

The Shakespeare Films of Grigori Kozintsev

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By

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For my grandchildren

Come not between the dragon and his wrath.
—*Lear*

There could be no golden mean.
—*Kozintsev*

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PREFACE

Presented here is a study of the directorial achievement of Soviet era filmmaker Grigori Kozintsev for a Shakespeare film that has become an international treasure, his 1971 *King Lear*.

Kozintsev's 1963 *Hamlet*, called the "best ever" by Laurence Olivier, is examined in these pages as well. "Best ever" must be the ultimate compliment coming from one whose own portrayal of the Dane has received the same praise.

Of Kozintsev, Richard Dyer¹ of the Boston *Globe* says, "Paradoxically, the two most powerful films of Shakespeare plays were made not in Great Britain but in the Soviet Union."

Many become familiar with *Hamlet* after seeing the work of Olivier, Kenneth Branagh, and John Gielgud. *Lear*, though, is seldom associated with a specific actor, not even Olivier, for the 1984 Granada Television production, which never received proper distribution.

Audiences struggle to fathom the spiritual complexities of Lear, a monarch in his early eighties, suffering at the hands of two elder daughters who are finally revealed as wicked beyond redemption. *Lear* is a drama about betrayal and reversals of fortune. The King, in the words of one daughter, not only suffers from "the infirmity of his age" but is one who "hath ever but slenderly known himself" [*I.i.292-93*]². Lear's fall to madness begins with self-delusion, and not until he is about to die does he recover his senses.

Public performances of the play are infrequent. This writer's entanglement in the web of *King Lear* occurred in a February 1974 Public Broadcasting System offering³ of the play, with James Earl Jones as Lear and Tom Aldredge as the Fool. In many *Lear* productions, the Fool brings a deeper understanding of the play.

¹ *Lear* DVD

² When the full Shakespeare theatrical text is used in this study, act, scene, and line numbers are noted and formatting is preserved. Dialogue from the film is taken from the English subtitles and has no act-scene-line designation. Boris Pasternak's punctuation of the subtitles is left intact.

³ PBS series Shakespeare in the Park

In Kozintsev's *Lear*, he appears childlike, troubled, wearing beggar's attire—oddly enough, a dog's hide turned inside out. The only trappings of clownery here are some bells tied on one leg that reveal his presence.

In Act I of the Shakespeare text, the Fool chides Lear for dividing his kingdom and calls him "a bitter fool":

LEAR

Dost thou call me fool, boy?

FOOL

All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.

KENT

This is not altogether fool, my lord. [*I.iv.141-44*]

Not altogether, to be sure, and with those words, the spotlight moves to the Fool, loyal, protective of the King but sometimes voicing his unspoken thoughts and making him more a part of Lear. In the dialogue above, "[the title] that thou wast born with" could come from the thoughts of the King himself. The Fool's function is choral, sometimes warning of dire consequences, but much of what he says would never occur to one who is barely more than a boy.

In the full text, the Fool's final verbal exchange with Lear, now gone mad, is in Act 3:

LEAR

Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains:
so, so, so. We'll go to supper i' he morning. So, so, so.

FOOL

And I'll go to bed at noon.

[*III.vi.81-3*]

But in Kozintsev's film, the Fool is seen again—the director keeps him near the King—and in the final scene he plays his flute, homemade, carved from a bone. On these notes, the film comes to a close.

This study began after a 2015 viewing of *Korol Lir*.⁴ The DVD includes a commentary by Peter Sellars, known for his collaboration with composer John Adams on the contemporary operas *Doctor Atomic*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, and *Nixon in China*. Two books written by Kozintsev contribute extensively to the study, his 1966 *Shakespeare*:

⁴ 2007 DVD Facets Video.

Time and Conscience and 1977 *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy - The Diary of a Film Director* (cited here as *Diary*). Both are exceptional English translations, with diary notes made during planning stages and filming of *Lear* and *Hamlet*. No commentary could even come close to explaining what was in Kozintsev's mind as he put together his films.

Here, one of his many précis on *Lear* and the Fool:

The end echoes the beginning: the King and his three daughters are carried through the ruins of the kingdom. The Fool who amused the King at the beginning—the boy in the dog's coat, put on inside out—turned out to be both the last man to stay by him and the only one to mourn him.

As to why the Fool does not vanish in what would be Act 3 of the film, Kozintsev says,

I couldn't bear to lose the Fool half-way through the play. Oleg Dal [plays the Fool] helped me to grow fonder of this character. A tortured boy, taken from among the servants, clever, talented—the voice of truth, the voice of the poor; art driven into a dog's kennel with a dog's collar round its neck. Let one of the soldiers carrying the bodies finally aim a kick at his neck with his boot, to get him out of the way! But his voice, the voice of the home-made pipe, begins and ends this story; the sad, human voice of art.⁵

Kozintsev tells “how I began as a boy: screens, puppets, red calico and tin foil, battered top hats, clowns’ noses, beards which hooked on, painted, green, red, agit-sketches on lorries, platforms made out of planks set up in town squares, on railway wagons, showbiz, shouting at the top of one’s voice. . . .

“This was my training; it taught me to be revolted by grandiloquence; I look back on it with nothing but happy memories.”⁶

⁵ *Diary* 238

⁶ *Ibid.* 101

PART I:

KING LEAR

CHAPTER ONE

‘MAKE IT NEW’

Korol Lir is an international treasure that some believe to be the greatest *Lear* ever filmed. One reason is simplicity. Another is that Grigori Kozintsev’s judgments as director are precisely aimed. Throughout, he follows Ezra Pound’s entreaty to “Make it new” so that decades after his *Lear* became a film, all 132 minutes still shine like new coinage.

The film is not minimalistic, as sometimes characterized,¹ not a sketch on a white canvas with black lines. Yet its forms are almost never massive. Exterior scenes with dirt and stone are intricate. Scenes of conflict, people in opposition to each other, are finespun.

Kozintsev’s choice in casting Lear was based on his own vision of what the King should be. The actor Yuri Yarvet is small in stature, beardless, large-eyed, with the massive hands of a peasant and white hair flying behind. Yarvet is Estonian, not Russian. When he arrived to work for Kozintsev, he spoke Estonian and only a bit of Russian.

In the Diary, Kozintsev writes: “I looked at Yarvet and recognized Lear. Yarvet looked like him.”² And that he does. It can be seen in a first viewing of *Korol Lir*.

As the two began to work together, Kozintsev says, “Yarvet and I had a complete compatibility of spirit. With every day I became more convinced of this. We loved the same qualities in Lear.”³

Because Yarvet’s Russian language skills were lacking, Kozintsev thought it best to have a Russian-Estonian translation written for him. The director says, “Yarvet went home to Tallin to learn this text. I had already had several meetings with him. My mind was at rest: Yarvet understood my every word—I would see this by the glint in his eyes

. . . . He said nothing for the time being; he was making notes in the margin of his script.”⁴

¹ Sellars commentary, 2007 DVD

² *Diary* 76

³ *Ibid.* 77

⁴ *Ibid.* 76

When he returned from Tallin, he “immediately presented me with an unexpected surprise: the Estonian text was ready but Yarvet did not want to speak it. . . . [H]e explained that technically speaking the layout of the dubbing script was exact, but that artistically, it was revolting and unpoetic. The very task would murder the poetry.”⁵

The director recalls Yarvet’s words: “He would find it impossible to speak such a text even though it was in his mother tongue. He would have to learn to speak Pasternak’s⁶ beautiful verse (even if with an accent, and stumbling).

“And so began the inhuman and agonizing task of overcoming alien consonants.”⁷

A rehearsal followed. As they were leaving, “Yarvet told me with embarrassment, without looking at me, that he would give all his energy to the task. He stumbled as he talked, making mistakes of pronunciation, but he talked in Russian. There was not one of my colleagues who would be rehearsing the play who would not have called me aside and said smiling happily, ‘We have a Lear.’ ”⁸

Yarvet did indeed master the Russian text and did it so well that the verse of Pasternak can be heard, even for those without command of the Russian language. When a word is heard—not necessarily recognized—the language’s musical qualities become apparent. The verse in Russian has a tempo and, as Kozintsev explains, the dialogue has “a natural prosaic quality, the even deliberately unpoetic quality of certain parts is all the voice of a great poet, and the rhythm of his breathing is always audible.”⁹

Silence itself can be an instrument, says Kozintsev, who had worked in silent film for a time. “In sound cinema, silence is very effective. We were trying to create a magnetic field of silence, an expanse of fear—and praying to God that no-one’s boots would squeak, or their breathing be audible.”¹⁰

“There was not a sound, only the oppressive silence of enormous buildings.”¹¹ Only a change in the expression of a courtier’s eyes: the moment was approaching, any time now . . . and the silence was broken by

⁵ Ibid. 77

⁶ Boris Pasternak, known for his novel *Doctor Zhivago*. He worked under Kozintsev on *Hamlet* and *Lear*.

⁷ Ibid. 77

⁸ *Diary* 77

⁹ Ibid. 42

¹⁰ Ibid. 118

¹¹ Lear’s castle and surrounding structures

a fanfare, signaling his entrance? No. By a drum roll? No. By a canon salute? No.”

The silence is broken by laughter, “a long way behind the door, but quite distinctly. The important old men (the same ancients with ossified faces) solemnly moved forward, approached the wrought iron doors and stood at either side. . . [T]he door creaked: in the far depths of the room two laughing figures were playing some sort of game, one was a boy-fool, the other (his back was turned) had white hair.”¹²

For the film, the full *Lear* text was trimmed by about an hour. Those who regard the text as sacred should remember from their Shakespeare studies that it was written to be performed, not read. The performance came first.

In Shakespeare’s time, the manuscripts themselves were not considered important and in fact were the property of the theatre troupe, headed by its leading actor Richard Burbage. When Shakespeare died in 1616, his plays and the two poems published during his lifetime were not even mentioned in his will.

He spent twenty years with the Burbage troupe, writing new plays and revising old ones. He shared in the profits of the troupe and invested in new facilities. The troupe worked year round, performing in early afternoon when there was light and rehearsing later, if need be, by candlelight.

Public performing required a patron; otherwise, the troupe could have been charged under vagabond statutes. Initially, the Earl of Leicester served as patron and later, the Lord Chamberlain.

Kozintsev tells of a trip to England where he was allowed to examine a first edition of the plays, now known as the 1623 Folio. He soon realized that the plays had been “preserved—not by patrons or scholars, but by his friends, his co-workers in the rugged world of the theatre. John Heminges and Henry Cordell collected the texts of thirty-six plays. On the title page, the two actors claimed that the book was published according to original manuscripts.”¹³

Philologists tend to disagree. “Some manuscripts were probably incomplete,” Kozintsev says, “and others dappled with the cuts and insertions usual in stage copies. Several plays had to be restored from individual scripts. Someone remembered; someone had prompted; ad libs were taken from the author’s own words. Thus, the first collection came to be. It was published in 1623, in folio.”¹⁴ So much for purity of text. It might only become pure when the author dies.

¹² *Diary* 119

¹³ *Time and Conscience* 4

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 4

Examination of the 1623 Folio led Kozintsev to another conclusion.

Perhaps, among other things, the price of a ticket was significant in itself. While the building constructed by Burbage was not particularly comfortable, he strove for moderately priced performances. Shakespeare wrote for various audiences, of course, but the ones who paid only a penny at the door were those who decided the fate of the play. Shakespeare stood right with them, face to face, on the stage where his fellows, the actors, were speaking the lines he wrote. These audiences surrounded Burbage's troupe on three sides; the players spoke directly to them. The strange conditions under which the performances took place have often been described: the whirls of tobacco smoke, the hawkers of both food and drink, the card games. It was quite possibly like this. But it is more probable that when Iago spoke to Othello of Desdemona's infidelity, the card playing and nibbling stopped.¹⁵

These were times of change, of upheaval, and Shakespeare had “travelled the savage world of his day. Hordes of vagabonds made their way along the heavily trafficked high road. Ploughmen, for example, were turned out of their fields so that arable land could be converted into pasture: wool was commanding a high price then.”¹⁶

And in the midst of this, the Tragedies took their form. “Here King Lear met his subjects, poor naked wretches. Stone towers stood sullen in heavy fog, while the witches prophesied the crown to Macbeth and blood to the people. From village to village, the death knell marked the carousals of the Black Death. Tired horses pulled heavy loads. . . .”

And the Histories were shaped: “People squabbled. Rumors of rebellion were rampant. A bloody comet shot past the earth. Conspirators surrounded the throne. The executioner’s axe ticked off the reigns.”¹⁷

Today’s travelers to Shakespeare country, Kozintsev says, might be unaware of this. “The kingdom of the glorious Queen Bess, restored for the tourist trade, is pleasant to view from a car. A tidy sixteenth century gladdens the eye, stimulates the appetite—it would be a crime to complain of Stratford restaurants. These clean little storybook pictures, however, vanish from memory when you but recall Shakespeare’s rough words.”¹⁸

Reality lurked there. “Instead of the peace of a road smoothed by steam rollers, you see an arduous one, dirty and pockmarked. You see beams swollen by dampness, ramshackle houses, crooked destinies. . . . Foul

¹⁵ *Time and Conscience* 14

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 12

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

places! Ulcers on the horses' backs; rotten peas and lentils. The fleas are oppressive. No chamber pots even; you have to urinate in the fireplace.”¹⁹

No wonder then that the Globe Theatre and others had to be a place of inspiration for patrons. The plays were escapist. “Burbage’s troupe did not skimp on costumes, and was not unacquainted with the devices of stage technique. It was not a question of meagerness of theatre equipment but one of poetic excellence.”²⁰

Stage directions in the Shakespeare texts are limited for a good reason: the troupe did not need them. Much of the time, directions are implicit in the dialogue. The actors, all experts in their field, knew the context, and if something unforeseen arose, they did what had always been done—they improvised. Mistakes were inevitable.

Fidelity to the spirit of the text was expected, but cutting for continuity and overall timing was often required. After-dark rehearsals were limited, little more than a run-through since the actors would have been at the point of exhaustion after a long afternoon performance.

Visualizing the troupe at work, the most daunting member of the cast surely must have been Richard Burbage himself as he played the title roles in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, and *King Lear*. Burbage and company likely made a change or two during performance, and if Shakespeare ever took exception, it is not recorded. The troupe got on well, always striving for the best performance. The Globe, after all, was a business venture and a successful one. To satisfy the audience, the ghost of Hamlet’s father had to be made formidable. King Lear had to go mad and, like Poor Tom, throw off his clothes, his human identity—his mask. And, a murder or two commanded attention; card playing probably stopped when a dagger was drawn. All of it made for good box office and filled seats.

Kozintsev says that Shakespeare always paid close attention to the spectators:

Shakespeare frequently gave voice to the thoughts of his audience. He sensed the transformations in sixteenth-century life, as did many of his contemporaries, but it was only he who could shape the general anxiety and rage into words. He was the poet of the penny-ticket holder, and his creative work was born not of social strife, but of the unremitting and unwearying work of a popular playwright and actor. He wrote quickly, without revision. Two thousand spectators filled the theatre; they were waiting for him. There is no reason to insinuate that the playwright did not value their applause. Gentlemen of learning were unable to persuade him to write in an elevated classic style. As a youth, he wrote two poems that

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Time and Conscience* 25

agreed with a Renaissance aesthetic and that opened the door to patrons of the arts. This kind of work was not continued. All the fury of the age could rage inside a clumsy tower without a roof, but it was impossible to express these tempests in imitation of Seneca. If words ran out, he made new ones; when grammar got in the way, he ignored it. His art, too, had no roof.²¹

When Kozintsev began studies at the Kiev School of Art, he was in his teens. In 1920 he moved on to St. Petersburg where he and colleagues Sergei Yutkevich, Leonid Trauberg, and Leonid Kryzhitsky established the Factory of the Eccentric Actor. The group, known by the Russian acronym FEKS, bravely proclaimed the sentiment of the young and the art community at large that the Bolsheviks had seized power from the people, to whom the revolution really belonged. The revolution, they said, should have been democratic.²²

In his commentary, opera director and librettist Peter Sellars²³ says that Kozintsev was “a member of the Soviet avant-garde in the most exciting period in history since the Renaissance when, truly, artists were creating a new society, a new measure of man, a new question of what humanity could do.”²⁴

The avant-garde movement tried to include art and design, music, film, theatre, writing, and architecture. It had appeared in Czarist Russia as early as 1850 and, surviving the Bolsheviks, lasted until the 1960s when interest in it faded. Key groups in art were Suprematism, Constructivism, Russian Futurism, Cubo-Futurism, and Neo-primitivism. Music composers included Sergei Prokofiev, Alexander Scriabin, and Dimitri Shostakovich, who would write the superb scores for Kozintsev’s *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Among filmmakers were Alexander Dovzhenko, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein,²⁵ who was his own artist and at the forefront of other movements.

The popular work of FEKS in the silent film cinema of the 1920s alerted the Soviet regime and the group found itself subject to scrutiny and censorship.

In 1929, Kozintsev and Trauberg co-directed *The Adventures of an Octoberite: The New Babylon*, an allegory of the 1871 insurrection of Paris against the French government. France had been defeated by Germany and Napoleon’s Second Empire had collapsed. The story of the Paris Commune

²¹ *Time and Conscience* 15

²² Peter Sellars commentary

²³ Sellars is known for the operas *Nixon in China* and *Doctor Atomic*.

²⁴ Sellars commentary

²⁵ *Ibid.*

is well known to today's audiences owing to the popularity of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*; people of all ages know the name Jean Valjean.

*The New Babylon*²⁶ fails as a film. It tells no real story but is only a series of characterizations strung like beads. Soviet censorship has been blamed for the film's demise, but the restored version with all scenes intact reveals it to be a disaster from the first frames. It is not even well-intentioned. Decadence is given emphasis, and the filmmakers seemed to have reveled in it. Such excess alone would have resulted in these scenes being blue-penciled by the Soviet regime.

Dimitri Shostakovich's score—his first ever for film—was thrown out. The film's loss of continuity caused by the cuts would have rendered the score unusable, but it was ruined from the first by Shostakovich's heavy use of atonality. Shostakovich tried to echo the work of Arnold Schoenberg, a powerful but highly controversial influence in music at the time. Atonality was viewed as decadent, not only by the Soviets but other regimes as well, including the Nazis. In the restoration of *New Babylon*, atonality is a distraction; one after another, the music passages call attention to themselves.

New Babylon suffers from another directorial misjudgment. It is understandable how the young Kozintsev and Trauberg would be in awe of Sergei Eisenstein. They certainly knew his 1925 *Battleship Potemkin*.²⁷ Throughout *New Babylon*, Eisenstein's techniques are seen but are badly executed. For example, montage²⁸ is repetitive, with far too many duplicate shots of the Paris Bourgeoisie carrying out acts of self-indulgence. These episodes quickly become boring and are sometimes ludicrous.

New Babylon imitates the avant-garde at a time when so-called Soviet Realism called for abandoning the avant-garde practices of the 1920s. Unfortunately, *New Babylon* flaunts them.

In defense of *New Babylon*, credit should be given certain actors, above all Yelena Kuzmina²⁹ as a shop assistant who joins the Communards of the movement. A handful of other actors with smaller parts also stand out. But this is the difference: in *Potemkin*, no single actor is at center stage for long. One reason for this is that Eisenstein doggedly integrated every element of the story he was trying to tell and would do so at the expense of individual performance. In Eisenstein, the star is the story itself. *Potemkin*

²⁶ Available on YouTube in a restored version (2004) running about 90 minutes

²⁷ Also available on YouTube

²⁸ Kozintsev uses montage to advantage throughout *Lear*.

²⁹ Kuzmina's work was recognized, and she remained a luminary in Soviet film until her death in 1979.

has been branded as propaganda, but it is much more: from beginning to end it keeps human struggle and martyrs in the center of its lens.

Seldom can *Potemkin* be considered subtle, except when compared to *New Babylon*. A good example is how *Potemkin* presents its villains, first in the person of the oppressive officers on board the battleship and then the Czar's soldiers and Cossacks on the Odessa Steps: they are all in their proper places, presumably following orders. On the other hand, the villains of *New Babylon* might as well be dancing on the rooftops of 1871 Paris.

Stalin came to power around 1922, but there is no evidence that he micromanaged Soviet culture in those early years. It was the Soviet regime itself that viewed the Russian avant-garde as undermining the state-sponsored style that glorified communist values with realistic imagery. In all this, there was no place for the abstract, leading to difficult years for Kozintsev and his colleagues.³⁰

Kozintsev appears to have been more flexible than his contemporaries. Early on, he turned to teaching, and later at the Soviet Film Institute, he conducted a master class for filmmakers. This was from 1944 to 1964, and he devoted his efforts to a similar class at Lenfilm Studios from 1964 to 1971. In the 21st Century, Kinostudiya Lenfilm is still a training center and second largest production branch of the Soviet film industry (after Mosfilm), and in 2007 adopted Apple computers and programs for editing and special effects.³¹

During World War II, Kozintsev had turned away from avant-garde in his stage adaptations of *Hamlet* and *Lear*. The enormity of these works would have outweighed his commitment to the FEK activities of years gone by. He turned to Boris Pasternak to write the Russian translation for the plays and to Dmitri Shostakovich for the music score.

Pasternak, Kozintsev said, “considered the merit of poetry was that there was more left unsaid than there was said.”³²

Sellars³³ calls Pasternak “one of the most creative of the poets in the avant garde period of the teens, the symbolist period, the period of where, again, Russia was in the vanguard of the world avant garde. Pasternak didn’t join the Bolsheviks—the official Soviet avant garde. He wrote material that was more personal [and not] on behalf of the revolution.”

Stalin denounced Pasternak’s work, and the writer’s reaction Sellars addresses in a telling anecdote: “Pasternak, whose work could not be published [by then], had this notion that some artists have, that if only he

³⁰ Sellars commentary

³¹ Wikiwand Lenfilm online (www.wikiwand.com/en/Lenfilm)

³² *Diary* 19

³³ Sellars commentary

could have ten minutes of Stalin’s time, Stalin would realize how wrong he was.” Pasternak felt strongly that he should point out the error of the gulags and exterminations, believing that “‘as an artist, I can speak to him—to his heart.’ And in fact, Pasternak had a famous phone call with Stalin and, sadly, he was unable to change the course of world history.”³⁴

Kozintsev’s success and recognition for his film of *Hamlet* gave him sufficient stature to appoint Pasternak for *Lear* without objection from the regime.

In a letter to Kozintsev, Pasternak set down his methodology:

[F]or the objective, realistically performed Shakespeare play on stage you need a completely different sort of understanding, a different viewpoint and a different degree of intelligibility. Here the actors are not addressing me, but are throwing sentences out to each other. It means little if I understand them; I must be convinced by the obvious visual evidence that they understand each other to the last word.

I always considered that it was essential for me to capture this lightness, smoothness and fluency of the text; and I strived to achieve a visual comprehensibility which was neither literal, nor off the point, but directly related to the area of the stage. And I was always upset and annoyed when producers diminished, suppressed and broke up this essential fluency and involuntary quality of the language, which my translations have by no means captured, for the sake of unrelated and ephemeral ideas, for the sake of the acceptability of these works within the changing concepts of contemporary society.³⁵

Pasternak summarizes his goals:

Obvious visual evidence; action within a real area, not within a literary and confined text; fluency and smoothness—this is what I want to achieve on the screen.³⁶

Kozintsev’s selection of Shostakovich, who had suffered under Stalin, was based on his work. In a time of bombastic, patriotic music, Sellars explains, “Shostakovich was writing at the same time, string quartets, sonatas for twos and threes that are the most private, unbearable music of secret hell, and the level of depression and death of the soul certainly had never been touched in the history of music. . . .”

Shostakovich’s Symphonies 13, 14 and 15, Sellars describes as “meditations on death, meditations on genocide, a bleak orchestral sound

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *Diary* 51-2

³⁶ Ibid. 52

stage. And by Symphony Number 15, most of the orchestra does not play. You have a stage of 100 people sitting silently, listening to one cello play. And then, a fourth. And then, three cellos.”³⁷

Sellars poses the question, “[H]ow do you set Shakespeare to music? Shakespeare is music, Shakespeare has musical structure. Shostakovich chose one or two instruments, and then this dark, haunting, strange percussion, a wail of a few and then emptiness. And that becomes the score for *King Lear*.³⁸”

In the Diary, Kozintsev explains where his methodology led him: “Working on a Shakespearean tragedy reminds one of archeology; the search is always going deeper, beneath the limits of the top layers; the whole is usually reconstructed from fragments. But the strange thing is that the deeper you dig, the more contemporary everything that comes to the surface seems as it reveals its significance.”³⁹

Sellars points out that initially “*King Lear* was a play that was not permitted on the Soviet stage.” Shakespeare, he says, “had a political, analytical view that dissected the power of this world—the power structures of this world.”⁴⁰

He adds, “What’s amazing is when an author who has been dead for 400 years is still on the censorship list, where the material in those plays is still considered too radioactive to touch.” Yet, he says, Shakespeare stands alone “for being beyond reproach and at the same time politically dangerous.”⁴¹

Shakespeare, especially in Stalin’s time, could have been viewed as tacit condemnation of Soviet authority merely by its depictions of corruption in high places—Hamlet’s uncle, Richard III, Gloucester’s bastard son Edmund and a few others. Only over Stalin’s dead body would Shakespeare be performed. And so it was: 10 years after Stalin’s death in 1953 permission was granted to film Kozintsev’s *Hamlet*.

Sellars and others contend that Cold War austerity in the Soviet Union led to a distinctive realism in Soviet film of the time.⁴² Even so, it should be remembered that monochrome U.S. television of the 1950s and early 60s, live productions in particular, had a similar look: the darkened background used in live productions of Playhouse 90, the eminent CBS

³⁷ Sellars commentary

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *Diary* 49

⁴⁰ Sellars commentary

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

anthology drama series that ran from 1956 to 1960. The simple sets often used were striking.

Background suppression can be done with lighting, with a strong Fresnel-lens keylight and backlight on the subject and with a low level of filler light. The objective is to keep light from reaching the background, ideally a seamless cyclorama. First used on the German stage in the 1800s, the cyclorama became a staple of the television studio as well as theatre.⁴³

“In the time of FEKS,” Kozintsev writes, “we turned cinema into a pantechnicon: both giants and dwarfs wandered about our screen; there were faces that one would only dream of while delirious. Our characters would probably have won a competition against [Federico] Fellini’s monsters from *Satyricon*.⁴⁴

In the fifth chapter of the Diary, he explains crucial choices: “I wanted to bring *Lear* as close as possible to life. This is why I was not interested in the unusual or the beautiful I did not want to shoot the film in colour for this very reason. I do not know what colour grief is, or what shades suffering has. I wanted to trust Shakespeare and the audience: it is shameful to sugar *Lear* with beautiful effects.”

If Kozintsev’s *Lear* were filmed in colour, the prevailing shades would be the grey of the skies and the browns of buildings and roads; colour would be relegated to faces and eyes.

And there is the issue of blood, the director’s nightmare:

On colour film blood does not look like real blood; it reminds one of ketchup. And now they have added kitsch to the ketchup: knights in full armour trip each other up with their heels, butt each other with their shields, kick each other’s armour with their feet; they are of course [in] furious fights. But when one hefty fellow all arrayed in armour turns down another thug’s visor and the other gives him an ‘oecumenical pasting’ with his iron sleeve, it is evident that the armour is all show: it is difficult to walk even a few steps in real armour, so therefore they are idiots fooling around on the screen; they smear the tin plate with ketchup.⁴⁵

Kozintsev and other Soviet filmmakers were not alone in their lack of enthusiasm for colour. Innovative directors of the era, even a handful in America, favored black-and-white. But the reality is, monochrome is inadequate for some subject matter. The lowly Spaghetti Western, for example, would have little impact without colour. At the high end of the spectrum, Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky’s now-classic *Solaris*, 1972,

⁴³ Phyllis Hartnoll, ed. (1972). *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre* 126

⁴⁴ Diary 200

⁴⁵ Diary 207-8

was shot in colour and benefitted from it. (Producing *Solaris* was likely a Soviet reaction to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, released four years earlier.) Audiences prefer colour, and nowadays a feature film shot in black-and-white will have a smaller audience.

Directors in years past alternated between colour and black-and-white. Fellini did not shoot in colour until his ninth film, *Juliet of the Spirits* in 1965; and Ingmar Bergman, not until his sixteenth film, *Smiles of a Summer Night* in 1955.⁴⁶ Many pictures by these visionaries, along with several by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, have yet to show their age, whether in colour or not⁴⁷ (Kurosawa's *Rashomon* or *Throne of Blood* in colour are unimaginable).

In the Diary, Kozintsev specifies that for *Lear* "Only real materials should be used: wood, wool, iron, leather, fur."⁴⁸ Even so, he did film *Lear* with an anamorphic lens—a format known as CinemaScope.⁴⁹

Cash was short in the Soviet Union during these years, but Kozintsev spent money all the same—on the horses he wanted for the film and on transportation and lodging for his cast and crew to distant locations.

A key site for the opening scenes of *Lear* was the town of Narva, on the Estonian border. Narva was divided by a river, and he describes it in the Diary: "[T]he ruins of a castle of the Livonian Order are on the left bank, and a fifteenth-century Russian fortress on the right. This was our new location . . . [T]he cracks in the ancient walls reminded one of the wrinkles on Lear's face."⁵⁰

He and his crew "felt at home here. Every corner was adapted to the purposes of the shooting, the inner courtyards were turned into Goneril's castle and Gloucester's house⁵¹ with the help of a few additional constructions."

As to the horses he preferred, "The stables were occupied by the short-legged, stock Taurian horses specially brought for the film; I had turned down the elegant thoroughbred steeplechasers."⁵²

Winter arrived, and he and the crew settled in. "The place was excellent: the simplicity of line and form, the absence of any architectural style—all this matched the outward appearance of the people and their

⁴⁶ Internet Movie Database online

⁴⁷ Soundtrack quality, primarily by its background noise, reveals age.

⁴⁸ *Diary* 36-37

⁴⁹ Widescreen: a ratio of 1 by 2.66 instead of the Academy ratio of 1 by 1.37 (3 by 4)

⁵⁰ *Diary* 205

⁵¹ Kozintsev saw Gloucester's abode as a dacha rather than a castle.

⁵² *Diary* 205-6

faces. There was only one factor by which we could date the building—the year when it was destroyed. A time of murder and destruction—that meant that it was suitable for this tragedy.”

Selecting what would be Lear’s castle had vexed Kozintsev from the beginning. “The long-shot of the castle gave us the most trouble. From far away the fortress looked imposing but it did not look like Lear’s castle. I do not think such a castle exists anywhere: the work itself did not allow the possibility of defining its shape. Any real building would have looked ‘unsuitable’.”⁵³

So he fine-tuned his vision of the castle. “I wanted to show not the castle but a hazy impression of it: this is how it would have looked to people approaching it from afar, hoping to find out how their fate had been decided. We had not so much to film the real object (the fortress) as to transform it (and fundamentally) by means of photography.”⁵⁴

To do this, the obstacles themselves turned out to serve him well. “We chose weather in which cameramen are usually given the day off: the sun would come out only for a moment, the light was constantly changing—conditions which are generally unfavourable for shooting. But all the same Gristus [cinematographer Yonus Gristus] caught the precious few seconds; the crowd of people gathered together on a hill were covered in mist and far away where everyone was gazing, flickering spots of light filtered through onto the fortress walls.”⁵⁵

One of Kozintsev’s inspirations had long been the British director Peter Brook, whom he finally met in 1967. Kozintsev writes, “I saw Brook’s production of *King Lear* for the National Theatre during the company’s tour of Russia. The bareness of the evenly lit stage, plain sackcloth, a few pieces of iron.” Many of the costumes were leather, “reminding one of decayed sheepskins dug up by archaeologists from an ancient burial ground.” Brook’s stage elements “enclosed the action of the tragedy in a cold and timeless emptiness. It was as if all the clocks in the world had stopped.”⁵⁶

Kozintsev observed, “What interested Brook most of all was the delocalization of space. He wanted to film [his] *Lear* without any traces of history showing on the screen.”⁵⁷

Early on, probably in his silent film work, Kozintsev developed a bond with the camera. Several times, he speaks of the proscenium and the mask

⁵³ Ibid. 206

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 206-7

⁵⁶ *Diary* 22-23

⁵⁷ Ibid. 25

in theatre. But, he says, “[T]here is no proscenium in the cinema and the mask would look theatrical to the screen. Then one must say it another way: Lear—King, father, old man, tyrant, wise man, martyr, Shakespeare himself (how many more masks are there in the role?) enters facing the camera and walks forward into a close-up; there must be no reflection of footlights on his face.”

The result he sought was simple: “No separating line between Shakespeare’s people and the people in the audience; between the grief on the screen and the memory of grief in real life.”⁵⁸

Kozintsev’s camera is not Sergei Eisenstein’s camera. The Eisenstein lens looks down from on high, from a crane dolly or even from atop a fortress; Kozintsev’s lens often looks up, from below the level of the stage. He tracks the subject, moving parallel to it. Takes, the individual shots that make up a scene, tend to be prolonged in Kozintsev’s work, sometimes tracking a subject across a lengthy span to the point where resolution occurs. Or, as seen in the opening of *Lear*, the view might move to a door and hold the image until the door finally opens and the subject emerges in close-up, filling the frame.

Eisenstein, whose work is often incorrectly viewed as documentary, would handle this with a series of scenes, the montage. In *Battleship Potemkin*, the technique enhances the narrative; numerous shots of the same subject from different angles become an articulate statement.⁵⁹

Eisenstein’s final but unfinished film before he died in 1948 was *Ivan the Terrible*. Kozintsev says, “In *Ivan the Terrible* Eisenstein used the force of plastic art to turn theatrical and even operatic qualities into tragedy. The face of the Tsar lingers long in the memory: it was not for nothing that Eisenstein thought out long beforehand and made a quantity of sketches of every aspect of the Tsar’s figure....”

The outcome is, Kozintsev says, “His sketches came to life on the screen. . .⁶⁰ The screen shook from top to bottom with Eisenstein’s ideas—which have now become world standards.”⁶¹

For *Ivan* and other projects, Eisenstein traveled to locations that required extensive organization. His films could be elaborate. “Eisenstein’s last films,” Sellars argues, “are still the films of a great propagandist—what Andrei Tarkovsky would always reproach Eisenstein for, that his films were finally too brittle.”

⁵⁸ Ibid. 99

⁵⁹ *Potemkin* clips are on YouTube, including the infamous scene of the baby carriage on the Odessa Steps.

⁶⁰ *Diary* 29-30

⁶¹ Ibid. 107

Sellars adds, “All of the celebrated gift for metaphor was somehow in the hands of a Soviet Madison Avenue advertising artist, that Eisenstein could not stop trying to sell you something ideologically. What’s so moving is to see this film language, perfected by Eisenstein, deepened to a level by Kozintsev.”⁶²

Politics aside, a careful look at *Potemkin* reveals the care Eisenstein took with characterization, particularly that of a citizenry of all status levels who were rightfully appalled at what authorities were doing to demonstrators. The Czar’s sanction of these actions was assumed. So is the Church’s: one scene has an old priest on the side of oppressors and trying to use his standing crucifix as a weapon—an axe. The revolt, which led to the October Revolution of 1917, began out of sympathy over the wretched living conditions of the Russian Navy, particularly, maggot-ridden meat provided for meals. In addition, the citizenry objected to Russia’s unpopular war with Japan.

Kozintsev acknowledges Eisenstein’s effect on his own work, one example of which can be seen in camera placement for the storm scenes of *Lear*. But Kozintsev went further and made the storm a character, an actor playing opposite Lear, the Fool, and Kent.

The overall look of *Lear* appears entirely appropriate for the time depicted, an unspecified period occurring after the Romans marched out of Britain. Kozintsev makes skillful use of exteriors, where much of *Lear* takes place. When looking for locations, he mentions that “Kind and welcoming English people took me to Lear’s ‘places.’ Newcastle-upon-Tyne, a ninth-century cathedral, castles, Anglo-Saxon monuments. . . . Only not these; the action could not take place here.”⁶³

One reason is that these edifices would have been recognizable, which was unacceptable because *Lear*, he believed, must function outside of time.

He explains further:

I have never been convinced by the idea of filming Shakespeare in the actual settings of the plays, neither by Orson Welles’ Venice nor Franco Zeffirelli’s Verona; historical naturalism is alien to the poetry of *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*. I could not have filmed *Hamlet* in the real Castle of Elsinore: it bears no resemblance at all to Claudius’ kingdom. It is no accident that the playwright had never visited these places: he had only the most approximate conception of them.⁶⁴

⁶² Sellars commentary

⁶³ *Diary* 21

⁶⁴ *Diary* 80

As to the paradox and reality of time, Kozintsev says, “The boundaries of time are particularly vague in Shakespeare’s plays, the action of which takes place supposedly in historical times. [In *Lear*] it was a time they swore by Apollo and Juno, christened their children, and had the rank of captain in the army. Apart from this, the author considered that the action took place in pre-history.”⁶⁵

Years before the camera rolled, long before he had faces, scenery or music, Kozintsev wrote down a précis of *Lear*:

There are no more notions about the sanctity of kingly power; there is no royal mediator between heaven and earth. The heiresses to the throne mock the very idea of the intrinsic worth of the King’s person. Deprived of his troops, the King is only a senile old man with idiotic whims. Only military force or wealth possess any measure of sanctity.

The foundation of the family is overthrown. In the night, the daughters cast the old man out of their castles into the storm; in the downpour, he goes into fields where there is not a shrub for shelter. A son condemns his father to death. Brother is ready to execute brother. Sisters despise each other, and finally one kills another. The younger son rises against the elder. Kin kills kin. Nothing unites people anymore, nothing—not family, not creed, not country. This is the realm of Dame Avarice.

Like a titanic cave-in, there begins in *King Lear* an uncontrollable avalanche of the fragments of structures, attitudes, ties, all intermingled in frenzied movement. The social organization crashes. Ugly formless slivers are all that is left of what was once whole and stable. The government disintegrates; revolts flare up; foreign troops burst into a country mutilated by discord. Smoke from the conflagration creeps over the ravaged earth.

A bloody dawn casts its light on migrating crowds of beggars, on trees weighed down with the bodies of the hanged. The stumps of human bodies putrefy on the wheel on which their owners had been broken. Poisonous fumes rise over the earth and gather into thunderclouds. A storm rumbles over the world.

The diminutive figure of the exiled King summons all the forces of his little human world to argue with the violence of the forces of destruction which have just broken free.

Trial by love has become trial by iron and blood.⁶⁶

As stated earlier, the film begins and ends to the forlorn notes of a flute. Titles appear on a burlap background, “some old sack which was falling to pieces,” Kozintsev says, “or a remnant from one of the crowd costumes. And I wrote on it in rough letters, without a trace of style, the

⁶⁵ Ibid. 1

⁶⁶ *Time and Conscience* 68