Assignment #2

(5-6 pages double-spaced, due on line F 3/9th)

When you submit online (on Blackboard, under Assignments), please head your Word file "YourNetID_2080_S18_#2.docx."

There are several options for this essay: please forgive a lengthy exploration of opportunities. Stuart and Noah will be available to you during office hours to discuss prospective essays.

1. *King Lear*, Shakespeare's and Kozintsev's

View Grigori Kozintsev's celebrated *King Lear* (1970), which you'll find streamed from the Blackboard site (under Course Reserves). Then write an essay showing how this production interprets the outcome and import of Shakespeare's play and how you evaluate it as a version of the play. **Focus your interpretation on one, two, or three key scenes**, going into detail about language, action, visual imagery, dramatic emphasis, and emotional tone, and be sure these details support and illustrate your judgment of this filmic interpretation. You should approach them with questions in mind (why, in detail, has Kozintsev done this rather than that, and what spin does it give his interpretation?) – questions that will give clear and conspicuous focus to your essay. It is up to you to come up with a **clear, focused argument** in support of your judgment.

- **What scenes?** They will probably jump out at you: they include (filmic action corresponding to) the abdication scene (1.1); the hovel and trial scenes on the heath at 3.4 and 3.6; the Cordelia-Lear action at 4.4 and 4.7; the Edgar, Lear and Cloucester action at 4.6; the capture of Lear and Cordelia and the death of Cordelia in 5.3. There are plenty of others whose key significance you can show. You are encouraged to put the scenes you choose in context, but your chief attention should be on features of them that mark the film's interpretation – with which you may well disagree.

- **What questions?** These features are among (but not limited to) those to be questioned:
  - What does K. do with the British populace (near the central castle, on the heath, at the end), and why? Who are these people?
  - How does K. sculpt his landscape to answer his sense of the play's era and milieu?
  - Is K.'s Lear Christian or pre-christian, and why does that matter?
  - Why does K. vastly enlarge the role of the Fool, playing him almost in full and keeping him alive until the end of the play?
  - At what key junctures do Lear- and Gloucester-plots "cross" and talk to – or contest -- each other most intensely, and with what results?
  - How does K. manage the last battle, and how does it count as a "Last Battle" i.e. Armageddon?
  - Does K. find "redemption" in the (several) final Lear-Cordelia scenes, or do they work to destroy that possibility? What possibilities for redemption does the play offer?

- **What about cuts?** You can expect textual cuts in almost any staged or filmed Shakespeare. But if episodes or lines that are important to your reading of the play disappear, ask what effect their omission has.
Examples: • Does K. keep or cut (action corresponding to) the trial scene (3.6)? Why and with what effect? • Markedly, he cuts 4.6.12-82, Gloucester's would-be clifftop suicide? Why and with what effect? (This one is a rather big one: it has a lot to do with the Gloucester-Lear crossing.)

• How to reference filmic text? With films, readers often need help, and you should not hesitate to fill in contextual detail that will identify what you're writing about, but this is true of discussion of the text, too. The film obviously, does not number its parts, but you can mention "the action corresponding to Shakespeare's 4.6" or "Edgar's defeat of Edmund in the final scene." Example: Suppose you want to cite from the film Lear's "No, no no, no! Come, let's away to prison" speech (at 5.3.8-19 in the play text). Readers would expect brief contextualization ("The British forces have won against the invaders, dragging in Lear and Cordelia as prisoners"), and they would want to know why he's speaking ("Cordelia asks, "Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?" but Lear replies . . . "). You would also want to include dramatic and visual detail supplied by the film: the burning castle and sheds, for example, and the tumultuous soldiers.

You do not, by the say, have to mark action obviously in the film with parenthetical reference to e.g. "(Kozintsev)." Only if you want to pick out a salient detail – for example, Edgar's confrontation with the scarecrow at 1:26:16 – do you need to give hour : minute : second references.

• What if you don't like or agree with this production? That's all the more reason to offer an intelligent critique of it, based on particular observations and evidence – or enjoy and write about Kurosawa's Ran.

2. Lear and Kurosawa's Ran

Be sure you have the handout "Contexts for Ran," downloadable from the course website.

View this 160m film and write an essay appraising one of the transformations wrought on Lear by Kurosawa's film. Be sure to cite lots of verbal and filmic detail. Be sure your essay reflects a judgment on this transformation and its impact on your understanding of Shakespeare's original. Following are some suggested transformations.

• Daughters into sons. Kurosawa’s most obvious change in the Lear material was to swap daughters for sons, presumably for cultural as well as aesthetic reasons. In principle, the change should have relieved the heavy burden of misogyny carried by the Lear plot. Responsibility for the filial ingratitude, treachery, cruelty, changefulness, and lust shown by Goneril and Regan is shifted in part from women to men, and the complexities of in-law descent of property (to the daughter’s husbands) are avoided. But does this massive shift relieve Lear’s emphasis on the corruptions and vicissitudes of women’s nature? Are leading characters in Ran less or more preoccupied with woman’s role in crime, sex, and generation? Are representations of women more or less complex, interesting, or nuanced? If so, is this change the result of writing women out of key roles in the action (and inserting them elsewhere)? If not, and if you find that the film insists equally with Lear that women are a source of evil (as well as, with Cordelia and Sué, a source of virtue and transcendence) how do you account for the persistence of this imbalanced gender theme?
• **Double to single plot.** An intricately plotted play like *Lear* is like an equation with many variables (change one value and all the rest are changed) or like a large tissue (tweak one thread, or make one fold, and the whole fabric is affected). Write an essay in which you *show a central connection* between major structural changes and the net narrative and dramatic effect of the whole.

One major change is this: in eliminating the double-plotted structure of *King Lear*, Kurosawa effectively combines the Lear plot and the Gloucester plot of the play, merging partially independent actions into one and distributing roles from the second plot among characters in the first plot. (Trace this redistribution. Where do the bits and pieces of the Gloucester plot go in this new structure? What roles and actions in the Lear plot absorb them, and how are they changed by this massive act of consolidation? Who takes on the Edgar role? the Edmund role? the Gloucester role? Most important, what is the effect of lodging some or all of these roles in representatives of the past enormities committed by Hidetora in his path to power?)

Issues of motivation matter here. Recall Kurosawa's puzzlement at the fact that "Shakespeare gives his characters no past. We are plunged directly into the agonies of their present dilemma without knowing how they came to this point" (quoted on "Contexts for *Ran*"). His compression of plots works to provide the prehistory he finds lacking in Shakespeare. And it may provide a clearer, perhaps simpler combination of necessity and contingency in the causing of tragic actions. But you should ask: in combining the two *Lear* plots, does Kurosawa improve or impair the unity of Shakespeare's story, and in what ways? Show how some of these changes alter the motivation of actions in *Lear* and affect the nature of action offered by Kurosawa.

• **Fool (et al.) to Kyoami (et al.).** One role that grows significantly under Kurosawa's hands is that of the Fool, who as Kyoami is part of the action from beginning to end and comments richly on it, providing theological and moral perspectives at almost every turn. Compare Kyoami's relationship to Hidetora with the Fool's to Lear, seeking to show what key changes in Shakespeare's play are connected with the building up of this relationship. There may be a link to sex and gender here (Kurosawa's Kyoami is an actor expert in transvestite roles), and there is surely a connection with the heightened emphasis on loyalty and service—and the heightened horror at seeing it break down — created by Kurosawa's translation of the action into a medieval Japanese milieu where the relationship of lord and vassal was thought to be at its breaking point. Kyoami may *also* absorb some of the commentator's function from characters excluded from Kurosawa's reduction of the *Lear* double plot.

This topic should lead you to a **key question:** in putting so much folly and so much wisdom into Kyomai's mouth, does Kurosawa clarify the philosophical perspective on human action and suffering in Shakespeare's play, or does he make it more diffuse and conflicted?

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☞ Be sure to cite and reference all material for which you are indebted to a source, whether print, electronic, or visual.

☞ Before writing, be sure to read the handout "A Good Paper in English 2080," downloadable from the open website.