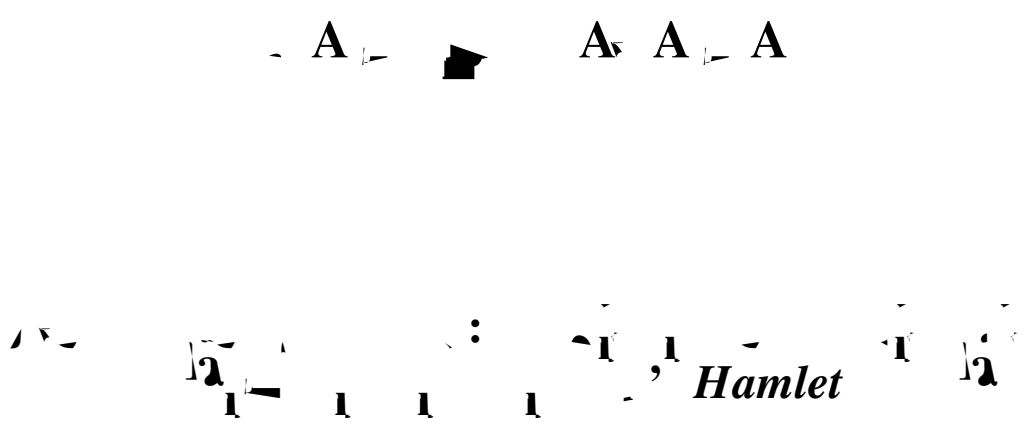


"But one drop of blood shed is equal to an ocean."[1]
Andrey Tarkovsky

While much critical commentary on the filming of *Hamlet* is explicitly apprehensive of the play's cinematic unsuitability, none is perhaps as categorically adamant about its daunting difficulties as J. Blumenthal's belief that the tragic protagonist is unfit for film narrative: "Hamlet would be untranslatable because of the verbality of his experience."[2] Indeed, even a less drastic critic like Barbara Hodgdon who readily admits that Grigori Kozintsev's *Hamlet*[3] (1964) "does achieve some of Shakespeare's effects,"[4] likewise emphasises its literary source's non-visual qualities: "*Hamlet* is a 'head play', in that much of the action (or, rather, the questioning about whether to act and when) takes place in the imagination and is expressed primarily in language. Because of this, Hamlet's physical role has a commanding stasis."[5] The echo of G. Wilson Knight's

remark is unmistakable especially in the final epithet: "Instead of being dynamic, the force of Hamlet is, paradoxically, static."[6] Given this unequivocal consensus on *Hamlet* having what Robert A. Duffy calls "un-filmic tendencies,"[7] one can easily presume that Kozintsev's version shares with other filmed *Hamlets* the inevitable shortcomings of any such doomed attempt to film Shakespeare's unfilmable text.

Nor are the various short reviews and articles on Kozintsev's *Hamlet* more sympathetic to its merits. A typical example is Dwight Macdonald's comment on its anaemic rehashing of what distinguishes its most prestigious predecessor: "The chief trouble is that it is staged in the academic style as was Olivier's *Hamlet* (from which it has borrowed freely, as the device of having Hamlet's soliloquies take place in his head, or rather on the sound track, a gimmick perhaps, but not a bad one; but I wish those roaring seas around the castle hadn't also been borrowed)."[8] In what follows I intend to explore the complex problem of filming Shakespearean monologues, but not without focusing first on the Kozintsev "borrowing" which troubles Macdonald most—the stormy seas crashing against the castle rocks. In the process I hope to demonstrate that, far from being a mere borrowing from Olivier, Kozintsev's sea-rock setting accrues a central thematic suggestiveness that is crucial to an understanding of the Russian *Hamlet* as a Shakespearean film adaptation. For Kozintsev's beach replaces Shakespeare's castle as the location for three major sequences: the Hamlet/ghost meeting, the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, and Hamlet's death-scene. The importance of this shift from castle to beach can hardly be exaggerated, since the interpolated beach sequences become the very means whereby Kozintsev makes Shakespeare's "head play" think in predominantly visual images. This statement can be viewed in truer perspective through an analysis of these

three sequences beginning with Hamlet's encounter with the ghost of his father.

Any consideration of the Hamlet/ghost meeting would reveal that its relocation from battlements to beach entails more than just a change of scene, for the interaction of seascape and phantom creates a visual network of thematically expressive links and synapses. A case in point is Kozintsev's subtle morphing of the ghost's appearance in terms of the beach setting as a means of conveying visually the hidden sickness of the body politic—the "disease [which] is not visible."[9] This political dimension is central to Kozintsev's interpretation of *Hamlet*, since for him Shakespeare's play is pivoted on the poison of politics: "the infection was injected not only in the bloodstream of the rightful king of Denmark but also into the circulatory system of society. Everything was infected."[10] Consequently, Kozintsev creates images oozing political poison. Consider, for instance, just one Kozintsev detail, the ghost's cape, and how it undulates like a wave. By shooting the beach phantom in slow motion, Kozintsev accentuates the cloak's fluidity, thereby hinting visually that what Hamlet confronts is a spirit of the billowing sort—one

spirit of health [than] goblin damn'd" (1, 4, 40), endeavours to render its unhealthiness quintessentially Shakespearean by creating his version of Horatio's phantom of the sea-abysses—one whose undulating movement rightly reeks of the deadly "cliff […] flood" (1, 4, 69-70). Consequently, Kozintsev's billowing fabrics accrue deep watery associations: they signify, in fact, a specific kind of death—the liquid one that their billowing subtly suggests. Dying of lethal liquid, Kozintsev's royal victim returns in ghostly shape as a billowing emissary of the sea of death. The billowing cloth connection which the director establishes with Ophelia is thus proleptic of her death by drowning and, in the case of Gertrude and Claudius, of their own death by liquid poison. What he visualises through the billowing cloth motif, with its suggestion of a lethal fluidity, is the Shakespearean concern with images of fluid death. The imagery of liquefaction looms large in *Hamlet* whether in the Gravedigger's tanner speech (5, 1,164-66) or Hamlet's first soliloquy. Indeed, what Hamlet initially soliloquises about is his suicidal lust to liquefy his life: "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew..." (1, 2, 129-30). Kozintsev

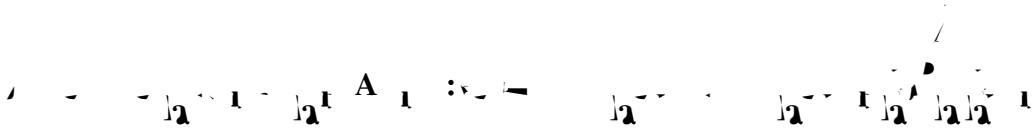
all expressed one and the same

What Kozintsev creates here is the speculative spatiality of a phantom dimension. Hence the more disquieting dislocation within that shot of the camera panning past Hamlet, seemingly to the further reaches of the shore, but only apparently so—for suddenly the ghost's outstretched arm irrupts into the frame from behind and above Hamlet to appropriate the beach location.[4] Kozintsev's moving camera does not retain a dramatic spatial continuity, thereby transforming even on-screen spatiality into an area of uncertainty. Barbara Leaming remarks that Kozintsev's initial shot of the castle as a watery reflection w

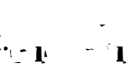
Shklovsky calls *ostranemie*, the aesthetic process of "defamiliarising [or] estranging" objects.[27] Kozintsev estranges the beach location by defamiliarising it in the Shklovskian sense of "making it strange,"[28] and once more visually to evoke key Shakespearean themes in *Hamlet*.

This is also quite apparent in the way Kozintsev integrates the strangeness of both the beach and its visitant. Consider, once again, how he handles the ghost's physical appearance. He follows Shakespeare in presenting the ghost as Horatio describes him to Hamlet: "Armed at point exactly, cap-à-pie" (1, 2, 200). Moreover, Kozintsev graces the ghost with a Meyerholdian feature: a pair of profoundly sad eyes that recall Meyerhold's moving vision of the Shakespearean phantom as "a ghost on whose cheek a tear of gratitude freezes."[29] However, Shakespeare's military phantom has a similar countenance,

[...]" (3, 1, 79-80). It is necessary at this point that we consider the thematic aptness of Kozintsev's decision to exchange once again a Shakespearean location within the castle for this beach and make it a locus for the "To be or not to be" soliloquy.



It is quite reasonable to assume that Kozintsev's relocation of Hamlet's existential soliloquy to the haunted beach could have been inspired by its vision of life as "a sea of troubles" (3, 1, 59). Admittedly, Shakespeare's sea metaphor could have provided Kozintsev with the solution to his major problem about the soliloquy setting having to "reveal the link between the hero's spiritual life and the material world."[31] Still Kozintsev, striving for what Charles

Consider, for example, that moment when Kozintsev first pans with Hamlet leaving frame right, and then cuts to pan with him again entering frame left.  Such a juxtaposition of two panning movements, while suggesting by its integrated fluidity an unbroken spatial continuity, concurrently affirms by its pivotal cut and the diametrically opposed exit from and entrance into the frame that this is also a broken space, and visually opaque. The suggestion is of an oxymoronic dimension where, since left and right can be bizarrely interchanged, the strolling Hamlet remains rooted to the same place. The effect Kozintsev conveys is of a spaceless space that renders Hamlet's wandering ultimately static. It is through its paradoxical spatiality that Kozintsev's beach is made to embody Hamlet's metaphysical paralysis. Hedged between the contraries of life and death, Hamlet fulfils the ghost's prophetic words by becoming an inert watery plant:

> And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
> That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,
> Wouldst thou not stir in this… (1, 5, 32-34)

Viewing life, as it were, from Charon's skiff, Hamlet is a living dead thing, hence the antithetical geography of Kozintsev's beach where surging waves ritually flow in and ebb away. By their suggestion of motion in stasis, the seesaw waves embody Hamlet's personality as Knight interprets it, "wavering, oscillating."[34] On Kozintsev's beach then, Hamlet treads on what Jacques Derrida labels in his essay on the ghostliness of *Hamlet* "the virtual space of spectrality"[35]—a territory of existential antitheses where Hamlet's walk becomes the stroll of an essentially static soul.

Rather than reflecting Hamlet's spiritual sickness, Kozintsev's beach partakes of it both spatially and elementally, and to such an extent that it becomes its actual embodiment.

This is a crucial point, for as Blumenthal cogently argues: "it is not enough that…thoughts can be photographed; photographing them must bring them to life."[36] However, contrary to Blumenthal's own expectations that such a process would be filmically impossible with *Hamlet*, this is exactly how Kozintsev handles cinematically the beach location. For Kozintsev's beach is fundamentally a reworking of what T. S. Eliot finds lacking in *Hamlet*, the "objective correlative"[37] which Kozintsev senses in the "Lethe wharf" image. Out of Shakespeare's soporific Hades river, Kozintsev moulds a beach of paradoxes, where waves of inert energy help him film the unfilmable: Hamlet in static action. Much as Akira Kurosawa does with the *Macbeth* wood in *Kumonosu-jo* (Toho,1957), which Kozintsev considers "the finest of Shakespearean movies,"[38] Kozintsev transforms the beach into the essence of his film. The beach is the space of Hamlet's and the ghost's tragedy, and hence the landscape of their being.

Rückenfigur

The aesthetic principle underlying Kozintsev's choice of setting for the "To be or not to be" soliloquy is now more clearly understandable. For the essential problem of Shakespearean monologues on film, as Kozintsev evidently sees it, is not ultimately a question of whether to retain them wholly or partially, nor of whether they are spoken or voiced-over. More crucially, Kozintsev sees it as being essentially a problem of code-breaking, since he conceives Shakespearean soliloquies as "scenes in code."[39] This is an intriguing concept, since what Kozintsev sees as being coded in a Shakespearean soliloquy is the clue to "the thought behind the whole tragedy."[40] Hence his definition of the Shakespearean soliloquy as "an entrance into…the essence of the action."[41] Only by cracking the soliloquy code can

one open the door to Shakespearean perception or what Kozintsev calls "the way to the interior."[42] For Kozintsev then, direction becomes detection: "You have to try out a multitude of hypotheses until the main clue has been found."[43] Worth mentioning is that Kozintsev settled for the beach as the setting for the "To be or not to be" soliloquy after experimenting with various other locations.[44] His choice was finally determined by his belief that the rocky Crimean beach could be made to embody and partake of the metaphysical issues at stake. The soliloquy setting, like any other film setting for that matter, should therefore become, quoting Blumenthal again, "both the battleground where the conflict rages and the very incitement to conflict."[45] Hamlet's beach trek is nothing less than a confrontation with his solitary self. Kozintsev's Hamlet brings to mind the *Rückenfigur* of Caspar David Friedrich's p p3ake

[1] Andrey Tarkovsky, *Time within Time: The Diaries, 1970-1986* (London: Faber, 1994), 379.
[2] J. Blumenthal, "*Macbeth* into *Throne of Blood*," *Sight and Sound* 34.3 (1965), 195.
[3] Grigori Kozintsev, dir. *Hamlet* (*Gamlet*). Perf. Innokenti Smoktunovski, Michail Nazwanov, Eliza Radzin-Szolkonis, Anastasia Vertinskaya. Videocassette. Castle Hendring (HEN 2211).
[4]