

Lisa S. Starks-Estes, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

Patrick J. Cook. *Cinematic Hamlet: The Films of Olivier, Zeffirelli,*

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In *Cinematic Hamlet*, Patrick J. Cook provides a detailed, formalist, shot-by-shot description of four filmed *Hamlets* — that of Laurence Olivier (1948), Franco Zeffirelli (1990), Kenneth Branagh (1996), and Michael Almereyda (2000) — in an effort to demonstrate that they succeed as examples of Shakespeare as "classic Hollywood cinema." Using the conventions of that style as a kind of rubric, Cook has evaluated filmed *Hamlets* and found these four to be the most cinematic in these terms. Cook's purpose in this book is to demonstrate how, and through what devices, these particular *Hamlets* are exemplary films in mainstream cinema, emphasizing their strengths and downplaying their weaknesses.

In his Introduction, Cook lays out the theoretical framework underlying this "evaluative rubric." For Cook, influenced by the film theory of David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Noel Carroll, classic Hollywood style prevailed in the twentieth century because its essentially "realistic" conventions exert tremendous power over the audience's "mental responses" (11). In this view, because classic Hollywood cinema is more accessible and understandable for mass markets, it has risen to become the dominant style in the medium of motion pictures worldwide. Cook explains important concepts used by these theorists, which he mentions in subsequent chapters: Bordwell's idea of "world making," the way the film creates its own "world," and "maximal design," the way the film attracts mass viewers (19-20); Thompson's division of classic films into "four-part structure"; Carroll's notion of the "erotetic" or question-and-answer rhetoric, which he sees as inherent in classic film storylines; and cognitive psychology's concept of "mirror neuron systems."

Underpinning this theory is the idea that the devices of classic Hollywood cinema best connect to human brain processes, an assumption based primarily on the research of communications psychologist Annie Lang and others on mental processing and memory. Cook suggests that cognitive studies of "mirror neuron systems" — the human mirroring of the actions or feelings of others — provide insight into audience responses of empathy, horror, or excitement generated

by figures on the screen. For Cook, "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" (14). Because mirror neuron systems are most intensely activated by facial expression, Cook claims that film — especially in its use of close-up shots — elicits a more powerful response than stage performance. However, this view seems to counter his earlier point that humans have a less intense response to a filmed image of a face than one encountered in person (14). It would seem that the physical presence of the actor would complicate Cook's contention of audience reaction to screen versus theatre, but he does not address this apparent contradiction.

Although I applaud Cook's emphasis on these films as films rather than as filmed stage productions, he seems to be caught in the old theater-versus-cinema debate, overemphasizing remarks made by George Barbarow in an article published in 1949 (in which the author denigrates film in favor of stage performance, regurgitating debates that circulated in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century) and belaboring points that have long been accepted in Shakespeare and film as well as performance studies. Cook's strict delineation of film versus stage causes him to overlook some important theatrical aspects of these films, particularly Olivier's appropriation of stage tradition within his cinematic *Hamlet*. For example, Cook cites Olivier's shift of "To be or not to be" to follow rather than precede the nunnery scene (39) and the importance of that change in the scene, but he seems to suggest that this move is Olivier's invention, not his adaptation of stage tradition, which it is — along with many other aspects of Olivier's film. Cook attributes Zeffirelli's decision to make the same scene switch to Olivier. Certainly, Zeffirelli's choice references Olivier's film, but again, it also hearkens back to stage tradition. Cook here misses the chance to explore the complex, fascinating way these films adapt the theatrical legacy of *Hamlet* and reshape it through the conventions of cinema.

Cook claims that he, unlike other critics in Shakespeare and film, seeks to "focus closely on the complex ways in which film as a distinctive medium engages, controls, and provokes the viewer" (2) in his detailed accounts of these four films of *Hamlet*. Unfortunately, however, despite his lucid explanation of his theoretical framework, he stops short of fully completing this goal. Cook does not truly delve into the interconnections of filmic devices with the complexity of audience response or the way film "provokes the viewer." His notion of the spectator is untheorized, collapsed into a universal first-person plural pronoun that effaces differences between individual viewers and their varied backgrounds, subject-positions, and experiences of film narrative. His own endnotes indicate differences in critics' readings of key moments in these films, illustrating the range of responses even within that limited community of viewers — one can only imagine

the multiple reactions of mass audiences to those same scenes. These differences point to a much more complex reception of filmic narratives than this theoretical framework seems to allow.

Although I believe there are serious problems with Cook's "neuroscientific" approach to cinema in its treatment of the spectator, psychological processes of viewing, and the cultural construction of meaning in representation/perception, Cook is clear and straight-forward about his own position, employing ample theorists to support his point of view. Cook states that his goal is "to explicate the adaptational procedures of four filmmakers" (9). He attempts to achieve this goal in four chapters devoted to each film, in which he briefly employs concepts explained in his Introduction. For the most part, Cook proceeds in each chapter to provide detailed description of the film with some integration of ideas outlined in the Introduction. He divides his description of the films into Thompson's four-part movements in all chapters except the one on Branagh, which he discusses by act and scene, as it exceeds this structure; makes quick references to erotetic rhetoric in the narrative of particular scenes in his chapter on Olivier's *Hamlet* (28, 47, 62, 66); notes a filmic device that he thinks elicits audience mirror neuron responses in Olivier (30) and Branagh (119); mentions Bordwell's "world making" in his chapter on Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*; and employs Stefan Sharff's "cinesthetic elements," particularly "delayed disclosure" (a convention in which ambiguity is created through deliberately deceptive visual cues) throughout the book. Nevertheless, the majority of the book involves explanation of each film, shot-by-shot.

Although Cook makes some sharp observations and certainly points out features and important elements of these films that even multiple-time viewers may have missed, his use of meticulous technical description still seems overly excessive. Cook himself notes that his book contains more detail than typically provided in scholarly texts, as he seeks to "explicate the adaptational procedures of four filmmakers," and he wants his readers to go against the grain of classical cinema to look beyond the surface and see how these films work, to see how they are put together, to resist "the seductive and effortless pleasure of immersion to look closely and systematically at technique" (9). Following the work of philosopher Colin McGinn, Cook notes that classical Hollywood style covers up its own devices, rendering its surface as seamless, something to "look through" or "into" rather than "look at" (10-12, 21, 62). This aim is commendable and worthwhile. However, even with this disclaimer and statement of purpose, the amount of detail in this book is disproportionate, especially without an integrated interpretive viewpoint in each chapter. The techniques he points the reader to "look at" need more in-depth analysis, more interpretation than he provides. The book sometimes reads almost like a technical document, one in which the sequence-by-sequence explanations continue on and on but never really add up to meaningful,

fully developed points about the films discussed, which is a shame, because when Cook does add interpretive comment, he provides tremendous insight into these versions of *Hamlet*.

As a reader, I found myself wanting Cook to develop these ideas more fully, especially in particular moments, when it seems that he might continue an interpretive thread — as in his reference to Ophelia looking at her reflection in Olivier's, his brief gesture to the filmic world of the "medieval community" created in Zeffirelli's, his short but extremely interesting discussion of the "found objects" and theme of the uncanny in Almereyda's *Hamlet* (165, 163-64), just to name a few. I found the beginning of Cook's chapter on Almereyda's *Hamlet* (163-64), in which he briefly sketches out a reading of the "uncanny imagination" in the film — the "uncanny interplay of the familiar and unfamiliar," related to other Freudian concepts developed in the film — to be the strongest, most compelling section of the entire book. Unfortunately, he drops this line of development after just a few pages to provide the detailed technical description of the film's "four movements." As a reader, I wanted to him to continue on about the uncanny, providing selective detail to support it rather than explaining every shot, scene-by-scene. As Cook's main argument is based on evaluation (these films are successful examples of classic Hollywood cinema) rather than interpretation, it tends to lack in-depth analysis beyond this careful, painstaking description of cinematic technique. Moreover, although in line with his overall purpose, Cook's emphasis on how these four *Hamlets* succeed, without equal time to how they fail, sometimes leads to overly generous readings and little critical inquiry.

At its best, Cook's careful, scrupulous treatment of these films, which includes all technical facets — soundtrack, cinematography, art direction — provides a wealth of resources for students, teachers, scholars, and viewers of these films. As a kind of reference, the book is extremely valuable. *Cinematic Hamlet* would be an excellent source for anyone interested in how these films "work" as cinema.

### References

Barbarow, George. 1949. " *Hamlet* through a Telescope." *Hudson Review* 2: 98-104.

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