ALEXANDER ETKIND
University of Cambridge

Mourning the Soviet victims in a cosmopolitan way: Hamlet from Kozintsev to Riazanov

ABSTRACT
The article contextualizes Grigori Kozintsev’s celebrated films, Hamlet and King Lear, and Eldar Riazanov’s Beware of the Car. In the historical environment of post-Stalinist Russia, scrutinizing Kozintsev’s political and artistic itinerary, the Shakespearean productions are interpreted as works of mourning for Soviet victims. In his writings on Shakespeare as well as in his films, Kozintsev insisted that his ideal was not historical accuracy but rather a self-conscious modernization of the classical text. Having found in Shakespeare an adequate cultural idiom that was resonant, cosmopolitan and ambitious, Kozintsev developed his language for a mournful meditation about the long Soviet period. In response, his former student, Riazanov, inserted a parody on Kozintsev’s Hamlet into his popular but subtle epiphany on Soviet utopianism, Beware of the Car.

In 1939, the famous film-maker Grigori Kozintsev started a biographical film about Karl Marx. Elocutiously and sincerely, he expressed his admiration for Marx, a prophet of the victorious Revolution. But the film has never been...
realized. There were rumours that Kozintsev fainted when he reported this film project to Joseph Stalin. An experimental, futurist film-maker in the 1920s—a leader of the ‘jolly generation that created the Soviet cinema’—Kozintsev embraced the theory and practice of the Marxist revolution in Russia. However, his disenchantment steadily grew during the subsequent decades. Like his Marxist beliefs in Stalin’s presence, Kozintsev’s early support for the socialist experiment did not survive the long decades of Soviet rule. In this essay, I argue that mourning for the victims of the regime and mourning for its ideas were both crucial for the films that Kozintsev directed during the late Soviet period. The next generation of intellectuals and film-makers, who came of age during the Thaw, subverted this complex condition of double mourning. The final part of the essay discusses El’dar Riazanov’s ironic response to Kozintsev’s work.

LOCAL VICTIMS

Kozintsev is known mostly for his screen versions of Gamlet/Hamlet (1964) and Korel’ Liri/King Lear (1970). These austere, black-and-white versions of Shakespeare in Boris Pasternak’s translation and with Dmitrii Shostakovich’s score, have been recognized as major cultural achievements of the Soviet period. At the end of his career, Kozintsev, a laureate of two Stalin Prizes and one Lenin Prize, was the most important film-maker in Leningrad. Among his students were the leading film-makers of the later period, El’dar Riazanov and Aleksei German. By all indications, success was genuine. While Kozintsev’s films were screened at Shakespearean events in England, a Tajik film studio produced a documentary about screening his Hamlet for mountaineers in Pamir. Clearly, Kozintsev succeeded in finding a language that was comprehensible to various audiences on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

From his eccentric experiments that made him famous in the 1920s, Kozintsev turned to ironic films in the 1930s and then, to faceless biographical films in the 1950s. Though these developments do not surprise the historian of Soviet film, a Shakespearean turn in the 1960s was unique. It was also unusual that apart from his life-long film-making, Kozintsev was a prolific scholar and author who wrote many volumes of essays and memoirs. While some of his books were published in the Soviet period and some were translated into English, many notes have been published after his death and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In important ways, Kozintsev’s thoughts and feelings were parallel to those that were documented in the letters and conversations of his friend and associate, Dmitrii Shostakovich. Both developed a consistent, self-conscious protest against the Soviet oppression, and both revealed their political sentiments in the established forms of their arts. While the credibility of some of Shostakovich’s materials is controversial, Kozintsev’s documents have never been questioned. Apart from the assiduous work of their publishers, these documents have received little scholarly attention, a striking contrast with the furious debates generated by Shostakovich’s ‘Testimony’ (see Riley 2005).

Kozintsev was not ‘repressed’ during the waves of the Soviet terror but some of his relatives and many friends did find themselves in the Gulag. He was witness to many campaigns of repression. One friend from his childhood, Aleksei Kapler, also a film-maker, was arrested for courting Stalin’s daughter, Svetlana, and spent eleven years in the camps. Kozintsev’s mother-in-law, Ol’ga Ivanovna, a modest but universally admired woman who was a
realized. There were rumours that Kozintsev fainted when he reported this film project to Joseph Stalin. An experimental, futurist film-maker in the 1920s – a leader of the ‘jolly generation’ that created the Soviet cinema – Kozintsev embraced the theory and practice of the Marxist revolution in Russia. However, his disenchantment steadily grew during the subsequent decades. Like his Marxist beliefs in Stalin’s presence, Kozintsev’s early support for the leftist experiment did not survive the long decades of Soviet rule. In this essay, I argue that mourning for the regime and mourning for its ideas were both crucial for the films that Kozintsev directed during the late Soviet period. The next generation of intellectuals and film-makers, who came of age during the Thaw, subverted this complex condition of double mourning.

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Kozintsev was also friends with Solomon Mikhoels, an actor, and theatre director who also staged King Lear. Mikhoels founded and led the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, an organization that helped Stalin to attract worldwide sympathy during World War II (Harasz 2008). Mikhoels’s assassination in 1948 signalled the collapse of this Committee and the start of a major anti-Semitic campaign of the later years of Stalin. Kozintsev was also close to Ilya Erenburg, a charismatic writer who was married to his sister. Personally involved in some of the most obscure dealings of the regime, Erenburg later characterized his own survival as a mere accident. It was Erenburg who, after the death of Stalin, coined the word ‘Thaw’. He launched the enormous stream of late Soviet literature in memoirs with his Ljudi, gody, shiri! People, Years, Life (1961).

Born into a Jewish family in Kiev in 1905, Kozintsev learned the bitter truth of the official anti-Semitism that reigned in imperial Russia. In Kiev, he entered an elite gymnasium under the Jewish quota system; in his notes, he richly documented his hatred towards this school that haunted him for many decades. Later, Kozintsev was trained as an artist; his teaching was a lead- ing figure of the Soviet avant-garde, Nathan Altman. After the Revolution of 1917, Kozintsev met Vsevolod Meyerhold and Sergei Eisenstein, the leading figures of the Soviet theatre and cinema. He adored Meyerhold, who was arrested and killed in 1940; according to Kozintsev, Meyerhold would have been the best person to play King Lear. In his memoir about Eisenstein, Kozintsev called him a friend rather than a teacher (Kozintsev 1985: 160–70). Only seven years younger than Eisenstein, Kozintsev lived significantly longer and now he feels much more like our contemporary. He loved Broenemoets Potemkin/The Battleship Potemkin (1925) but was sceptical about the later films by Eisenstein: quite often, he writes in his notes about his anxiety to overcome Eisenstein’s influence.

In 1992, Viktor Shklovskii wrote a famous essay, ‘The End of Baroque’, in which he criticized Eisenstein’s interests in the masses and montage and called upon Soviet film-makers to adopt a ‘new simplicity’ and a ‘continual art’ (Shklovskii 1990: 448–54). Kozintsev cited this essay with approval, in his criticism to Eisenstein’s, Kozintsev’s films consist of long, continuous shots. But Kozintsev watched with disgust the ideological campaign against Eisenstein and took a risk by writing encouraging letters to him. Kozintsev was equally compartmental when another friend whose importance he knew well, Shostakovich, became a target of ideological attacks.

Throughout his lifetime, Kozintsev was close to the leading Soviet literary scholars, whom he recruited to write scripts for his films. Some of these people were arrested; the survivors were targets of ideological attacks. Adriano Piotrovski, a charismatic classicist who wrote scripts for Kozintsev’s films and founded the state film studio in Leningrad, died in jail. Kozintsev’s close friend, philologist Matvei Golubovskii, died in jail. Juli Olekman, another philologist who wrote scripts for Kozintsev, served ten years in the Kelyma camps.
According to his friend and correspondent, Isaac Glikman, after receiving this offer Shostakovich was in a 'deep hysteria', wept 'in full voice', and lamented: '... they have persecuted me, chased me for so long.' Many times before that, he told Glikman that he would never enter the Communist Party, which 'creates violence'. A few days later, he accepted both offers and wrote his Eighth Quartet, which he wished to dedicate to his own memory. When he broke his leg a few months later, he said, 'This is how God punishes me for entering the Party.' (Glikman 1993: 180-63).

Another friend from the world of literary scholarship, Leonid Pinskii, served five years. Evgeni Enei, the artist who worked for Kozintsev on many films, was arrested in 1938 and returned years later. Kozintsev survived in 1937 and again in 1949, when many in his circle were humiliated and sacked, and some arrested, during the notorious 'struggle with cosmopolitanism' campaign. However, he saw his long-time friend and co-author Leonid Trauberg scapegoated and sacked; Trauberg could not make a film for more than a decade. Shostakovich, Erenburg, Tynianov and many others were under threat, which did not materialize because of Stalin's death. When Kozintsev's mother-in-law finally returned home in 1956, Kozintsev told his wife that neither he nor she should ever argue with her as she had suffered too much in her life (Kozintseva 2005). In May 1956, after one of the chiefs of Stalinist culture, Aleksandr Fadeev, committed suicide, Kozintsev wrote to his student Stanislav Rostotskii: 'An era of shame has started in the arts' (Letter of 13 May 1956, in Kozintseva and Butkovskii 1998: 161). Despite his status and influence, Kozintsev shunned official titles and never led a Soviet organization larger than his film-making workshop in Leningrad. At the peak of the Thaw, in June 1960, his friend Shostakovitch experienced a crisis when offered a position as chairman of the Union of Composers, with the condition that he would also join the Communist Party. After desperate resistance Shostakovitch accepted the offer. Fortunately, Kozintsev had never received such an offer.

The Overcoat

A friend noticed that the 1920s had endowed Kozintsev with his 'snobbish, aristocratic nature' (Kozintseva 1996: 91). In the disillusioned world of post-Stalinism, maintaining the values of the revolutionary years was perceived as vanity. One of Kozintsev's secrets of success was a very stable team of co-authors, many of them also 'people of the twenties', who worked with him throughout many turbulent decades. On dozens of films he worked with the same cameraman, artist, composer and even fencing instructor. Some of them were world-famous, others unknown.

The most successful among Kozintsev's early films, Shenot/The Overcoat (1926), ridiculed the social hierarchy of the old regime. The film was based on Nikolai Gogol's short story; Iurii Tynianov, an expert in Gogol who had authored pioneering studies of prototype and parody in literature, wrote the script (Butovskii 2005). In the film, as in the story, the protagonist cherishes a hard-won new coat, which is then stolen by thieves. Played by Aleksei Kapler, a Very Important Person refuses to investigate the crime. Deprived of his coat and illusions, the protagonist dies of sorrow. A hapless Oedipus who failed to resolve the puzzle of power, he is portrayed questioning the enormous Sphinx of St Petersburg in one of the most expressive scenes of the early Soviet cinema.

With its obvious dependence on Weimar film, The Overcoat is human and funny. In the end, however, something shocking happens or rather, does not happen. The powerful ending of Gogol's story is entirely omitted. At the end of Gogol's The Overcoat, the protagonist rises from the dead and, as a gigantic spectre, takes revenge on the streets of St Petersburg where he was once robbed and left without protection. This wandering spectre steals one overcoat after another and disappears only after he scares and robs that very official who refused to help the protagonist in his last struggle. This is a great scene, the very last refuge for a utopian hope, a Gogolian premonition of the Revolution. I believe that this powerful scene of retribution is what made The
Another friend from the world of literary scholarship, Leonid Pinski, served five years. Bystroshski, the artist who worked for Koziyntsuv on many films, was arrested in 1938 and returned years later. Koziyntsuv survived in 1937 and again in 1949, when many in his circle were humiliated and sacked, and some arrested, during the notorious 'struggle with cosmopolitanism' campaign. However, he saw his long-time friend and co-author Leonid Trauberg scapegoated and sacked; Trauberg could not make a film for more than a decade. Shostakovich, Enniburg, Tytain and many others were under threat, which did not materialize because of Stalin's death. When Koziyntsuv's mother-in-law finally returned home in 1956, Koziyntsuv told his wife that neither he nor she should ever argue with her as she had suffered too much in her life (Koziyntseva 2008). In May 1956, after one of the chief's Stalinist culture, Aleksandr Fadeev, committed suicide, Koziyntsuv wrote to his student Stanislav Rostotski: 'An era of shame has started in the arts' (Letter of 13 May 1956, in Koziyntseva and Butkovski 1998: 161). Despite his status and influence, Koziyntsev shunned official titles and never led a Soviet organization larger than his film-making workshop in Leningrad. At the peak of the thaw, in June 1960, his friend Shostakovich experienced a crisis when offered a position as chairman of the Union of Composers, with the condition that he would also join the Communist Party. After desperate resistance Shostakovich accepted the offer. Fortunately, Koziyntsev had never received such an offer.

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Overcoat so popular in the Russian literary tradition. In Gogol, the scene is scary and funny at once. The reader desires justice but when it happens in the story, the reader does not believe in it for a second. The spectre from The Overcoat (1842) has an organic place among other great ghosts of world literature, from the ghost of Hamlet's father to the spectre in the Communist Manifesto (1848). The difference is, however, that Gogol's ghost is not tragic or threatening but rather ironic, maybe even parodic. With subtle but convincing humour, Gogol parodied Marx's image of the wandering spectre of communism by demonstrating the futility of this hope.

The film of 1926 replaced the appellation of the clerk's revengeful ghost, which in Gogol's story is seen by the whole city, with this clerk's personal vision of his deathbed. These visions were eccentric but far inferior to the unbridled imagery of Gogol's. Interestingly, Koziyntsev's friend, the literary scholar Boris Eltenbaum, in his famous essay of 1919, 'How Was Gogol's Overcoat Made?', also chose to omit the final scene of The Overcoat from his analysis. The consistency of this post-revolutionary misreading of The Overcoat is striking. After the Revolution in Russia had happened, performing Gogol's story too literally would be perceived not as this Revolution's premonition but rather as its parody. I believe that this is exactly the reason why enthusiastic supporters and promoters of the Revolution chose to omit Gogol's great finale in their post-revolutionary creations.

Gogol's imagery haunted Koziyntsev for decades. In his later productions, he substituted Gogol's fantasy of immediate, ultimate and self-mocking retribution with Shakespearean tragic, hard-earned, self-fulfilling justice. However, Koziyntsev was aware of the seminal significance of Gogol's tale and, at the end of his life, wished to produce a new film, Gogoliana. In his last note, Koziyntsev recurrently wrote about Overcoat as if he felt that his debt to Gogol had not been returned. 'It was difficult to think about the past as reality: the past felt like a mirage [...] These [Gogol's] stories strike us with their combination of plausibility and mystery [...] It was evident: the social structure resembles a nightmare, the state is dead' (Koziyntsev 1982: 112). When Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's story about a small man in the Gulag first came out in a Soviet journal, Koziyntsev compared it, as 'equal in scale', to Gogol's The Overcoat (Koziyntsev 2004: 433).
In the 1960s, Kozintsev's project consisted in 're-reading Shakespeare after Dostoevsky' and not after Marx. Disenchanted with basic Marxist ideas such as class warfare, historical progress or economic determinism, he did not use them in his Shakespearean essays and did not integrate them into his films. Arguably, there is more Marxism in John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* than in Kozintsev's *Hamlet*. The task that he set for himself illuminated the ambiguous plotlines of the English Bard with the conscientious, guilt-ridden sensitivity of the Russian *intelligent*, who felt his responsibility for the suffering of millions of Soviets as his nineteenth-century forebears felt their responsibility for the suffering of millions of serfs. Like many of his friends, Kozintsev was a convinced atheist, a belief system that was necessitated not only by his Soviet allegiance but also by his hybrid Russian-Jewish experience. In its practical application, in the post-Marxist Soviet Union, this secular framework resulted in a sublime understanding of high culture that was uniquely endowed with meanings that had previously been invested in religion and ideology.

In Kozintsev's *Hamlet* and *Lear*, famous scenes became unusually earthly: ghosts full-bodied, hesitations resolved, wars bloody and dirty, life bare and meaningless, and the division of the state a utopian project that had to find an ignoble end. Secularizing both Shakespeare and Dostoevsky meant that their religious themes and contexts were either cut out or interpreted in purely human ways, political and moral. We do not know what the role of censorship was for the mature Kozintsev and whether he would have made similar films if he had been perfectly free to define them. One of his friends, the much-experienced playwright Evgenii Shvarts, believed that Kozintsev had never been able to do what he wanted (Shvarts in Kozintseva 1996: 91). Comparing Kozintsev's private notes with his films does not confirm this statement. His use of Shakespeare to formulate his feelings about his life and the world, as he knew it, was his choice. Inside of this framework he was not particularly restricted. In fact, the scale and financing of his Shakespearean productions were generous.

In his writings on Shakespeare as well as in his films, Kozintsev insisted that his ideal was not historical accuracy but rather a self-conscious modernization of the classical text. It is not for us to resolve Shakespeare's problems; it is Shakespeare who resolves ours. Having found in Shakespeare an adequate cultural idiom, resonant, cosmopolitan and ambitious, Kozintsev used every chance to tell his audiences that his interest in Shakespeare was not antiquarian. Shakespeare is our contemporary, he wrote; in *Hamlet and Lear*, Shakespeare had found solutions to the 'most important issues of our time'. Screening *Lear*, Kozintsev wrote that the tragedy contains much that 'resembles us' and much that does not; he saw his task as highlighting the resemblances and downplaying the differences. *Lear*, he wrote, is 'a bloody melodrama', and blood spills in the play 'as if from a fireman's hose'. The nineteenth century purged this genre, melodrama, from the stage; it should, believed Kozintsev, return to the screen if it wanted to be true to the twentieth century with its *coup d'état*, state crimes and political fabrications. 'Blooded melodrama has become routine; it has become our everyday existence; it is no more exceptional than drinking tea in Chekhov' (Kozintsev 1984b: 178, 319; Kozintsev 1984a: 40).

After the success of *Hamlet*, Kozintsev was invited to spend a year in England to make another film. The trip never happened but his widow remembers a revealing dialogue. Let's go to England, she said, at least we will spend a year in decent conditions. But Kozintsev responded that he would never have made such a *Hamlet* there in England. His wife rendered
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THE POPULIST TRADITION

In several volumes of his published notes, Kozintsev was absorbed in classical Russian authors from Gogol to Tolstoy. In an entry of 1971, he acknowledged his increasing alienation from the contemporary cinema, both in the USSR and the West, and continued:

One day, and after much sorrow, I realized that I have inherited not the American 20th century, with comic characters fighting policemen and escaping across rooftops, but the Russian 19th century, with the unbearably sick consciences of its art, with the martyrdom of Gogol and Dostoevsky, ... with its feeling of co-responsibility, its enormous bleeding wounds.

Kozintsev believed that the experience of Russian classical literature helped him to represent the scenes of suffering and desolation that were a major part of his Shakespeare and the people in our audience, between the suffering on the screen and the memory of suffering in life. His works were widely praised by his contemporaries such as Boris Pasternak and Lidia Ginzbarg. Kozintsev attributed the ilks of his time not to the Marxist tradition but to the populist legacy. Late in life, Kozintsev contemplated making a film about Lev Tolstoy’s final departure, a tragic story of his terminal going-to-the-people. Taking the narechaetsa to task to speak the masses, it was deeply ingrained in the collective psyche of the intelligentsia. Kozintsev’s films show kings and princes, not the masses; when we see ‘the masses’ it is usually a revolting picture. Eisenstein spent years of his life studying shamanism and altered states of consciousness. Kozintsev wrote about Tolstoy’s obsession for ecstasy with a clear irony. While directing his film Odessa Alone (1931), Kozintsev observed a shamanistic ritual in a Siberian village, and was not impressed: ‘The Shaman’s mouth foamed. The smoke hurt one’s eyes, a mother waited, and a sick child cried.’ In this film, a young female teacher goes to the eastern edge of Russia to spread civilization. There she meets with oriental barbarism, which is symbolized by the local shaman (Kozintsev 1982: 189). With the young woman from Leningrad bringing Bolshevik civility to the old men of the Altai, the drama of collectivization acquires a Progressivist and even Feminist shape. Ultimately, Kozintsev’s films, a quiet, though very erotic, adoration of the female protagonist threads through the entire film. But there is no ecstasy or carnival in the mature Kozintsev. Even the wandering theatre in his Hamlet is a highly professional enterprise.

Looking back from the 1970s to the 1920s and then further, to the 1870s, Kozintsev tried to find a moral ground for his ongoing meditations about the long Soviet period. He was especially interested in the mid-nineteenth-century
critic Vissarion Belinskii. The judgmental, moralizing Belinskii epitomized the conscientious tradition of the Russian intelligentsia, and Kozintsev ‘took lessons’ from Belinskii in the same way that he later took them from Shakespeare (Kozintsev 2004: 108; Kozintsev 1984b: 347). Like Belinskii who aspired to change life with his writings and therefore had to push them through censorship, Kozintsev wished to produce films that were acceptable for the censor but retained their political, transformative effects. Around 1950, Kozintsev was commissioned to make a biographical film about Belinskii. Written by Iurii German (father of film-maker Aleksei German) and others, the screenplay presented Belinskii as a faceless maître. However, this work gave Kozintsev another chance to discuss his hero with the leading scholars of Russian literature, such as his friend and correspondent, Iulian Oksman. In 1958, after his release from the prison camp, Oksman annotated Belinskii’s letter to Gogol, the gospel of the rebellious intelligentsia, and pushed it through the provincial censorship. Always interested in the heroes of the Russian intelligentsia such as Belinskii and Tolstoi, Kozintsev felt increasingly distancing from them.

Hamlet

Watching Kozintsev’s Hamlet, one cannot fail to see the subversive irony towards earthly power, which the film embodies in Claudius. Living and dying among his portraits, Claudius is full of himself, always pompous and silly. A historian of Soviet film, Birgit Beumers (2009: 142) discerns in this Claudius a portrait of Stalin and in Kozintsev’s reading of Hamlet, an echo of the Thaw. Relying on this interpretation but shifting its focus, I see in this Hamlet not only an allegorical protest against a criminal state but also a play of mourning for its victims.

Hamlet is unusually decisive in this film, and so is the ghost of his father. In his well-crafted collection of essays on Shakespeare, Kozintsev argued against the many attempts to produce Hamlet without the ghost. He also rejected the psychoanalytic readings that focused on the personal drama of Hamlet. For Kozintsev, the play was about history, not psychology. Providing historical examples, he argued that Shakespeare’s contemporaries understood the apparitions of ghosts as signs of the coming catastrophes: ‘The ghost is the herald of national disasters. […] Everything in Denmark is going to ruin.’ Like Jacques Derrida but much earlier, Kozintsev connected the ghost of Hamlet’s father with the spectre of the Communist Manifesto: ‘Marx recalled Hamlet speaking to the spectre and purposely made it an image of the continual, subterranean work of history.’ He also speculated that in the play, those who remembered the dead king saw his ghost, while those who had forgotten the king, did not see the ghost. ‘The metaphor is literal,’ commented Kozintsev: the ghost is memory, and Shakespeare an apocalyptic author who feels the ‘inevitability of approaching catastrophe’. Contrasting Hamlet’s ‘spirit of Wittenberg’ to Claudius’ ‘spirit of Elsinore’, Kozintsev espoused his own historical experience: ‘In many eras, the finest men knew despair and lofty dreams proved futile. The time came when the heavy cannon of Elsinore dispersed the ideas of Wittenberg.’ Such was the time of Hamlet and also of Kozintsev. A modern Elsinore, he wrote, is again eager to enclose ‘humanity into concentration camps’ (Kozintsev 1967: 152–55, 166–68; Kozintsev 2004: 248).

Like Derrida but much earlier, Kozintsev found it important that the ghost came to Hamlet in his combat armour. For Derrida, the ghost’s armour is prosthetic: ‘We do not know whether it is or is not part of the spectral apparition.
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Figure 2: Still from Hamlet (the ghost in armour).

[... The armor may be but the body of the spectral artefact, a kind of technical prosthesis. For Kosintsev's film, historical armour was borrowed from a museum. It was so heavy that a champion wrestler was recruited to carry it. Moreover, Kosintsev chose an unusual helmet, with an open visor that had the shape of a human face. Derrida wrote about the visor that 'even when it is raised', it signifies 'that someone, beneath the armor, can safely see without being seen', which for Derrida is 'perhaps the supreme insignia of power' (Derrida 2006: 7-8). The visor that emulates a human face in Kosintsev's Hamlet deepens this paradoxical, prosthetic function of the ghost's armour even further. Again, this doubling of the face of the dead father matches Derrida's dictum that ghosts do not come alone and that by its nature, a spectre is 'more than one' (Derrida 2006: 24).

A political reading of the ghost of the father constitutes the core of Kosintsev's version of Hamlet. Wishing revenge for himself and redemption for his country, this armoured ghost with a doubling visor was a symptom of the crisis but also a promise of overcoming it. From the ghost, Hamlet learned the truth that every son of a catastrophe wants to learn about his perished father and, ideally, from him. The ghost urges for Hamlet the truth about life, as if he lifts the curtain over Denmark the past, and everything becomes clearly visible' (Kosintsev 2004: 205).

Scholars deciphered Kosintsev's message immediately after its victorious premiere in the Soviet and western cinemas. 'Life's pretences fade away, but their spiritual consequences do not', wrote the aspiring film critic Maia Turovskaya (1964: 218). Appropriately called 'We and Hamlet', her review was published in the same issue of the Novyi mir that discussed, in positive terms, Solzhenitsyn's story, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. 'This Hamlet does not require particular erudition or volumes of commentaries', wrote Turovskaya (1964: 227). Sublime and sincere, Kosintsev's film and Turovskaya's essay are both free of the double-speak that scholars of the later era nicknamed the 'Aeroplane language' (Loepp 1984). According to Turovskaya's masterful analysis, different tragedies emerged on the Soviet stage at different moments. In the 1930s, the Soviet theatre presented Othello as the symbol of a bloody but fair retribution'. Then, Othello looked so wholesome that even the murder of Desdemona 'did not look like a murder'. Despite his blind mistake, this Othello demonstrated, as Turovskaya (1964: 217) put it, 'the splendour of simplicity and the innocence of greatness'. While this Othello was the hero, Hamlet was accused of 'hamletism', a form of bad nerves along with the inability to act. Turovskaya made it clear that she associated this 'Othello of the 1930s' with
Stalin and juxtaposed two plays of revenge, Othello and Hamlet, by connecting them with two Soviet eras, Othello with the 1930s and Hamlet with the 1960s. It was 1954 that became a breakthrough in the stage history of Hamlet in the USSR (Turovskaya 1964: 217). She explored the decade after Stalin’s death as the maturation of the Soviet Hamlet, from Kozintsev’s theatre version of 1954 to his film version of 1964.11

Kozintsev imagined Hamlet to be his compatriot who survived the terror to find himself a foreigner in his own country. ‘Hamlet is a man before 1937’, he wrote, using this year to signify the Great Terror (Kozintsev 2004: 432). ‘Men before 1937’ would also be a good description for the co-authors of this Hamlet, its director Kozintsev, translator Pasternak and composer Shostakovich, who all miraculously survived the terror, physically and psychologically (the fourth member of their team, artist Evgenii Enei, was arrested in 1938 and spent several years in the Gulag). Like Hamlet, they all had the energy to mourn their dead. As Turovskaya noted, Kozintsev was far from the Russian theatrical tradition of presenting Hamlet as a weak, hesitating embodiment of ‘hamletism’: Kozintsev ‘does not argue with the 19th-century concept of hamletism — he ignores it’ (Turovskaya 1964: 227). Played by Innokentii Smoktunovskii, a veteran of World War II who marched from Kursk to Berlin, this Hamlet was not young. In Shakespeare he is 30, in some Soviet versions he looked 18, but Smoktunovskii was about 40 and looked even older. In Hamlet, Smoktunovskii played himself — a survivor of the Great Terror, a soldier of World War II, a man who perceives his country as a prison though he does not know the reason or remedy for it. He searches for both and we watch this epistemological process, which is closer to a military reconnaissance than to a neurotic hesitation. It is a focused, intellectual Hamlet who creatively uses various tools, from the ghost to the theatre, to crack the mystery of his fate. He does not hesitate to take revenge, but he wreaks it only after he accomplishes his task of learning. In Kozintsev’s film, Hamlet’s famous monologues were largely omitted, which surprised some critics. But the scenes of exploration, mourning and revenge were shown in detail and with full sympathy.

For Turovskaya (1964: 220), Hamlet ‘claims a human right on spiritual complexity’. The decade after the death of Stalin, which was also the decade when Kozintsev transferred his Hamlet from the stage to the screen, was a time of tremendous growth in the perceived complexity of the world. Acknowledgement of this complexity had nothing to do with indecisiveness. The opposite was true; after the Thaw was over, it was the simple minds in the Soviet leadership who manifested much hesitation and indecision. Understanding the crises of the past was the purpose of the Thaw, a time of exploration and mourning which turned into revenge only twenty years later, with perestroika. Turovskaya claimed that Kozintsev’s Hamlet was neither a tragic hero, nor a romantic one; he was an ‘intelligent-hero’. But of course this Hamlet was not a typical representative of the Soviet intelligentsia; he was rather its collective ego-ideal. Succeeding in his heroic, self-sacrificial act of revenge, he was not only a scholar but also a warrior. It was here that this Hamlet’s complexity, which Turovskaya emphasized so strongly, was rooted. Belatedly grieving his father and therefore inviting his ghost, Hamlet took revenge, an action that the Soviet intelligentsia barely considered in the 1960s.

This Hamlet’s highest success, however, is a ceremonial, slow funeral, which takes about ten minutes at the end of the film. A product of Kozintsev’s fantasy, this funeral is the central scene of the film (in Shakespeare’s tragedy,
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This Hamlet’s highest success, however, is a ceremonial, slow funeral, which takes about ten minutes at the end of the film. A product of Kozintsev’s fantasy, this funeral is the central scene of the film (in Shakespeare’s tragedy, it is described in one line). Fortinbras gives Hamlet military honours, as a soldier to a soldier, and then the funeral starts, scored with Shostakovich’s music, which reached the peak of its unbearable intensity in the last moments of the film. Kozintsev had in mind an even better story: “I had a good alternative for Hamlet’s finale: the wall of Elsinore. […] slowly, the ghost of the father is walking along and after him, proceeds Hamlet, i.e. his ghost. The military patrols are saluting them” (Kozintsev 2004: 327).

Even as staged, the final scene of Kozintsev’s *Hamlet* was a powerful, sublime mourning ceremony. Posthumously, Hamlet completed his work of mourning, which had remained tragically unaccomplished while he was alive. With this powerful scene, Kozintsev transfigured a Shakespearean orgy of revenge into a Soviet dream of mourning. It was his personal but also collective desire, a proper grieving for the unmourned Soviet dead, one generation deferred – arguably, the best memorial to the Soviet victims that has ever been produced.

**Lear**

Eagerly historicizing his work, Kozintsev wrote in 1968: “the year in which I was working on Lear: there was war… people were killed… whole districts were burnt down… students revolted… the tanks rolled into the town.” Responding with his *Lear* to the war in Vietnam, the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia and the global student unrest, Kozintsev pursued the same strategy he had employed in *Hamlet*: the double movement of modernizing Shakespeare and interpreting the Soviet condition. In his private notes, Kozintsev also characterized his film as a new commentary on the Apocalypse. “The Sermon is over. What remains? The smell of ashes and the echo of crying.” His anxiety and mourning were intense and unmistakable: ‘Lear and Cordelia in captivity: the terror and humiliation of a concentration camp. Barbed wire, dogs, machine guns. Humanity, heralded like cattle’ (Kozintsev 1977: 124, 161; Kozintsev 2004: 366).

Staging the Soviet *King Lear*, Kozintsev had a powerful predecessor, the 1955 version by the State Jewish Theatre, with his friend, Solomon Mikhoels, playing the king. Mikhoels reinterpreted *King Lear*, driven by his insight about the resemblance between Lear and Lev Tolstoy. Lear left his kingdom as Tolstoy left his house, stated Mikhoels. His Lear was hugely successful and in hindsight, prophetic. Mikhoels’s murder by Stalin’s order...
in 1948 signalled the collapse of state-sponsored Jewish culture in the USSR. Many arrests of Jewish activists and cultural figures followed, and rumours about the imminent deportation of the Soviet Jews to newly built camps near the Chinese border started to circulate right after Mikhoels's murder. When the news of Mikhoels's 'sudden death' became public, Kozintsev stayed in Moscow with Erenburg, who was also a prominent member of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. The two men remained silent and scared, but Valentina Kozintseva ran around the room in a panic. Erenburg quipped, 'no Jews are more orthodox than these Russian wives' (Kozintseva 2005). Looking at Mikhoels's photos as Lear, one immediately detects their strong resemblance with Lear in Kozintsev's film. Like Mikhoels, Kozintsev was fascinated by Tolstoi's departure from home; he had actually worked on a film project about this event, but then replaced it by making Lear. The 1968 film became a monument to Mikhoels who was murdered twenty years earlier.

Kozintsev's Lear continues the major themes of his Hamlet: the obscenity of power, the truth found in personal relations and a finale starring a funeral of the central character. The opening scene with Lear's move to divide his kingdom presents it as a well-meaning but ill-fated project, a study in the unintended consequences of utopian politics. The slow action of the film develops the idea of Lear's spiritual regeneration after his abdication, but the focus shifts onto the broad picture of the collapse of the state and the catastrophe for the people. With his new experience of suffering, Lear starts to understand the world, the people, and his daughter. This is Shakespeare read after Dostoevsky, and also after Stalin.

The chain is broken, it could not be otherwise because order is already dead, an illusion. Underneath lies total collapse and everything is rolling, tumbling, turning to confusion ... Space and people are at one in this commotion.

(Kozintsev 1977: 113)

Combining Lear with Dostoevski's Notes from the House of the Dead, Kozintsev wrote, 'The King of Britain has ended up in a hut on a penal settlement.' Unlike Hamlet, who dies as a prince, Lear suffers the full and complete collapse of his status. He descends from the very top to the very bottom of the social ladder, from king to pariah, from sovereign to bare life. This top-down transfiguration is symbolical: 'Does it not happen in time of revolutions, coups d'état, and wars, that those who held power find themselves behind barbed wire? [...] We can bear witness: this has happened [...] to many thousands.' This Lear is unusually interested in the depiction of the bottom: the hapless Lear, the poor Thom and the blind Gloucester merge with those who have always wandered across the burnt land. In these long and slow but mesmerizing scenes, Kozintsev showed the meaningless, bare life of the people. Treated like cattle, they live like cattle. They can be killed but not sacrificed, because they have no value. Having descended down to this bare life, Lear has become transformed; moreover, he is unrecognizable. This is why at the end of the play, the soldiers cannot find Lear: 'the difficulty was not in finding Lear but in recognizing him'.

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Here, at the very bottom of existence, the tempest has thrown one who was on the very top of the social pyramid. Here, in the midst of this miserable life that mixes dirt, straw, beggars and men, Lear asks his question, is it true that the bare man is just a bipedal animal? (Kozintsev 1977: 113, 191–95, 46)

Kozintsev made much effort to modernize the action of Lear in line with his principle, ‘Shakespeare is our contemporary’, and to provide it with a catastrophic, apocalyptic dimension. There are no ghosts in this film, but political transformations are dramatic, eerie and unjustified; they are simply announced by those in power, as happened in Soviet history. Some characters undergo the full-range transition from the highs of power to the lows of misery; some characters lift themselves from the very bottom to the very top, and then fall again. People are miserable, specified Kozintsev, not because of the fate of mankind, an idea that he associated with ‘citations from Kafka and Camus, the jeans and the black sweater’, the symbols of existentialism... People are miserable because of the policies of the state, which he associated with barred wire, handcuffs and prison bars. In his private notes, Kozintsev explicitly stated that the dynamics that he saw in Lear were typical of Soviet life, with its banal and extraordinary character: ‘Much of what we have seen with our own eyes, of what is taught in schools, of what people talk about in the subway, is similar to the tragedy of Lear’ (Kozintsev 2004: 279, 285). Unlike Hamlet, a second-generation victim, Lear is both a victim and an agent of the crime, one who triggered the catastrophe with his own action. In the course of the film, Lear comes to accept this responsibility, a lesson for the Soviet public.

The world after catastrophe is how Kozintsev described the physical setting where he wanted his Lear to be shot. He searched across the enormous Soviet space for this setting. Some scenes he shot on the wild rocks of the Crimean and others on the wasted mounds of shale in Estonia. In many ways, this Soviet Lear was an imperial production. Performed in Russian, the film featured very few Russian actors or landscapes. White scenes were shot in the exotic environments of Soviet colonial domains in the north and south, most of his cast Kozintsev recruited from among Baltic – Lithuanian and Estonian – actors. Among those who played the central characters, only Lear’s daughters and the Fool were ethnically Russian. The actor who played Lear did not even speak Russian and was dubbed. The set designer was Georgian, the cameraman Lithuanian (the composer was, as always, Shostakovich). Prophetically, Kozintsev imagined Lear’s decision to divide his kingdom as a premonition of
the dividing of the Soviet Union, which he did not live to see. ‘The Duke of Cornwall and the Duke of Albany are rulers of particular, separate peoples, who resemble one another no more than the Georgians resemble the Lithuanians,’ he wrote (Kozintsev 1977: 129; Kozintsev 2004: 36). In Hamlet, Kozintsev settled his accounts with the past; in Lear, he anticipated the future. In Lear, we watch not only a tragedy of mourning and revenge, but also the drama of a changing political order, which leads to social catastrophe. In hindsight, it is easy to see this film about the failed attempt to divide a kingdom as a warning regarding the collapse of the Soviet state. However, contemporary viewers still associated Kozintsev’s Lear with the Soviet past: ‘our recent past with its bloody, scary events, war, fire, destruction, and suffering.’

BEWARE THE FOOL

Though the action of Lear is generally clear, there are moments of complete irrationality in the film, bizarre action that cannot be explained or justified. Such is the scene of the funeral of the Duke of Cornwall, when his wife unexpectedly kisses his dead lips with an open mouth, as if she is a vampire from the Weimar films that Kozintsev adored in his youth. Paradoxically, Kozintsev believed that this subtle play on the edge of reality brought the action closer to the contemporary world.

I often see as my task the turning of some consistent, logical scenes into nightmares. The meaning of these dreams is found not in their distortion of reality. This is the way to approach modern reality: the delusions of coups d’état, mass repressions, murders, and the degeneration of beliefs.

(Kozintsev 1984b: 290)

Kozintsev appreciated Bakhtin’s idea of carnival, but in his Shakespearean films he created an atmosphere of misery and mourning that had nothing to do with humour. Hamlet’s jokes are never funny in Kozintsev’s film, and Lear’s Fool is sad. ‘The cry of grief reaches us through time. Grief integrated the people, kept them together. This is why we are making the film, to hear this cry.’ Sadness is the overwhelming atmosphere of Kozintsev’s versions of Shakespeare; in his notes, he repeatedly wrote about misery, grief, suffering.
and compassion. With approval, he described how Shostakovich kept rewriting some of the music for his films so that ‘it would be even sadder’. In this he saw his poetic licence, ‘the people’s misery gives the right to screen this tragedy’. He wanted to show Lear’s tragedy (an extraordinary story by any criteria) in such a way that ‘everyone would understand: the same or similar has also happened to me’. He wished to immerse the action of Lear not in the beauty of decorations but in ‘the midst of the people’s misery’. The proper form of compassion, he said, ‘means feeling hatred towards the source of misery’. This is why his films were black-and-white: colours of mourning. I do not know what colour grief is, or what shades suffering has,’ wrote Kozintsev. Grief is what he saw in all his favourite authors, in Dostoevsky as well as in Shakespeare: ‘no matter where the man goes, grief is bound tightly to him and plods alongside, never leaving him […] The tragic power of history and the grief of everyday life are always inseparable’ (Kozintsev 2004: 290, 291, 255; Kozintsev 1982: 52-55; Kozintsev 1978: 37, 86-89).

Kozintsev’s films are deadly serious, and even the Fool tells truths rather than jokes. The film-maker’s notes articulate an idea to present the Fool as Lear’s hallucination, his exteriorized conscience: he compares Lear’s conversations with this Fool to Alesha Karamazov’s dialogues with the Devil. Like the ghost of the father in Hamlet, sometimes this Fool is visible to everyone around and sometimes only to the king. Memorably played by Oleg Daï, Lear’s Fool is a powerful, sometimes amazing performer, but he is never funny. Kozintsev wrote that this Fool was ‘a symbol of art under tyranny’. The film-maker acknowledged that his Hamlet betrayed Shakespearean proportions by ‘weakening, or even eliminating, everything comic’ in the play; the same was true of his Lear. Citing Marx, Kozintsev stated that history repeats itself twice, first as tragedy, then as farce. Working on Shakespeare, he added, ‘in the dusk of civilization, tragedies and farces mix in this way that they become indistinguishable’ (Kozintsev 2004: 203, 436; Kozintsev 1984d: 55). On Shakespeare, Kozintsev was probably wrong: his tragedies are distinct from his comedies. But it turned out that Kozintsev was also wrong on Soviet cinema.

One of his students reformulated Kozintsev’s mournful tradition and produced sparkling comedies, popular for their humour and clever in their way of confronting the Soviet twilight. This man was El’zar Riazanov.14 An experienced teacher, Kozintsev developed a problematic relationship with this talented but underperforming student. According to Riazanov’s memoirs, Kozintsev was supportive but never warm towards him; upon graduation, they parted ways, not without rivalry it seems. Characteristically, Riazanov decided against inviting Kozintsev to the premier of his first commercial comedy, Karavan’s Komediya (Comedy Night) (1956), in the hope that the teacher would come of his own accord. He did not, so Riazanov called him at the last moment and then postponed the show until Kozintsev arrived. Having watched the film, the master told Riazanov, ‘This is not what I taught you to do’ (in Kozintseva 1996: 62). Both the tension in their relationship and the teacher’s self-conscious rejection of his student’s extraordinary humour are evident in this situation.

Riazanov said nothing about Kozintsev’s attendance at another comedy, Bereg pretes’emobilnosti (Banquet of the Car) (1966), nor of his comments on this film. He had good reason to be silent, as in this very popular film, he had produced a parody of Kozintsev and in particular, his Hamlet. The two films, Hamlet and Banquet of the Car, share one actor, Innokenti Smolotovskii. Both films also stage Hamlet, the former as its central story and the latter, as a play within the
play, a kind of latter-day 'Mousetrap'. Smoktunovskii plays Hamlet in both films, in the former as a tragedy and in the latter as a farce.

Set in Moscow, *Beware of the Car* shows a corrupt society where almost everyone benefits from illegal networks of connection and distribution, with a private car being the highest symbol of success. In this film, Smoktunovskii plays a role that for the Soviet cinema was no less unusual than Hamlet: the charming maverick and belated utopian, Detochkin. A character whose name connotes childishness, he hopelessly struggles against corruption and disenchantment by finding corrupted functionaries, stealing their cars, selling them on the black market and sending the money to orphanages. When his actions are revealed some think that he is criminal and some that he is crazy. Refusing to accept the dystopian message of Soviet history, this noble savage pursues the radical agenda of the bygone Revolutionary generation: expropriation of the expropriated. Like Kozintsev, Detochkin is a man of the 1920s living in the 1960s. He is an anachronism, which makes him funny; but he is also shown to be competent, loving and loved. On top of his driving and robbing skills, he is also shown to be an actor. Interspersed with his auto thefts, we watch him playing Hamlet in an amateur theatre. When his crimes are revealed, nobody supports him apart from a few older characters who still keep the living remains of the Revolutionary faith. Meaningfully, we learn nothing about his absent father.

A theme of friendship runs through the film. In a little episode, Detochkin asks for the paradigmatic Soviet cigarettes, 'Belomor', which were named after a lethal agglomeration of labour camps. But a cheerful kiosk on a Moscow street has run out of 'Belomor', and Detochkin satisfies himself with the cigarettes called simply 'Drug' (Friend). Make friends, not camps – this could be the slogan of the Thaw. Detochkin acquires friends even among the law enforcement officers who are investigating his crimes. In the end, of course, these personal friendships recede before the Soviet law, and Detochkin is sent to serve in the newest version of the Gulag. But at the very end he returns to his friends.

The play that the protagonists prepare, rehearse and finally perform throughout the whole film is Hamlet, which encapsulates the action of the film, just as the Mousetrap scene does in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Like Hamlet, Detochkin preserves the betrayed values of the generation of the fathers, which brings him into mortal conflict with his contemporaries. In the amateur theatre, a joint venture of two trade unions, the militia men and the taxi-drivers, Detochkin, who plays Hamlet, meets his nemesis, the state investigator who plays Laertes. Together they listen to a long, funny speech in which the director of this theatre echoes Detochkin's utopianism by claiming the intrinsic advantage of amateur actors over professional ones. Without further ado, the director announces his production of Shakespeare, whom he calls by his first name, as Kozintsev did in some letters. To add to the fun, the director mispronounces William in a very Russian way, starting with V and stressing the second syllable. Is it not obvious, he asks the audience, that the actors who are not paid for their performances play better than those who are paid? A man with a high-pitched voice and the aura of a Soviet cultural manager, this director looks and sounds like Riazanov's caricature of Kozintsev. The fact that Smoktunovskii, the actor who played Hamlet for Kozintsev, also played Detochkin, who played Hamlet in *Beware of the Car*, deepens the feeling of a blasphemous, even cruel parody on Kozintsev's *Hamlet*.

At the end, the film shows a duel between Hamlet and Laertes on the stage, which is accompanied by the loud, pathetic tune of an amateur orchestra, a truly vicious parody on Shostakovich's music in *Hamlet*. Then we see a court
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At the end, the film shows a duel between Hamlet and Laertes on the stage, which is accompanied by the loud, pathetic tune of an amateur orchestra, a truly vicious parody on Shostakovich's music in Hamlet. Then we see a court trial in which both duellists fight again, one as the accuser and another as the investigator. The latter gives a speech in which he acknowledges the complexity of the world in aphoristic terms that were remarkably different from the Soviet tradition: 'He is guilty', the investigator says about Detochkin, 'but he is not guilty.' After deliberation, the court convicts Detochkin. But in place of
Hamlet's funeral in Kozintsev's film, *Beware of the Car* features a happy ending. The aged, shaved, but recognizable hero returns from a camp and finds his fiancée. 'I have returned' – these are Detochkin's final words. Illuminated by the crazy and happy smile of Smoktunovskii, this iconic scene is an epitaph to the saga of the Gulag returnees and to the decades of Soviet experience.

For the new generation, the Shakespearean way of mourning – one of the highest manifestations of the 'longing for world culture', the slogan of the Soviet intelligentsia since the 1930s – seemed incapable of reflecting the complexity of the historical process that led to the deaths of parents and grandparents. The process had to be grasped locally, by looking at mundane characters in their indigenous environment, who reveal their unusual stories.
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Riazanov’s long and productive career, which featured the most popular Soviet-style Christmas story, *Ironia suzhytov* (1975), and a forward-looking analysis of the complexity of social change, *Garaza/Garage* (1979), proved that this comedian mastered an art that he could not learn from his teacher. In his films, mourning for the Soviet losses—victims and ideals—took comic forms. Through warped, playful re-enactments of the past post-catastrophic culture claims that the past has gone and will never return.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Alexander Bkind is Reader in Russian Literature and Cultural History at the University of Cambridge, where he also directs an international research project, ‘Memory at War: Cultural Dynamics in Poland, Russia and Ukraine’. His latest book is Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience (2011), and he is working on a new book on Russia’s political mourning.

Contact: King’s College, Cambridge University, Cambridge, CB2 1ST, UK.
E-mail: ae2640@cam.ac.uk