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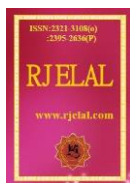
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

AESTHETICS OF DISSENT; SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* ON FILM IN SOVIET RUSSIA

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Article info

Article Received:26/11/2023

Article Accepted: 19/12/2023

Published online:26/12/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.4.225](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.4.225)

Abstract

In a letter to the to the People's Commissariat for Education in 1925, Lenin had famously proclaimed cinema to be the most important of all the arts in the twentieth century. A hundred years later, cinema continues to play a massive role in building socio political discourses and ideologies. This paper has tried to bring forth the connection between cinema and politics by exploring the ability of cinema register political dissent. In the light of theories given by philosopher Giles Deleuze that view cinema as a medium of both philosophical and political renewal, the paper studies the film adaptation of one of Shakespeare's most significant political tragedies, *Hamlet*, by Soviet director Grigori Kozintsev. Kozintsev's cross cultural adaptation of Shakespeare's play not only attempts to revisit Shakespeare in a new medium for an entirely new historical and cultural era but also this re-examination is extended towards the exploration of pertinent questions surrounding the creation of grand narratives of socio-political and cultural unification produced by the state often sacrificing the nuanced struggles of its citizens to bolster claims of homogeneity and nationalism. The paper shows how Kozintsev's film can be read as a cinematic 'act of dissent' in the politically restrictive environment of the Soviet regime where through the reinterpretation of Shakespeare's classic, the film invites viewers to reflect on the timeless themes of power, corruption, and individual responsibility. By analysing the interplay between cinema, history, politics and culture, this paper aims to rekindle the discourse on cinema's capacity to incorporate dissenting voices and become a catalyst of change.

Keywords: Adaptation, Cinema, Grigori Kozintsev, Hamlet, Giles Deleuze, Political Dissent

Introduction

The birth of cinema ushered a cultural revolution in the world, cinema swiftly became more than a simple form of entertainment and evolved into a medium of information and cultural representation. Simultaneously, at the turn of the century the ideological effects of the moving image

also became more apparent, cinema was exploited as a tool of intervention in political crises and catastrophes like the two world wars, producing powerful politically and emotionally charged visual narratives that governed public opinion. In the recent years, cinema and politics have become exceedingly intertwined. By producing images that mediate with reality, cinema either affirms existing

cultural and political discourses or creates new possibilities to challenge them.

The paper attempts to bring out this relationship between cinema and politics and the role of cinema to manufacture 'dissent' through a critical re-examination of reality by presenting alternative ways of 'seeing' or 'viewing'. In the light of theories given by philosophers like Giles Deleuze who propose cinema's potential as a philosophical as well as political medium, the paper analyses the cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by Soviet director Grigori Kozintsev who used adaptations of Shakespearean classics as a vehicle to critique the years of corruption and degradation of the communist state under the Stalinist regime, highlighting the active role cinema can play in engaging with political discourses and ideologies.

Deleuze's cinema books, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (French 1972, English 1977) and *Cinema 2: The Time – Image* (French 1985, English 1987), as well as other writings, have contributed immensely to film theory. These works by Deleuze provide us with a large framework to interrogate the aesthetical, philosophical and political aspects of the cinematic arts especially the art of filmmakers of the post-war generation. For Deleuze the Second World War becomes a watershed moment in the history of the western world in the way that it brings about a renewal of thought and sensibility across disciplines. Cinema as a medium of representation responded to this crucial moment in history by playing a very important role in the creation of this renewed sensibility. As a postmodern thinker the central idea in Deleuze's theories is the ability of arts like cinema and literature to formulate a new understanding of time and space, and through it, man's relationship with the real. The post-modern/post-war era saw a reinvention of the narrative, where the standard chronological narrative underwent a radical reconstruction through the introduction of disruptions and ambiguity which challenged linear storytelling. The post war arts (including cinematic arts) were now defined by de-centered systems/networks of thought or 'rhizomes' as mentioned in Deleuze and Guattari's book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987). Connections that are no longer marked by

continuities and successions but rather understood in terms of complex set of variations, intersecting spatio temporal, cultural, linguistic and generic boundaries. Inter-cultural/inter-medial adaptations, translations and re-tellings, such as Kozintsev's Shakespeare films are an apt example of Deleuze's rhizomatic narratives that pose a challenge to the traditional and totalising narratives within art, culture and history.

Filmmaker Grigori Kozintsev was born in 1925 in Kiev, Ukraine, to a Jewish family. Witnessing war and violence from a young age, be it the long political struggle between Ukraine and Russia, the systematic persecution of the Jewish/ polish community at the hands of the antisemitic Russian monarchy, the two world wars or the long civil war which culminated in the rise and fall of the Communist regime in USSR. The filmmaker lived through the most tumultuous moments in Russian and human history and needless to say, his art bears witness to all these moments of historical of political struggle within his own country and the world.

It is interesting to note that cinema as a medium of communication and representation within Soviet Russia was instinctively perceived as a 'game changing' art form by both the Russian monarchy in the pre revolution era and later by the communist party. Lenin who had acknowledged cinema as the most important medium of the age, immediately nationalised cinema as soon as he came to power. The Soviet state had gauged the ideological impact the medium could have on its masses and thus, by 1929 cinema along with other forms of art, was brought under the rigorous surveillance of the state. Further, in an attempt to create a homogeneous and common model for all Soviet art forms, including cinema, the genre of 'Socialist Realism' became the official style prescribed by the state and remained so until as late as the 1980s. 'Socialist Realism' was directly antithetical to the celebrated Realist movement that had dominated the Russian literary and artistic scene of the 19th century, memorably encountered within the works of great Russian writers from Pushkin to Tolstoy, who endeavoured to depict the socio- political and cultural realities of the nation within the genre of realism. Contrary to this, Socialist

Realism had a singular agenda which was to construct an 'idealised' representation of the socialist way of life and promote communist ideology, leaving no room for critical voices. Thus, Kozintsev's films, especially his adaptations of Shakespeare's plays were a reaction to this crisis within Soviet cinema. The use of the genre of adaptation provided a kind of Brechtian distancing that eventually allowed the filmmaker to also circumvent the stringent laws of censorship and surveillance in his country, to register dissent, and critique the current socio-political environment through his cinema.

Among all of Shakespeare's works, *Hamlet* had invited the most polar reactions from Russians ever since the 19th century when a variety of adaptations of the play had begun to appear in literature as well as drama. *Hamlet* had historically been read as a 'superfluous' character. A case in point being T. S. Eliot's famous essay "Hamlet and His Problems" where Eliot denounces the tragedy as a complete "artistic failure" (Eliot 2), reading the character of Hamlet as being dominated by emotions that are often "inexpressible" and in "excess" to what the action requires (Eliot 4). Eliot's criticism of the play finds its roots within the Romantic German philosophical tradition where philosophers like Hegel read Hamlet as a self-consciousness character struggling towards self-realization.

Later similar interpretations of the play became popular amongst Russian writers too. According to John Collick¹ by the 19th century *Hamlet* had become a literary prototype for the Russian intellectual, dissatisfied with the system but too powerless and unmotivated to eventually answer the call for a revolution. *Hamlet* symbolised the political dilemma of 'to do' or 'not to do' for the Russian intellectual of the 19th century, the contradictory/anti- hero figure was further made popular within the literary works of major writers of the realist tradition like who often portrayed the struggles of a similar self-conscious, sceptic Hamlet like hero, an intellectual who is forced to be a

bystander to a corrupt and slowly degrading world around him. However, by the 20th century, with the rise of the communist regime, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* became a critical contrast to the positivist socialist ideology of the state prescribed within the genre of socialist realism. The play's subversive subtext threatened to demystify the ideal myth of the victorious socialist state, so much so that the play was promptly banned from production by the party for the whole of Stalin's lifetime and any adaptation or appropriation of the play's themes was considered as an offence to the autocrat himself.

Thus, it becomes essential to see Kozintsev's adaptation as a form 're-reading' situated within the historical context of the play's political and cultural reception within Russia. The film becomes a part of a long tradition of literary and critical scholarship on the play, that existed in Russia since the early 1900s, where *Hamlet* was appropriated and re-fashioned to become a metaphor for political dissent in the popular cultural imagination of the Russian people. Kozintsev's own interpretation of the play, found in his critical writings on Shakespeare², similarly mention this long tradition of its appropriation within the works of writers like Turgenev, Pushkin and Dostoevsky, in all of whom Kozintsev finds traces of Shakespeare's continuity. This dialogue between Shakespeare and the cultural and artistic history of the Russian nation, existing in the form of a 'web' of intertextuality, influenced the filmmaker's own approach to the adaptation of Shakespeare in cinema. Kozintsev's intermedial, intercultural adaptation of the play overlaps cultural, temporal and linguistic boundaries to return to Shakespeare's text through the Russian translations of Soviet novelist and poet Boris Pasternak. Transposing the cultural site of Renaissance England with that of Soviet Russia where politically subversive themes within Shakespearean drama provide an opportunity to critique the corruption and abuse of authority within the communist regime. The power of these adaptations, through such complex multilayering of ideas and discourses highlights the ability of the adaptive, cinematic text to pave new

¹ See John Guy Collick, *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society*, (p 112)

² See Grigori Kozintsev *Shakespeare Time and Conscience*

possible ways of reading and looking at the 'source' text and the cultural contexts that define their creation, challenging the notion of hierarchies especially when seen with respect to canonical texts like that of Shakespeare.

Gamlet / Hamlet (1964)

Kozintsev association with Shakespeare' had been a lifelong affair both on and offscreen. The filmmaker who was also a Shakespearean scholar had produced a series of detailed and well researched critical writings on Shakespeare. In his book *Shakespeare Time and Conscience* published 1966, Kozintsev comments upon the significance of Hamlet's observation 'time is out of joint', made in the fifth scene of the first act after Hamlet is made aware of the murder of his father by his uncle (Kozintsev, *Shakespeare*, 19).

Like Kozintsev, Deleuze, in the preface of his book *Cinema 2*, notes the significance of the line "time is out of joint" in Shakespeare's play. According to Deleuze, "Hamlet's words signify that time is no longer subordinate to movement but rather movement to time" (Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, xi). For Deleuze the disjointedness of time that Hamlet feels in the play signifies a grand revolution in philosophy, "waged over several centuries from ancient Greeks to Kant" (Carvalho 113) which is then repeated once again within cinema, as a revolutionary medium which could record and represent the passage and movement of time in a way that had never been done before by any other technological medium or art form in the span of human history. The concept of time and how we experience it has been a subject of deliberation within philosophy from Plato's *Timaeus* to Kant's *Critiques of Pure Reason*. The ancient Greek or classical Christian philosophy understood time as "subordinate to an already given movement of the physical world" (Kerslake 7), a uniform reflection of the perfect and eternal order of the creator. This idea was contradicted by modern philosophy, especially by philosopher Emmanuel Kant who in his work, *The Critique of Pure Reason* says, time is a "subjective condition of our (human) intuition (which is always sensuous, that is, so far as we are affected by objects), and in itself, independently of

the mind, is nothing" (Kant 74). For Kant time is a part of the subjective human experience and does not exist as outside of human perception. According to Deleuze, cinema especially modern post-war cinema, is a realisation of the Kantian notion of time. The revolutionary philosophical understanding that time is no longer subordinate to movement, is realised in the cinema of Orson Welles, Visconti, Tarkovsky and others, a cinema that is no longer defined only in relation to the external reality, or to movement/action of what happens next in the story. Rather, modern post-war cinema, Deleuze notes resists being "integrated into a totality" of chronological eternal order of time, to present to us a world of non-chronological narratives and irrational cuts, images that represent the disintegration of the post-war world (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* xvi). For Deleuze this revolution within modern cinema is what leads to the creation of thought.

Kozintsev's adaptation of *Hamlet*, came out in the year 1964, two years after the event of the Cuban missile crisis and towards the end of the years of the thaw when Stalin's political successor Nikita Khrushchev fell from power. According to critics like T. A. Conroy the film, became not only a poignant reminder of the years of compromise with an autocratic regime but also testimony to the global political unrest during the years of the cold war (Conroy). In the film as in Shakespeare's play, Hamlet's crisis begins when he realises that not only has the reality of his world and his time slowly become 'unhinged' and 'de-centred' but also that the onus and responsibility of setting things 'right' might have fallen upon him because unlike others around him, as the film shows, it is the prince who has the ability to see the what Deleuze calls the 'unbearable' and the 'intolerable' within his time (Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 19-20).

Even as the plot of Kozintsev's *Hamlet* remains more or less faithful to the play, Kozintsev's genius lies in subtle transposition of the stifling universe of Hamlet's world to that of his own contemporary Russian society struggling to cope under repressive state mechanisms.

Echoing the idea of the Deleuzian time image Kozintsev deliberately juxtaposes images to create patterns of associations, inviting viewers to “register repetitions, associations and contrasts” (Jorgen 222). The opening scenes of the film, which are marked by the haunting background score of tolling gongs and bells, hint at the theme of the slowly unravelling world of fixed, stagnant systems of power. In the opening sequences of the film, the camera pans to the close-up of bare walls of a prison like castle of Elsinore that seems to be immovable and fixed against a wildly crashing turbulent sea (0:10 – 3:15). The camera cuts repeatedly to show the contrast between the turbulent sea, symbolic of dynamic change/movement and the cold silent walls of the castle which become a metaphor for the hostile and impenetrable nature of power of the authoritarian state.

Just as within the Deleuzian concept of time, the ‘infinite time’ acts upon the finite fixed understanding of reality, so, the initial scenes of the film seem to hint at how all structures fixed in time will eventually and inevitably succumb to chaos and change. In both Shakespeare’s play and Kozintsev’s film, the fixed static systems of old order have reached a state of putrefaction. Suspicion and distrust breeds within the walls of Elsinore where Claudius seems to stand for a despot much like Stalin. The first images of the prince on the screen appear as he rides swiftly along the shores of the turbulent sea entering the castle Elsinore which seems to swallow him immediately upon his arrival as the heavy trapdoor gate cuts off all connection with the outside world.



Fig 1.1 Kozintsev films the castle in tight shots.

The feeling of entrapment, closeness and claustrophobia are enhanced as the camera films the castle from behind tight spaces. As critic Jack

Jorgen points out the castle in the film takes on a Kafkaesque character “seen in fragments only obscured in the fog, too large and complicated to be taken in all at once” (Jorgen 228). The underlying allegory that connects the world of the film and the world of the audience becomes more obvious and Hamlet’s troubles seem not so distant anymore. In this world, as Kozintsev shows, Hamlet’s task is then to introduce transparency and truth into an opaque and imprisoning system that thrives upon its impenetrability.

Thus, for Kozintsev, the tragedy of Hamlet is that he sets himself the impossible task of correcting the ‘time out of joint’ or, in other words, restoring order and meaning back into his world through the avenging the murder of his father. But as the film shows any semblance of order that Hamlet’s revenge might have brought about seems too insubstantial against the death and destruction it leaves in its wake. In his notes the director mentions how he deliberately chose to ‘revive’ the bleak ending to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* which transpires in the arrival of the ‘external’ forces of Fortinbras taking over Elsinore after the deaths of Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes in the final scenes of the play. This ending which had been otherwise routinely avoided in many of the earlier stage productions of the play in Russia is restored within the film. Hamlet’s death in the film coincides with the arrival of Fortinbras and his troops, Hamlet’s body is briskly wrapped up and given a military funeral at the hands of Fortinbras and his men and the film ends with a new regime of power swiftly overtaking the previous. The film’s ending ultimately evokes a sense of hopelessness and inability to overcome the impenetrable systems of power which is significant when seen in the context of Russian politics in the period post the death of Stalin when things barely changed for the better.

However, the film’s pessimistic ending can also be read alternatively, keeping in mind Deleuze’s theories of the ‘time image’ and how it creates the ‘cinema of the seer’. Deleuze’s cinema books make a distinction between pre-war cinema, which Deleuze designates the ‘movement image’ and the post-war cinema which is defined as the ‘time image’. For Deleuze, pre-war cinema fashioned

traditional narratives that were dependent upon movement and action, defined by clear cohesive relations between time and space. Such narratives through their progressive action and movement seek to alleviate the “collective consciousness” of the viewing masses thus propagating the myth of “unanimity of people as a collective subject” (Reid 78). As Julius Reid points out, Deleuze identifies the cinema of pre-war directors like D.W Griffith and Eisenstein as the cinema of the movement image where characters overcome socio-political challenges to reach a “complete state” where conflicting desires, identities and values are all perfectly synthesized within the larger discourses of national unanimity/collective identity (Reid).

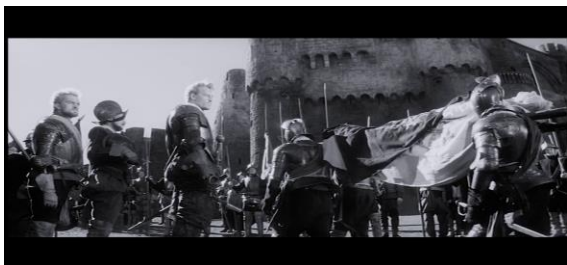


Fig 1.2 Hamlet’s brisk military funeral at the hands of Fortinbras and his soldiers who have taken over Elsinore in the final moments of the film.

As pointed out, the significance of Kozintsev’s adaptation is the ultimate challenge it poses to the narratives of unification and coherence produced by authoritarian regimes like Stalin’s socialist state and its socialist propaganda films. According to Deleuze unlike the pre-war narratives where the action strived to arrange and order social and political history through the assimilation of characters within the system as ‘ideal’ subjects. Post-war narratives on the other hand, whether in the modern post war literature or cinema (example neo realist/ new wave cinemas), evolved to become more complex and self-reflexive. As Reid points out the trauma of the world wars, the horrors of holocaust and fascist totalitarian regimes around the world had finally resulted in the shattering of the belief in the narrative/ idea of “national unanimity” upon which the power of the sovereign state depended. Thus, in the Post-war cinema or the ‘time image’, characters and situations seem more aberrant and neat resolutions are seldom possible. For Deleuze post-

war cinema is then, the cinema of the ‘seer’ and not the cinema of ‘actors’/‘agents’ of the state sanctioned narratives of coherence, fulfilling their destined roles as ideal citizens. Post war cinema rather becomes a cinema of possibilities, as the “purely optical and sound situation gives rise to seeing’ function” (Deleuze, Cinema 2, 19), where characters lose the power of action to gain the power of critical insight of thought and perception which is then transferred upon the viewer.

Thus, Kozintsev’s adaptation of the play emphasises this discord between Hamlet and his time, the disjointedness between Hamlet and his external reality is highlighted within the film as the prince of Denmark sets himself profoundly against the corrupt social order of Denmark drowning in “irrelevancies, ciphers and dead ends” (Jorgens 309).

The film shows how Hamlet’s paralysis of action, his inability to resolve the action through revenge is replaced by Hamlet’s ability to see the ‘unbearable’, ‘uncomfortable’ truth. Kozintsev’s Hamlet resists being the agent of cohesive meanings that flow from dominant modes of ideological representation but rather helps to make the viewer grasp at the intolerable and the unbearable aspects of the socio-political reality inside as well as outside the text of the play/film.

Conclusion

Kozintsev’s *Hamlet* was a response to the totalizing narratives, by providing an alternative view of the cultural and political history of his times the Soviet director challenged the deliberately imposed State narratives of propaganda which seek to promote a false sense of unification often at the cost of effacing the contradictory nature of the struggles of the citizens to support the claims of homogeneity and nationalism. At the same time Kozintsev’s cinema also supports Deleuze’s arguments that cinema can keep alive the culture of dissent and restore our belief in the world by engendering political action and awakening mass consciousness through the exploration of the impossible and intolerable within our times keeping and preserving the citizens’ right to question and critique systems of power.

In conclusion, cinema emerges as a powerful medium that not only revisits and rewrites the cultural, political, literary past for a new century but also engages in an interrogation of vital questions surrounding history and the creation of texts and narratives.

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