

Hamlet

GRIGORI KOZINTSEV

1964

Shakespeare's Hamlet is a tragedy perceived by many to be about internality, inaction and inertia. Yet Grigori Kozintsev's adaptation is an active affair, zipping along at a brief two hours and twenty minutes. The film boasts a castle setting that could hold its own against any contemporary blockbuster, the Baltic shore as an elemental backdrop and a dazzling Shostakovich score. These elements, which are largely inaccessible to a theatre production, juxtapose Hamlet's interiority and illuminate what Kozintsev saw as the production's major tension. He was determined to, 'Not adapt Shakespeare to the cinema, but the cinema to Shakespeare'. He succeeded in making one of the great if not the greatest film adaptation of Shakespeare in any language.

The unique visual language of the film is gothic and dark. The film is shot in black and white, despite colour film being easily available as Kozintsev thought it would add to the tragedy. There is a gorgeous interplay of shadow and light which accentuates the film's supernatural themes. As the action unfolds, it is constantly informed by sophisticated lighting adding suspense that only cinema can achieve. As a viewer we see shadows approach key scenes, before we see the actors. Furthermore, the film's imagery is poetic and elemental: sea, stone, fire and iron. The rugged coast and the inherent power and loneliness of the sea interplay beautifully with Shakespeare's tale. Ophelia being dressed by her maids is a profound visual symbol of the madness of grief and mourning.

Other cinematic techniques used in the film are nothing short of genius. To express Hamlet's internality, Kozintsev cleverly deploys the use of diegetic (source) and non-diegetic sound to accompany the film. The momentous scene where Hamlet deduces his uncle's guilt is set dramatically to a score that elevates the tension and mirrors the working of his mind. Moments later, as Hamlet maniacally runs through the halls, he demands that a band play. As the comparatively light sounds of the band echo through the castle, the anticlimactic transference from roaring score to source sound accentuates Hamlet's madness.

Kozintsev's success in adapting Hamlet is due not only to his singular vision but to his placing himself at the centre of a trio of creative collaboration. He used a Boris Pasternak translation,

which imbued Shakespeare with the beauty and specificity of the Russian language. There were many letters exchanged between Kozintsev and Pasternak, as the director used Pasternak's insight as a translator to understand how to adapt and reduce the screenplay. Moreover Shostakovich, a long time collaborator with Kozintsev, developed the score. The pieces Shostakovich wrote for the film (reworking a score he produced for a 1920s theatre production) range from themes for characters, grand orchestral movements and quiet moments of diegetic sound. Without doubt the stature of Kozintsev's Hamlet, is due to the collaboration of three Russian Cultural greats, with Kozintsev marrying their insights and contributions to make one perfect whole.

The shots in Kozintsev's Hamlet demonstrate the play's political dimension, as well as its much famed interiority. The mise-en-scene is vast, expansive and filled with people. The camera traverses with characters across this bustling and rugged scape to express competing interests, and to document the domino effect of emotions from various events. As Hamlet leaves the court for England after Polonius's murder, the camera notably lingers on the faces of the court. Battalions of soldiers are shown marching across the landscape.

Kozintsev's focus on political themes takes his adaptation in a vastly different direction from the iconic 1948 Laurence Olivier version, which opted to focus predominantly on the play's psychological elements. Shakespeare had been decreed a 'decadent' writer by Stalin and his works were not widely circulated. Pasternak's translation, which was completed in the 1940s, was an act of dissidence. Kozintsev's direction of a famed production of the play in 1954, was only possible after Stalin's death the year previous. There is no doubt Kozintsev uses the corruption and foul play inherent in Shakespeare's work to communicate a critique of contemporary Russia. This lauded adaptation utilises material written centuries prior to provoke the present. Kozintsev described the process of working on Shakespeare as follows: 'It reminds one of archaeology... the strange thing is that the deeper you dig, the more contemporary everything that comes to the surface seems as it reveals its significance.'