

RADICAL *LEAR* REVISITED: THE TRAGIC GENRE IN  
KUROSAWA'S *RAN* AND KOZINTSEV'S *KING LEAR*

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**ABSTRACT:** The present article aims at analyzing Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* and Grigori Kozintsev's *King Lear*, taking into account the subversive potential of the tragic genre as discussed in Jonathan Dollimore's classic study *Radical Tragedy*. To pursue with the investigation, we analyze here, in both films, the deaths of Lear and Cordelia (Hidetora and Saburo, respectively, in Kurosawa's *Ran*) and the presence of the Fool. It is possible to conclude that, in the moments we analyzed in both films, the subversive potential of tragedy is explored, going beyond more traditional interpretations of the play text, showing Lear's and Cordelia's death not as moments of redemption, but rather as a continuation of an oppressive social order.

**KEYWORDS:** Shakespeare. *King Lear*. Tragedy. Kurosawa. Kozintsev.

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## REVISITANDO *LEAR* RADICAL: O GÊNERO TRÁGICO EM *RAN* DE KUROSAWA E *REI LEAR* DE GRIGORI KOTZINTSEV

RESUMO: O presente artigo se propõe a analisar os filmes *Ran*, de Akira Kurosawa, e *Rei Lear*, de Grigori Kozintsev, levando em consideração o potencial subversivo do gênero trágico como discutido por Jonathan Dollimore em seu estudo clássico *Radical Tragedy*. A fim de conduzir a investigação, analisamos, em ambos os filmes, as mortes de Lear e de Cordélia (Hidetora e Saburo, respectivamente, em *Ran* de Kurosawa) e presença do Bobo. É possível concluir que, nos momentos analisados em ambos os filmes, o potencial subversivo do gênero trágico é explorado, indo além de interpretações mais tradicionais do texto da peça, mostrando as mortes de Lear e Cordélia não como um momento de redenção, mas como uma continuação de uma ordem social opressora.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Shakespeare. *Rei Lear*. Tragédia. Kurosawa. Kozintsev.

### INTRODUCTION

Terry Eagleton, in the foreword to Jonathan Dollimore's classic *Radical Tragedy*, writes that tragedy is often thought of as "the most blue-blooded of literary forms" (2004, p. x). In tragedy we see represented the death of kings and of the aristocracy, not of the common people. With his usual acumen, Eagleton remarks that "radical tragedy" is almost an oxymoron, one would commonly think. However, Dollimore is able to read tragedy as a more subversive genre than usually thought of. Even though tragedy is often considered a reactionary genre, the author considers its subversive possibilities. What has made tragedy so reactionary, then, are perhaps Christian and humanist readings.

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Francis Barker presents a different view in his essay “A Wilderness of Tigers”. When reading *Titus Andronicus* in the light of Walter Benjamin’s theories on history, Barker sees the spectacular violence of tragedy as a way of shifting focus from the actual violence taking place in Elizabethan England, that is, the systematic persecution of common citizens by the State legal system. Famously, what Barker saw in *Titus Andronicus*, as opposed to what most critics see in this gruesome play, is the “occlusion of violence” (1993, p. 205). In the action, the arbitrary hanging of a messenger goes unnoticed amidst the ritualized killings of the aristocrats. The death of the messenger, one of the typical peasant figures in Shakespeare’s plays, seems to be a trace of a history of violence that, perhaps unintentionally, the play effaces, according to Barker,

*King Lear* is one of Shakespeare’s tragedies discussed in Dollimore’s book, possibly due to its focus on the issue of inheritance and its recurrent Christian and humanist readings. Both of these readings emphasize the redemptive qualities of the tragedy, but from different perspectives. Dollimore, however, presents his own reading — he calls it’s a “materialist reading” — focusing not on a supposed transcendence, but on how the material reality of the kingdom shapes the characters’ actions (2004, p. 196).

However relevant the discussions raised by Dollimore and Barker are, they deal exclusively with the playtext. What they do not seem to take into account is that Shakespeare’s text was written to be performed, and has been performed and adapted since then. Thus, in this paper we want to discuss political arguments, but focusing on two realizations of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in the cinema: Kurosawa’s masterful adaptation to feudal Japan, *Ran* (1985), and Kozintsev’s bleak *King Lear* (1971).

In our view, both films contribute to enrich the possibilities of tragedy, being more complex than a simple dichotomy between conservatism and subversion. *Ran* is colorful but highly pessimistic;

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mankind is unable to reach redemption, be it by means of God, humanity itself or social justice. In *Ran*, God does not seem to exist; and even if He does, however, He is either a sadist or passive towards humans' destructive behavior. Kozintsev's *Lear* goes beyond the dichotomy between the play's redemptive and materialist readings. For Jack Jorgens, Kozintsev's film is, at the same time, Christian and Marxist (1977, p. 237). Thus, we will analyze recurrent elements in both films' *mise-en-scène* and, more specifically, the deaths of Lear and Cordelia (Lord Hidetora and Lord Saburo in Kurosawa's film, respectively).

#### KOZINTSEV'S SOVIET SHAKESPEARE AND *KING LEAR*

Mark Sokolyanski, in his essay on Grigori Kozintsev's Shakespeare films, highlights the role of the dialogue between the arts in Kozintsev's success as an interpreter of Shakespeare in Russia. "Kozintsev's road to his two Shakespeare films", he writes, "was long and not very easy. It passed through three channels", namely theater, criticism, and, finally and most remarkably, cinema" (2007, p. 203-4). Kozintsev produced, for the Russian stage, *King Lear* (1941), *Othello* (1943), and, remarkably in the post-Stalin years, in 1954, *Hamlet* (p. 203). Similarly to Jan Kott's classic piece of criticism, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Kozintsev's criticism focused on the present day relevance of Shakespeare's drama. His critical work was translated into English as "*Shakespeare, Time and Conscience*, [. . .] presumably chosen to avoid confusion with Jan Kott's recently-published *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*" (2007, p. 203-4). Besides adapting *Hamlet* and *King Lear* to the cinema, the Russian director planned to adapt *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest*, and *As You Like It*, but unfortunately passed away in 1973. His two films, however, were

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enough to guarantee “a place of honour in the history of cinematographic Shakespeare” (Sokolyanski, 2007, p. 214).

The seven years that separate Kozintsev’s *Hamlet* and his *King Lear* brought significant contextual changes, as Sokolyanski points out. *Hamlet* was produced during the “Thaw” period, a term “commonly [. . . ] used to define the post-Stalin decade”, which saw the rise of an effervescent cultural life in the Soviet Union (2007, p. 204). *King Lear*, on the other hand, saw the “toughening of Soviet foreign and internal policy, as well as an aggravation of East-West antagonism”, making “the traditional, somewhat romantic approach to Shakespeare impossible” (2007, p. 208). Hence, *King Lear* is darker than *Hamlet* and more discrete visually. Kozintsev’s conception of the play attempts to embrace its complexity on several levels. For him, as stated in an interview, *King Lear* is about

personality and history [...] And further, I could go on all night listing various themes: personality and power, society and personality, old age and youth, the fate of a clan and of one person, the fate of a group of people, and the fate of human thought too. (KOZINTSEV qtd. in SOKOLYANSKI, 2007, p. 208-9)

Visually, what seems most striking in Kozintsev’s film is the constant presence of “the wretches”. It is as if Kozintsev foregrounds Lear’s speech about the “poor naked wretches” and populates his film with them. If tragedy, as argued by Francis Barker, occludes State oppression by spectacularizing aristocratic violence and treating the violence suffered by the oppressed as negligible, thus being conformist with the dominant ideology, Kozintsev’s *Lear* seems to do the opposite. From the opening shot the audience is reminded of the poor subjects of Lear’s rule — those Lear only remembers when he finds himself in the same situation of poverty and neglect. As Jack Jordens puts it, “Kozintsev shows us a wasteland peopled, masses of subjects who have suffered from Lear’s tyranny, blindness, and neglect, who after

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his rash, fatal act are ravaged by the civil war and must rebuild when it is over” (1977, p. 238). Domestic animals are also present in several scenes as part of the background, almost as a reminder of the beastly value of human life in the play.

The film opens with a powerful and telling interpolation: a procession of the common people, beginning with a low-angle shot of their worn-out, ragged shoes (Fig.1).



Fig. 1 – The wretches worn-out, ragged shoes.

As the camera moves upwards, it is possible to see a cart precariously moving, carrying a sleeping boy. Long shots reveal the magnitude of this mob, and a stark cut juxtaposes it to the horsemen, symbolizing kingly authority and truculence. The space each group occupies is radically different. The mob is clearly alienated from the state matters that are discussed afterwards, namely the question of inheritance.

We would also like to point out the acting of Lear and the Fool in Kozintsev’s adaptation. Sokolyanski calls attention to the “majestic manners and servile weakness” of the Estonian actor Yuri Yarvet as Lear, as well as his “gentle humanness [ . . . ] before death” (2007, p. 210). Yarvet thus seems appropriate both for the royal as well as for the madness scenes. The fool, Sokolyanski recalls, “is quite unlike

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most Fools in stage and film versions of the play”, or, as Kozintsev himself calls him, “a boy from Auschwitz” (qtd. in SOKOLYANSKI, 2007, p. 210). In line with the film’s dark tone, this Fool rarely if ever produces laughter (p. 210).

#### THE WARRIOR’S SHAKESPEARE: KUROSAWA’S *RAN*

The title *Ran* could be translated into English as “chaos”. In Kurosawa’s *Ran*, chaos has never been so colorful. His film, loosely based on Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and also drawing on a Japanese tale of a lord who had three sons, opens with a hunting scene, set in a green field in a sunny day, with the lords wearing red, yellow, and blue kimonos (Fig. 2). In spite of the lively *mise-en-scène*, his film is informed by sheer pessimism. In Kurosawa’s words, “[i]f you look at the situation of the world around you, I think it’s impossible in this day and age to be optimistic”. He goes on: “All the technological progress of these last years has only taught human beings how to kill more of each other faster. It’s very difficult for me to retain a sanguine outlook on life under such circumstances” (qtd. in PRINCE, 1995, p. 284).

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Fig. 2 – The lords wearing red, yellow, and blue kimonos.

Lord Hidetora, Kurosawa's *Lear*, epitomizes this dark view of humanity. As stated by Stephen Prince in his comprehensive study on Kurosawa's work, *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*, Hidetora, indeed, "is condemned throughout the film as a bloodthirsty monster, and, in this respect, is quite different from Shakespeare's *Lear*, who at his worst was simply an old fool, a man 'more sinned against than sinning'. Hidetora, by contrast, is continually haunted by his own acts of violence that rise up about him like phantoms" (1995, p. 286). But humanity seems to be doomed not simply due to their choice to act wickedly, but also due to the nature of the world itself and to mankind's inability to escape its destiny. Kurosawa submits that "some of the essential scenes of this film are based on my wondering how God and Buddha, if they actually exist, perceive this human life, this mankind stuck in the same absurd behavior patterns" (KUROSAWA qtd. in PRINCE, 1995, p. 284-5).

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## CORDELIA AND SABURO ARE DEAD: SCENE ANALYSIS

*King Lear* is a story of great suffering and redemption. It shows a movement from ignorance to self-knowledge, from callousness to pity. However dark *King Lear* may be, there is a comfort in Lear's and Cordelia's deaths, for they are reunited close to that final moment. Kozintsev's film in a sense takes that away; it strips us from whatever redemption can come from tragedy. Jack J. Jorgens writes that Kozintsev's film ends with redemption and social renewal (1977, p. 237). But does it? Redemption may be achieved by Lear, but, as we shall argue, Kozintsev's film does not offer social renewal, but rather indicates that a dismal future lies ahead in the kingdom.

The scene begins with Lear's cry, and the camera cuts to a low angle long shot revealing Cordelia hanged and Lear screaming alone in despair. Cordelia is a white figure, an angel hanged on the rocks by the sea (Fig. 3), as revealed by the medium shot that follows. Lear delivers his final speech to a multitude of soldiers: the camera films his back slightly from above, while the soldiers completely occupy the rest of the shot. Jüri Järvet displays the aforementioned senile fragility at its highest in this scene, as Lear, himself nearly dead, pathetically tries to come to terms with Cordelia's death. The king dies looking at the place where Cordelia was hanged, now only the noose and the rock with the sea in the background, and a seagull is seen flying over the waters. The images produced at this point exhibit great suffering, but are certainly poetic. We would like to focus, however, on what follows Lear's and Cordelia's death.

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Fig. 3 – Cordelia, an angel hanged on the rocks by the sea.

The way their corpses are handled is strikingly cold. No funeral rites are seen in the film. The soldiers carry their bodies away on stretchers and no one weeps for them. The camera descends from a low angle showing their bodies being taken off-screen, with the common people in the background, struggling in vain to rebuild what is left of the kingdom after the civil war. Remarkably, since in Shakespeare's *King Lear* the fool vanishes halfway through the action, here, the camera then reaches a lower angle and reveals the fool sitting on the ground, the only one who seems to be moved by Lear's and Cordelia's deaths. The soldiers carrying the bodies pass him by, but not without kicking him. A mother walks around with her child amidst the ruins as the fool recomposes himself after the kick and begins playing a haunting, sad tune on his flute. The film ends with several shots of the workers reconstructing what has been destroyed, but for what purpose? Is it possible to have social renewal if the Fool is arbitrarily kicked and the poor are forced to work endlessly to repair the damage caused by a quarrel with which they had nothing to do? If, as shown in the beginning of the film, the people have no place in the affairs of State, why should they have to work now to fix it? That is the true tragedy of Kozintsev's *King Lear*.

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In Kurosawa, Lord Saburo's death takes place onscreen. Saburo, Hidetora (Lear in Kurosawa's film), the Fool and the soldiers ride through a barren field in a long shot. The camera cuts to a medium shot framing Lord Hidetora, Saburo and his horse and two soldiers — one of them accompanied by the Fool. Father, son and his white horse are framed in the middle, foregrounded, while the fool and the soldier stand in the background, more to the right. The camera moves slowly to the right, accompanying the movement of the horses, who tread slowly along the field. Hidetora's decrepit appearance seems clearer now than in the previous shot. The wind waves his white hair and beard to the left, his body seems loose and weak, and his face is shriveled, dirty and cadaveric. Similarly to Kozintsev's *Lear*, Hidetora already appears to be dead before actually losing his life.

Saburo, unlike Cordelia, is not executed. His death seems completely random. The camera cuts to a shot of soldiers carrying colored banners and shotguns and quickly cuts back to the protagonists, but now showing that Saburo has been fatally wounded. Hidetora collapses beside Saburo's dead body, and, as he dies, the interaction between the Fool and the soldier epitomizes the main themes in Kurosawa's film, setting the tone of their deaths.

While the Fool hugs Hidetora's dead body and cries his lord's name (Fig. 3), the soldier asks him to stop as not to "call his spirit back. Would you have him suffer still more?". For both the Fool and the soldier, the world Hidetora and Saburo left comprises nothing but suffering.

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Fig. 4 – The Fool hugs Hidetora’s dead body.

If in Kozintsev’s film we have the critique of the social order that is being established — or rather the lack of a new social order, be Lear the ruler or someone else, the population will suffer — in Kurosawa, by means of the dialogue between the Fool and the soldier, we have a critique of the social order as a whole. For them, there is no hope for humanity. This dialectical moment is synthesized in a pessimistic way: be the Gods merciless as the Fool argues, or disappointed at humanity as the soldier claims, humanity’s fate is equally somber.

#### THE FOOL’S PRESENCE: FINAL REMARKS

The late Francis Barker writes that the disappearance of the messenger in *Titus Andronicus* is problematic: “It is simply *there*: strange, *unheimlich*, and, I have found, haunting” (1993, p. 168). The way his death is treated is a means of occluding violence: the

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messenger laughs his way to death, whereas the aristocrats in the play die in spectacular fashion. We see, in tragedy, the theater of punishment Foucault describes as being recurrent in European monarchies until the eighteenth century (2013, p. 269). But, unlike the panorama presented by Foucault, such punishments are applied to the aristocrats in spectacular plots of revenge and passion, unlike the harsh reality of an authoritarian ruler displaying their power through such violent signs. We wonder what Barker would have to say about the mysterious disappearance of the Fool in *King Lear*. Perhaps the claim would be the same. The Fool's unexplained disappearance is haunting for the same reasons as the messenger's: it attempts to hide a culture of State violence against the common people of England. Tragedy, thus, would be serving the "enemy", the ruling class. But after analyzing these two films, as far apart as they can be, it is possible to see that they share an important trait: the presence of the Fool in their final moments. In both Kurosawa's and Kozintsev's films we do not have occlusion, but rather the display of such violence.

If the disappearance of the Fool is haunting in Shakespeare, in Kurosawa and in Kozintsev his presence is disturbing. It is through the Fool that a certain tragic truth of each narrative can be known. In Kozintsev, it is the Fool's being kicked by his superiors and sadly playing the flute to the people's vain labor that reveals that the social order remains unaltered in spite of the personal redemption of Lear. In Kurosawa, it is the Fool's nihilism that reveals that, in a world where the Gods are either non-existent or passive, humanity's fate is to destroy itself. That is the politics of tragedy in both films: however tragic Lear's suffering is, the real tragedy is collective.

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