Vigo.”

Rampant parallels include the trauma of parental loss, alienation, suicidal inclinations, early death, and, through the familiar yet mysterious alchemy, the creativity that can rise out of tragic events.

Dean and Mayakovsky make their appearance in his Hamlet, but it is the last-named “hero” who suggests the depth of Almereyda’s personal investment in his title character. He has not discussed his name in any of his numerous published interviews, but one might deduce that his decision to become a filmmaker coincided not only with a fascination with Hamlet but also with his assumption of a nom de caméra. The French anarchist Miguel Almereyda was murdered in prison in 1917, probably by an agent of the French state. The traumatized twelve-year-old son he left behind, Jean Vigo, would become, in the words of film historian David Thomson, “the first young martyr to ‘cinema’” and a hero to subsequent cinematic avant-gardes. His mythic status and potential as a Hamlet figure are encapsulated in the back-cover copy of the standard biography, which proclaims that Vigo was “haunted all his life by the injustice done to his father” and “spent most of his working life battling against authorities wary of his political background, against censors suspicious of the subversive nature of his films.”

Although Almereyda’s career as an independent filmmaker has included much battling with producers, it cannot be said that he is a politically subversive director in the manner of Vigo, and wringing speculative meaning from an artist’s pseudonym is hazardous. What can be said is that Almereyda aspired to film a character associated since his adolescence with the son of the man after whom he named himself. In a gesture that I will not attempt to interpret, but which should not go unnoticed, his avant-garde filmmaker Hamlet will contemplate Jean Vigo’s image before going to the scene of his death.

The three features written and directed by Almereyda before Hamlet concern dysfunctional families, youthful alienation, parental death, and suicide, themes that suggest how easily Shakespeare’s play fits into his career. His experience in making these films determined his approach to Hamlet. He describes the making of his first feature, Twister (1989), about an extended Kansas family unable to break free from the patriarchal domicile, as “a travesty” in which he lost control over the editing and the soundtrack.

Making The Eternal (1998), a better-funded excursion into the horror genre, the frustrated director found himself confronting the “very confused worries and whims” of the producers. Only with the low-budget, independently produced Nadja (1994), which reworks material from vampire film and André
Breton’s surrealist novel to create a variation on the Shakespearean comic plot, were his artistic ambitions satisfied. His resolve to maintain similar control over Hamlet necessitated a similarly miniscule budget.

Produced for under two million dollars, the 2000 Hamlet is by far the least expensive of the four major treatments in English. At least in part for this reason it is also the shortest, presenting like all but Branagh’s film a significantly cut version of Shakespeare’s text. The final version became even shorter than the shooting script when several scripted scenes remained unshot and completed scenes proved unsatisfactory, due to the difficulties of filming in found settings with a schedule so “fast and furious” that his star, Ethan Hawke, claimed soon after to “remember very little of it.”

Nevertheless, Almereyda’s film merits the longest chapter in this book because it makes up for insufficient money and time with ceaseless and often astonishing creativity. Even though the film’s editing tempo is leisurely, its 111 minutes are crammed with such a density of visual details, and these details are so cunningly organized, that it continually grabs and challenges the viewer’s interpretive attention.

A New Approach to Shakespeare on Film

The four chapters that follow contain close readings of the films on a level of detail that is admittedly unusual. Their level of detail is not as high as the frame-by-frame descriptions of the prepsychoanalytic Christian Metz or his colleague Raymond Bellour, but it is much higher than that of most current film criticism, which typically selects only a few details to support an overarching thematic argument. The readings are less close than those of Metz and Bellour because my goal is not to support an all-inclusive theoretical model but, more practically, to explicate the adaptational procedures of four filmmakers. The readings are much closer than those of more thematically minded critics because understanding the filmmaker’s craft requires a continual effort to resist that craft, which deploys a stalwart set of devices that efface themselves, that direct our attention through the screen to the object represented rather than to the means by which our attention is directed. It is a situation perhaps unique to the art of cinema that an increased familiarity with a work generally does not imply greater awareness of its methods. Unless one steps back from the seductive and effortless pleasure of immersion to look closely and systematically at technique, what discourse analysts call elements of “surface structure” are subject to a relentless “push down” into forgetfulness.

As Edward Branigan states the matter, “When we say we remember a film, we
do not normally mean that we remember the angle from which it was viewed in the theater, or the exact angles assumed by a camera in a scene. Rather, when we speak of comprehending something, we mean that our knowledge of it may be stated in several equivalent ways; that is, our knowledge has achieved a certain independence from initial stimuli.” Branigan is claiming, rightly, that we remember the contents of the film setting as if they are objects in real space and time, not as they were presented from the camera’s limited point of view and, moreover, that we recall the objects themselves rather than the formal means by which they were so presented.

The philosopher Colin McGinn has recently made a similar argument, observing that film’s distinctiveness as an art results from its unique promotion of “looking into” rather than “looking at.” The latter activity, in fact, is not the viewer’s “typical stance and detracts from the power of the film.” As one result of this process of self-effacing devices, just as viewers naturally prefer the pleasures of immersive looking into the screen over the labors of analytic looking at the screen, criticism of films is much more often about what they contain than how they create this content. Stefan Sharff observes that in critical writing about film “there is a persistent lack of clarity about matters strictly cinematic.” Greater clarity can be achieved only through raising into our analytic awareness the teeming plenitude of devices whose job is to vigilantly point beyond themselves toward the desired object within.

The nature of these devices might be approached through considering how radical the transformation of Shakespeare’s theatrical text must be to produce a successful film. An early review of Olivier’s Hamlet by George Barbarow captures with naïve brilliance the difference between the two media. Likening viewing the film to looking at the play “through a telescope,” Barbarow complains of the endless details that “unintentionally distract us from the action of the drama.” To solve what he views as an essential incompatibility between theater and film, Barbarow concludes by proposing an alternative method of adaptation. His proposal so starkly rejects what would now be called the “cinematic” dimension of Olivier’s film that it is worth quoting extensively:

It would make the camera and microphone as much as possible the exact recorders of a stage performance. The camera should be fixed at one point, and remain in this position without moving, while each scene is played out before it. The machine would thus have a single but very important function: to be a non-participant observer of the play. It should be totally subservient to the scenic action and speech, while rigidly maintaining the physical
boundaries of the scene. Everything should be held within the fixed frame; it would then be up to Shakespeare (who has done quite well in this work) to provide the drama, and it would be up to the actors to do their acting in compliance with the play. The spectator would have “the best seat in the house,” would not be burdened with constant readjustments to new views, and would quickly thank the camera for not interfering. It muddles a play (written from one viewpoint) if one hops about visually during a scene; this can easily be discovered by moving four or five times to different seats during a theatrical performance, getting new perspectives each time and then coming away from the theatre with jumbled memories.39

Barbarow’s proposed method, which would negate at least four decades of film history, reverting to preclassical “primitive” cinema and reducing the filmic part of Shakespeare film to the most basic documentary function possible, provides a useful starting point for understanding how any successful adaptation must break radically with theatrical practice.40 By analyzing why such a restriction on “the machine” would produce something totally unwatchable, would in fact place us not in the best but in the worst seat in the house, I hope to establish the base points from which the filmmaker must proceed.

The four Hamlets of this book are unequivocally examples—virtuosic examples, I argue—of “classical Hollywood cinema,” a style of audiovisual storytelling that compels audience attention using devices that are at once grounded in fundamental mental processes and reinforced through the experience of watching motion pictures. As defined by such theorists as David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Noël Carroll, classical style is fundamentally realistic but also strongly controlling of viewers’ mental responses. Most of its devices were established as conventions in the early decades of the twentieth century, and because of the efficiency by which these devices make film narratives comprehensible and exciting for large audiences, the classical style became, and remains, the international norm for mass-marketed films. Some of its defining features might be realized by Barbarow’s restricted machine, just as they might be realized on the stage: for example, a focus on individuals with recognizable psychologies who become the principal causal agents of the plot by pursuing identifiable goals; and the question-and-answer or “erotetic” rhetoric that Carroll proposes as fundamental to film narrative. But even in these cases, classical cinema has developed enormous additional resources over what is available on the stage. Psychologies can be rendered more recognizable than they are both in the theater and in real life through close-ups of emoting
faces, interpretive music, expressive camera angles, even editing rhythm. Goals can be identified and approached visually, with their attractions made clear to see and defined as subjective or objective. Questions can be posed by the intriguing audiovisual detail and the selective release of information, techniques in which film excels.

More fundamentally, Barbarow's alternative cinema would be unwatchable, because it would not activate many of film's most potent means of engaging the viewer. To translate into modern film jargon, what Barbarow claims that the adaptor must eliminate is “variable framing.” Of course, this is exactly what he cannot do if he aspires to popular comprehension and enjoyment, avowed goals of our four directors. Variable framing through editing and camera motion, which makes us continually focus on what is most significant and produces intense identification with characters by allowing us to share their optical point of view, is generally considered the most fundamental source of “the power of movies.” It allows, indeed conventionally relies on, the creation of a coherent three-dimensional space that is essential to classical storytelling. In addition, as Jean Mitry argues, both editing and camera motion establish a film's rhythm, which allows us to comprehend its temporal dimension and its structure, a structure that relentlessly unfolds in a present that we continuously strive to link up with the past and extrapolate into a future. To follow the plot of a film, we must experience shots combining into spatially coherent scenes, scenes into larger storytelling segments, segments into the larger movements of the narrative. Storytelling in film is not a mere recording process but an art of multileveled segmentation, communicating in large measure through its elaborate structures, although in the classical aesthetic it labors to efface the construction process, making it something we look through rather than look at.

On a deeper psychological level, the coherent space and the rhythmic segmentation produced through variable framing allow film to underscore its narrative with powerful instinctive drives. Most viewers will stare with intense interest at a flat screen for hours only if an impression of movement through a realistic three-dimensional space is maintained. In part, this interest derives from highly conscious participation in the story. As recent research on moving picture media by cognitive psychologists has illuminated, movement within and into this represented space also triggers the brain's largely involuntary and subliminal “orienting response,” which directs immediate attention to any new environmental stimulus to determine whether it is a threat. First described by Ivan Pavlov in 1927 (coinciding, interestingly, with silent cinema's apogee of
motion effects), the orienting response, nicknamed by Pavlov the “what’s this?” response, is now a well-studied component of our evolutionary heritage: it developed to allow our ancestors to survive on the African savanna by alerting them to potential predators. In film, changes in the visual field redirect our attention much more continually and variously than occurs in most other activities. As communications psychologist Annie Lang and others have recently demonstrated in laboratory experimentation, the most elementary formal features by which classical cinema constructs its narratives—camera movements and editing transitions—measurably activate the orienting response, gluing attention to the screen. What allowed our ancestors to survive several million years ago and become our ancestors began empowering an art of unprecedented mass appeal at the end of the nineteenth century.

Acutely sensitive to what made movies pleasurable and therefore profitable, the pioneers of early film quickly settled into a standard practice that combined repeated camera movements with rhythmic editing transitions. As films lengthened to accommodate longer stories, groups of shots constituting a scene continuous in space and time were succeeded by additional such groups, producing a more complex rhythm in which the rapid sequence of same-scene transitions is punctuated by a slower sequence of transitions between scenes. Editing within the scene grew dependent on the “master shot discipline”: an “establishing shot” depicts the overall setting and configures the characters in space, then closer shots direct attention to selections within the space of the scene via “analytic editing.” As editing within the scene grew more sophisticated and formalized, transitions between scenes became more elaborately highlighted. Such punctuation as the dissolve, wipe, and fade developed as devices to reinforce an already present difference between same-scene and different-scene transitions.

Lang’s research into what she calls “the limited capacity model of mediated message processing” reveals that between-scene transitions produced heightened demands on the orienting response that momentarily overload our mental processing, interfering with our memory. Cognitive studies using other methodologies demonstrate that crossing spatio-temporal “event boundaries” in both film and real life immediately shifts previous events from working (short-term) memory to long-term memory. The precise implications of such research are not yet clear for film studies. At the very least, because transitions affect memory and because the orienting response is largely subliminal, it may eventually provide new cognitive explanations for film’s effacement of its devices. Offering a new cognitive explanation for the development
A source of engagement perhaps as important as film’s activation of the orienting response is its activation of the “mirror neuron” systems. Since their discovery in the early 1990s, mirror neurons, which simulate within ourselves the movements performed by others and the emotions we witness in others through facial expressions, have been offered as the clearest biological explanation for empathy and altruistic morality. We might explain the tendency of all films to be “action” films, as Almereyda’s Hamlet sadly observes in his “to be” soliloquy, from the fact that the fixed screen, on which we must remain focused, and other, more social aspects of the settings in which films are viewed discourage physical imitations of actors’ nonfacial actions. The activation of mirror neurons in the experience of merely viewing an action is identical in nature to imitating that viewed action, but significantly lower in intensity. As a result of this difference, we might infer, film developed as our primary means of experiencing motor actions that we do not, cannot, and would not perform; our mirror neurons allow us to experience the viewed action in vicarious safety, even if we squirm in our seats.

The situation is different for facial expressions. Among primates, humans are the greatest specialists in processing information through the face. We read emotions primarily through interpreting what Paul Ekman in a series of books calls the facial action system, in which the eyes work together with the eyebrows and mouth. Mirror neuron research reveals that actual motor mimicry by our own faces is crucial to our processing of this information. The fact that facial expressions are the one area of motor action not discouraged by the viewing context means that film art specializes not only in normally unacceptable action but also in facial observation. Another source of its variety and rhythm is the alternation between action-adventure and emotional engagement, which most commonly takes the form of an alternation between longer shots depicting movement and closer shots depicting reactions. In both areas, of course, classical film possesses great advantages over the stage. It is no accident that facial expression became the predominant use of the close-up at the very beginning of film. Nor is it an accident that Almereyda’s Hamlet concludes his soliloquy among the action films at Blockbuster with the scene’s closest shot of his face.

Barbarow’s naïve model sees a successfully adapted Hamlet as deriving from the stripping away of devices that complicate and compromise our viewing of the profilmic dramatic performance. A more accurate view would...
consider how a filmmaker re-creates Shakespeare's greatest play while maximizing the advantages of the medium. Because a film contains something approaching an infinite amount of information recorded onto its audiovisual tracks, any analysis must be highly selective. Although the subsequent chapters do not ignore the occasional failures in the films covered, they concentrate on the most creative and effective uses of these advantages.

Variable framings achieved through camera movement and placement, present in every sequence of shots, cannot, of course, be analyzed exhaustively. Continually at work in directing the viewer's attention, their operation is more often than not of a relatively neutral, inexpressive, or conventional nature that does not require comment. But against this background there can be seen more creative uses. Variation deployed through editing together shots of different camera distance, for example, can become meaningful when it organizes a segment, as when Olivier's first soliloquy divides into a circular journey not only through the actor's motions to and from the thrones but also through the placement of close-ups at the beginning, middle, and end, a sequencing that controls and organizes the intensity of our responses. It enhances, in effect, the mirror-neuron activation of the close-ups through alternation with the lesser activation produced by his more distanced gestures. Camera movement that serves principally to "reframe," adjusting to a figure's change of position on screen, is not often noteworthy, but it can be. It may be used to neutrally follow a figure's motion, or to enhance it, as when the camera following Olivier's Ophelia as Hamlet throws her down onto stone steps in the nunnery scene disturbingly amplifies the action's violence and calls Hamlet's sanity into question.

Recognizing the importance of the orienting response and mirror neurons in motion pictures can lead to new ways of thinking about various conventional devices and illuminate their potential for specialized exploitation in a Shakespeare film. For example, in terms of camera movement, tracking toward an object stimulates the orienting response less than a camera tracking away, because the latter continually brings new objects into view that need to be identified and assessed. Slow camera movement is inherently less demanding than fast, for a similar reason. The relaxing of orienting stimulus through such devices allows the mind's limited capacity for processing information to be redirected away from instinctual, involuntary threat assessment toward something else: say, the emotional nuances of Branagh's "to be" soliloquy spoken during a slow camera track-in toward his mirror reflection. The most familiar image in the entire film, Hamlet's expressive face, is brought slowly nearer as
the voice-over forces us to watch for the smallest facial gesture that will help us to interpret the emotional content of the words—indeed, to search ever more closely for visually expressed meaning. One critic finds that Branagh “plays the scene with seething, self-contained anger.” The very act of self-containment, the absence of gesture that becomes a gesture through its absence, combined with an intense, unblinking concentration that is mirrored in our own, represents a remarkable development in the film medium’s use of the face, an instance of cinematic artistry worthy of Shakespeare’s verbal artistry.

In addition to introducing such concepts not traditionally applied to film criticism, the following chapters make considerable use of several more traditional categories explored in Stefan Sharff’s highly informative, if overconfidently titled, *The Elements of Cinema*. Sharff attempts to define cinema’s “unique methods of providing aesthetic gratification,” which he calls its “cinesthetic elements.” Several of these elements, such as “parallel action” and “moving camera,” are devices of variable framing that are familiar enough to require no definition. Two less familiar on which Sharff is especially persuasive, however, should be mentioned. He is illuminating on the power of “delayed disclosure,” the creation of questions or incorrect assumptions through insufficient or misleading visual cues. In the earliest uses of the master-shot discipline, the establishing shot came at the beginning of a scene, minimizing the new stimuli of the more closely framed “cut-in” shots that followed. Soon after this undemanding norm was established, filmmakers developed more demanding sequences that might begin, for example, with a close-up and then offer an establishing shot to place it within a context. This early form of delayed disclosure emerged as a simple reversal of the norm, to stimulate the viewer’s interest but inevitably at the expense of other forms of attention. Delayed disclosure would therefore be used most effectively not at moments when the demands of Shakespearean poetry require our fullest concentration but when the erotetic narrative poses tantalizing questions: what is in the mind of Zeffirelli’s Ophelia as we see her rise mysteriously from behind a rock after Hamlet’s departure for England, or what is Almereyda’s Hamlet planning when we see him in extreme close-up after killing Polonius? Delayed disclosure has also become important in Shakespeare films because it effortlessly produces desirable effects difficult to produce on the stage. The delayed revelation of Hamlet’s presence in the first court scene (1.2) becomes such a conspicuous device in three of the films that Almereyda transposes it to a later scene to surprise the viewer familiar with the tradition.

Sharff is equally valuable for his emphasis on the power of what he calls a “separation” sequence. A two-party conversation may be constructed using
objective two-shots, with both characters fully visible; a shot/reverse-shot sequence of “semisubjective” over-the-shoulder shots; and a “separation” sequence, subjective shots/reverse-shots that alternate presenting one interlocutor alone on screen.\textsuperscript{51} The semisubjective sequence is the most commonly employed, to the point of signifying conversation even where conversation is not taking place, as in Zeffirelli’s mute encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia in the weaving room. The semisubjective sequence also generally engages the viewer more emphatically than the more stagy objective two-shot, because it includes optical point of view, the opportunity for a closer camera, and the orienting demands of editing. Most intense for the viewer is the separation sequence, which includes not only undiluted focus on one interlocutor at a time and the occasion for the closest camera, but also a form of engagement described by Sharff as follows:

The viewer is engaged in the dramatics not only as a mere observer of the plot, but as an actor playing the part, of A when B is on the screen, of B when A is on the screen. Once “playing” the part, the viewer tries to impose his interpretation, expecting or wanting the next shot to conform to it. . . . If this happens the viewer is gratified and encouraged to participate further. The pictured reaction of B in shot 2 is, in a sense, a replay of what the viewer has already acted out.\textsuperscript{52}

The three types of conversational shots, separately or in combination, allow filmmakers to calibrate the intensity of their conversations. The power of Zeffirelli’s ghost scene, for example, is heightened by his unusually extensive separation after using the technique minimally before this privileged moment of father-son communication.

Sharff is primarily concerned to assert film art’s reliance on what he calls “grammar” (“the relationships among shots in a sequence”) and “syntax” (“the system by which larger units are organized into structural elements”).\textsuperscript{53} Wary of a potentially confusing linguistic analogy, I will avoid his vocabulary of grammar and syntax but follow his recommendation in paying especially close attention to each film’s complex and multileveled segmentation and organization, which is a much less systematic and formulaic affair than linguistic grammar and syntax. The stage director of a full, modern-text Hamlet mounts nineteen discreet scenes punctuated by the emptying of the stage.\textsuperscript{54} The filmmaker develops a shooting script consisting of hundreds of planned shots, to which more are almost always added in filming, because filming produces
added opportunities and uncovers previously unrealized needs for images. After the act of filming, this enormous set of building blocks is assembled, and reassembled, to form coherent scenes and larger segments: Olivier’s completed film, for example, which acquired additional shots to fulfill needs not foreseen in the shooting script, assembles 433 shots into scenes, which are then assembled into sequences, which are then assembled into still larger segments that I will be calling “movements.” Shots are varied using the devices of variable framing not only to tell the story but also to interpret, focus interest, facilitate the construction of meaningful structural units on various scales, and produce complex rhythms along these scales. Structural units can be constructed in myriad ways: through continuity of action and time (the standard definition of a film “scene”), of course, but also through sustained or recurring images, settings, or music, indeed, through the sustaining or recurrence of any device available to film. A major part of the difficulty of reading films closely is the sheer variety of segments and means for their construction, which are continually being invented. All films reveal extensive patterning, but few present global organizing patterns that can be precisely delineated. In that, they are like life itself, which they purport to represent. With so many building blocks and construction techniques at his disposal, the filmmaker can organize this virtual life by creating simple or elaborate symmetries, contrasts, and audiovisual echoes that enhance comprehension and enjoyment.

One partial exception to the lack of global organizing patterns is revealed in Kristin Thompson’s recent work, which offers new insight into larger-scale structures of classical Hollywood feature films. Providing a thoroughly documented corrective to the three-act model advocated almost universally in screenwriting manuals, she demonstrates that such films more often than not “break perspicuously into four large-scale parts, with major turning points usually providing the transitions.” The narrative changes direction, dividing the film into four roughly equal movements, usually when there is a shift in the protagonist’s goals. To fit within a commercially viable feature-film length, Shakespeare’s longest play must be substantially shortened. Yielding to this necessity, all of the films except Branagh’s full-text version delete, divide, and transpose Shakespeare’s text to move, in varying degrees, in the direction of this “global Hollywood” paradigm, as well as to readjust emphases to suit modern values. Consequently, the chapters on all but Branagh’s film are subdivided by movement to trace this process.

On the one hand, Shakespeare facilitates screenwriters’ attempts to accommodate the movie audience’s highly conditioned expectations of this kind
of segmentation. The play divides nicely into four parts, shifting motivations with the ghost’s revelation of the murder (end of 1.5); the confirmation (at, say, 3.2.287) in the aftermath of the Mousetrap; and Hamlet’s return to Denmark after the death of Ophelia and the escape from Claudius’s plan for his death (5.1), until the moment of his death (5.2.342). Most simply stated, Hamlet’s pattern of motivation moves from Hamlet’s motiveless melancholy to his seeking to confirm the ghost’s message to a more complicated third movement in which Hamlet’s desire for revenge is thwarted by his mother’s beckoning and Claudius’s desire to ensure his own safety and, finally, to continuing or renewed desire and new opportunity for revenge. On the other hand, Hamlet presents formidable obstacles to realizing such a pattern. There is, of course, the ultimately unmovable obstacle of Shakespeare’s endless psychological complexity. To ask merely one complicating question among the many that any reader might add: is the Mousetrap really motivated by the need to confirm, and does it renew Hamlet’s desire to obey his father’s ghost? (As Hamlet might say, that’s two questions.) Nor is Shakespeare’s plot as neatly balanced as a typical Hollywood plot, for it frames two much longer central segments within a shorter beginning and end. The filmmaker wishing both to popularize and to present a subtle interpretation of the play has many interesting problems to solve.57

Barbarow’s primitive documentary model ignores not only the fundamental attractional and structural devices of film but also its unbreakable habit as a “realist” medium of documenting a represented world in detail. David Bordwell describes two closely related forms of “density” increasingly incorporated into modern film that should be of interest to the student of Shakespearean adaptation. The first he calls “worldmaking,” the provision of “a rich, fully furnished ambience for the action.”58 Although even by the film standards of his time Olivier’s Elsinore provides a minimally furnished ambience, Barbarow finds its level of visual detail distracting. The few crucial props and locations—the precarious battlement, Hamlet’s distinctive chair, Ophelia’s corridor leading to daylight, Gertrude’s spacious bed—stand out in high relief against the castle’s plain background, allowing the film’s concentrated, evocative repetitions of a small number of visually characterized items to become one of its most memorable innovations. Later directors moved in the direction of ever more abundant, if not necessarily more evocative, visual detail. Zeffirelli’s medieval setting is relatively austere among period films, but it contains a much more fully realized world than Olivier’s.59 Seamlessly uniting scenes from three historical castles with a soundstage and exterior sets, he uses an “archaeological”
approach reminiscent of the Victorian stagings of Charles Kean. His Elsinore communicates its period materially, through stone and wood surfaces, forged metal, textiles, and geometrical ornamentation that visually connects the full range of human artifact, from jewelry to clothing to architecture. Inspired by the Bayeux Tapestry, panels of which are being prepared by the castle’s women, Zeffirelli surrounds Hamlet with the everyday life of a medieval community. This economic activity culminates in the enormous banquet that fills the hall while Hamlet awaits the ghost, altering the nature of the prince’s alienation, which, in Zeffirelli’s film, is from an integrated community in which the populace has a stake in the travails of the royal family. Branagh’s Elsinore retains such features of Olivier’s as a reliance on fewer, more evocative locations and a schematic and symbolic architecture that sometimes sacrifices realism for meaning. But like Zeffirelli’s, it also contains a large implied community and a wealth of interpretable visual details, especially in the décor and paraphernalia of characters’ rooms, which the 70mm cinematography displays in sharp abundance. It expands the scope of the family story into the international arena with its visual elevation of Fortinbras to the status of a major character. Almereyda’s film likewise implies an international scope through the iconography of multinational capitalism. Filmmaker Hamlet’s obsession with images adds a rich virtual dimension to the worldmaking of Almereyda’s film, extending his mental reach across the history of art and cinema. Indeed, the film generates the kind of information overload that Bordwell finds in such pioneer worldmaking films as Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner.

Even as density is creating a compelling effect of reality, it can also be producing what Bordwell calls “maximal design” incorporating appeals to a wide variety of audiences. “With many films designed to appeal to a wide range of viewers,” he writes, “there are pressures to sprinkle in details that might be caught by only a few.” As popularizing treatments and aesthetic creations in their own right, original-language Shakespeare films are almost inevitably aimed at an audience gamut that is broad even while it contains numerous subgroups of the “few”—as, of course, were Shakespeare’s plays, with their mix of clowns and kings and their wide-ranging allusiveness. One goal of the following studies is to take this gamut much more into account than most recent criticism has done. The four Hamlets all embrace a viewership that ranges from those unfamiliar with the play to the Hamlet literate. The audience embraced also includes groups with competencies and interests that are more specific: Shakespeare scholars, cineastes and film scholars, fellow filmmakers, auteurists who follow the director’s career, and numerous other groups that
can follow allusions unremarked by others. Bernice Kliman recognizes the complexly allusive nature of Branagh’s *Hamlet*:

This is a film that stands back from itself and asks the audience in the know to recognize allusions—to Gielgud’s famous pose holding the skull at arm’s length; to the celebrities, and the relation of some of them to Branagh; to the Adrian Noble/Branagh RSC production of 1992. These presumably are meant to function like Shakespeare’s metatheatrical references. The actor-friends passing through this film—reprising Branagh’s career—and the many celebrity actors, some who stand in a parental role to him, make for multiple texts, multiple significations. 61

Kliman is correct to assume that one specialized audience for Branagh’s film is viewers who have studied the play’s performance history, while another is viewers who have followed Branagh’s career. Other targeted subgroups can be identified for this and the other films, including, of particular interest in a book on *Hamlets*, the audience who will note the allusions that develop within the evolving tradition. Having closely studied his predecessors, each filmmaker acknowledges his debt with gestures large and small.

One result of the broad reach of Shakespeare films is that many more people, of course, have by now experienced the dramatist in performance through film than through stage productions, and the disproportion will continue to grow. I believe that it is important to study the complex procedures of adaptation because for most people today Shakespeare is experienced primarily, and for many even exclusively, through films. We need to understand what the films are doing to and with Shakespeare, and they are inevitably doing much more than any single viewing experience reveals; moreover, the films as “looked-through” artifacts are working hard not to advertise what they are doing. This book is intended to assist anyone viewing any of the four *Hamlets* to “look at” the remarkable panoply of devices deployed by four brilliant filmmakers who are simultaneously popularizing and subtly interpreting the play. Because the book grew out of numerous university classes that ranged from using film as an aid in teaching Shakespeare to using Shakespeare as an aid in teaching the critical study of film, I especially hope that it will prove useful to the vast and growing number of instructors, at a variety of levels, who find any of the ways of combining Shakespeare and film a synergistic, miraculous means for engaging the minds of students.