

THE DIRECT IMAGE OF TIME AND INTERSTICES: JEAN-LUC GODARD'S *KING LEAR* AND THE CELEBRATION OF EUROPEAN CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Taking into account concepts developed by Gilles Deleuze in *The Time-Image*, namely the direct image of time and interstices, this article analyzes Jean-Luc Godard's filmic adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and argues that the resulting film, in spite of breaking up the narrative canon, is Eurocentric in its celebration of revered art works of Western culture.

Keywords: adaptation; time-image; experimental film; interstices.

RESUMO

Levando-se em conta conceitos desenvolvidos por Gilles Deleuze em *Imagem-Tempo*, especificamente as noções de imagem direta do tempo e de interstícios, este artigo analisa a adaptação filmica de *King Lear* de Shakespeare, realizada por Jean-Luc Godard, e argumenta que o filme, apesar de romper com a narrativa canônica, é eurocêntrico em sua celebração de reverenciadas obras de arte da cultura ocidental.

Palavras-chave: adaptação; imagem-tempo; filme experimental; interstícios.

Katherine Dieckmann: What about your *King Lear* project with Golan and Globus? (...)

JLG: Well, *Lear* I'm not sure about yet. It's just a project at this point, and I'm going to do another movie in between, though that isn't decided either. I've never read it, you know.

KD: Oh, come on!

JLG: I don't know much. I'm not a very good pretender. [Laughs] I just know it's about some old man and his young daughter, or three daughters, but one specifically. Of course I'll read it before I shoot. (STERRITT, 172)

1. Introduction

The philosophical concepts that underlie Gilles Deleuze's way of looking at films are found in Bergson's works *Matter and Memory* (1896) and *Creative Evolution* (1907) and are fundamental for his reasoning. They have enabled Deleuze to develop his theory in two works, namely *Cinema 1, The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2, The Time-image*. This article, however, does not aim at discussing Deleuze's concepts in depth but at appropriating the concept of the direct image of time and that of interstices to discuss Jean-Luc Godard's adaptation of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* as an experimental film that, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, celebrates European culture and addresses an educated audience.

In Deleuze's view, two types of narrative can be constructed in films, for films can generate indirect and direct images of time, depending on whether time is subordinated to movement or subordinates it. The first case includes classical films, mainly the ones

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produced in the pre-World War II years, whereas films which present a direct image of time are mainly produced in the postwar years. That does not mean that after the war films following the classical Hollywood tradition were not made. They have been produced up to our days, but many of them, although not presenting a direct image of time, reveal in their composition elements that show that they have been influenced by the time-image sort of films. These two types of film can be easily distinguished, for they have clearly defined characteristics. What might be a little more difficult to detect in them is the way movement and time are related and the way time is presented.

In films in which the movement-image is the norm, that is, films in which time is subordinated to movement, the composition makes up an organic whole, and the film has a sense of totality, of closure, of a chronological continuum. The notion of time derives from the way movement is structured in the images: a causal relationship in the assemblage of shots, sequences and parts, produces the notion of time. As D. N. Rodowick says in *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*: “two coordinates map this classical image: images are linked or extended according to principles of *association* and *contiguity*, and associated images are integrated into a conceptual whole and differentiated into more extensive sets” (1997, p. 177). So what the movement-image does is to fragment space and to place shots end to end in order to represent organized actions. The notion of time is born from the interplay of action and reaction. In Rodowick's words: “The movement-image only gives an indirect image of time, because time and change are always measured as the division or addition of spatial segments” (1997, p. 48).

The films of postwar cinema in which time-image prevails are characterized by a disconnected space, which is presented serially, little or no organicity, and movement is now subordinated to time, to duration, with the result of undecidability, diversity, no chronological continuum, a sense of instability. Visual and auditory elements, although related and referring to one another, do no longer form an organic whole, as in the movement-image. Time does not result from the links of shots end to end, there is no construction of contiguous spaces through match cutting, and movement is subordinated to time. Time is not considered as a linear succession in space, but as change. Godard's *King Lear* falls into this category.

In this challenging experimental film, Godard tries, to a certain extent, to translate Shakespeare into a modernist iconography. David Bordwell, in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985, p. 311-13), says that the problematic aspect of Godard's films is that they solicit comprehension according to several narrational schemata – organized clusters of knowledge that have an important function in the comprehension of stories – but then deny the ability of any single schema to unify *syuzhet/fabula* relations.² Moreover, Bordwell says, as we watch Godard's films we must shift schemata abruptly, and they will often conflict with one another. The resulting discontinuity makes these films difficult to analyze.

Because he uses “collage” to a great extent, and because the order of episodes in his films is subjected to several different arrangements, Godard can be said to spatialize narration: he constructs paradigmatic sets of images and sounds (e.g., sets of reproductions of paintings or natural sounds, as in *King Lear*) and scatters them throughout the film. With the intensive use of collage – fragmentation of the filmic unity by the juxtaposition of different texts, from different sources – the *fabula* construction is challenged by the accumulation of materials, and the *syuzhet* gets spatialized by an unorthodox succession of items that implies alternative temporal arrangements.

² To Bordwell, *fabula* embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field. A film's *fabula* is never materially present on the screen or soundtrack – what we see is a representation that signals us to infer a story event. The *syuzhet* (usually translated as “plot”) is the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula* in the film. The same *syuzhet* patterns could be embodied in a novel, a play, or a film. And, at a gross level, the same *fabula* could be inferred from a novel, a film, a painting, or a play (1985, p. 49-53).

David Sterritt identifies three main periods in Godard's career, which goes from socially and politically committed films to films with more metaphysical concerns. Other accounts insert a 'video experimentation cycle' between the 'revolutionary years' and the 'contemplative period' (STERRITT, 1999, p. 35). In films like *À Bout de Souffle* (1960), *Une Femme Est Une Femme* (1961) and *Alphaville* (1965), he transgresses the conventions of the gangster film, of the musical and of the science-fiction film in order to make his audience aware of the hidden cinematic structures of these classic genres. In his overtly political phase Godard tries to undermine political and ideological assumptions of the capitalist and imperialist society by more radically attacking the pleasures of the movie-going experience. To this period belong films like *La Chinoise* (1967), *Le Gai Savoir* (1968), and *Vent d' Est* (1969). Arguably, Godard's *King Lear* belongs to a phase of his career when he believed that our lives are more subject to unseen philosophical and spiritual influences than sociopolitical ones (STERRITT, 1999, p. 24).

In Godard's first films, in spite of the elements that disrupt the narrative, it is possible to follow a storyline peopled by more or less psychologically coherent characters – one of the characteristics of the art film is the presence of ambiguous characters. These first films show an affection for the genre in which they can be included, but at the same time they force the spectator to remain distant from the material he/she is being shown by making him/her aware all the time that what he/she is watching is an artificial construct. From *Made in U.S.A* (1966) on, Godard's films have the flimsiest of plots. They rather resemble essays in that he uses the medium to discuss art, religion, film production, and personal relationships. They are not essays, however, for they still have characters in a fictional context and do not present a coherent reasoning and a set of arguments that lead to a conclusion. In *King Lear* Godard no longer presents a narrative which has a coherent plot, a sequence of events, or well defined characters. This film presents the same scene twice, there are intertitles which sometimes do not seem to have any relation to the film, the dialogue is not always audible, and there is often a mixture of speaking voices, which makes certain scenes completely enigmatic. The film is not, strictly speaking, an adaptation of *King Lear*. It is rather a meditation on film and the processes involving its production, the pressures and betrayals, the 'shot in the back' – an intertitle refers to the film as having been shot in the back – which can be connected to Lear's betrayal by his daughters. The 'shot in the back' is related to the film production. Godard had to shoot the film practically by himself, for he was abandoned by his crew – Norman Mailer, who was supposed to write the script, would also star in the film, alongside his daughter, but after a quarrel with Godard they left after the first day of shooting, and Godard had to write the script and recast his film. But the scene already shot with Mailer was kept. In fact, Godard edited it twice into the final cut of the film.

There are very slight references to Shakespeare's play: Don Learo, an aging gangster, dictates his memories to his daughter Cordelia; simultaneously, a young man, William Shakespeare Jr. V, tries to reconstruct his ancestor's plays by collecting pieces of dialogue. Godard's *King Lear*, therefore, is not an adaptation and not even a reworking of the play. It does not try to transfer the play to the screen. On the contrary, by using, as a point of reference, a revered classic play to discuss movie-making production and by laying hold of collage – mainly of written texts, shown in intertitles or read aloud – and references to well-known paintings, popular filmmakers and the gangster world, he tries to equate 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' art. Quotations from the playtext serve as a pretext for digressions on several topics.

The use that Godard makes of space has to be viewed from two different perspectives: the geographical space in which the "action" takes place – a beach resort hotel, the recurrent presence of the sea, or its evocation through the cry of seagulls – and the space created by the assembly of often disconnected scenes and asynchronous sound. As I briefly mentioned earlier, the images in the film are organized in the form of paradigmatic sets: we have the set of images by the sea; the set of images of paintings, often candle-lit; the set of intertitles; the set of verbal references to film directors – Welles,

Visconti. All these sets are mixed together, distributed along the film and form the net for the film's display of ideas on film, life, art, and the creative process.

There is no mention, in the film, of Dover Cliff, a meaningful place in the playtext, for it is at Dover that all the characters meet save the Fool. But, after all, the film is not based on *King Lear*; it appropriates some of its characters and lines. But many of the outdoor scenes take place near the sea with frequent meditations expressed in voice-over. As there is an interplay between the indoor and the outdoor scenes and also an interplay between Shakespeare's text and Godard's sounds and images, there is also an interplay between the fragmentary aspect of the film, due to editing and collage, and a fragmented view of the world. Hence the abundance of references to other media, like the frequent inserts of reproductions of paintings; to other films, for example, Carl Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc*; and to the film itself – some shots are shown in isolation on television screens. If we relate that to the idiosyncrasies of the plot – the main character is a descendant of Shakespeare, Gloria's and Regina's (Goneril's and Regan's) declarations of love are sent by telex – it is possible to perceive that Shakespeare's text only served as a starting point for a reflection on the fragmented complexity of art and mass media. One of the recurring intertitles reads: "fear and loathing", an allusion to Kierkegaard's work "Fear and trembling", which deals with the basic issue of Existentialism: the conscientious choice by the individual among the alternatives offered by life (DINIZ, 1994, p. 186). And what the film presents, in its paradigmatic sets, is a multitude of possibilities, of choices from among images and sounds that are not apparently linked in any coherent way. For collage does not limit itself to the linking of isolated images and sounds and citations of other works: it is also a collage of two "storylines" – Don Learo's and William Shakespeare Jr. V's. The task that the latter assigns himself – to reconstruct the work of Shakespeare from bits of dialogues heard here and there – is the task that Godard also assigns himself: to create by quoting, by combining elements, by making a pastiche.

There is fragmentation in the characterization as well. Don Learo is a character who seems to be in the middle of a crisis – "Who is it who can tell me who I am?" Following his 'darker purpose', he divides his empire in three parts. He is simultaneously writing an account of the glorious past of the Mafia, the time when the vice and leisure centers Las Vegas and MGM were linked by the Learo Jet Company. He discourses on the gangster ethics – Bugsy Siegel, a real killer, had killed eight or ten people; Lasky, another gangster, used to say that when you lose your money you lose nothing, but when you lose your character, you lose everything. A voice-over tells us that "obviously this old man was 'power'." But he does not look powerful.

Like the other characters in *King Lear*, Don Learo is not clearly developed. He is an elusive character, a fact that is enhanced by his being played by two actors. He is not clearly outlined – he is only one more piece in the great assembly of images in the film. Not only him but also the other characters in the film do not seem to have a fixed identity like the characters in classical cinema. In this respect, Learo and the other characters in *King Lear* fit in the description Stuart Hall makes of the postmodern subject: people trying to construct their stories/selves in a wasted environment – the 'action' of the film takes place after the Chernobyl catastrophe has destroyed culture and civilization. In order to help restore them, William Shakespeare Jr. V tries to reconstruct the works of a canonical Western writer. Shakespeare, in this context, stands for culture and civilization.

2. Godard and the direct image of time

Godard's films belong to that category defined by Deleuze as films that present a direct image of time. It is worth recalling that these films are characterized by a disconnected space in a non-organic regime, in which movement is subordinated to time. Consequently, there is no chronological continuum, no sense of stability. Visual and auditory elements do not form an organic whole, as they do in the movement-image. Time

is not the consequence of the linking of shots end to end, and there is little or no concern with the construction of contiguous spaces through match cutting. In the time-image, as Rodowick points out in *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*, framing, which in the movement-image allows for the chronological succession of presents through the assemblage of contiguous images, is replaced by a series of reframings, in which space is interrupted by time (RODOWICK, p.144). This leads to a different concept of offscreen space in the time-image. Whereas in the movement-image offscreen space is implicitly present, which gives the sequence a linear, causal and chronological development, in the time-image, due to irrational connections, it does not refer to shots or sequences, but to duration, “which is immanent to the whole universe, which is no longer a set and does not belong to the order of the visible” (DELEUZE, 1989, p. 17).

Godard's *King Lear*, which fits the description above, is a film that sides with films such as *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* and *L'Avventura* which, back in the 1960s, meant the introduction of modernism in commercial cinema, a kind of cinema that had most of the time maintained a classical film structure: “invisible” editing, eyeline match, synchronized sound, three-point lighting, a goal-oriented narrative, the 180° rule, narrative closure, no gaps, a deadline. This sort of cinema, thus, had a very definite sense of time.

This does not happen in Godard's film. It is impossible to define how long the ‘action’ takes in *King Lear* by analyzing the shreds of narrative that the film presents. Let us examine its first scenes. From the very beginning the film asserts its experimental status by the insertion of intertitles that read “A Picture Shot in the Back”, “King Lear Fear and Loathing”, “King Lear A Study”, “An Approach”, “King Lear A Clearing”, “No Thing”. These intertitles will recur throughout the film. During the ‘credit sequence’ we can hear the producer, in voice-over, discussing production problems during a telephone conversation. The first scene takes place in a hotel room. We hear the word “action” and then Norman Mailer, who had been assigned to play Don Learo, says: “Mailer. Oh yes, that's a good way to begin.” The voice over continues talking about the contract to Mailer and his daughter Kate, who would play Cordelia. There is a knock on the door and Mailer rises to let Kate in, and they talk while the voice over goes on and then Kate sits at a table with the script her father had left there. He now talks briefly on the phone. Mailer invites Kate for a drink, they go to the balcony and then she mentions the names of the characters of his screenplay: Don Learo, Don Glaustro. Mailer comments that the only way to deal with *King Lear* is by relating it to the Mafia. Then the scene is repeated with some alterations. Mailer would later be substituted by Burgess Meredith as Don Learo. We have some more intertitles, “Virtue Versus Power”, “King Lear A Study”, followed by Don Learo asking offscreen: “Am I in France?” and his daughter answering “In your own kingdom, sir.” There is next a succession of photographs in an album in which pictures of Luchino Visconti are shown while a voice-over says he was first assistant to Renoir and became old like Renoir, who became old like his father Auguste, who in turn became old like his own father. Another voice is superimposed: “I fear I am not in my perfect mind, come not between the dragon and his wrath”. These words are quoted from Shakespeare's playtext. More photographs: black and white pictures of Orson Welles and color prints of a painting by Vermeer.

This detailed description of some of the first scenes of the film shows how a traditional filmic procedure like cutting is replaced by the turning over of the pages of a photographic album; how sound and images are treated separately; how allusions to art and films, to color and black and white, are mixed; but, mainly, this description shows how impossible it is to make a chronology of the events displayed, because time here is not dependent upon movement – whether it is movement within the frame, or movement of the camera, or that created by cutting. *King Lear* belongs to the type of film that is characterized by a direct presentation of time, because that includes it in a class of films, produced in the postwar period, that are related to modernism in commercial cinema and to the cultural space that this sort of film occupied and still occupies in Western culture. Art-cinema narration, because it takes its cues from modernism, is characterized by a

dedramatized narrative, in which not only climaxes but also unimportant ordinary events are presented; by a loosening of the cause-effect principle through the presentation of permanent gaps; by the inclusion of the element chance, and by removing deadlines. It is a type of narration that favors an episodic construction of the *syuzhet* (BORDWELL, p. 205-233). It is in this kind of film that Godard's *King Lear* can be inserted.

3. Interstices in Godard's *King Lear*

Parallel to Don Learo's there is the plot following William Shakespeare Jr. V. When this character appears, a voice-over narrates: "And then suddenly it was the time of Chernobyl and everything disappeared." There follows an intertitle – No Thing – and the voice-over continues:

And then after a while everything came back, electricity, buses, cars, everything except culture and men. I was one of the few survivors in that field, as an individual. At the corporate level there was the Cannon Cultural Division, and by special arrangement with them and the Royal Library of her Majesty the Queen, I was engaged. My task: to recapture what had been lost, starting with the works of my famous ancestor.

This seemingly coherent plot captivates the viewer, relieved for being able to finally embark on a narrative, but hopes of a traditional storytelling will soon be thwarted when from Nyon the character goes to Goodwater, once called Los Angeles, and later meets a group of mysterious clown-like youths on a muddy road sided by leafless trees. "Come not in here, nuncle. Here's a spirit." The clown-like figures can be associated with the Fool in Shakespeare's play, mainly if we take into consideration the Fool's line referring to the hut where Lear shelters from the storm and where Poor Tom is taken for a spirit. But soon we are faced with a girl dancing in a bedroom, while in the background William sits on a bed. A few moments later he removes the sheets of the bed to find it is soaked with blood. Is this a reference to the scene of the decapitated horse in *Godfather*? Probably, for after all the film is also about gangsters and references to cinema abound: Godard himself plays Pluggy, a character with a rastafari-like hairdo made up of pieces of hoses, cables and medals. Pluggy, who has also been working on the recovery of Shakespeare's works, is a survivor who used to deal with 'visual means' and who had stayed inside his editing room for twenty years. In one scene William Shakespeare Jr. V finds a film can as he walks in an open field. In another scene a heap of filmstrip almost fills a room. A character edits a film in a moviola and links the pieces by sewing them with thread. A box with a cutout hole and a lamp inside acts as a projector; a sparkler eventually takes the place of the lamp.

Therefore, William's plot does not develop coherently, and neither does Don Learo's. Bits of William's thin storyline are interspersed with bits of Don Learo's plot and with bits of scenes showing seagulls, paintings lit by flickering candles, the sea, flowers in the sunshine, sounds of bells, bird songs, petals that had been plucked from flowers and are now inserted back. Everything in the film is collage, quotation, ideas and lines borrowed from the playtext and combined with Godard's own ideas: "Cordelia's silence, violence, her silence produces violence." "(Learo) wants to be wanted. Who wants him? Nothing. Not will, not intelligence, no sex. (...) Because for Learo to hear is to see. A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears." A voice-over says: "I've reinvented the lines, I've reinvented the plot. Now it's up to the characters. (...) Obviously this old man was Power; obviously this girl was Virtue."

These different sorts of collage – one of the most obvious stylistic devices of the film – can be read on the basis of Deleuze's notion of interstice. Deleuze refers to interstice as the spacing between the images that are placed end to end. Instead of the dialectical type of montage characteristic of Eisenstein's work, here we have a process of addition, of accumulation. As Deleuze remarks, it is not an operation of association, but of differentiation. In *King Lear* two images are not placed together just to produce synthesis; it is the in-between that Godard tries to make visible: that which comes between two visual images, between two sound images, between the sound and the visual. The two elements that are placed together are neither opposed nor fused – they function as complements. They remain in a relation of contiguity only, not in a metonymical relation. Even when there is an apparent naturalistic use of offscreen sound, the film plays with cinematic conventions and frustrates the viewer's expectations, as in this scene: Cordelia is in the bathroom when a chambermaid enters the bedroom with her breakfast on a tray. There is a cut to Cordelia as she leaves the bathroom. On the soundtrack we hear the sound of cups and cutlery, as if a table were being set and coffee stirred. The camera tracks back as Cordelia advances and then we discover the source of the sound: the table where the tray lies is rotating and the chambermaid is playfully beating the cups, saucers, metal teapot, and sugar basin with a spoon. The sound that was initially fused to an unseen image in fact belonged to another action. The perception-image gave way to an action-image that was unrelated to it.

The scene described above showed an interstice between sound and visual image. But interstices also occur in *King Lear* in the sound image only. The overlapping oral narratives and dialogues maintain their independence even when mixed. In the first scene of the film, already described, we hear the voice of the producer and the dialogue between Learo and his daughter. One does not clarify the meaning of the other. The same occurs in the visual track when images follow one another but do not relate, like in this sequence of shots: shot of a picture of an angel with stretched arms and spread wings; close-up of Cordelia's face as she says "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth"; shot of William Shakespeare Jr. V lying on his stomach on the ground; shot of a painting of an angel in profile; shot of an impressionistic painting; detail of a Van Gogh painting showing a black bird – sound of seagulls in the soundtrack; shot of a plate flowing down a river; intertitle: A Picture Shot in the Back; image of an angel with an anguished face; intertitle: A Picture Shot in the Back; image of an angel; shot of a heap of filmstrip on the grass. Again, instead of montage in the sense of relating two different images in order to arrive at a synthesis – in which meaning would be produced by the collision of the two images – Godard's film presents the interstice, with one image complementing the other, as if the two were united by the preposition 'and'. Godard achieves a differentiation instead of a combination by breaking with the linearity of the narrative, by shuffling the paradigmatic sets. The result is a complex spatial tapestry of sounds and images and, at the same time, a highly personal type of cinema.

4. A cinema of personal expression

King Lear belongs to a vast list of films that are easily identified as 'Godard films' and this fact allows us to make some assumptions in relation to its status: it is an art-house film; it does not conform to a traditional way of cinematic storytelling; and it is full of references to other works. That makes it a representative of the so-called cinema of personal expression, a kind of cinema Godard is intimately related to not only as a filmmaker but also as a film critic. But, in spite of the notions that one immediately tends to associate with an auteuristic perspective – originality, individuality – which are strongly challenged by postmodernist and poststructuralist views, his cinema of personal expression in fact paradoxically creates a whole universe in which everything is related to film, in

which everything is a simulacrum, in which other works play a fundamental part, a universe that does not go against the same postmodernist and poststructuralist views.

Godard's quotations sometimes mix 'high' and 'low' culture – in *King Lear* a television screen shows a painting and soon afterwards a scene from a cartoon. However, most of the citations are from master works of the Western culture. *King Lear* is not the only canonic text that Godard used as a source for a film: Bizet's *Carmen* inspired *Prénom: Carmen* (1983). It is European culture that he always celebrates in his films, which is not challenged by them, as I will argue in the section called 'Candles'. Besides, Godard's films have always been directed to a sophisticated educated audience. Though they are deeply indebted to mainstream cinema, they never mix with it. In this respect, *King Lear* is highly nationalistic in its celebration of European culture. As Godard, a representative of European intelligentsia, has shown a respect for tradition, for high art, and is the quintessential cinematic auteur – in spite of a possible reading of his work as ambivalent in this respect, on account of his destruction of the narrative canon and his skill in simultaneously celebrating and satirizing Western culture – it is not surprising that he chose a Shakespeare play to interact with what is ultimately another 'Godard film', with all that the phrase implies.

5. Candles

In relation to what has been discussed so far, certain points must be highlighted. The use that the film makes of space – no chronology, lack of closure, no causal relations, an intensive employment of collage – includes this adaptation of *King Lear* in the category of films that have a direct presentation of time. Taking this into consideration and also the fact that *King Lear's* editing is done in such a way as to create what Deleuze calls 'interstices' – which is not the usual way commercial films are edited – the film is easily recognizable as making part of the Godardian canon and is immediately placed among art-house films of the sixties and seventies.

Although it is adapted from a canonical British work, *King Lear* is not a film that involves issues of British culture, at least not more than issues related to other cultures – Van Gogh's paintings, Visconti's films, the Chernobyl accident, American gangsters. Nevertheless, its very use of space, the way it was summarized above, makes it a typical product of a group of French films that have as their ancestors the Nouvelle Vague films of the end of the fifties and beginning of the sixties. It celebrates French art – the impressionists; existentialism – 'fear and loathing'; an art form that the French cherish – cinema. But *King Lear* does more than that. In spite of only taking a few ingredients from Shakespeare's playtext, it shows reverence for European culture in general, mainly European art. It is a spatial element – the shots of paintings lit by candles – that will be used to support the assertion that the whole film metaphorizes Europeanness.

"So out went the candle and we were left darkling." This statement is uttered in voice over in a scene in *King Lear* where images are shown on television monitors. But the candles in Godard's *King Lear* do not go out. On the contrary, the film's insistence on the image of candles makes them the telling metaphor of the film. One of the first images seen is that of a painting lit by a candle. Other paintings throughout the film are also lit this way. Sometimes the flickering candles scrutinize a painting in order to show some of its details. But the insistence on this form of lighting makes one suspect that there must be more to it than merely the sheer beauty of the shots and the highlighting of parts of the paintings.

Candles serve to shed a soft light on things but also to show reverence – to saints, as a sign of respect and devotion, and to the memory of deceased ones. The shots of candle-lit classical paintings in *King Lear* show this reverence. There is a ceremonial atmosphere in the shots of hands slowly moving candles across paintings that are part of the Western cultural heritage. In my view these are unmistakable metaphors for the reverence and respect for tradition that the film *King Lear* shows and a celebration of the creative force

that produced the great works of art of Western culture. The idiosyncratic and experimental style of the film is in keeping with this view, for it reaffirms the characteristics of a certain kind of self-indulgent high-class cinema and the supposedly superior quality of a certain kind of culture. Though apparently disrespecting a canonical work of art by refusing to adapt its plot, its characters, and its setting in a conventional way, the film in fact praises not only French culture but also European culture in general – national and European values are reaffirmed. It is not, after all, a film for a large audience; it is a film for a learned elite.

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