Notes for Lecture on the Films of Hamlet

I. The universality and cogent exploration of themes and openness to interpretation as reasons for no less than 44 films about Hamlet

II. Lawrence Olivier’s Hamlet (1948)
   A. First significant film version of the play
   B. Honored with multiple Academy Awards including Best Actor and Best Picture
   C. Olivier starred in and directed after his success with Henry V
   D. Use of cinematic medium- a raw, power vision of Shakespeare’s story
      1. Black and white- somber and dark feel
      2. Use of chiaroscuro, fog, shadows and deep-focus lens to convey inner tumult, emotional distance, and an sense of imminent doom
      3. Example of selected scene and its intensity
   E. Critized by some for narcissism and has been whittled down, but still remains the definitive version for many

III. Mel Gibson’s Hamlet (1990)
   A. Massive talents behind this version
      1. Franco Zeffirelli and his previous smash success with Romeo and Juliet in 1968
      2. Use of big Hollywood names- Mel Gibson, Glenn Close, Alan Bates, and Helena Bonham Carter
   B. Also an edited version of the original text
   C. Gibson’s triumph despite the qualms of many- just another Hollywood hunk?
      1. A very natural rendition of Hamlet- seems like a real person with spontaneous line readings rather than rehearsed recitations
      2. An everyman Hamlet-unpretentious
      3. Infuses role with great athleticism
   D. Very realistic mood and tone
      1. Bucolic and natural setting of cinematographer David Watkin- scenes and costumes not too lavish or overstated
      2. Minimal use of music in Ennio Morricone’s score
   E. Unique interpretation of the Gertrude-Hamlet relationship
      1. Gertrude as a very lustful and sexual creature- still no confirmed guilt
      2. The Oedipian interpretation
         a. Numerous passionate embraces and kisses
         b. The disturbing nature of the bedchamber scene
   F. Overall a successful version in its primal power and realism

IV. Kenneth Branagh’s Hamlet (1996)
   A. A very lavish and talent-laden production
      1. Lead and direction of Shakespeare maven Branagh
      2. Incredible cast including Robin Williams, Jack Lemmon, Julie Christie, Gerard Depardieu, Billy Crystal and others
3. Use of the 70mm format- first since 1992’s Far and Away
4. Breathtaking production values and lush, colorful cinematography
5. Uncut version of the play and second longest major Hollywood production
   at 238 minutes (one minute shorter than Cleopatra)
B. Branagh’s intense and passionate Hamlet
C. A very intimate and intense version
   1. Scene of Hamlet’s near revenge
   2. The repeated use of mirrors
D. Very through and fleshed-out
   1. The play presented in its entirety
   2. Claudius as a complex and troubled character, not just a sneering
      villain
E. The best and most comprehensive film production of Hamlet

On my honor as a gentleman, I have neither given nor received aid on this work.
Something was rotten in Denmark, rank and gross, as rotten as a dame named Gertrude in bed with her husband's killer while the caterer recycled the funeral baked meats for the wedding reception, at which bride did not wear white. Hamlet was a sharp prince, good with a knife, but not sharp enough to handle his old man kicking the bucket with an earful of murder. My name's Horatio, Hamlet's gunshoe buddy, trying to stay clean in a dirty castle. A grizzled ghost pleaded the Fifth when I gave him the third degree, then split the scene when the cock crew, like a guilty man before a marshall serving summons. King Claudius, cool as a cucumber after offing his brother, twisted nephew Hamlet's arm not to return to college at Wittenberg, Caltech not having yet been built. The air bit shrewdly, it was very cold, when the ghost came again. It was Hamlet's father's spirit. His tale would freeze blood, pop out eyes, and make you hair stand on end like porcupine quills. He demanded revenge for murder most foul. The snake that killed him wore the crown. Me and Hamlet took the case. Hamlet's main squeeze, Ophelia, a green girl, griped that Hamlet was as pale as his shirt, in dirty socks, acting weird. Fortinbras was gangbanging Polacks. The sun bred maggots in a dead dog. Hamlet played mad, but when the Santa Ana blew, he knew a hawk from a handsaw. A bunch of non-Guild actors showed up for the castle venue. \"To be or not to be,\" mused Hamlet, thinking of a one way ticket to the morgue. At the play, \"The murder of Gonzago,\" an actor dumped poison in the play-King's ear. The real King freaked. Polonius hid behind Queen Gertrude's bedroom curtain, but Hamlet smelled a rat and stabbed him dead. \"I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room,\" he said, the corpse where worms ate brunch and didn't leave a tip. I heard Ophelia do the hey-nonny-nonny gig, singing about flowers and valentines, but a Valentine's Day Massacre was more like it. Laertes found his sister Ophelia, poor wretch, in the weeping brook, drowned in muddy death. It is time for the great axe to fall. A couple of clowns found a skull a scream, when they tipped Ophelia into the grave. Hamlet jumped in on top of her. Hamlet and Laertes got down to business with a couple of long knives while the Queen gulped down some poison Pinot Noir the King meant for Hamlet. The Queen fell. Hamlet and Laertes cut each other up, then Hamlet swigged from the deadly cup and stabbed the killer King stone cold dead. Instant Karma, I guess. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were snuffed. Fortinbras stomped into Denmark with his gang, and lots of drums. I was the last guy left. I heard a gunshot. I looked off into the distance, toward beautiful La Jolla, a solid heavy man like a rock.