COMMENTARY

A tragedy of idle weeds

Why Grigori Kozintsev's *Lear* is more faithful to Shakespeare's 'arable play' than most modern stagings

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Three years before he died in 1971, the dissident Soviet film-maker Grigori Kozintsev released *Korol Lir*, his final work, a Russian-language version of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Boris Pasternak provided the translation and Dmitri Shostakovich the score. Widely celebrated, though now rarely shown, Kozintsev's production was in part a response to, and a reaction against, Peter Brook's seminal 1962 staging of the play, filmed in 1970, at the centre of which is the barely contained rage of Paul Scofield's Lear.

Brook's stark sets place events against the ground-zero backdrop of a bare, apocalyptic winter landscape. This nihilistic topography was inflected by an influential reading of Shakespeare's tragedy by the Polish critic Jan Kott in his *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1961). For Kott, *King Lear* was an absurdist drama, a Shakespearean *Endgame* – and registered the paranoid climate and denuded mental landscapes of the Cold War. The absence of the living land from this production also marks a post-Second World War shift towards desiccated, psychologized dramatizations of *King Lear*. For Brook and others, stage directions in post-1681 editions of the play – which misleadingly suggest that much of its central action takes place on a "heath" – authorize a blasted vision of the earth.

Brook's – and through Brook, Bertolt Brecht's and Samuel Beckett's – influence continues to be felt. His is largely the image of the world of *King Lear* inherited by modern audiences. More recent productions, including Adrian Noble's 1982 and 1993 RSC productions, and Trevor Nunn's 2007 version, which starred Ian McKellen as a ludic Lear, and which took its ground-zero references from Brook, also largely ignore the land, bringing to the fore more cosmically scaled battles. Today's audiences could be forgiven, then, for thinking that in *King Lear*, Shakespeare was wholly uninterested in the worked land as a living actor in the drama.

Kozintsev, although a personal friend of Brook and an admirer of his work, lamented the "Brechtian aesthetics" and "mannerisms" of this staging. Kozintsev spurned what he called Brook's "desolate nature", and his own staging was informed by an interest in returning to Shakespeare's original focus on the land – a focus lost to most modern audiences. The spaces in his film – as in Shakespeare's play – are not "empty"; rather, they are populated by the common people, who make this into a lived and living, and hence also diseased and dying, land. This refusal to redact the land on the stage is shared by Natal'ia Vorozhbit's *The Grain Store* (reviewed in the *TLS*, October 9, 2009), which toured the United Kingdom recently. In his press release, the director, Michael Boyd, compared this RSC commission to *King Lear*. Yet *Korol Lir* actually offers the more fruitful pairing, since, like *The Grain Store*, its cultural and political frame of reference is also the 1930s Ukrainian famine, known as the *Holodomor*.

So what nature of land is revealed by Kozintsev's wide angles? In what approximates to Act IV Scene vi of Shakespeare's play, Korol Lir crawls on his elbows through a wheat field, gathering furrow weeds (and a "beet-top" – beetroots tellingly provide a recurring motif in *The Grain Store*). The hungry King even grazes, like a ruminant. This is emphatically not a "heath"; it is tilled, cultivated land. Kozintsev's presentation of Act IV Scene vi is faithful to Shakespeare's play-text and to what we know of early modern agriculture and its lived – and living – landscape. The idea of the mad and dispossessed Lear on a "blasted heath" – a phrase from *Macbeth*, not *Lear* – which seems to have influenced Brook and his followers is in fact an editorial invention. The term "Heath" was introduced in Nahum Tate's text of 1681 and picked up by Nicholas Rowe for his edition of the play (1709). Further damage was done in early nineteenthcentury stage directions, in which a childlike and Christ-like Lear enters "fantastically dressed with wild flowers".

Jüri Järvet as King Lear in Grigori Kozintsev's film, 1971

By returning to Shakespeare's 1608 quarto, we can restore the play to its original agricultural and political context, and ask why it is that for Shakespeare, as for Kozintsev, *King Lear* is an arable play. Here is Cordelia's description of her father in Act IV:

> . . . why he was met euen now . . .
> Crownd with rank femiter, and furrow weedes,
> With hor-docks, hemlocke, nettles, cookow flowers
> Darnell and all the idle weedes that grow,
> In our sustayning, corne; a centurie is sent forth,
> Search euery acre in the hye growne field,
> And bring him to our eye.

Despite the fact that this report clearly, and in a very particular manner, describes a crown of arable weeds, we have been encouraged to think of Lear as being adorned with a crown of wild flowers – decidedly not the same thing. And what about Shakespeare's "hye growne field"? We are familiar with the sight of modern fields of wheat or barley in which mature plants stand less than a metre tall. Such so-called dwarf cereals are, in fact, a product of twentieth-century plant breeding and biotechnology. In Shakespeare's time, you could get lost in a wheat field, among crop plants (and their weeds) up to two metres and more tall. Cordelia's scout heard Lear singing, but could he have seen him? Only his crown, if at all. Lear crawls through wheat fields in Kozintsev's film – that was the only way, given the prevalence of modern dwarf varieties of wheat, for Kozintsev to remain faithful to the lines spoken in Act IV.

One of the "idle weedes" that tells us much about the world, the environment, that Shakespeare has in mind in *King Lear*, is the poisonous wheat-mimicker darnel, which ripens – as one of Shakespeare's sources, Gerarde's *Herball* (1597), points out – in August. The play's climax, then, takes place during early harvest time – and not, as stage orthodoxy has it, in winter or spring. When darnel infiltrates the food chain, most often in the form of bread or beer, the results are symptoms resembling madness: blurred vision, hallucinations, incoherence, and disorientation. In the central image in Natal'ia Vorozhbit's play – a church converted into a grain hoard – the undistributed contents become mouldy, psychotoxic and corrupt. Vorozhbit's grain store, then, harbours precisely these symptoms of derangement, and in one of the play's most trenchant scenes, the hapless Gavrilo, in a "drunken stupor", is shut inside and goes mad as a result.

Gerarde's taxonomy, or genealogy, of arable species and subspecies distinguishes three kinds of relationships between field plants: "fools", "kin" and "bastardes". The terminology is particularly suggestive in the context of *King Lear*. We have proper wheat, and we have fool's wheat: darnel. We have an Edgar, and we have a fool's Edgar: Edmund – who is, of course, referred to as "*Bastard*" from the opening stage direction of the 1608 quarto. And so in this brief description of Lear's crown of "idle weeds", and in the King's choice of "darnel" in place of "wheat", Shakespeare alludes to the personal and political issues at the heart of his tragedy: a father's privileging a subversive, "bastard" child, Edmund, over a legitimate and loyal son, Edgar; the potential for subversion to arise from within; and the devastating effects on the living landscape and its people when a King abdicates his responsibilities in the autumn of his life.

Lear was begun in 1604, the year of King James's coronation and the beginning of negotiations that would result in the Union of the Crowns. In this same year, Shakespeare was forty, and like Lear requesting "rayment, bed and food" from his daughters – he seems to have started making provision for his eventual retirement. But what should have promised peace and prosperity delivered a period of sustained civil and social unrest – particularly in Shakespeare's homeland, the Midlands – fuelled by a series of bad harvests, deaths from starvation and malnutrition, and land enclosures. These factors prompted civil disobedience, withdrawal of labour, and the illegal "hoarding" of grain.

Shakespeare himself was guilty of the latter activity. Although living in London, he retained substantial properties in and around Stratford, where he stockpiled grain for sale at inflated prices to the local brewing trade, and in July 1605 paid a large sum, £440, for a half interest in a lease of "tithes of corn, grain, blade, and hay". Anticipating his retirement, Shakespeare found that his personal "harvest time" was neither peaceful nor pastoral. Instead, when he sat down to devise *King Lear*, Shakespeare contemplated a turbulent Britain, in which food was scarce, harvests uncertain, and its subjects divided.

There are parallels between Shakespeare's Britain and Kozintsev's Soviet Union that suggest reasons why the director was able to pick up these themes. In *King Lear: The space of tragedy*, Kozintsev's filming diary, he reflects on his wish to portray Lear's world as one in which the state descends from plenty and abundance into famine, where crops have been destroyed as a consequence of political decisions and "wholesale burning". Situating some of the film in a plain by the Caspian Sea – one of the ancient trading routes and sources of grain – he brings to the play his own childhood memories of disease and famine under Stalin. "This", he writes of the scenes in Acts IV and V, "is my idea of the black death. I saw more than enough of this sort of darkness or black death in my early childhood."

Kozintsev would have been very aware of the politicization of agriculture and what can happen when the state mishandles food and grain supply. *Korol Lir* is traumatized by memories of Stalinist agrobiology. In addition to the 1932–3 *Holodomor*, the Soviet Union suffered two other devastating famines: 1921–2 and 1946–7. The author of Stalinist agronomy was Trofim Lysenko, whose political rise between 1928 and 1940 was built on an ideological rejection of the discipline of genetics as established by the work of Gregor Mendel, Thomas Hunt Morgan and others; Stalinist collectivism, as depicted in *The Grain Store*, provided the opportunity for an Edmund-like upstart such as Lysenko. In Lysenko's own words: "It is clear to us that the foundation principles of MendelismMorganism are false. They do not reflect the actuality of living nature and are an example of metaphysics and idealism". Instead, on the flimsiest of evidence, Lysenko, with the imprimatur of Stalin, introduced quack remedies to the already ailing agricultural economy of the Soviet Union.

The year 1946 was one of severe drought, especially in the Ukraine, Moldavia and parts of the central black-earth and lower Volga regions. The grain harvest was only about 40 per cent of that in 1940, and had declined by almost 20 per cent compared with production in 1945, the last year of the Great Patriotic War. It was not until 1964 that Lysenko's doctrines were finally discredited: Nikita Khrushchev eventually conceded that under Lysenko, "Soviet agricultural research spent over thirty years in darkness". Kozintsev's vision of *King Lear* took shape as these historic events unfolded. *The Grain Store*, which focuses explicitly on events from 1929–33 and their continuing impact on Ukrainian identity, registers a similar renewed anxiety about crises of sustenance, man-made and natural.

Dramatic orthodoxy follows the ground-zero conceptualizations of *Lear* so starkly exemplified by Brook, Nunn and Noble. However, it is in fact Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* that is closest, not just to the radical energies of Shakespeare's play, which interrogates the political uses of land, but also to our own twenty-first-century fears and preoccupations about what we do to the land – and what it does to us. The thought of an empty stomach, as Vorozhbit's *The Grain Store* illustrates, is every bit as creatively energizing as post-nuclear Angst. Shakespeare's Lear, like Kozintsev's Lir, is the Autumn King, the King of Wheat, and this arable play Shakespeare's unrecognized Georgic.