CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Dis-locating King Lear *on Screen*

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King Lear presents an anatomy of despair. It charts the descent of a monarch from the height of his powers to a state of abjection. Lear shifts from a position at the centre of his court and family to one at the periphery, vulnerable and exposed on the heath. The country moves from unity to civil war, the court becomes a site of barbarism, and the royal family are ultimately extinguished. As the wheel of fortune turns on its downward trajectory, Lear is revealed as a ruler unable to distinguish truth from surface appearances, authenticity from rhetoric; he has little grasp of statecraft and his actions implode a family, debase a state and disintegrate a nation. Yet Shakespeare elicits our sympathy for this flawed figure who, at his lowest, finally learns something of the responsibility of leadership and the need for empathy. Throughout it all, the word 'nothing' reverberates, striking at the core of human existence and meaning. One of Shakespeare's great tragedies, *Lear* constitutes one of our cultural 'monsters of the deep' (4.2.48 Q1), a reminder of humanity's dark capacities.[1]

Lear continues to speak to us, illuminating the human condition and the contemporary world. Two decades into the twenty-first century, the globe continues to witness and grapple with repressive political regimes; behaviours by political leaders viewed by many as irrational, if not repugnant; the use of state-sanctioned torture; entrenched misogyny and the consequences of patriarchal structures; and mass human displacement, exile and suffering. *Lear* seems more relevant than ever; thus, unsurprisingly, filmmakers have continued to enter into dialogues with the play.

Lear has a rich history on screen, beginning with the silent era, during which adaptations included those directed by William V. Ranous (1909, USA),[2] Gerolamo Lo Savio (1910, Italy)[3] and Ernest Warde (1916, USA).[4] Adaptations have taken a wide variety of forms, including the 1965 French 'dramatique',[5] directed by Jean Kerchbron, and television films, the most recent of which was directed by Richard Eyre for the BBC (2018).

Filmmakers have pushed the boundaries of narrative convention, as in Jean-Luc Godard's 1987 film,[6] and they have utilized the medium of filmed live theatre performance, as in the 2016 production starring Don Warrington (directed for the stage by Michael Buffong and for the screen by Bridget Caldwell).[7]

This volume explores *Lear*'s varied screen afterlives, taking 'screen' in its broader sense, extending beyond the cinematic to include a wide range of digital material (television, live theatre broadcasts, video archives and online movies and fanvids). Of course, complete coverage of *Lear* on screen is beyond the scope of any single volume; however, the essays here – in the print volume and the additional essays in the online resources – offer an extensive engagement with the key issues raised by the various adaptations and appropriations of *Lear*.

This introduction provides a broad overview of *Lear* on screen and offers some critical contexts for the chapters in this volume, highlighting their original contributions to the field. The volume comprises four sections. The first, 'Surviving *Lear*', revisits the canon by offering new perspectives on productions that remain landmarks of screen history, continuing, through their afterlives in video and online archives, to influence more recent adaptations and appropriations, and to invite new scholarly perspectives. The second section, '*Lear* en Abyme', considers the metatheatrical reframing of *Lear* generated through intersections of theatre, screen and forms of 'liveness'. The chapters in the third section, 'The Genres of *Lear*', focus on what happens to *Lear* when Shakespeare's tragedy intersects with the codes of various filmic genres such as comedy, the Western or the road movie. The chapters of the final section, '*Lear* on the Loose', focus on the migration and appropriation processes that *Lear* has gone through and explore cases where *Lear* has wandered from the zone of adaptation into freer retellings and citations. Loosened from its moorings to the hypotext, *Lear* moves into new cultural contexts and geographical locations, creating new perspectives that nevertheless maintain dialogues with Shakespeare's text.

The word 'dislocate' appears only once in the whole Shakespearean corpus, uttered by Albany in Q1 of *Lear*, in a speech in which he imagines his hands would be 'apt enough to dislocate and tear' Goneril's 'flesh and bones' (4.2.64 Q1). The notion of 'dislocation' permeates *Lear* and informs this volume, comprising the ways in which the *Lear* films have explored notions of state disintegration, crisis, vagrancy and geographical displacement; the transposition of the play into various contexts; and fragmentation, with dramatic motifs being dismantled and appropriated in free

adaptations. By revisiting 'canonical' versions and radical retellings, translations beyond the Anglophone zones, intermedial explorations of metanarratives, hybrid genres and the varied nodes of the *Lear* cultural rhizome, by standing up for both 'legitimate' and 'bastard' versions, the volume aims to re-invigorate the current critical field.

Surviving *Lear*: Revisiting the Canon

From the extensive *Lear* on screen oeuvre, three films have emerged as canonical, evidenced by José Ramón Díaz Fernández's film-bibliographies (in print and the extended online version): Grigori Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* (USSR, 1970), Peter Brook's *King Lear* (Great Britain and Denmark, 1971) and Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (Japan and France, 1985).[8] While scholars may differ in their preferences for what can be considered canonical, if we take the amount of critical literature generated by the films as a measure of impact on the critical field, these three films emerge as landmarks in the *Lear* screenscape: the three 'legitimate' children issuing from the matrix of Shakespeare's tragedy and nourishing many generations of offshoots. Furthermore, the three films and their directors engage in dialogue with each other, constituting a fascinating cluster of interactions and influences.[9]

Kozintsev's experiences in filming *Lear* suggest that adapting the tragedy for the screen can become an endurance test and experience in survival. In her insightful 2013 chapter on the director, Courtney Lehmann quotes his acknowledgement that 'working on the tragedy was unbearable', and argues that 'the feelings detailed in his film diary paint a picture of a man on the brink of suicide'.[10] Kozintsev both did and did not survive *King Lear*: the film was his swan song and he died in 1973. Yet, as Kenneth S. Rothwell notes, although the play is a source of despair, 'Kozintsev squeezes some hope out of hopelessness by identifying his mad king with the struggles of humanity in general'.[11] The casting of 'the diminutive, softly spoken Jüri Järvet (Yuri Yarvet) as Lear facilitates the film's interpretation of *Lear* as the story of a journey towards self-revelation of the human condition' (Figure 1.1).[12]

In Kozintsev's film, the Fool survives: the king is dead, long live the Fool, thus highlighting the play's interlinking of king and Fool. The surviving Fool becomes witness to the apocalypse – however, in the etymological sense of revelation. Rothwell notes that the film is embedded in 'Marxist meliorism rather than in Kottian pessimism'.[13]

Peter Brook's 1971 *King Lear*, the next landmark of the *Lear* canon, constituted a second take on the play. After the heavily abridged Omnibus

Figure 1.1: Yuri Yarvet as Lear in Grigori Kozintsev's *King Lear* (1970)

Figure 1.2: Paul Scofield as Lear in Peter Brook's *King Lear* (1971)

television production Brook directed in 1953 with Orson Welles (Lear) and Natasha Parry (Cordelia), Brook revisited his vision of *Lear*. Shot in 1968, with Paul Scofield in the title role, the film was not released until 1971. This version, highly influenced by Jan Kott's reading of *Lear* as an absurd Beckettian world, provoked a 'profound critical division'.[14] Anthony Davies describes it as a 'drama of faces',[15] while Rothwell sees Lear as a 'talking head' (Figure 1.2).[16] The film cultivates discontinuity and a sense of nihilism, drawing from the key idea of nothingness in a play that could ironically be subtitled 'Much Ado About Nothing'. Brook, on many occasions, uses his camera to make this nothing conspicuous, from the first completely soundless sequence[17] to the last shot of the film that leaves a blank colourless screen. It is, according to Peter Holland (2013), 'an

exercise in defamiliarization and distanciation'.[18] In Brook's vision, the viewer is situated in this visible nothingness, but ultimately there are no survivors in this bleak world.

In Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985), the sense of despair is translated but in a more colourful way. *Ran* (meaning 'Chaos' in Japanese) constitutes an adaptation both canonical and cross-cultural.[19] Financed by an international partnership of Japanese and French creditors, and distributed by Orion Pictures in the USA, the film was shaped to appeal to both Japanese and international audiences.[20] Consequently, Kurosawa has been criticized 'for being both not Japanese enough and too unapologetically so'.[21] Yet the immense volume of critical responses to *Ran* evidences its significance to the history of *Lear* on screen.

Kurosawa intersected *Lear*'s plot with the Japanese story of sixteenth-century warlord Motonari Mori, who transferred power prematurely to his sons. *Ran*'s narrative centres on the character of Lord Hidetora Ichimonji, and Lear's daughters become sons. Key shifts include adding a violent past for the Lear figure, responsible for the eye gouging of Tsurumaru, brother of Lady Sué. The 'quiet stoicism' of the blind Tsurumaru functions as a 'potent accusation of Hidetora's past guilt'[22] and the haunting flute that he plays adds to the sense of the past catching up to the present. The overall tenor of the film is, in the words of Mark Thornton Burnett, 'a disquisition about loss, chaos and despair'.[23]

Many critics have noted the striking aesthetics of *Ran*. Judith Buchanan has commented on the irony of the film's title, given that 'a more aesthetically beautiful or ordered film could scarcely be imagined'; she notes its 'vividly schematic use of costume and colour, its appreciation of landscape and its painterly eye'.[24] Long shots predominate in the film, the framing constantly placing human action within a wider context of time and space that undermines human pretensions. Peter Babiak suggests that one interpretation of *Ran* is that 'the frame represents the view of the gods, who are powerless to intervene in human affairs but are deeply affected by them'.[25] While the film is set in a specific historical period, the Sengoku Jidai or 'Age of the Country at War' (c. 1467–c. 1600),[26] Kurosawa's depiction of 'dissipating mist' in the opening and closing shots has the effect of 'situating the diegesis of his film in a mythical, rather than historical past'.[27] Yet the spectres of history remain. Also reflecting on the implications of natural elements, Burnett observes the way that repeated cloud imagery 'conjure[s] the terrifying nuclear emblems of the cessation of World War II'.[28]

The first section of this volume revisits these canonical versions in two ways: by focusing on the filmic treatment of one specific character – the

Fool – across three productions, and by reconsidering *Ran* through the lens of posthumanism. Samuel Crowl's chapter, 'Lear's Fool on Film: Peter Brook, Grigori Kozintsev, Akira Kurosawa', puts what seems marginal at the centre of the picture by focusing on the figure of the Fool in these three canonical versions. This character in *Lear* is one of the potent truth-tellers, who differs from Cordelia and Kent in that the Fool's role sanctions and protects his subversive voice. Brook cast Jack MacGowran, a veteran Beckett actor, as the Fool, thus aligning the production with a bleak and minimalist Beckettian world. Kozintsev's choice evoked the horrors of the Second World War; he commented that his Fool, Oleg Dahl, was 'the boy from Auschwitz whom they forced to play the violin'.[29] Kurosawa's androgynous Kyoami, the only Fool given a name, was played by transvestite actor Shinnosuke Ikehata (Pîtâ) (Figure 1.3). Crowl argues that the character is key to the vision in each of these canonical adaptations: 'Each director uses his conception of the Fool as a means of anchoring Lear's story within a cinematic narrative.'

Critics debate whether there is any dimension of hope in Kurosawa's *Ran*. Kott, writing in the late 1980s, emphasized the apocalyptic emptiness at the end of the film.[30] While most critics read the Buddhist references as stressing the bleakness of human destiny, some have found in them suggestions of the potential for redemption.[31] Melissa Croteau's chapter, 'Wicked Humans and Weeping Buddhas: (Post)humanism and Hell in

Figure 1.3: Lord Hidetora Ichimonji (Tatsuya Nakadai) and the Fool Kyoami (Pîtâ) in Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985)

Kurosawa's *Ran*', approaches these debates through the lens of posthumanism, a concept that challenges various aspects of humanism, within an overall context of care for humanity. In the wake of several critics who have analysed the Noh elements in *Ran*,[32] Croteau argues that Kurosawa presents a vision of hell, consistent with a filmic practice that looks directly at the horrors that humans create, and that he draws from Noh in order to break its schemata, resisting resolution to leave audiences in the limbo of apocalypse. She suggests that if there is any hope to be found in the film, it is likely to be located in the viewer; Kurosawa reminds us that 'we have the power *not* to turn away from suffering'.

Alongside *Lear* in the cinema, a rich history of televisual *Lear*s has unfolded, a history relevant to each of the following sections. In her 2008 article on medium specificity, Katherine Rowe highlights the dichotomy between increasing contemporary media convergence on the one hand, and scholarly tendencies to maintain 'medium-specific rubrics' and intellectual boundaries between different types of media on the other.[33] The digital age has brought the reception contexts for film and television closer together, and the increased quality of television productions has arguably reduced the distinction between screen media in some respects. Nevertheless, differences in production contexts and conditions remain relevant to the history of *Lear* on TV, which extends from the early twentieth century to the 'post-television' era. Anthony Davies describes TV as a 'hybrid medium, more happily accommodating words than visualising a universe'.[34] Alan Kimbrough has observed that 'part of the evolution of television can be charted by paying attention to the shift from aural to visual' in signifying.[35] He also points out the risks of 'limited budget studio sets' becoming 'only distraction when . . . subjected to the clarity of the camera' and that stylization can often be more effective.[36] The traditionally intimate space of TV shapes acting styles, requiring actors to convey more with gestures reduced in scope, requiring 'the mastery of minimal effects'.[37] Critics generally agree that '*King Lear* is not an easy play for television'.[38] William Worthen comments, 'Everything about the play attacks the restraint of television; it's a magniloquent, grotesque, cruel spectacle.'[39]

However, Ted Nannicelli has noted the recent 'aesthetic turn' in television studies and argues for an appreciation of the art of television.[40] *King Lear* survives through canonical film versions but also through various TV adaptations, which display a wide variety of aesthetic choices, working within the particular conditions of television to achieve effects resonating with *Lear*'s central themes. Peter Brook's 1953 Omnibus production[41]

presents a stark, formal set and Orson Welles as a menacing Lear who tears the map with a knife, foreshadowing the impending violence. The sharp edges of the portcullis at Gloucester's castle, together with the cage into which Kent is cast, enhance the sense of foreboding. Backgrounds of shots recede into darkness, overcoming the constraints of a studio set through lighting appropriate for the play's themes. Dramatic chiaroscuro effects, with Lear's lit, stricken face in contrast to the shadows, make for an effective storm scene. However, the compressed text that excised the Gloucester subplot attracted negative criticism.[42]

Tony Davenall's 1974 production, with Patrick Magee as Lear, presents a medieval setting with colourful costumes and tapestries on the walls. The aesthetic detracts from the effect of menace in some places, and the heath is unconvincing as a threatening space during the storm. Yet subtle signs of the violence to come are conveyed through the use of animal skins on the throne, the vein of fire imagery and the mounted antlers, invoking the hunt, in Goneril's dining hall. Effective lighting used in the hovel creates shadows with the appearance of a cage and, for the blinding of Gloucester, the device of a blank screen aligns us with his point of view, drawing us into his suffering. Some critics found the production insensitive to the medium; for example, Davies found the visualization and theatricality of the play 'cramped' and commented that there was 'little to suggest a gain in wisdom' in Lear.[43]

Jonathan Miller directed his first television *Lear* in 1975, with Michael Hordern as Lear, then returned to the challenge in 1982, using the same lead actors and production and costume designs.[44] Miller's set used a simple yet effective *mise-en-scène*, with wooden floorboards and black cloth backdrops. The production spent less of its budget on the set in favour of elaborate costumes that, although almost uniformly black, present a range of textures and details creating an aesthetic recalling seventeenth-century Dutch portraiture. The ensemble shots create visually compelling tableaux, prioritizing more visual choices for the viewer over more 'cinematic' editing.[45] However, in Davies's view, Miller's choice of 'dispensing with the royal dimension' rendered 'the tragedy essentially a domestic one. Lear moves about the room like a father, but not like a king'.[46]

Channel Four's 1983 production, directed by Michael Elliott, starred Laurence Olivier as Lear (Figure 1.4). Its opening set suggested Stonehenge; a high-angle shot shows the court prostrate before Lear, rendering the human figures akin to the circle of stones, and this shot is echoed at the tragic ending with the circle around the bodies of Lear and

Figure 1.4: Laurence Olivier as Lear in Michael Elliott's television *King Lear* (1983)

Cordelia. The Stonehenge aesthetic sets a religious tone, also emphasized at several points when Lear prays. Animal skins on the throne suggest the potential for brutality, as does the animal hide map. The use of realistic detail brought the production closer to the conventions of cinema.[47] However, there was criticism of the attempt 'to apply inappropriate techniques of realism' to the television studio context (Holland) and of the predominance of close-ups (Kimbrough).[48]

In Richard Eyre's 1998 BBC production, Ian Holm's Lear is vicious and unpredictable – one who, as Kenneth Rothwell notes, is 'on the edge of lunacy' from the very beginning.[49] Alexander Leggatt points to the production's emphasis on 'close personal relations' and subtlety of performance that are indebted to its origins in a stage production.[50] The dominant reds of the opening set (echoed at the ending with Cordelia's dress) suggest the intersecting associations of blood, family and violence, while the costuming, varying between the modern and the medieval, creates a *Lear* that is not fixed in time, emphasizing its ongoing relevance. The use of mist, with the shift to a white palette, abstracts the setting, accommodating the limits of a studio set, while also linking with the play's theme of compromised vision.

Channel Four's 2008 production, directed by Trevor Nunn and Chris Hunt, presents Ian McKellen in the title role, who effectively 'charts [Lear's] movement towards madness'.[51] Throughout Shakespeare's play, a central vein of circle imagery resonates with its palimpsest of meanings, encompassing the crown, female genitalia, nothingness and the circularity of events and their consequences. The Nunn/Hunt production emphasizes this with a key moment in the opening scene where McKellen's Lear articulates his violent 'nothing' to Cordelia with his face through the

crown, a gesture that returns to haunt him. McKellen repeated this gesture in the 2018 live theatre broadcast of the production directed by Jonathan Munby.

It is in the wake of this long history of TV *King Lear* that the online companion to this volume offers a study of the 2018 *Lear* designed for television.[52] Peter J. Smith's essay, 'Richard Eyre's *King Lear*: a Brexit Allegory', explores the new production directed by Richard Eyre for the BBC, starring Anthony Hopkins as Lear and Emma Thompson as Goneril. The film, Smith shows, presents Lear as a military dictator in a bleak contemporary England of stark inequalities, in which the heath becomes a refugee camp and the hovel a shipping container. Eyre's new vision of *Lear* has links with Edward St Aubyn's *Lear* spinoff novel *Dunbar* (2017), part of the Hogarth Shakespeare series, as well as with the developing fallout from Brexit.

Lear en Abyme: Metatheatre and the Screen

Whereas in theatre the audience has the freedom to look where they please, the televisual and cinematic camera can be 'manipulative, even tyrannical', directing our attention and inviting us 'to interpret a series, rather than a congeries, of events'.[53] The camera decides what we see, thus affecting how we read particular scenes. The second section of the volume, '*Lear* en Abyme', explores various aspects of reflexivity in *Lear* on screen. Sarah Hatchuel's chapter, 'Filming Metatheatre: the "Dover Cliff" Scene on Screen', explores the implications of framing choices in her analysis of the conspicuously metatheatrical Dover cliff scene across various types of productions, cinematic and televisual. She argues that, contrary to Kott's assertion that transposition of the scene to the screen is impossible, television and cinema can 'maintain, and even facilitate, the scene's paradoxes of a *non-space*'. Approaches to the scene range from cutting it completely (Brook 1953; Kozintsev) to a variety of choices including using realistic scenery to reproduce the countryside in the television studio yet revealing no cliff (Davenall), showing a real cliff (Blessed 1999; Eyre 2018), using mist to create ambiguity (Eyre 1998), using close-ups to hide environment and thus sustain the non-space (Miller 1982; Elliott) and using editing and framing techniques to oscillate between certainty and uncertainty (Brook 1971; Blessed). Hatchuel locates agency in the viewers, illuminating the ways in which they must deconstruct the visual discourses to decide how to read the filmic spaces created in the Dover cliff scenes.