

# Surviving Shakespeare: Kristian

## Levring's *The King is Alive*

Thomas Cartelli, Muhlenberg College

Katherine Rowe, Bryn Mawr College

---

### Abstract

Kristian Levring's *The King Is Alive* shows how rich the payoffs can be when Shakespeareans turn their attention to experimental cinema, with its strong ties to postmodern notions of text, authority, and reception. Following the strictures of the Dogme95 movement, Levring surrogates Shakespeare's story of "unaccommodated man" to a form of stripped-down, unaccommodated filmmaking. He targets *King Lear* as a rich site of dramatic plots, functions, and effects, which he redistributes in a postmodern version of survival narrative. A former British stage-actor memorially reconstructs *Lear* on the back of the Hollywood screenplays he reads for a living, then encourages his fellow survivors to rehearse the play in the abandoned mining town in the Namibian desert that is the film's *mise-en-scène*. As the film evolves, characters who initially approach their assigned roles without understanding or conviction begin to claim passages associated with their emerging subject positions, so that the play itself uncannily speaks through them.

---

What does it mean to recycle a story within a culture that should already know all about it? Contemporary screen updatings of Shakespeare's plays typically avoid the problem of their long-term embeddedness in Western culture.<sup>1</sup> It is not that these films shy away from naming the playwright in their titles, as Baz Luhrmann, Michael Radford, and others have done recently. Shakespeare's box office appeal may be small by Hollywood standards, but it has stood the test of time. Naming the playwright may also serve to finesse specific marketing challenges, alerting audiences that some degree of linguistic decoding may be required of them, as in a foreign language film. Even films that use little or no Shakespearean language engage in sly verbal or visual references of the kind that proliferate in Billy Morrisette's *Scotland, PA* (2001), playing around with the rise and fall of intertextual awareness as it changes from moment to moment and from

spectator to spectator. Such references establish a relationship with "knowing" audiences and keep teachers interested in screening these films for their students.

Whatever their mode of adaptation, however, most screen updatings demand that audiences suspend whatever knowledge of Shakespeare we have in a very specific way. They ask us to accept the idea that characters who use the same names, speak the same lines, or act out the same plot as *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, or *Romeo and Juliet* themselves have no acquaintance with these stories or their history. Despite being fundamentally absurd, this suspension of disbelief has become so normal that it seems odd even to raise the issue. Few screen updatings bring the question of what it means to retell a story that has been told numerous times before into the fiction represented on screen. While directors and films themselves may be haunted by earlier films, as Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996) is haunted by the figure of Laurence Olivier, they rarely address this haunting directly.

There are exceptions to this rule. In his recent film-version of *Hamlet* (2000), Michael Almereyda rather boldly "cites" the pre-existence and persistence of a play called *Hamlet* by showing a brief clip of another *Hamlet* film on "Hamlet"'s monitor. The clip quotes a famous scene (Hamlet addressing the skull of Yorick) and a famous Shakespearean actor (John Gielgud) (figure 1). We can guess that Hamlet (Ethan Hawke) must have clipped this scene himself since we often see him working with such found materials in Almereyda's film. So at this moment we might say that Almereyda is "confessing" the extent to which his film is one in a series of *Hamlets* going back in time. Yet Almereyda's film leaves out of the picture the problem of what Shakespeare's *Hamlet* means to his video-collaging main character. We never actually see Hamlet working with the clip the way we see him working with Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhist riff on the "To be" speech that he also plays back on his monitor. Because of this, the film does not give us a clear sense of how we are to understand that gesture backward. Is Almereyda's film a belated homage to or "afterimage" of the original play and later films? Or is it an image of *Hamlet* "now," understood to replace or perhaps uncannily surrogate those earlier versions (Roach 1996, 3)? Or do all these versions together constitute some emergent, composite work that Western culture names "Hamlet," as Jerome McGann would define it (1991)?

Audience familiarity with Shakespearean story and language may be as much an issue in theatrical restagings of Shakespeare as it is in filmic reproductions. So it is useful to think about the challenges that cinematic and theatrical audition share in this context. Consider, for example, how difficult it is for someone already deeply conversant with Shakespeare to get caught up in yet another "new" stage-production of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. For such a playgoer, there is essentially no *drama* in the offing, since she not only knows virtually everything about the play in question and how it will turn out, but also anticipates most of the lines the actors will speak and even how

they will probably say them. Indeed, beyond the pleasure of hearing beautiful language recited, the only reason for watching may be the hope that someone will say or do something differently: will *perform* the roles (that is, call overt attention to their doubleness and belatedness) rather than merely *play* them (that is, fit into them as one fits into a well-worn seat or suit). The conditions of mainstream theatrical production often preclude the kind of performativity we have in mind here, as does the residually theatrical conditioning of recent, conventionally realist Shakespeare films (ranging from Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* [1993] to Radford's *Merchant of Venice* [2005]). Even updated stage productions are regularly performed in an isolated space — a theater — that separates their audiences from immersion in an everydayness that would contextualize the plays far more densely. But set an actor who calls himself Hamlet in a profoundly multi-mediated and updated cinematic setting — the streets of New York City, a Blockbuster outlet — and a whole world that always already contains and rearticulates Shakespeare appears before our eyes. This requires from the actor something that both refers back to or cites his secondariness and/or something that exceeds a mere playing of the role.

The convention by which an audience agrees not to ask what Hamlet thinks about *Hamlet* — to suspend its disbelief in the ignorance of the characters — is, of course, a premise of these films. But it cannot be, and is not, the premise of audiences at the level of reception, whatever their degree of familiarity with the playtexts. The reason that so many Shakespeare films since the 1990s are interesting and powerful is that they make visible the restored behaviors named by these different characters (Hamlet, Iago, Juliet). Performance scholars think of such actions as "restored" in several senses (Schechner 1985, 36-37; Roach 1996, 3). They are played back (and given back) to us; they are represented *as* playable, repeatable givens; they are stored up for future replaying and thus conserved for the culture; they are constituted in and as repetitions. Thus, *Othello* films remind us that when ambition, love, and racism intersect, we call the one who takes advantage of this intersection and tells us all about it "Iago." To perform Iago is also to tell us what Iago's work means, *now* — and by reprising the role to revise and reinvent it, along with an "invisible network of allegiances, interests, and resistances" attaching to ideas about ambition, love, and race that animate this character (Roach 1996, 39). Iago thus serves a particular "character-function" that is part of the constellation of behaviors represented and restored by *Othello* in Western culture.

In this essay, we work through some of these concerns in relation to Kristian Levring's *The King is Alive* (2000), one of the few films that explicitly addresses the cultural, psychological, and social uses of a Shakespearean text and the constellation of characters and plot it furnishes. *The King is Alive* explores the fate of a group of Western tourists marooned in an unnamed African desert. Their struggles to survive include an intimate encounter with the text of *King Lear* — or rather,

with as much of it as they can remember and use. The film works in a stripped-down cinematic style that places it well outside the mainstream of conventional film-production, and "Shakespeare on film," alike. Its stark, elegant presentation, sometimes absurdist and sometimes brutal, connects it to the avant-garde *Lears* of Peter Brook, on the one hand, and to documentary traditions, on the other. Indeed, the film seems at moments to be in conversation both with Brook and with Jorgen Leth, a pioneer of Danish documentary — as well as with the popular genre of survival film.

Graham Holderness has claimed that if we seek Shakespeare films that reflect the break with "early twentieth-century models of narrative, character, action, imagery, and form" critically rehearsed in post-structuralist criticism and "postmodern readings," we had better look to "the deconstructive experiments of 'underground' cinema," which are able to bear "these interpretive responsibilities," than to conventional film adaptations (1992, 66, 74). As Holderness concludes, "Here at least is a recoverable body of cultural production which seems to offer some degree of filmic equivalent to the modern theoretically activated Shakespearian text" (1993, 74) and embodies the changing notions of authorship, textuality, and reception we seek to bring to our teaching and writing. A genealogy of such films would appropriately include Derek Jarman's *The Tempest* (1980), Jean Luc Godard's *King Lear* (1987), Aki Kaurismaki's *Hamlet Goes Business* (1987), Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991), Eric Rohmer's *Un Conte d'Hiver* (1992), and Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). It would look back to earlier, more expressionist filmic appropriations like Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) and Peter Brook's *King Lear* (1971). And it would look forward to the recent work of directors like Julie Taymor, Michael Almereyda, and Kristian Levring. Such films may seem initially more challenging than mainstream Shakespeare films. Their appropriative logic tends to be disintegrative or implosive, targeting the playtext as a rich site of plots, dialogue, characterizations, dramatic functions, and effects that they redistribute in ways that require new modes of description and analysis. Furthermore, because avant-garde Shakespeare films tend to use the playtexts to satisfy the interests of the filmmaker and filmic apparatus, they lead us into potentially unfamiliar artistic contexts. Yet precisely because they do so, such films tend to engage more thoughtfully — and indeed, more pleasurably — with the diverse ways that Shakespearean materials survive in Western culture.

In this experimental tradition, *The King is Alive* opens up questions conventionally suppressed when we suspend our disbelief in a cinematic world that specifically excludes the text being replayed. What does it mean to speak the words of a Shakespeare play, here and now? How do the specifics of different "heres" and "nows" change our answer to that question? How might the words, characters, actions, and story of a Shakespeare play be useful, not useful, and how do they use us? As the journalist Bernard Levin long ago pointed out, a good part of idiomatic English

is effectively scripted by Shakespearean language, whether we know it or not. Although this is not the only — or even the primary — issue this film is interested in, it takes up the uncanny effects of this verbal inheritance in a sustained way. The turning point of the film is a moment in which, as a central character observes, those in the film find themselves playing "good old *Lear* again" and then, deliberately and with difficulty, begin to rehearse the play itself. Playing *Lear* in this film means two things. It means being inhabited by the character-functions and effects associated with Shakespeare's story of a king reduced (in part by his own actions) to a "poor, bare, fork'd animal" (3.4.108). And it means adopting and adapting the subject-positions and speeches of various characters in *Lear*, as circumstances in the frame story require. Authentic experience and self-knowledge emerge, the film argues, through knowingly reusing Shakespeare's playtext for one's own purposes.

### Unaccommodated Filmmaking

Image and ambient sound come before word in the first frames of *The King is Alive*, the fourth film certified by the Dogme95 experimental "movement." In seemingly artless shots facing directly into sun and sky, light flares on the camera lens and gusts of wind blow across a microphone. From these first paired sounds and images we are invited into a cinematic experiment with "unaccommodated" filmmaking. The Dogme95 movement's aims involve a Lear-like stripping down of the apparatus of Hollywood cinema as a way of restoring a purer kind of cinematic experience that will get us back to human truth, "the thing itself." In keeping with these aims, these opening moments announce themselves as only what has been found at the moment of recording in a natural, unconstructed space. Yet the quick flash of lens-flare and hiss of wind also remind us of the presence of camera and microphone; nothing in this story will be unmediated. Rather, this stripped-down mode of recording, which keeps us aware of the apparatus rather than hiding it, yields (the Dogme movement claims) a privileged access to the experience of mediation.<sup>2</sup>

The first words we hear in the film are similarly dislocated: spoken in voiceover by an unseen character in an African language, translated into English subtitles as in "foreign" films. The scene shifts under this gentle, bass voice as diffraction lines from two headlights on a road at night replace the hexagonal patterns of lens-flare. The rising hiss of approaching wheels replaces the sound of the wind. Moments later, we find ourselves on a bus filled with white tourists and driven by a black man through a desert, our eyes the eye of a camera that moves among them and occasionally settles on one or two to provide us with characterizing signs and gestures, though little in the way of backstory. As in Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, there is no hint of Shakespearean intertext in these opening moments. That intertext (the tragedy of *King Lear*) will emerge later as

both a means to and the object of radical cultural displacement. The journey down this road, the subtitles promise us, is a "long one."

Genre-watchers are apt to guess that "we" and these travelers are headed towards some kind of crisis or disaster as the anxiety-levels of several of the passengers begin to rise, night turns into day, and the road on which the bus has been traveling devolves into little more than a desert-track. The crisis hits when the oldest and (temporarily) most assertive among them, Charles (David Calder), notices that the compass on which the driver, Moses (Vusi Kunene), has relied is broken. They have traveled hundreds of miles in the opposite direction from their destination, an unnamed airport from which they all plan to fly "home." Hope sparks when they spy the outlines of an old mining settlement in the distance, but dissolves when they find it all but abandoned and the bus out of gas. The lone inhabitant, we discover, is one Kanana (Peter Kubheka), the speaker of the film's first voiceover lines. He seldom budes from the shaded and elevated stage-like structure on which he sits for the duration of the film and from which he supplies subtitled commentary on the "story" that is about to unfold before our eyes (figure 2). Given the retrospective nature of Kanana's commentary, all of it phrased in the past tense, we know that this story has ended by the time the film begins.

The three video cameras that Levring deploys in both hand-held and fixed positions render the humans under inspection in a stark, unadorned manner. The cameras often fasten on them unflatteringly, in pairs or in isolation, at moments of strain or tension. Their postures are configured in posed relation to the shifting curves and pyramids of sand or the lamp-lit spaces of empty rooms in abandoned houses that serve as the film's immediate "found" setting. Levring takes the liberty of deploying overhead and panoramic shots of the ghost-town and surrounding desert, establishing the latter, in particular, as a space of astonishing beauty. He takes fewer liberties regarding sound. Apart from the periodic, editorial voiceovers of Kanana, the only human sounds are the dialogue of the travelers, music blaring from a CD player, road-noise from the bus, and voices played back from a mini-recorder. The only other sounds we hear are the natural ones of wind whistling through the desert and the crackling of flames from the bonfires the survivors set to attract would-be rescuers. Almost all of this is diegetic sound, originating in the story itself. Yet the way sounds get to us matters as much as where they come from. Most of the soundtrack seems to have been recorded on site, with the action. Even Kanana's voiceovers have a flat, thin quality that suggests they were made using the same hand-held tape recorder that turns up later in the story. In accordance with Dogme95 principles, the production team has kept post-processing to a minimum, except in the final credits. Audio is usually scaled (in terms of distance and volume) to its apparent source. Cuts

in sound and image tend to be synchronized, rather than staggered to smooth over the transitions, as they would typically be in mainstream cinema.

All of these choices convey the same thing: we are getting the recording itself — the cinematic equivalent of "the thing itself" to which Dogme95 films are dedicated. However, like all certified Dogme95 films, *The King is Alive* is marked as much by how it does not conform, as by how much it does, to the austere strictures of the Dogme95 manifesto. That manifesto was published by the movement's founders, Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, at the 1995 Cannes film festival and has since been used to "certify" some thirty-five films. Its central tenets comprise the DOGME 95 "Vow of Chastity":<sup>3</sup>

2. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a specific prop is necessary, a location must be chosen where the prop is to be found).
4. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice-versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)
6. The camera must be hand-held. Shooting must take place where the film takes place. (No stationary camera, no cranes, helicopter shots, etc.)
8. The film must be in color. Special lighting is (for the most part) not acceptable.
10. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
12. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
14. Temporal and geographical alienation is forbidden. (The film must take place in the here and now.)
16. Genre movies are not acceptable.
18. The film format must be Academy 35 mm.
20. The director must not be credited. Furthermore I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a "work," as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.

As we will have occasion to note, while Levring generally holds fast to at least four strictures of the manifesto (#1, 2, 4, and 7), he takes considerable liberties with rules #3, 5, and 6, while crediting his writing and direction (#10), filming in video (#9), and working within several overlapping genres (#8) at the same time. As we have already noted, the opening frames of the film directly mine generic conventions deployed in "survival-narrative" films and literature. From the days of *Robinson Crusoe* to those of *Lifeboat* (1944), *Lord of the Flies* (1963), *Flight of the Phoenix*

(1965), *Walkabout* (1971), and beyond, this genre focuses on how presumably civilized people contend with surviving shipwreck, airplane crashes, or natural disasters. Indeed, the first "action" that occurs as Levring's characters begin to reckon with their situation is the sudden emergence from their number of an otherwise undeveloped character named Jack (the Zimbabwe-born, British actor Miles Anderson), who seems to have cut his teeth on *King Solomon's Mines* and knows everything one needs to know about surviving in the desert. That Jack will ultimately prove as unequal as any of the other characters to this task, however, is but one of many ways in which Levring sets out to subvert the very convention within which he seems to be working. And this is also one of the ways Shakespeare, or more precisely, *King Lear*, becomes embedded in the film.

The "king," Levring suggests, is "alive" in that the pragmatism and optimism that Jack brings to bear on their plight (and that in conventional survival-narrative films will be confirmed or actualized on the level of plot) prove entirely unfounded, and other ways of surviving (or at best, passing time) must be found. Jack's appearance proves to be nothing more than a cameo. He gives orders, supplies directives and guidelines, and marches off into the desert, never to be seen alive again. Indeed, it appears in the end that he never gets more than a half-mile or so from the settlement before falling victim to the desert sands and heat. What or who takes Jack's place in the film — and fulfills, in a decidedly different way, his function — is the considerably more diffident Henry (David Bradley), a former stage-actor in London, now a professional Hollywood script-reader. The survival tool Henry offers his singularly undistinguished cast of characters is *King Lear*, or, more precisely, what he can memorially reconstruct of that play, whose rolls/roles he painstakingly inscribes on the back of one of the Hollywood screenplays (entitled *Space Killers*) that he reads for a living.

How should we understand this mode of partial reconstruction? There are several ways to approach it. In one of the only scholarly essays written on this film, Amy Scott-Douglass contends that by inscribing *King Lear* on the back of a movie script, Henry is performing a kind of penitence in the desert for "selling out" his earlier career as a stage-actor in London, and that Henry's action is part of a larger confrontation between European artistic "purity" and American commercial corruption that Levring is staging in the film. She concludes that "Levring's film attempts to reclaim Shakespeare *for* Europe, *from* Hollywood" (Scott-Douglass 2003, 259-60). This interpretation both links Levring's effort to, and distinguishes it from, what Al Pacino is trying to do in *Looking for Richard* (1996), reclaiming Shakespearean language for the American street (see Cartelli 2003).<sup>4</sup> To be more precise, Levring's target here is less the United States than it is the multinational monolith subsumed under the name "Hollywood," the production values associated



with it, and the self-involved, know-nothing philistinism of Euroamerican bourgeois culture as represented by his cast of characters, who are as clumsy and unfamiliar with the popular matter of their own culture (*Saturday Night Fever* [1977], *Grease* [1978]) as they are with the plot of a Shakespeare play.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, Levring's film is consistent with Pacino's more theatrically-oriented effort "to communicate a Shakespeare that is about how we feel and think today," though both films may suffer (more than they would like to admit) from their own inevitable "glo-calization" (Cartelli 2003, 195; Burt 2003, 14-36) — that is, neither can fully escape the fact that their chosen medium is also one of the dominant means of global transmission for Western (i.e., Hollywood-packaged) ways of seeing the world. Nor can they escape the fact that those ways of seeing are tied fundamentally to the growth of Western capitalism. Indeed, Levring has deployed a largely Anglo-American cast of actors in his film (two of whom, Janet McTeer and Jennifer Jason Leigh, command international reputations). And he has also chosen the world's reigning *lingua franca*, English, as his film's primary linguistic medium, while consigning the local Namibian setting to a stage-set for acting out and working through decidedly "first world" preoccupations.

Henry's reconstruction of the play on the reverse side of a screenplay that is so overtly artificial may also be read in thematic terms. *The King Is Alive* seems preoccupied with partial transmission: from the whip cuts that momentarily blur images, to misremembered tunes and plots, to the mismatch between dialogue and text in its subtitles. No cultural matter is recalled or conveyed perfectly here by any character. But the fact that all human experiences are mediated — captured and transmitted only through artifice, incompletely — may be as enabling as it is limiting, because it opens space for making the old new. Moreover, according to the film, some modes of artifice are better than others, and those artificers who come clean about the limits of expression are more trustworthy than those who hide them.

The limits of expression (cinematic expression in particular) are the central concern of the Dogme95 project. The struggle with them explains an emphasis in Dogme films on "the *auteur* thinking": "the director's creative process" that characterized the early and arguably most adventurous films of the French New Wave (Scott-Douglass 2003, 256-63). While such an emphasis would seem to contradict the most urgently expressed article of the Dogme manifesto (that is, #10, in which the director swears "to refrain from personal taste" and even to disclaim his status as an artist), Levring, for one, confesses that "the most difficult thing for me was the aesthetic bit," finding it "difficult to look myself straight in the face and say: I am not creating a picture" (excerpted from a phone interview with Levring conducted by Peter Rundle, 1999a). Levring is particularly insistent on the shaping role he played in making the kinds of aesthetic

choices that are unavoidable, in deciding to place his cameras here rather than there, and in having written the film script in the first place: "As soon as you direct an actor and you have written a script, you are not depicting reality."

Levring's candor on this count should remind us that for all the Dogmatic brethren, the articles of the manifesto function more in the way of a general template than as fixed, unbending rules. Even von Trier admits that "many of the rules can't be kept and are as impossible to keep as the commandment 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" They are better construed as "tool[s] to be used freely." In the 1999 interview from which these remarks are drawn, von Trier likens the changes wrought in the preceding four years of Dogmatic practice to the conversion "from Catholicism to Protestantism" and concludes that "We are now by definition sinners due to the fact that the rules cannot be kept. Our position must be that the perfect Dogme film has not been made and probably never will be" (interview with Peter Rundle, 1999b). This has not, however, discouraged von Trier and company from continuing to find cinematic virtue in technical constraint or prevented them from finding in the very condition of constraint an unusually enabling form of creative freedom. As von Trier says of his effort to observe "rule number two, which states that the sound must never be produced separately from the images or vice versa: What makes it interesting is . . . that you have to make all the decisions on the spot. It is as if you were shooting the very first talk movies."

Some of the same kind of thinking seems to inform Scott-Douglass's observation that "*The King is Alive* is not just a film *by* a director following Dogme rules; it is a film *about* a director following Dogme rules . . . who attempts to put on a play having been stripped of all theatrical devices: props, costumes, technological tools, even the text itself," and that "To a certain extent, *The King is Alive* is a film about the history of film in the twentieth century" (2003, 260). These are apt, but not perfect, analogies. Levring and his director-surrogate, Henry, seem more interested in process than product, and — not unlike Pacino and his own band of brothers — in "penetrating into what at every moment the [play] is about" (Cartelli 2003, 189). In giving his actors the freedom to improvise — to choose what they put in their baggage, to pick their own houses — and in filming the script chronologically such that "the time span of the story is roughly the same as the time it took to shoot the film" (Rundle 1999a), Levring pointedly allowed process, accident, and actors who "simply went out and burnt their heads to shreds" to make choices of their own — some fortunate, some not.

There is, of course, nothing accidental in Levring's decision to superimpose this particular Shakespearean script on the survival-narrative. Modern theatrical productions and films — most notably, Akira Kurosawa's samurai epic, *Ran* (1985) — have interpreted the play as the story of a regression to barbaric disorder, making it part of the pre-history of the survival genre. Yet Levring

takes pains to make the connection with *Lear* seem to emerge spontaneously from Henry's mind as he sits beside Kanana on the latter's raised stage and takes stock of the human comedy before him, at the beginning of DVD Chapter 4, "Is Man No More Than This?" Henry is portrayed here as the polar opposite of the action-oriented Jack, whose estimated return date has all but passed, prompting the other survivors to perform more drastic measures (like removing the bus tires and setting them alight) to attract the attention of rescuers. Henry views their "performance" with undisguised contempt, in lines that only we and Kanana hear and that presumably only we can understand: "Assholes, fucking assholes. Repairing a roof out here in dead men's land. It won't be long before we're fighting over water, killing for a carrot. Some fantastic striptease act of basic human needs."

This surprisingly cynical outburst of vulgarity and eloquence combined signals a shift in the generic conventions the film is mining, as its center of gravity migrates from the pragmatic optimism of the swashbuckling Jack to the despairing pessimism of the witnessing Henry, and *King Lear* displaces works like *King Solomon's Mines* and *Robinson Crusoe* as the intertext of first resort.<sup>6</sup> The move to *Lear* is made by way of quotation and citation in a brief moment which, for the thoroughly informed cineaste, also "quotes" a seemingly impromptu dance movement drawn directly from the 1967 short, *The Perfect Human*, made by the father of modern Danish documentary film, Jorgen Leth (with whom the Dogmatics maintain a typically unresolved oedipal relation, as attested to in Leth and von Trier's *The Five Obstructions* [2003]).

Henry sits, at this moment, with Kanana on the rusty structure that supports Kanana's throne-like chair and from which Kanana's cryptic, subtitled commentary issues. As Henry looks out on what he calls a "fantastic striptease act of basic human needs" (itself an implied citation of Lear's terrible epiphany of man as nothing more than a "poor, bare, fork'd animal" [3.4.108]), his gaze lingers briefly on the middle-aged American, Ashley (Brion James). Ashley has just entered the scene from a dark hut, as if into a performance space, squinting confusedly into the bright sun (see figure 3). Soon to be cast as Lear, though shortly to withdraw with a pronounced case of DTs, Ashley enters performing an otherwise unprompted dance movement, reminiscent of the existential routines in Laurel & Hardy or Samuel Beckett. Henry observes: "Is man no more than this? It's good old *Lear* again . . . Hah . . . Perfect." Ashley's dance-step is the immediate prompt that brings *Lear* into Henry's mind. Its possible "origin" in Leth's film draws *Lear* into the DNA of the Dogme movement and also brings that genealogy to bear on how *Lear* is remediated in Levring's film. *The Perfect Human* is a deliberately flattened, mechanically constrained, but otherwise poignant twelve-minute "documentary" representation of "basic human" gestures and

actions, like getting dressed and brushing one's teeth. In the film, the narrator's voiceover directs our gaze to its subjects in a way that enhances our sense of their isolation: "The perfect human in a room with no boundaries, and with nothing, and a voice saying a few words, this voice, saying a few words. Look at him now, look at him all the time." These commentaries resemble Kanana's similarly detached refrains, "Together they said words. But they still didn't say them to each other," and Henry's rather Olympian assessment of characters he will later refer to as "these lost souls." However, Levring's barren landscape that starts everywhere and ends nowhere, which he often films in deep focus, and the sparsely-furnished, but essentially featureless *mise-en-scène* against which he pins his subjects in isolation shots, are considerably more unforgiving than Leth's "room with no boundaries."

The set's status as a physical testament to the barren legacy of the European scramble for Africa also graphically underwrites the surprising cynicism of the usually soft-spoken Henry's initial casting of his fellows as "assholes" and the brutal eloquence of the seemingly more free-floating, "some fantastic striptease act of basic human needs." This last observation reads less like an observation and more like a design or plan. Levring will present Henry as the most considerate and patient of directors — thoughtfully lending his mini-recorder to Amanda (Lia Williams) so that she can speak and replay her lines in private and willing to allow Liz (Janet McTeer) to reprise an exchange between Goneril and Edmund three times, until it finally sends her despairing husband Ray (Bruce Davison) out into the desert. Yet there is, as Charles and Catherine (Romane Bohringer) sense, something perverse and degrading in the very idea of the project, something we also sense as we watch the overmatched actors struggle with their lines under the double pressure of the relentless desert sun and a diet of superannuated canned carrots.

As Scott-Douglass suggests, Henry's plan may well involve performing a kind of penitence in the desert. On this count, however, we would probably do better to identify the primary motive for his own eventual (clearly traumatizing) assumption of the role of Lear with his failure as a father and unresolved relationship with his daughter (which he describes and addresses in a voice-letter composed on his mini-recorder). But if we ask why he decides to put the others through such hard paces under the desert sun, we may also need to ask questions such as why did the Dogmatics take their "vow of chastity" in the first place and why, in his 2003 film, *The Five Obstructions*, does von Trier have Jorgen Leth remake *The Perfect Human* under even more radically constrained and potentially disabling conditions?<sup>7</sup> All these questions directly link the strictures of unaccommodated filmmaking to Henry's unaccommodated re-staging of *King Lear*. We learn little more about Henry than we have already established — his personal and professional

background, the combination of tenderness and contempt with which he treats and views his fellow survivors — but we do crucially witness something that we also catch fleeting glimpses of in Leth's patient and profoundly humane responsiveness to von Trier's dictatorial edicts in *The Five Obstructions*: that is, Henry's growing attachment to people he had previously seen as nothing but "assholes," which is at least partly mediated by his own deepening immersion in what we would term the Lear-effect or *King Lear* phenomenon. As Henry evolves into a participant in the play-within-the film that he both co-authors and directs, he begins to purge himself of the assumption of superiority articulated in the clinical detachment of the director-auteur, exactly the detachment Levring confesses not to be able to achieve and that Leth delicately sets aside.

Before turning to the film's unfolding of *Lear*, one more cinematic issue needs to be addressed, and that is Kanana's choral commentary, delivered through a combination of voice-over, subtitle, and special camera work. Kanana's commentary directs our gaze throughout the film and Henry's gaze in this particular sequence (Chapter 4, "Is Man No More Than This?"). Indeed, Henry awakens to the idea of *Lear* because, as the camera-work suggests, he is beginning to see the group with some quality of the way Kanana sees. The sequence begins with Kanana's commentary ("out here there is silence") over blurry isolation shots that signal we are looking through or *with* Kanana's uncorrected vision. The blurred images prepare us to see the varied activities of those awaiting rescue (playing with a coin, filling a lamp with fuel, repairing a roof) as Beckettian dumb shows: abstract patterns of motion filling time and space. Kanana observes these scenes with what Slavoj Žižek terms the "penetrating power of the perplexed foreign gaze" which, by interpreting a scene awry and out of cultural context, facilitates a greater understanding for the audience (Žižek 2004, 292). The "audience" here is first Henry, who sees Kanana interpreting the scene, and then the film audience, who watch Henry re-interpret it through the clarifying, but also foreign, lens of *Lear*. When Henry wakes up and squints out on these existential dances, he has to put on his dark glasses. We start to look now *with* him, and the camera picks up speed as if in response to his quickening connections between the scene and *Lear*. This faster motion reproduces the signature quality of Kanana's point-of-view — the quality that made these scenes seem like performances in the first place — moving so quickly as it pans from person to person that it temporarily blurs. Most importantly, these whip pans reproduce that quality of seeing *for us*. As these juxtapositions proceed, we begin to see how transformative, but also partial, the process of watching someone looking may be. Henry's way of looking is not only more embittered and ungenerous than Kanana's (at this point), but also distinctly mediated: fostered by an understanding of *Lear* that is itself mediated not only by his own cynicism and misanthropy, but also by the postwar status of *Lear* as an apocalyptic and absurdist dramatic document.

That this witnessing has been limited and partial is an essential component of Levring's cinematic vision, which privileges such constrained perceptions as the only true ones. This privileging of constraint is particularly evident in the interaction between the voiceover and the subtitles. Kanana's remarks convey the usual authority associated with voiceover pronouncements: grave, masculine, analytically acute, particularly as the survivors begin hesitantly to rehearse ("Together they said words. They still didn't say them to each other"). Yet the subtitles qualify the usual effects of voiceover, situating Kanana's authority firmly beyond the audience's ken. These brief, and sometimes stilted, sentences are clearly incommensurate with what Kanana says (at least in the English-language version that we are working with). As with all subtitles, the text that makes it to the screen is constrained, as much by the technical demands of audience reading time and visual layout as by Kanana's meaning. Moreover, the fact that his observations fail to bridge a significant communication gap is something Kanana calls attention to, by prefacing many of his observations with "I don't know if," or "I think," and by declaring, "I didn't understand a word they said. Nor did they."

Crucially, what the audience learns from Kanana is to be aware of that gap in communication, yet not to perceive it as a liability. Just as Kanana's blurry vision intensifies our sense that the castaways are engaged in timeless ritual, so too the strongest effect of the subtitles is their abstraction into what Leth calls "few words." The mismatch between the highly compressed medium of screened text and the more expansive medium of recorded speech reminds us that translation, always partial, is occurring. Catherine's mistranslation of her nasty story in French prepares us to be suspicious of how culturally biased, as well as duplicitous, translation can be.<sup>8</sup> Yet the sparseness of Kanana's subtitles, like the sparseness of Cordelia's expressions of love and Lear's language at the close of the play, reads differently. These few words seem stripped to essentials. Far from smoothing over the differences between Kanana's utterances and the target language, as if to make the foreign "ours" (as the idiomatic subtitles for Catherine's story do), these subtitles emphasize the labor involved in stripping language down so as to accommodate meanings that exceed the superficial. The wrestling involved in that accommodation is not with the "foreign" language, but with the target language — the one normally transparent to its users. Thus, as Amresh Sinha describes the effect, "what is ours, our own language, is made foreign" in these subtitles (Sinha 2004, 189): made difficult, opaque, requiring effort, just as the text of *Lear* so clearly requires.

### *Lear Again*

The Lear-effect, understood in these multiple contexts, involves the dislodging of a patriarchal figure from his established position of control or "effect" of authority, the haunting of that figure by feelings of loss and inadequacy, and the conviction of having made crucial, possibly unforgivable, mistakes that he nonetheless tries to redeem. The Lear-effect reaches out, in turn, to a Cordelia-effect that satisfies his need for forgiveness (indeed, forgives everything) and helps to recuperate feminine qualities that have been degraded by what may be termed Goneril/Regan-functions. (A *function* does things, performs behaviors that are integral to the working out of a dramatic design; an *effect* suffers or embodies the consequences.) Although the figure of Cordelia precipitates Lear's downfall by rejecting his overbearing demands in Shakespeare's play, she ultimately serves as little more than a passive redeemer of Lear's guilt and fellow victim of her sisters' unrelenting rage. The Cordelia-effect thus operates as an attribute or aspect of the Lear-effect more than as a free-standing dramatistic unit in its own right.

Thinking about dramatic roles in this way means seeing them as fictional constructs that work in certain scripted ways in relation to each other — as operations, not as separable entities. We see a reconfigured form of this operation take shape in *The King Is Alive* when Levring divides his two Cordelia surrogates into Catherine, who rejects, and Gina (Jennifer Jason Leigh), who accepts. In the process, he delegates the functional (oppositional) aspect of the Cordelia-effect to Catherine, while limiting Gina's agency to her decision to sacrifice herself sexually to Charles. That sacrifice allows the play rehearsals to go forward and also eventuates in Gina's "adoption" by Henry. Henry's growing attachment to Gina, in turn, begins to erode his own directorial detachment (from which station he has, Lear-like, proclaimed his superiority) and to bring him level with people he has previously denounced as "assholes." Thus, what starts out as "some fantastic striptease act," in which Henry's cast will be compelled to rehearse their already pronounced individual "crimes" of pride, vanity, arrogance, brutality, self-loathing, etc., evolves into something less clinical and more personally revealing as Henry is compelled to acknowledge the part he plays in "good old *Lear*."

The part of Lear was initially assigned to the middle-aged American alcoholic, Ashley, who falls off his chair during one of the first rehearsals, spends much of the rest of the film in a stupor, and is pointedly shown clawing the sand in his "house" in one of the film's many isolation shots. Henry's replacement of Ashley in the role could be said to function as an enabling displacement of Henry's own less savory "effects": his status as failed father, failed actor or director, and, possibly, recovering alcoholic in his own right. As noted above, Henry's decision to stage *Lear* has many possible motives, ranging from his personal and professional preoccupations, his apparent cynicism and misanthropy, to his channeling of peculiarly Dogmatic concerns about working within disabling constraints to get at the truth of human experience. However, it is also

clear that Henry discerns, in the emerging configurations he witnesses from his seat beside Kanana, much that is already established in the *Lear* script. From this vantage point he sees a father (Charles) who treats his son (Paul) with contempt; a wife (Liz) who treats her husband (Ray) even more disdainfully; two young women competing in different ways for Henry's attention, one who presents herself as an arrogant intellectual (Catherine), and another who is more secure about the attractions of her body than her mind (Gina); a man marginalized and degraded by the "custom of nations" (the bus-driver, Moses); and another young woman (Amanda, married to an overweening husband, Paul again, played by Chris Williams), who, though she seems to have no basis in *Lear*, will discover both a moral and creative force and function in taking on the role of the Fool. It seems like "good old *Lear* again" to Henry because he witnesses how close the "characters" already are to the roles he will have them assume in the play.

And yet, as the rehearsals begin, we immediately note that, close though the connections between character and role may be, the actual speaking of the lines from Shakespeare's play appears to constitute an insuperable barrier that none of the "actors" seems able to clear. In these early rehearsals, Levring has most of his unusually gifted cast repeatedly stumble over lines and words that they cannot pronounce and, as Kanana contends, they clearly do not understand. Levring's characters are not only compelled to act badly, but shown to have little to no acquaintance with the play or its plot or, for that matter, with anything that smacks of literature or high culture. The only character, apart from Henry, who shows any interest in reading is the self-styled French intellectual, Catherine, and even she has to ask Henry if she can borrow one of his books. To seal his point, Levring has Catherine, when prompted by Henry to read one of Cordelia's lines, get the play's title wrong, saying, "I don't know. C'est *Othello*?" Interestingly, it is Liz who, when asked by her husband Ray to tell her what the play is about, offers a synopsis that is fairly accurate. In her bland American accent, Liz says it's a story about a king who has two, maybe three daughters, "a couple of kids," in any event, and "he's old and wants to retire and divide his kingdom between his kids, so whoever says she loves him most gets to have the biggest share." To Ray's next question, "You get to play the evil daughter, right," she responds, "Sure, I get to play the real bitch," caustically adding "You don't have to worry, though, nobody has to fall in love and everybody gets to die in the end" (DVD Chapter 5). Still mulling over the subject, Ray later entertains an objection to the plot that evokes the story about embedded cultural norms that Laura Bohannan recounts in her story of fieldwork with the West African Tiv tribe, "Shakespeare in the Bush" (1966).<sup>9</sup> "Maybe he's a king and maybe she's a princess," Ray observes, "but who ever heard of a daughter that loved her father and wouldn't tell him that she loved him. That doesn't make sense" (Chapter 11).



At first the amateurism and ignorance of the characters, which Henry appears to have done little to alter by only supplying them with transcriptions of their own parts, situates Henry (in Jack's absence) not only as the reigning authority-figure, but also as "author" of the "text" they are all about to act out or re-live, as Catherine indicates when she asks, "Are you writing *King Lear* by hand?" and he answers: "As much as I can remember of it, or what I think I can remember." Yet the casual authenticity, even accuracy, of Liz and Ray's first assessments complicates the picture. And while Henry's soft-spoken modesty is made to seem admirable, the gaps in his memory are confirmed by the several mistaken line readings he delivers, thereby making his assumed authority seem to be as flawed or limited as is Lear's. Indeed, Henry's status as a bit of a fake in his own right is cued by another question Catherine asks when he hands her the part of Cordelia that he has inscribed on the back of *Space Killers*, which she first reads wrong side up: "Did you write this, Henry?" to which he deprecatingly responds, "No, I'm paid to read that stuff." The exchange underscores these two characters' shared presumption of being more than they appear and — in Catherine's case, in particular — their shared propensity to display cruelly their intellectual superiority to their fellow travelers. The extent to which Catherine interprets Henry's offer of the part to her as a sexual invitation also may unsettle our trust in Henry's authority, although Henry himself gives little indication of harboring this particular motive. For all these reasons, a reading of the film as an allegory of embattled European artistic purity, maintained against American commercial corruption, seems reductive. That reading founders especially on the film's characterization of Catherine, who not only rejects the part of Cordelia but assumes the competitive affect of Regan and the plot-function of Goneril as she proceeds to degrade and later poison Gina, the substitute Cordelia who claims the role in her place.

Catherine may be wrong about Henry's motives, but she is surely right to suspect some degree of projection or surrogation in his offer. The DVD's segmentation of the film into chapters allows us privileged access to how carefully Levring has structured Henry's Lear-effect as a matter that involves not only the competition for his regard of two daughter-surrogates, but also Henry's apparent failure to earn the trust and love of his own daughter. Chapter 8 of the film opens with a low-angle two-shot of Henry and Gina, seated on a desert elevation overlooking the settlement discussing the progress, or lack thereof, of the rehearsals. (This two-shot notably echoes the earlier two-shot of Henry and Kanana, gazing out at the rest of the cast from the vantage point of Kanana's raised "stage.") The camera maintains this double focus, in successive framings of their ongoing conversation, in a way that both establishes their growing intimacy and also contrasts directly with the shot/reverse shot framing that Levring deploys in Gina's ensuing negotiations with Charles. It cuts back after a few minutes to a daylight shot of Henry's work-room, where Catherine is

unaccountably poking around among Henry's things before fastening on Henry's mini-recorder and playing back the voice-letter Henry is taping for his apparently estranged daughter. Hearing Henry's footsteps, Catherine puts the recorder down and backs away, but is nonetheless caught in the act in a moment fraught with tension. Seeing the recorder set on his work-table equidistant between them, Henry pockets it and then engages in a fairly testy exchange with Catherine. Rather than explaining what she's doing there, she announces, "Your plan failed. You haven't even got a king," before unaccountably countering his response that he might take the role on himself with, "You would be a wonderful Cordelia. Better than what you have now."

Although we know that the second comment involves Catherine's one-sided competition with Gina (who appears never to notice, much less feel it), her attack seems motivated by the candid admission of the mistakes he's made as a father that Catherine has overheard. It is almost as if she's found what she was looking for in the recording (a sign of weakness?) and is using it to expedite her evolution from a chosen Cordelia who inexplicably rejects being chosen to a composite Goneril/Regan who can't get over having once been preferred and now replaced. When the next scene begins with Gina offering to serve as Charles's sex-slave in exchange for his assumption of the role of Gloucester so that Henry's play may go forward, we are surely meant to recognize the momentousness of what the chapter names Gina's "dignity in sacrifice," and how radically it contrasts with Catherine's repeated acts of treachery and betrayal. We may also notice here how radically Gina's commanding performance as a Cordelia-surrogate contrasts with the passivity of Cordelia's performance in *King Lear*. As one of our students, Rachel Harris, has observed, "Gina can be seen as an active version of the passive Cordelia, who sacrifices herself at the beginning of the play through near inertia." Gina not only "sacrifices herself for Henry and the play by agreeing to sleep with Charles," but "bluntly reeducates Charles at the end of the film" in a manner that "serves the same purpose as Gloucester's literal blinding — it makes Charles aware of reality and allows him, finally, to see himself closely in relation to others." Harris instructively concludes that this "altering of the Cordelia role serves not only to update the play, but to update Cordelia's purpose. Gina moves Cordelia from delicate ladylike subversion to unapologetic and uninhibited self-expression. This shifts — indeed, *elevates* — the Cordelia role from a character *effect*, waiting to be acted upon, to a character *function*, with purposeful action of her own" (unpublished paper).

The competition of the two daughters for Henry's regard/admiration, the emergence of Gina/Cordelia as a function, and Henry's consequent movement from aloof director to father-surrogate are several ways in which the film "overwrites" the Shakespearean plot, while also keeping it available for inspection on the part of the knowing viewer. This overlaid plot becomes one of several "backstories" that Levring complicates by embedding them in the *Lear* plot as the rehearsals

move forward. The already established conflicts of Ray and Liz, for example, continue to play themselves out as Liz opportunistically appropriates Goneril's infatuation with Edmund to arouse Ray's jealousy. Though initially cast as Kent, Ray effectively finds himself cast by Liz to double as Albany, or at least to endure the "effect" that Goneril's behavior has on Albany in the playtext.

Other ripple and fracture effects follow from the collision of filmic "backstory" with Shakespeare's plot. Initially cast as proud overbearing father to Paul's emotionally immature son (Paul and Amanda have been traveling with Charles to advance the younger man's plan to improve his relationship with his father), Charles has already been playing Gloucester outside the film's rehearsal space before he actually assumes the role within it. And when he does formally assume the role, the Gloucester he puts into play is not the kind old man who suffers horribly for trying to help Lear, but the Gloucester of the play's opening scene, who degradingly refers to Edmund as his bastard son while proudly recounting the sexual "sport" that went into his making, and the Gloucester who later relentlessly pursues his legitimate son Edgar's life and hounds him into a kind of self-annihilation.

Whereas in conventional survival-narrative films and fictions, the body of the plot stages conflicts and nostalgic reveries that specifically point back to the lives the characters have left behind, *The King is Alive* operates almost entirely on the level of conflict and gives no one but Henry a specific career, place of origin, or life-trajectory (though enough hints are dropped about the two marriages to build a backstory on). The characters are, instead, "charactered" largely in terms of age, accent, temperament, and marital status: a fact which allows them to merge with, to overwrite, and to be overwritten by the *Lear*-plot and effectively to be transposed into a series of functions and effects. At the same time, the film also disassembles any established sense we might have of the unitary wholeness of Shakespeare's cast of characters. The characters "acting" in Levring's film do not all play one Shakespearean role, nor do they ever play all of the role they variously quote, cite, or impersonate. At one point in the film, a character may speak the lines assigned to one role; at another point, the same character may fall into the "subject position" of another role (e.g., Ray moving between Albany and Kent). Since the characters do not have "unitary" identities of their own in the first place, they can only bring their own fragmented subject positions to bear on the different roles/scenes/speech acts they perform.

However, as the film moves forward characters who, initially, are merely playing at/playing out assigned roles, without understanding or conviction, begin to move toward and "claim" lines or passages associated with their own emerging subject positions in the film, so that the play begins to speak — haltingly, in bits and pieces — through them. As they begin to apprehend how the play speaks their positions more knowingly and effectually than they can represent themselves to

themselves, they either cede their grounding in their starting subject position, or gain an enhanced purchase on it. Indeed, several of the characters begin to perform their assumed or assigned roles or effects more intently, and in so doing assimilate themselves to the subject positions prescribed for them. The first Cordelia-surrogate (Catherine) initially channels her nervous distress at being displaced by withdrawing into the physical likeness of Tom o'Bedlam — naked, wild-haired, and keeping to the margins of the group. But as her resentment intensifies, Catherine performs the function of a secondary Goneril and surreptitiously poisons her successor, Gina. The callous and humanly insensitive Gloucester-function that Charles embodies becomes virtually all that "Gloucester" is in the film: the abuser of "Edgar" (Paul) and sexual master of "Cordelia" (Gina) who takes his own life after Gina has the temerity to degrade him, having first taken care to degrade her back and dress himself in the coat and tie that are his robes of authority. Alternatively, the character Amanda, who is assigned the part of the Fool and takes close instruction from Henry, whom she shadows throughout the rehearsals, seems to take from the role the moral clarity she needs to anatomize the disabling brutality of her husband, Paul. Her truth-speaking leads him, in turn, to mortify himself in the manner of Edgar and also Lear.

Thus, while the "deep structures" of *Lear* appear to rise up like the return of the repressed to overtake the film's characters, the characters return the favor, changing roles and lines to suit their evolving subject positions. In this way, they exceed what the plot makes available, coming to express drives and desires even they didn't know they had until they begin to perform them against the grain of the *Lear* script. This re-assembling of roles and subject positions works to particularly dramatic effect with respect to the film's re-staging of the frequently misogynistic, yet also anti-patriarchal, material that circulates throughout both competing editions of the *Lear* playtext. Each of the female leads, for example, has a dramatically privileged moment in which she lashes out at a husband (Ray, Paul), lover (Charles), or patriarchal figure (Henry) who uses her to construct a fantasy of himself as the center of her universe. The lone exception may be the occasions when Liz — the unregenerate Goneril-figure — abuses, berates, and degrades the seemingly unoffending Ray. Yet Liz may have reasons for what she does that range beyond what we know of her backstory and these — Ray's passive withdrawal and depression — emerge as she manages to strip away the defensive structures men build for themselves. Indeed, Liz's willingness to use the play self-exploratively, and her deep immersion in her part, suggest that even self-styled "bitches" may be motivated by a complex and reasoned drive for self-knowledge. In this respect, even Catherine's early rejection of the part of Cordelia may constitute a performance of the very role she rejects, designed to qualify our otherwise unqualified trust in Henry's knowingness and authority.

The most conspicuous collision of playtext and film-text with respect to this theme is Gina's bitterly detailed response to Charles's solicitousness as she begins to feel the effects of Catherine's poison. Gina has heretofore occupied a number of overlapping subject positions, as sexually-charged "tart"; stupid American; naively trusting sister-friend; corrupted "daughter" seeking absolution; and "dignified" sacrificial lamb. She "performs" her sexuality for Charles to please Henry (who needs Charles to play Gloucester to let the play go forward) and out of her strong desire to claim the role of Cordelia, which amounts to the same thing. Although Henry appears not to notice, or to feign indifference to, the bargain she has struck, her death prompts his total immersion in the Lear-effect in the film's climactic fireside sequence, in which the closing moments of the play take complete command of the film's *mise-en-scène*. Given the extent to which the film's Gloucester-function invades the Lear-centered plot, we may also "read" Gina's diatribe against Charles as a displacement of the Lear-effect itself, channeled through one of the several disaffected Cordelias that the patriarchal Henry has either failed to protect or has let down. As Amy Mahn, another of our students, writes, "Gina wanted to play Cordelia so badly that she turned Charles into Lear in order to become her." In this exchange, Catherine effectively performs the "active" function of the resisting/rejecting Cordelia, while Gina displaces whatever hostility she may feel toward Henry to Charles and thus remains "spiritually," though certainly not sexually, inviolate. This kind of doubling and displacement also informs the strikingly photographed tableau (figure 5) that soon follows when we discover that Charles has hanged himself and see Catherine kneeling, seemingly brought back to awareness of her fall into the Goneril-function. (Death is clearly distributed differently here than it is in *King Lear*.) Gina's body is strikingly absent from this tableau, which resembles nothing so much as an incomplete Pietà, with mourning the precursor to rescue, but not redemption. Indeed, the suspicion that Henry has let another daughter down inflects his otherwise impassioned embodiment of the Lear-effect when he discovers the dead Gina/Cordelia and informs his subsequent channeling of Lear's last lines around the bonfire, where it is difficult to distinguish passion from performance. Is this Henry mourning over Gina, or Henry mourning over Cordelia in the guise of Lear? The two are clearly inseparable, suggesting that the *Lear* text is simultaneously being mapped onto feelings and drives that the characters already have and calling forth new ones.

The closing movement of the film is particularly notable for the way in which it remediates the distintegrative effects of the closing movement of *Lear*. This move toward closure begins in Chapter 18, as the camera follows Ray out into the desert, where he has effectively been sent by Liz's insistence on repeatedly rehearsing, in his presence, an exchange with Edmund (Moses) that centers on a kiss. Pushed out by his enforced positioning as Albany in this exchange, Ray resumes

his role as Kent as he wanders aimlessly out into a desert photographed to suggest the voluptuous contours of the female body and repeats fragments of Kent's closing lines, "My master calls me," and of lines spoken at the start of the playtext's Storm scene: "Hard by here is a hovel" and "Repose you there, while I to this hard house" (3.2.61, 63). This is the moment in the film when lines from *Lear* begin most fully to speak the subject-positions of the characters outside the bounds of the rehearsal space and within the confines of the presumably "real" drama they inhabit.

Yet while the force of these and later iterations of the *Lear* playtext need to be reckoned with, as the time-space of rehearsal is left behind, the visual force of cinematic representation also begins to reassert itself. For example, after Ray despairingly howls at his discovery of Jack's mutilated body, Levring abruptly cuts to a series of starkly blocked and framed "still" shots of the grouped survivors, who seem at once becalmed and defeated by their suffering, posed stiffly in configurations that embody their alienation from each other. Like the series of discretely-framed and clinically-detailed shots that announce the closing movement of Peter Brook's *King Lear*, the figures here are presented as entirely "unaccommodated," yet stylized at the same time. As Charles turns and walks out of the frame in an earlier moment of the film, the citational allusion to Brook's *Lear* becomes more pronounced, bringing to mind as it does Lear's falling out of the frame to his death in Brook's film.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, the return from stillness to speech — as Paul reprises Edgar's belated effort to reconcile himself with Gloucester in the last act of *Lear* in the form of the bathetic "We need to talk" — notably fails to satisfy the demand for dramatic truth that the film has already met.

In fact, the substitutions Levring has his characters supply for the Shakespearean dialogue that mirrors their condition consistently fall short of the intensity, force, and deep-focus precision of the cinematography in the body of the film. Their lapse into colloquial speech seems expressly designed to highlight this disparity, revealing as it does the intellectual and emotional impoverishment of the characters, whose encounters and exchanges often operate at the level of the maudlin or soap operatic. By contrast, the characters' growing fluency in the delivery of dramatic verse in the film's last movement comes closer to approximating the expressive intensity of the cinematography. This growing fluency first emerges when Henry effectively claims the part of Lear, which is directly prompted by Liz's contention that she needs "to know who [Goneril] is and where she comes from" in order to better perform her part. Rather than answer her in the way a director might, Henry stands and speaks the speech beginning "Let it be so, thy truth then be thy dower" (drawn from 1.3.109-21 of the conflated edition), which is directed not at Goneril, but at Cordelia, in the playtext. Levring chooses to display more overtly than he needs to the

honesty, power, and sheer dramatic truth of Henry's utterance by having the camera record a series of reaction shots of Liz, Gina, Ray, Amanda, and Charles. But what makes the speech riveting is the nuanced way in which Henry's pauses, elisions, and substitutions transform what, in other hands, might be a mere recitation into a carefully managed struggle to match words answerable to the part to the words that have been accurately remembered. However much we may suppose that Henry's private struggle with his failings as a father is being channeled into his performance, what is most striking is the command the words themselves have taken of his character's self-possession, which leaves Henry with nothing more to say as the rehearsing actors await further instruction, and Henry's surrogate-daughter, Gina, is trained away to resume her sexual sacrifice with Charles, who rudely asks, "Is that all?"

Henry's apparent inability here to break the spell that his own acting of the part of Lear has cast over him anticipates the moment when the entire cast becomes similarly spellbound after discovering the poisoned Gina and the hanged Charles in the film's final chapter — the moment that propels the film into its immersion in *Lear* around the bonfire. In this last scene, the same impulse that took possession of Henry and moved *Lear* to speak through Ray outside the rehearsal-space — and, hence, to speak Shakespeare's lines more feelingly and articulately than ever before — takes hold of the rest of the cast. They take turns dropping their lines into the fire, which rages and flickers and blurs their images in an occasionally frantic montage of whip-pans, jump-cuts, flashbacks, and close-ups. And their turns are cued quite differently — not by prompts from other speakers but by the adequacy of specific lines to their own conditions at the moment. Liz belatedly tells Moses/Edmund that he has been "cozened and beguiled" into answering "an unknown opposite" and absolves him of any guilt (5.3.154-56). Moses, who has been beaten by Paul for taking up, Edmund-like, with Goneril/Liz, counters that absolution, eloquently confessing Edmund's treasons to Paul, who replies humbly with Edgar's line, "Let's exchange charity" (5.3.164-69). And Henry's climactic howls seem to well up out of this conflation of playtext and film, as if to mark the moment when the one overtakes, or is fully assimilated into, the other. Although the content of the lines, "A plague upon you murderers, traitors all; I might have saved her" (5.3.275-76), may seem to point a guilty finger at all the surviving characters for having allowed the play to subsume their hold on reality, the survivors' dignity, seriousness, and self-possession appear to suggest otherwise.

The final words the film speaks are not, however, Shakespeare's. They are spoken by and through Kanana in his unidentified language and interpreted to us in subtitles: "They are not here. Now they are gone." These words and those that precede them, "From the desert came peace; they didn't see everything, I saw it all," bring us as close as we get to understanding the film's last transaction, as two truckloads of sympathetically rendered Africans (the soft expressive eyes of

one of the younger men establish compassion as the dominant mood of the rescuers) circle the fire. They share silent looks with the apprehensive survivors, who seem shocked into bewildered silence at the timing and suddenness of their discovery. They are clearly no longer waiting to be rescued, in fact are well beyond it. After a cut sweeps this scene away, a last shot of Kanana establishes him sitting once again on his half-shaded platform, which suggests nothing so much as a patchwork stage: a stage that has not, crucially, been only a performance site but also a site of witnessing, storytelling, and observation, inseparable functions in this film.

Although the stage may embed itself in our minds as an artifact of early theater history, it has effectively served as no more than a grandstand or staging-ground for the true genius of the place, the three video cameras that we never see working but which take the measure of Kanana himself and reduce even him to the status of an actor reciting scripted lines, recorded and played back on screens that make his otherwise impossible presence in the desert worth noting. The slightly longer overhead shots that follow, of the now all-but-deserted ghost town, fade to the sound of a vinyl record bumping off its track, as the final credits roll. Possibly meant to suggest a heartbeat winding down, the sound certifies this latter-day embedding of *King Lear* as Dogme4, *The King is Alive*. While the title evokes everything from eternal recurrence to the old rendered new, this final beat records the mediations that make such recurrence possible.

### Notes

1. This essay has profited immensely from the readings, comments, and corrections of students and colleagues, whose number includes Scott Black, Curtis Bright, Claire Busse, Cristina Cervone, Samuel Crawl, Alice Dailey, Keith Harrison, Jane Hedley, Nora Johnson, Matt Kozusko, Kristen Poole, Lauren Shohet, and Nicholas Taylor.
2. Some of the aims and effects of this subtle, but clearly discernible, reflection of the presence and agency of the filmic apparatus within the filmic *mise-en-scène* are explored in Manovich (2001, 145-47), where they are differentiated from the conventions of mainstream fiction cinema, which are based (he claims) upon "lying to the viewer" (146).
3. This manifesto may be found at the Dogme95 website, [www.dogme95.dk/](http://www.dogme95.dk/).
4. As Scott-Douglass writes, "the title 'Dogme95' suggests that the movement should be regarded, at least in part, as a reaction to GATT93, the final year of the Uruguay round of General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade Talks, and GATT94, the international agreement that resulted from those talks." European representatives, particularly those from France, successfully "resisted the American initiative, arguing that films are works of art and, therefore, as Francois Mitterand put it, 'not mere merchandise [. . .] not simple commercial concerns' [quoted in Jeancolas



2000, 17]" (Scott-Douglass 2003, 253). Their success led to the exemption of films from the GATT94 agreement, and thus to the naming of this exception *l'exception culturelle* or *l'exception française*.

5. In DVD Chapter 3, "Turn On & the Married Man," Paul mistakes the opening chords of Errol Brown's "Every 1's A Winner" for the Bee Gee's "Staying Alive," an error compounded in the silly debate about John Travolta movies and dancing that follows. As Keith Harrison observes, this meta-critical moment humorously evokes "questions of performance, text, and scholarship" through a dispute over "low" culture (private communication). The dispute — and the arrogant and seductive posing that unfolds it — should cue us to the film's skepticism towards arrogant experts more generally (Jack, Henry, Catherine).
6. *Lear* has for some time served as an important intertext for critiques of the genre, at least since Peter Brook's work in the 1960s. Brook draws the connection both conceptually and artistically: his adaptation of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1963) is in many ways a *Lear* film and his *Lears*, on both stage (1962/1964) and screen (1971), repay the debt.
7. The DVD edition of *The Five Obstructions* includes Leth's *The Perfect Human*, a pairing that makes the duel between filmmakers and films accessible to new viewers.
8. Bilingual audience members will find the English subtitles to Catherine's French "fairy tale" adequate to the main sense of the French. However, by making the English slightly less offensive than the French, and by varying idiomatic translations for *con* (literally "cunt," translated as "cow"), these subtitles fail to match the full nastiness, repetitiveness, and verbal poverty of the names Catherine calls Gina. What they convey most clearly is Catherine's enjoyment of the power belonging to the translator. As one of our students, Lauren Everingham, notes, this disparity is ironically enriched by the fact that most of us "would not have understood Catherine's story without the subtitles, and yet we laugh at Gina's foolishness."
9. Like Bohannan, whose essay ironically turns on an American anthropologist being retaught both the plot and meaning of *Hamlet* by a group of Tiv elders, *The King Is Alive* is skeptical of claims to universal authority (and universalizing interpretations of Shakespeare). And as in Bohannan's essay, the figure who at once claims interpretive authority and embodies the limits of cross-cultural translation is a male African "elder." But in this instance, the American, Ray, inhabits the same kind of position delegated to an outspoken old man in Bohannan's account, who, while conceding that different cultures have different customs, nonetheless maintains that "people are the same everywhere; therefore, there are always witches and it is we, the elders, who know how witches work." In this respect, Ray's normative Americanness and the elder's normative Tiv-ness speak the same language.

10. As Kenneth Rothwell observes, at the end of Brook's *King Lear*, "a gravelly voiced Paul Scofield as the dying king literally falls out of the frame . . . to be replaced by white nothingness" (1994, 219). In a coincidence that may be more predictive than fortuitous, we note that Brook undertook his direction of the dystopic survival narrative, *The Lord of the Flies* (released 1963), at approximately the same time he was directing an RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company) production of *King Lear* (1962), which he took on world tour in 1964. Brook's *King Lear* film was, in turn, released just a few years later, in 1971.

### Online Resources

Dogme95 [cited 5 December, 2005]. <http://www.dogme95.dk/>.

## References

- Aldrich, Robert, dir. 1965. *The Flight of the Phoenix*. USA. The Associates & Aldrich Company. Sound, col., 142 mins.
- Almeryda, Michael, dir. 2000. *Hamlet*. USA. Miramax/Buena Vista Entertainment. Sound, col., 113 mins. (DVD edition).
- Badham, John, dir. 1977. *Saturday Night Fever*. USA. Paramount/RSO. Sound, col., 118 mins.
- Bohannon, Laura. 1966. "Shakespeare in the Bush." *Natural History*, 75.7: 28-33.
- Branagh, Kenneth, dir. 1993. *Much Ado about Nothing*. UK/USA. Renaissance Films/BBC/Samuel Goldwyn Company. Sound, col., 111 mins.
- Branagh, Kenneth, dir. 1996. *Hamlet*. UK/USA. Castle Rock/Columbia. Sound, col., 242 mins.
- Brook, Peter, dir. 1963. *Lord of the Flies*. UK. Two Arts Ltd. Sound, b/w, 92 mins.
- Brook, Peter, dir. 1971. *King Lear*. UK/Denmark. Columbia Pictures. Sound, b/w, 137 mins.
- Burt, Richard. 2003. "Shakespeare, 'Glo-cali-zation,' Race, and the Small Screens of Post-Popular Culture." In *Shakespeare, the Movie II*. Edited by Richard Burt and Lynda Boose. London and New York: Routledge. 14-36.
- Cartelli, Thomas. 2003. "Shakespeare and the Street: Pacino's *Looking for Richard*, Bedford's *The Street King*, and the Common Understanding." In *Shakespeare, the Movie II*. Edited by Richard Burt and Lynda Boose. London and New York: Routledge. 186-99.
- Dogme95 [cited 5 December, 2005]. <http://www.dogme95.dk/>.
- Everingham, Lauren Constance. 2005. "Foreign Languages in *The King is Alive*" (unpublished paper).
- Godard, Jean Luc, dir. 1987. *King Lear*. USA/Switzerland. Cannon. Sound, col., 95 mins.
- Greenaway, Peter, dir. 1991. *Prospero's Books*. Netherlands/France/Italy. Allarts/Cine/Camera One. Sound, col., 129 mins.
- Harris, Rachel. 2005. "Figurative Sight and the Wounding of Gloucester Characters in *King Lear* and *The King is Alive*" (unpublished paper).
- Hitchcock, Alfred, dir. 1944. *Lifeboat*. USA. Twentieth Century Fox. Sound, b/w, 96 mins.
- Holderness, Graham. 1992. "Shakespeare Rewound." *Shakespeare Survey* 45: 63-74.
- Jarman, Derek, dir. 1980. *William Shakespeare's The Tempest*. UK. World Northal. Sound, col., 90 mins.
- Jeancolas, Jean-Pierre. 2000. "The Reconstruction of French Cinema." In *France in Focus: Film and National Identity*. Edited by Elizabeth Ezra and Sue Harris. Oxford: Berg. 13-21.

- Kaurismäki, Aki, dir. 1987. *Hamlet Goes Business* ( *Hamlet liikemaailmassa*). Finland. Villealfa Filmproduction Oy. Sound, b/w, 86 mins.
- Kleiser, Randal, dir. 1978. *Grease*. USA. Paramount. Sound, col., 110 mins.
- Kurosawa, Akira, dir. 1957. *Throne of Blood* ( *Kumonosu jô*). Japan. Toho. Sound, b/w, 110 mins.
- Leth, Jorgen, and Lars von Trier, dirs. 2003. *The Five Obstructions*. Denmark/Switzerland. Almaz/Panic/Wajnbrose/Zentropa. Sound, col., 90 mins. [DVD (2004) Koch Lorber Films, includes Jorgen Leth, dir. 1967. *The Perfect Human*. Sound, b/w, 12 mins.]
- Levin, Bernard. 1984. "Quoting Shakespeare." In *Enthusiasms*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Levring, Kristian, dir. 2000. *The King is Alive*. USA/Denmark. Good Machine/Zentropa Entertainments. Sound, col., 108 mins.
- Mahn, Amy. 2005. "Functions and Effects in *The King is Alive*" (unpublished paper).
- Manovich, Lev. 2001. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- McGann, Jerome J. 1991. *The Textual Condition*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Morrisette, Billy, dir. 2001. *Scotland, PA*. USA. Lot 47 Films. Sound, col., 104 mins. (DVD edition).
- Pacino, Al, dir. 1996. *Looking for Richard*. USA. Twentieth Century Fox. Sound, col., 118 mins.
- Radford, Michael, dir. 2005. *William Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice*. Sound, col., 131 mins.
- Roach, Joseph. 1996. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Roeg, Nicholas, dir. 1971. *Walkabout*. UK. Twentieth Century Fox. Sound, col., 100 mins.
- Rohmer, Eric, dir. 1992. *Un Conte d' Hiver* ( *A Tale of Winter*). France. C.E.R./Les Films du Losange/Sofiarp. Sound, col., 114 mins. Distributed in VHS in the USA by MK2 Diffusion; New Yorker Films Video (c. 1995).
- Rothwell, Kenneth S. 1994. "Representing *King Lear* on Screen: From Metatheatre to 'Meta-cinema.'" In *Shakespeare and the Moving Image*. Edited by Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 211-33.
- Rundle, Peter. 1999a. Phone interview with Kristian Levring, 10 November. [http://www.dogme95.dk/news/interview/levring\\_interview.htm](http://www.dogme95.dk/news/interview/levring_interview.htm).
- Rundle, Peter. 1999b. Interview with Lars von Trier, 4 November. [http://www.dogme95.dk/news/interview/trier\\_interview2.htm](http://www.dogme95.dk/news/interview/trier_interview2.htm).
- Schechner, Richard. 1985. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Scott-Douglass, Amy. 2003. "Dogme Shakespeare 95: European Cinema, Anti-Hollywood Sentiment, and the Bard." In *Shakespeare, the Movie II*. Edited by Richard Burt and Lynda Boose. London and New York: Routledge. 252-65.
- Shakespeare, William. 1999. *King Lear: A Conflated Text*. Edited by Stephen Orgel. New York: Penguin.
- Sinha, Amresh. 2004. "The Use and Abuse of Subtitles." In *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*. Edited by Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour. Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press. 172-90.
- Van Sant, Gus, dir. 1991. *My Own Private Idaho*. USA. New Line. Sound, col., 86 mins. DVD edition.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2004. "The Foreign Gaze Which Sees Too Much." In *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*. Edited by Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour. Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press. 286-306.