

"Prithee, see there! Behold! Look!" (3.4.69):

## The Gift or the Denial of Sight in Screen Adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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### Abstract

What occurs, aesthetically and ideologically, when *Macbeth* is appropriated by filmmakers and adapted to the screen? What are the visual strategies chosen in different films using the Shakespearean text? Do they follow the same approach as found in the dramatic material, hiding some events and disclosing others? Or do they choose to impose their own horrible visions on the spectators, confronting them with the dangerous, hallucinatory "Gorgon" evoked by Macduff? This essay will compare key scenes from three screen adaptations of the play — the two renowned *Macbeth* versions by Orson Welles (1948) and Roman Polanski (1971), and the less renowned 1997 *Macbeth* by Jeremy Freeston (with Jason Connery and Helen Baxendale in the main parts). By examining the same scenes in the different film versions (in terms of *mise-en-scène*, viewpoints, camera moves, editing, and sound), this essay will attempt to reveal their distinct visual strategies in relation to three themes: the showing or hiding of "horrible sights"; the cinematic treatment of visions — such as the Ghost or the dagger — which are "present" and "absent" simultaneously; and, finally, the ending of the narrative, either in full-circle closure or in perpetuated suspense.

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*Macbeth* is synonymous with bloody murders, battles, and duels. When examining the Shakespearean text closely, however, one can be struck by the relatively small number of violent acts referred to as being actually shown on stage. Bloody events such as the battle against the Norwegian forces, the execution of the Thane of Cawdor, the murder of Duncan, or Macduff's discovery of the assassinated king are not supposed to be shown to the spectators. They happen "off stage," in a space where access is denied to the eyes of the audience. However, the coronation of Macbeth stands as a turning point in this visual strategy. The new king's tyranny and cruel manipulative practices seem to trigger a display of visual horrors. From this moment onwards, what was hidden is, on the contrary, offered to view. Spectators are invited to see the murder

of Banquo, the gruesome spectre of Banquo at the banquet, the gory apparitions when Macbeth meets the Witches for the second time, the murder of Macduff's young son and, finally, the death of Young Siward by Macbeth's sword. Yet, as Macbeth's reign is interrupted, so too is the visual display of horrors. Since the end of the final duel is supposed to happen off-stage, the spectators are denied the sight of Macduff killing Macbeth. Only Macbeth's severed head is shown as a sign of the brutal beheading that the audience is left to imagine. This back-and-forth movement between an aesthetic that hides and an aesthetic that shows, is, however, to be correlated with a dramatic discourse insisting on the potent effects that seeing horrors can have. As Macduff enters the (off-stage) room where King Duncan lies murdered, he warns Lennox: "Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight / With a new Gorgon" (2.3.78-79).<sup>1</sup> Witnessing a dreadful, bloody situation can provoke blindness and hallucination, as the reference to Medusa implies. Paradoxically, seeing "too much" would induce an inability to see any longer. Going beyond what one is supposed to see would mean losing one's sight. When Macbeth is exposed to the view of bloody apparitions by the Witches, horror is once more linked to blindness, awful visions to hallucinatory dismay. The "Weird sisters" explicitly state their intent to "Show his eyes, and grieve his heart" (4.1.110). When exposed to the royal line of Banquo's children, Macbeth cries out: "Why do you show me this? . . . / Another yet? A seventh! I'll see no more! . . . / Horrible sight!" (4.1.116, 118, 122). As he is shown the future, Macbeth is exposed to a kind of Gorgon and starts to hallucinate, as the comment of the First Witch reflects: "but why / Stands Macbeth thus amazedly?" (4.1.125-26). His cry of "I'll see no more" can be interpreted either as a strong desire to bring the dreadful vision to an end, or as a fear of becoming blind if the vision lingers on. In any case, Macbeth expresses his abhorrence of seeing what he considers to be utterly horrible. He wishes to escape, to be protected, from the sense (and the gift) of sight.

In the play, the notion of horror is, therefore, very much related to the gift of (double) sight. A horrible sight seems to be defined as what one can see that others cannot (or are not allowed/supposed to) see. Macduff sees the dead Duncan, but prevents Lennox from doing so; Lady Macbeth is the only witness to the "damned spot" on her hands; Macbeth is the only one who can see the Ghost of Banquo at the banquet; and only to him are the bloody visions addressed. It is almost as if this exclusivity of sight was what made the sight horrible to behold in the first place — the characters find themselves alone and isolated, confronted with a vision that only they can see.

These considerations lead us to wonder what occurs, aesthetically and ideologically, when this Shakespearean play is appropriated by filmmakers and adapted to the screen. What are the visual strategies chosen in different films using the Shakespearean text? Do they follow the same

approach as is found in the dramatic material, hiding some events and disclosing others? Or do they choose to impose their own horrible visions on the spectators, confronting them with the dangerous, hallucinatory "Gorgon" evoked by Macduff? This essay will compare key scenes from three screen adaptations of the play — the two renowned *Macbeth* versions by Orson Welles (1948) and Roman Polanski (1971), and the less renowned 1997 *Macbeth* by Jeremy Freeston (with Jason Connery and Helen Baxendale in the main parts). The 1957 Japanese appropriation, *Throne of Blood*, directed by Akira Kurosawa, has been excluded from this study. Though engaging as a piece of cinematic work, it does not follow Shakespeare's original text and scene pattern closely enough to be compared with the other films. Including some analysis of a filmed stage production also seemed necessary, as it provides a theatrical referent that can help to evaluate the cinematic choices of the film versions. I have chosen to refer to the televised film of Trevor Nunn's 1978 RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company) production for the bare simplicity and metatheatrical aspects of its *mise-en-scène*, which recalls early modern staging. It thus serves as an interesting benchmark with which to assess the aesthetics used by the film directors. Giving other accounts of stage productions did not appear essential, since the point of this essay is to assess the extent to which diverse cinematic techniques depart from the bareness of the stage.

By examining the same scenes in the different film versions (in terms of *mise-en-scène*, viewpoints, camera moves, editing, and sound), this essay will attempt to reveal distinct visual strategies in relation to three themes: the showing or hiding of "horrible sights"; the cinematic treatment of the visions — such as the Ghost or the dagger — that are "present" and "absent" simultaneously; and, finally, the ending of the dramatic narrative, either in full-circle closure or in perpetuated suspense. I will not provide a chronological study of influence from one film to the other, but will try, instead, to explore the cinematic aesthetics that each director has chosen in regards to presence and absence, revelation, and concealment.

### Choosing to Reveal or Choosing to Hide

The question of showing or hiding sights, whether horrible or not, is part of the aesthetics of cinema as a whole. Editing and camera moves, by progressively disclosing space and action to the view of the spectators, generate a permanent tension between concealment and undressing. According to André Bazin, in his book, *What is Cinema?*, the screen is not a frame, but a mask that allows the audience to see only one part of the action (Bazin 1967, 105). In Christian Metz's theory (1978, 23), the screen is both a mask and a frame — a mask, in that it only reveals parts of the diegetic world (i.e., what is represented); a frame, in that it surrounds the representation (since the screen is a limited surface). This tension between absence and presence arouses desire, as the

spectators generally want to see what is being hidden from them. It can also be used as a major aesthetic tool to create suspense or dramatic irony, since part of the action might be hidden from the on-screen characters, but revealed to the audience. Any screen adaptation of a Shakespearean play notably involves the introduction of this tension between hidden and disclosed action. The camera field is imagined as belonging to a larger diegetic space which would include it. If the space off-screen remains invisible to spectators, it nevertheless exists in their minds as belonging to the diegetic world. Cinema is, therefore, aesthetically prone to create imaginary spaces and to reveal parts of them at will, leaving the rest to the imagination of the spectators.

When adapting *Macbeth* for the screen, directors have to choose whether to leave some elements, actions, or whole events to the spectators' imagination or to display those moments to their "hallucinating" eyes. Such moments are specifically related to the Witches' prophecies and to how those prophecies eventually turn out to be true at the end of the play. The question of disclosing or hiding visual elements becomes, indeed, very cogent when aural revelations (i.e., disclosures of another nature) prevail in the dramatic discourse of the play. The filmed versions of the scenes involving the Witches offer an impressive array of visual possibilities, from minimalism to exhibitionism.

In Trevor Nunn's 1978 theater production, what is shown is kept to a minimum: the actors deliver their lines on an austere, bare stage, in the middle of a metatheatrical environment composed of other actors who surround the action. This aesthetic simplicity and absence of visual realism are compensated for by realistic acoustic profusion, in particular the sounds of thunder. The Weird Sisters are three women (played by Susan Dury, Judith Harte, and Mary Kean) — one old, one middle-aged, and one young. All of them are average looking. Ritually howling together, they question the youngest one, who looks sick and drools, looking at the sky and speaking as if she were possessed by a most potent oracle. These three Witches are dressed up as gypsy clairvoyants, with turbans and dark sequined shawls. They seem to be mere mediators between a dangerous, dark force and Macbeth himself (played by Ian McKellen). As they meet him for the first time, the Weird Sisters respectfully kneel before him and deliver their prophecies in turn, in a very organized and serene manner. When they meet Macbeth for the second time, the presence of two candles beside them reinforces their presentation as mediums, invoking spirits through their singing. The ritual then consists of painting primitive drawings on Macbeth's body, making him drink a drugged mixture, and covering his eyes with a blindfold, as if he were about to be executed by a firing squad. In this production, sight is forbidden. The spectators are denied the sight of any bloody apparitions, except in the form of horrible, wizened dolls held up in turn by the Witches to inspire Macbeth's visions and secure his reliance on the Witches' prophecies. Macbeth is also denied sight, as he is

blinded for a while. The apparitions invade the space of his mind, made fragile by the hallucinatory potion he has drunk. The choice of the bare stage and minimalist setting goes together with an aesthetic that, instead of exhibiting, conceals horrors and "blinds" the main character as well as the audience.

Orson Welles's visual strategy, in his 1948 black-and-white adaptation, offers more to the view, but in a blurring style that favours fluidity, uncertainty, and instability through a misty setting, out-of-focus shots, and slow dissolves. The film starts with a long shot on the three Witches (played by Peggy Webber, Lurene Tuttle, and Brainerd Duffield) on a rocky promontory, surrounded by swirling cloud, mist, and vapor that echoes the line "Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.12). The forked staffs they hold connote evil and demonism, and are directly opposed to the Christian crosses carried by the Scotsmen (who are recent converts from Paganism) throughout the film. The misty long shot is immediately followed by close-ups of boiling, bubbling mud in a cauldron. The spectators are, therefore, denied any close look at the Witches' faces. The following shots (which keep going in and out of focus) concentrate instead on their hands, which pour ingredients and shape, out of clay, a voodoo doll representing Macbeth. As J. Lawrence Guntner notices, Macbeth is therefore presented as "their creation and their toy" (2000, 125). In contrast to the Witches of Nunn's theater production, these Weird Sisters seem to possess a strong power in themselves, which endows them with a manipulative, controlling superiority. As they pronounce "There to meet with Macbeth" (1.1.7), the image fades to black with a dramatic musical crescendo. The title of the film *Macbeth* then fills the screen, giving the impression that it has been prompted by the Witches' pronouncement of the word "Macbeth." The Witches thus seem not only to manipulate the character of Macbeth inside the story, but also to control the images of the film itself, as if they were directly participating in the film's creation. In Welles's version, the Witches almost stand as doubles of the film director, literally shaping characters and giving birth to images.

When Macbeth encounters the Witches for the first time, the sight of their faces is still denied to the audience. Shot against a background of bright light with their long hair and forked twigs, they stand like figures of death. Their prophecies are accompanied by the correlating gestures of placing the insignia of Cawdor — followed by the royal crown — onto the head of the voodoo doll. The aural revelations thus go along with some physical manipulation, mediated through the object of the doll. In 4.1, Macbeth goes less to see the Witches than they come to meet him. Evoked by an ear-piercing voice-over from the off-field, they seem to spring up only in his disturbed mind, as he wrestles, Lear-like, on what looks like a desolate heath or an unrealistic sound stage, with lightning striking furiously around him. As the light turns to terrifying darkness, the camera locates Macbeth as a mere speck in this empty space, with only his face being lit by some invisible spotlight. (A

*sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Filmed from above from a very high angle, Macbeth suddenly looks very small and vulnerable. This shot contrasts with the way he is usually photographed throughout the film, generally in low-angle shots, with the camera located beneath him, so as to make his silhouette look more imposing and, as Kenneth S. Rothwell has written, "to give him the image of overpowering authority" (Rothwell 1998, 29). Macbeth's second encounter with the Weird Sisters thus reverses his usual representation in the film, showing him as fragile and weak. The camera then slowly tracks forward until his face fills the whole screen. Just before the sequence ends with a fade to black, Macbeth talks directly to the camera, looking at the spectators as if he were addressing the Witches. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) This sudden breaking of film realism not only interpellates the audience, but also places each spectator in the position of the Weird Sisters, looking at this defenseless character with a distanced, detached point of view. Identification with the main character is thus discouraged by the very aesthetic of the scene.

Welles's film, therefore, shows as much as it hides. While the first meeting creates a tension by showing the Witches' silhouettes, but hiding them through specific lighting and misty environment, the second encounter lets us hear the Witches, but conceals them visually. This double process, which both "gives" and "takes," excites curiosity and arouses the desire to see more. Welles's film, by denying identifiable faces to the Witches and by blurring the spectators' sight through numerous out-of-focus shots, fading in/out and dissolves, creates a world in which certainty is lost and the instability of form and meaning reigns.

Jeremy Freeston's 1997 *Macbeth*, shot in color, is much more realistic in style and displays more visual elements by creating parallel or interior — mental — dimensions. The film starts with a bloody, realistic, medieval battle that ends as Macbeth kills the Norwegian king in slow motion, thus emphasizing from the beginning his status as a hero. The Weird Sisters (played by Hildegard Neil, Jean Trend, and Phillipa Peak) first appear on a beautiful beach, where dreamlike Celtic music can be heard. With their rather fair features and serene attitudes, they are presented less as witches and more as sorceresses or sirens, tempting imprudent travellers into their net. They are included in an eminently natural world. As Banquo (Graham McTavish) and Macbeth (Jason Connery) ride through the wood, the film offers a romantic vision of Scotland, highlighting the wild, fine-looking nature around the characters with romantic shots of greenery, little streams, and other idyllic landscapes. But as much as the Weird Sisters belong to that world, they also depart from it through a cinematic means — that of filters. As they appear on screen, the dominant green color in the camera field is turned into a dominant yellow by a filter fixed on the lens. The Witches' apparition thus gives rise to a parallel dimension into which Banquo and Macbeth are transported

when they happen to meet them. This new dimension is also signalled through discordant music that contrasts with the serene, Celtic melody that had been heard previously. When the Witches suddenly vanish into air, the dimension they created is gone and the colors immediately come back to their original state. During the second encounter with Macbeth, the film focuses on Macbeth's vision through a succession of shots jolting forward onto his eyes. This emphasis on sight is also made through lighting: Macbeth's eyes are lit as if by a searchlight, with everything else in darkness. Contrary to what happens in the Nunn and Welles versions, the frightening apparitions are exposed to the view of the film spectators. These visions seem to spring up from a whirling eddy in the Witches' cauldron and notably include a bloody, tortured child carrying tree branches in his hand. The spectators are plunged again into another dimension. But this time, the dimension is a mental one, as it shows us what Macbeth sees in his mind. The creation of this interior dimension is confirmed when the prophecies regarding Macduff and Birnam Wood are uttered not by the Witches, but by Macbeth himself in voice-over, the cinematic voice of the mind. The sequence works as if the predictions arose spontaneously in Macbeth's mind and were assimilated to his own thoughts. Macbeth is seen almost as being responsible for what he "sees" and "predicts." Freeston's adaptation exhibits much more than those of Nunn and Welles, but immediately projects this exhibition into another reality — a parallel dimension created through color filters or an interior dimension created through subjective visions and voice-over. The act of showing seems to call for (or go together with) an absence of objective reality.

Roman Polanski's 1971 film is renowned for its horror, nudity, and violence. Of the four versions of *Macbeth*, Polanski's film is the one that shows and reveals the most, thus symbolically confronting the spectators with a dangerous "Gorgon" that can "amaze" them. The film locates the action of the play in a cruel and pagan world, between the Neolithic and the Middle Ages, in which earth, water, fire, and stone dominate. According to E. Pearlman, the Scots are presented as spiritually primitive and "ripe for invasion by demons" (1994, 253). The first scene with the Witches, which opens the film, unfolds in three phases: one long, contemplative establishing shot of a deserted, sandy beach at sunrise; close-ups on the three women (played by Maisie MacFarquhar, Elsie Taylor, and Noelle Rimmington) that emphasize their ugly deformities and their bloody actions; and another establishing shot when they move away, seeming to walk supernaturally on water as they are reflected in the wet surface of the beach. The scene is structurally framed by two impressive long takes of the hazy, empty beach, which Guntner has described as "Technicolor picture-postcard vista[s]" (2000, 127) and which contrast with the close shots of the hideous women — one young and pockmarked, one middle-aged and verrucose, one old and blind. The Witches start digging a grave in the sand, in which they bury a noose and a macabre, severed lower arm.

In the hand, they place a dagger and pour a vial of fresh blood into the sand. This strange and sinister ritual seems to predict (or even engender) the hangings, mutilations, and murders to come. The Witches, as in Welles's film, appear as figures of death. Even the squawking gulls look like vultures, flying in circles and waiting to devour their prey. But contrary to Welles, Polanski does not hide, but openly displays the ugly faces and gory acts of his Witches, focusing on them in detailed close-ups. This showing of horrors goes along with the showing of naked bodies. During the first meeting with Macbeth (Jon Finch), the Young Witch lures him towards her stone lair and lifts up her dress, revealing her nudity. The second encounter emphasizes this primitive, instinctive sexuality even more, as the spectators are faced not only with three Witches, but with a large grouping of them, all naked and massed in their cave. Polanski's film thus works on a very high level of exhibition that "anatomizes" the human body, unveiling its deformities, its maimed parts, and its unadorned nakedness. From Nunn's minimalist production to Polanski's "all-revealing" one, the visual strategies differ in terms of what is shown, how much is shown, and in which way it is shown. However, other important choices have to be made regarding these visions — such as the "dagger of the mind" or the Ghost of Banquo, which are "present" and "absent" at the same time.

### Present or Absent Entities?

This question of presence/absence is at the very heart of cinema aesthetics. In essence, the medium of the cinema stimulates perception through many pictorial and sound signifiers. It thus offers many signs that seem "present" to the eyes. However, although it shows a great deal, cinema immediately overturns perception because the objects represented are not actually there. Contrary to the theater, all the elements seen on the screen are not present in the same space as the spectators. This physical absence of the signifier makes the content of the film inaccessible and infinitely desirable at the same time. This absence creates a longing for what is not present here and now, thus inducing mechanics of lack and desire. The constant frustration that comes from not being able to grasp what we can see in front of us can be related to the words Macbeth writes to his wife regarding the Witches: "When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished" (1.5.4-6). The Witches' apparitions work in the same mode as do cinematic images, creating a desire to know and see more but, at the same time, constantly postponing that achievement through their ghost-like existence.

The entities of the dagger (2.1) and the Ghost of Banquo (3.4) are highly symbolic of what the cinema offers to the view: they are present for the person who sees them, but lack tangible substance. One cannot "clutch" them, as they both remain "false creation[s]" (2.1.38). When the scenes involving the dagger and the Ghost are performed in the theater, the director must make a

choice: either the two entities are physically present on stage, or they are not. Yet, in the cinema, they can be both present and absent through cinematic editing, which enables alternate viewpoints and turns objectivity into subjectivity. Cinema's ability to change points of view allows space, but also different perceptions of that space, to be shaped. Whereas theater can only present a single level of perceptible reality, movie editing can offer different visions of one event through the eyes of various characters. This aesthetic potential has some interesting consequences for the banquet scene in *Macbeth*, as the Ghost of Banquo is supposed to be perceived by Macbeth only, and not by Lady Macbeth and the guests, who remain bewildered by the words that their King utters.

In Trevor Nunn's theater production, both the dagger and the Ghost of Banquo are physically absent from the stage. The spectators are left to imagine the vision that Macbeth evokes verbally. While Macbeth delivers the "dagger" soliloquy, his hand only grasps some air as he says: "Come, let me clutch thee: / I have thee not" (2.1.34-35). In the same way, his finger points to nothing as he is confronted by the Ghost of Banquo, whose presence is only mentally configured. This production clearly emphasizes virtuality over physicality, absence over presence.

In Orson Welles's film, the dagger and the Ghost are present on the screen; but this presence is only achieved through metaphors of subjectivity. Consequently, their "objective reality" is still questionable. The dagger is never a physical object — it appears merely as a stylistic focus and dissolves. After suggesting the shape of a dagger through a white flash, the film concentrates mainly on the figure of Macbeth, who vainly attempts to grab the dagger. Through dissolves and changes in focus, the film offers a series of different perspectives on Macbeth, using as well various scales of shot — from long shots to close-ups. The dagger's presence is only metaphorically suggested each time the film goes out of focus, dissolves, and shows a new, in-focus vision of Macbeth. In this version, it is as if Macbeth were taking the place of the dagger in the spectators' eyes. Macbeth's hallucination is made our own: we too have the impression of seeing a dagger, while we never really do. During the banquet scene, in which Macbeth is seated at one end of a long wooden table, the Ghost first appears only as a shadow passing down over Macbeth's face. As a shadowy figure, it is thus both real and virtual. The camera lingers on Macbeth's hallucinating eyes as he is confronted with the horrible vision. But an "objective" shot of the banquet table shows what all the guests see — an empty seat at the other end of the table. As Macbeth rises and points in front of him, the camera moves to the shadow of Macbeth's finger on the wall and slowly tracks towards the right, following the direction it indicates. The end of the shot reveals the Ghost of Banquo (Edgar Barrier) in deep focus, as seen from Macbeth's perspective. In one continuous shot, the dimension changes from an objective viewpoint of Macbeth to his own mental, subjective vision. Welles's film, therefore, first shares the guests' point of view and does not show the Ghost, then

shares Macbeth's point of view and does show it. The combination of these two experiences through editing makes two realities coexist within the same geographical environment. According to Lorne Buchman (1991, 22), the alternation of subjective visions can reflect the Ghost's ambiguous state, an entity both real and virtual, creating a dynamic tension between identification and alienation. The spectators share the point of view of one character and are brought to identify with him, only to turn to another point of view that alienates them from the former. However, in Welles's film, there are not only two viewpoints, but three. The camera first acquires the guests' viewpoint to prove the objective, physical absence of Banquo, then shifts to Macbeth's viewpoint to assert the subjective, mental presence of the Ghost and, finally, cuts to Banquo's own viewpoint from the end of the dining table. This last viewpoint scrutinizes Macbeth's terrified and angry reactions. It is through Banquo's eyes that the spectators see Macbeth furiously throwing over the table and all the dishes. The film thus introduces a triangulation of gazes, with an alternation of three responding or contradicting viewpoints. Through different subjective visions of the same event, Welles's film makes the Ghost's presence and absence coexist within the same space.

In Jeremy Freeston's adaptation, shadows and changes in viewpoint also signal an entity that is both present and absent. However, the aesthetic strategy is more literal and displays more realistic or gory details. The "dagger scene" takes place in a chapel, where Macbeth kneels and starts praying. Suddenly, the wind blows a window open. The light comes in and projects the shadow of a golden Christian cross onto the floor. The shadow takes the realistic shape of a dagger whose handle is, indeed, turned towards Macbeth's hand. The status of the dagger is thus made ambiguous, but unlike in Welles's version, the spectators, along with Macbeth, witness the occurrence of a real phenomenon. Although the dagger is only present virtually, the shadow of the cross is a vision that can be apprehended objectively. Ceasing to be Macbeth's exclusive illusory experience, it is actually shared by the spectators. The vision only resides in Macbeth's personal interpretation of the shadow as a "dagger." Freeston's film finds a credible equivalent to explain realistically what remains a supernatural experience in the play. For the banquet scene, this screen version uses the device it had already employed to create parallel dimensions during the Witches' sequences — filters of different colors.

The banquet scene takes place in welcoming, bright, and warm colors (red and orange tones). As soon as Macbeth sees the Ghost, cinematic means all converge to express shock. Dramatic drum beats can be heard, and the camera zooms in extremely rapidly onto the face of the hallucinating Macbeth, as if giving him a stunning blow. In a very brief flashback, Macbeth sees Banquo being murdered, as well as a quasi-subliminal image of a horrible Ghost. He is then jolted into another dimension, that of his own vision, where he finds himself alone with and vulnerable to the Ghost

of Banquo. The other guests have disappeared, and the color tones have all changed from red and warm into cold and blue tones. The film insists on the physical and gory aspects of the Ghost. Banquo raises his head in slow-motion, increasing the effect of horror through this unhurried revelation. What he discloses is the head of a bloody corpse in an advanced state of decay. As Macbeth asks "Which of you have done this?" (3.4.49), the scene comes back to "objective reality": the colors are a dominant red, and all the guests are again present. Only the Ghost is missing in this dimension. But as Macbeth says "never shake / Thy gory locks at me" (3.4.50-51), he is sent back to the "blue dimension." This back-and-forth movement lasts until Lady Macbeth (Helen Baxendale) forces her husband to leave the table and speak to her. Through color filters, Freeston's film again constructs a parallel dimension, but this time related to the subjective vision of the character. While Welles merely changed camera viewpoints to express subjectivity, Freeston creates separate worlds, with their specific lighting, colors, and physical details. This version, much more than Welles's, insists on the gory side of Macbeth's confrontation with the Ghost. The character, sent as he is into his own mentally constructed world, is denied nothing visually. Nor are the spectators, on whom Macbeth's macabre, all-too-real vision is imposed.

Roman Polanski's film offers an even higher degree of realistic display. The dagger, which was completely absent in Nunn's production, suggested only through stylistic devices by Welles, and given the appearance of a real phenomenon (the shadow) by Freeston, is here granted fully realistic shape. The dagger appears in the form of a gleaming hologram in superimposition, floating in the air and moving towards Duncan's room. Each time Macbeth turns his eyes towards it, the dagger appears to him and the spectators. On the contrary, each time Macbeth moves away and stops looking, the hologram vanishes. The dagger is still virtual (Macbeth cannot grasp it after two tries) and is still dependent on Macbeth's sight to exist, but it nevertheless acquires a degree of physical reality unequalled in the other versions. Polanski's film keeps creating and displaying corporeality. The same strategy is applied to the banquet scene, in which camera angles, viewpoints, editing, and special effects all concur to produce feelings of fear, repulsion, and persecution. The spectators are immediately led to share Macbeth's point of view. They see that there is no "place reserv'd" (3.4.46) at the banquet table: all the chairs at the table are shown to be occupied, as the camera pans to disclose an uninterrupted row of human backs. While discordant, atonal music can be heard, the subjective camera moves closer to one of the guests, as he slowly turns around to face the king, with one hand still hiding most of his livid face. Very much like Freeston, Polanski works toward a deliberately slow revelation of gore, forcing the spectators to wait for the fulfilment of their voyeuristic compulsion and so exciting their desire to see what comes next. Macbeth, shocked by this unexpected sight of the Ghost (played by Martin Shaw), drops his wine glass on the floor. A

close-up of Lennox (Andrew Laurence) shows him immediately wiping up the stain of wine, which looks like blood. As Kenneth S. Rothwell has noted (1999, 157): "This obsession with wiping things clean resonates off Lady Macbeth (Francesca Annis)'s vain hope that 'a little water clears us of this deed' [2.2.68]." This brief shot, far from being gratuitous, thus participates in the weaving of a strong motif in the film — the attempt to erase the traces of the ever-too-present blood. Thick blood actually starts pouring from the Ghost's face when the camera comes back to him. Macbeth stares at this ghastly vision with amazed, bulging eyes. The Ghost, who starts running after Macbeth, is empowered through a low-angle shot (which amplifies his size) and the use of slow-motion (which generates an impression of strength). Banquo progressively vanishes from the screen, thus offering proof of his virtual, superimposed status. But he reappears suddenly in another low-angle shot, with a falcon perched on his arm, suggesting his position as a dangerous predator. This succession of apparition and "dis-apparition" follows the same rule as the dagger scene: each time Macbeth ceases to look, the vision evaporates. In Polanski's film, the apparition and presence of virtuality is conditioned and created by sight. Macbeth, who is pursued, is filmed from above, as if he were an easy, fearful prey. Terrified, he continues to move backwards, stumbles, and falls to the ground near a column from which iron chains hang. Macbeth is thus visually and symbolically presented as a prisoner of his own guilt and paranoia. He protects his face with his hands, trying to avoid the horrible sight and make it disappear. Polanski's adaptation is here consistent with its exploitation of corporeality. His Ghost is the most "physical" one. If the other versions presented the Ghost as a still figure, Polanski emphasizes its ability to move, pursue, and threaten. The audience, whose viewpoint is identified with that of Macbeth, is thus exposed to extreme horror and hallucination.

In terms of presence and absence, the four versions propose different strategies, with divergent consequences upon reception. Trevor Nunn's production favors complete absence, remains in line with its minimalist approach, and encourages spectators to be active in constructing the visions in their mind. Orson Welles's expressionist adaptation suggests presence through the use of stylistic cinematic devices and changes in personal viewpoints, but this presence remains unstable, ambiguous, and highly subjective. The spectators are, somehow, like Macbeth tricked into thinking that they "see," and the multiple viewpoints often alienate them from the main character. Jeremy Freeston's film attempts to explain (and justify) Macbeth's visions through the construction of observable, credible facts or parallel diegetic worlds: the audience is absorbed into Macbeth's mental world and his believable, frightening experiences. Identification with the main character is highly encouraged, creating emotional bonding between Macbeth and the spectators. Finally, Roman Polanski's version uses special effects to offer as much presence as possible, giving shape,

movement, and power to the ghost-like entities: filmic creation and exhibition are clearly favored over the spectators' imagination.

### Full-Circle Closure or Perpetuated Suspense?

The end of any fiction signals that the narrative ceases to be connected with the diegesis. The readers or spectators have to leave the world of the story and abandon the characters. A work of fiction can end stably by bringing a solution to a problem and conveying the feeling of something achieved, closed, complete, and fulfilled, as if it ended "naturally." But it can also end incomplete and uncertain, with suspense and indecision. At the end of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (5.7), Macduff and Macbeth fight. Macbeth boasts that he cannot be harmed by "one of woman born," but Macduff replies that he was "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd" (5.7.42, 44-45). The duel goes on, and they exit as they fight. The spectators are not supposed to see the result of the duel; in fact, they have to wait a short while before learning what has happened. Suspense is very well preserved, as Malcolm appears on stage only to tell Siward: "Macduff is missing, and your noble son" (5.7.67). The audience has to wait until Macduff enters with the head of Macbeth before knowing the outcome of the fight. Malcolm is then hailed king of Scotland and invites all his followers to see him crowned. Shakespeare's play ends, therefore, with a return to stability. The usurper of the crown has been killed, and the line of the legitimate king has been restored to power. The play has come full circle, from legitimate Duncan to legitimate Malcolm. But this ending in full-circle closure and stability is not always emphasized in screen adaptations. The films often distort it or depart from it, preferring either to close before or even after the original dramatic ending. They also insist on the duel, generally showing (or at least suggesting) its macabre outcome rather than concealing it completely from the spectators' sight.

Trevor Nunn's theater production remains very close to the stage directions found in the Shakespearean play. The duel is thoroughly choreographed, with Macbeth first having the advantage over Macduff (Bob Peck) and disarming him. But Macbeth loses confidence as soon as he hears Macduff's revelation about his uncommon birth. The fight resumes, but this time it is accompanied by organ music, endowing it with a quasi-religious, fate-like quality. As in Shakespeare's play, the spectators do not witness the end of the duel. They just see Macbeth running with his sword and dagger towards the camera (which takes the subjective position of Macduff). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Then the film fades to dark, leaving the spectators in a state of incertitude — just as, on stage, the lights were abruptly dimmed, leaving only one spotlight on McKellen's face. We have to wait until Macduff presents Macbeth's head to Malcolm (Roger Rees) before being informed of the actual outcome of the duel. Nunn's

production ends in a complete match with the Shakespearean stage directions, insisting on the return to stability and royal legitimacy.

Orson Welles's film, by contrast, is far from respecting the original ending, as it emphasizes the fight and the death of Macbeth and chooses to cut Malcolm's final speech. Welles's stylish expressionism turns the fight into a duel between two giants. A quick editing of high- and low-angle shots in chiaroscuro lighting makes each fighter, in turn, look more impressive and powerful than the other. Whereas Macbeth's commanding and huge stature had previously dominated almost every frame of the film, this is no longer the case. Another character can also dominate the camera field through low-angle filming. In Macduff, Macbeth has somehow found his aesthetic match. In contrast with Nunn's directions, this Macbeth never takes the advantage over Macduff (Dan O'Herlihy) before the revelation about his birth. The film keeps insisting on the uncertain outcome of the duel through aesthetic alternation — an alternation of angles, but also of viewpoints. The fighting sequence jumps from semi-subjective shots of Macbeth to semi-subjective shots of Macduff. In semi-subjective shots, the camera films both the character and the character's viewpoint. The spectators thus watch the character (usually seen from behind) in the act of watching. This alternating process creates a succession of changes in terms of reception. The spectators are encouraged, all through the duel, to change their point of identification from Macbeth to Macduff, from Macduff to Macbeth. Uncertainty lies, therefore, not only in the outcome of the fight, but also in our empathy for the characters. As in the banquet scene, Welles leads us to be both drawn to and alienated from Macbeth.

Instability is also inferred from the geographic environment. The duel takes place on a hill, and the camera angles stress oblique and vertical lines, so that the stability of horizontal lines is totally banished from the scene. The rapid change in vertical shot angles participates in a loss of spatial markers and a growing sense of danger. The fight ends with a swaying blow aimed at Macbeth's neck. Macduff's sword is directed towards the spectators, who are put in the same position as the victim and gain some experience of the violence of the action. A close-up on the terrified face of Macbeth, expectant of Macduff's stroke, is then instantly followed by a shot of Macbeth's voodoo doll being decapitated with a sword. The actual killing is not shown. The spectators can actually wonder who decapitates the doll. Could it be one of the Witches who decides to finish Macbeth off when he has served their purpose? In any case, the physical decapitation is only implied metaphorically and combined immediately with Macbeth's symbolic fall from power. In Welles's film, explicit showing is once more denied. The last shot of the film evokes the very first as it comes back to the Weird Sisters. With the castle in the misty background, the three Witches stand in the foreground with their forked staffs, looking like figures of destiny and inevitability, as

if they are waiting for the next plaything they will manipulate. Although the reign of Macbeth is over, the film subtly implies that dictatorship and tyranny can still be possible in the near future. Welles's strategy oscillates, therefore, between circular closure in terms of aesthetics (as the last shot evokes the first one) and instability in terms of meaning (as the film implies that the Witches could still threaten Scotland's newly-acquired freedom). This creates a most ambivalent ending, which brings diegesis to a very neat aesthetic closure as much as it leaves each spectator to imagine what could happen next.

Freeston's film insists on the primitive and subjective aspects of the fight, mostly from Macbeth's point of view. Non-diegetic, primal, Native-American-sounding music can first be heard over the vehement battle between the two armies. Macbeth and Macduff (Kenneth Bryans) only start fighting once the battle is over. Their duel thus takes place in the apocalyptic and hazy environment of the bloody battlefield, this décor already conveying an impression of doom. First, Macbeth appears as the strongest opponent. As in Nunn's *mise-en-scène*, it is only at the hearing of Macduff's revelation that he starts losing his mettle. Macbeth desperately manages to push Macduff to the ground but, as he rushes to finish him off, Macbeth is impaled. Macduff pauses with his blade on Macbeth's neck, then gives the final blow. At this very moment, the film abruptly cuts to black. The spectators only hear the sound of the blade cutting the neck and do not actually see the images of the deadly stroke. The credits start rolling, ending the film without showing Malcolm restored to power. If the film very strongly suggests the death of Macbeth at the end of the duel, it nevertheless throws a veil of modesty upon it. The end of the film coincides with the very moment when Macbeth dies. This is consistent with the whole strategy of the film, which has been to immerse the spectators into Macbeth's subjectivity and personal world. As soon as Macbeth passes away, the film loses its very core and the spectators lose their point of identification. The story cannot continue without him. With this sudden cut to black, which denies the ultimate sight of death, the spectators are, one last time, put in the position of Macbeth — a man who, expiring, lacks the ability to apprehend his last moment. Freeston's film favors an unstable ending through this abrupt departure from diegesis, an emotional (almost romantic) focus on the main character's last moments and the decision not to show Malcolm's accession to the throne.

Polanski's *Macbeth* continues to explore the human body until the very end. As in Nunn's and Freeston's versions, Macbeth first has an advantage over Macduff. After a few blows, he even decides to spare him. The fight resumes after Macduff's revelation. Contrary to Welles's film, the camera here follows the two fighters within the same shot, without any change in point of view. The spectators are encouraged to view the fight at a distance, without engaging with it or identifying with the characters too strongly. When Macduff succeeds in impaling his opponent, the film reveals

in showing Macbeth crawling up the stairs, bleeding heavily with the sword crossing his chest while atonal, disturbing music, highly reminiscent of the Witches, can be heard. As Macbeth is suddenly decapitated, the camera catches the last spasms of the headless body; it still moves a little before collapsing down the stairs. A gory shot then lingers on the bloody head, which is at the very bottom of the stairs in a pool of blood. As Macbeth's head is put on a pike and swished about for the soldiers to point and laugh at it, the camera adopts a subjective point of view, as if from inside the dead eyes. We see the catcalling soldiers in a distorted perspective through Macbeth's horrible, terminal sensory impressions. Polanski's exploration of the body goes so deep as to make us enter the subjectivity of a corpse. After the head has been raised on a long pike above the castle gates for everyone to behold, Malcolm is hailed as the new king. But, as in Welles's film, Malcolm's final speech is cut completely. The return to stability is not emphasized. The film ends with an interpolation, a whole scene which does not exist in the original play. Donalbain, Malcolm's brother, rides toward the Witches' hideout and enters their lair. The audience is led to believe that he will slyly try to take the place of the new reigning king. Like Welles, Polanski ends the film just as it began — with the Witches. Instead of focusing on a cycle that continues a legitimate royal line, the film evokes a never-ending circle from evil to evil. Polanski prefers to suggest the idea of circularity in uncertainty — a perpetual return of nightmare, absurdity, malevolence, and conspiracy. For him, if political regimes and human institutions are transient, brutality, witchcraft, and demonism seem to be everlasting.

### Conclusion

The different strategies employed by the films discussed in this essay— in terms of showing or hiding, offering or denying to the view — have deep aesthetic and ideological consequences. By concealing as many sights as possible, Nunn's stage production relies on the imagination of the spectators, who are free to create their own visual representations in their minds. The screen adaptations, on the contrary, work by various degrees of exhibition. Orson Welles uses expressionist devices to suggest presence through metaphors or through the alternation of subjective perspectives. Identification with the eponymous character is always threatened by alienating angles or viewpoints. Welles's film neither totally hides nor totally shows, but rather shows that it hides, stimulating curiosity and the desire of disclosure. Jeremy Freeston, on the contrary, wishes to make the audience sympathize with Macbeth, who is presented as a romantic and flawed hero, the victim of exterior forces. This effect is mostly achieved through an aesthetic sinking into Macbeth's subjectivity and mental world. This film becomes so Macbeth-centred that it cannot continue after the death of the character. Finally, Roman Polanski's adaptation works

less as a mental exploration than a physical one. The bodies are exhibited, stripped, penetrated, anatomized, and literally cut into pieces. This almost pornographic strategy leaves nothing out of sight: the camera goes into bodies and forces us to watch. Kenneth Tynan, who co-wrote the screenplay with Roman Polanski, was prompt to acknowledge "Roman's passion for concrete detail, his hatred of anything vague or imprecise" (1994, 479). The film imperialistically imposes every horror and every corporeal reality on the eyes of the public. According to E. Pearlman, this "catalogue of bloody horrors" (1994, 254) is apt to create a world of brutal politics purged of any Christian aspects, a cycle "from demon to demon" (255). But, for Stephen Buhler, this disclosure of flesh and blood insists less on violence than on the vulnerability of the naked bodies: "The human body, in this film, cries out for compassion and finds none . . . Polanski equates nakedness with victimization" (Buhler 2002, 87). Yet, ultimately, whether it be to insist on the executioners or on the victims, Polanski's film aims less at encouraging identification (or alienation) than at exploiting cinematic visual possibilities in a constant wish to shock and amaze. Bernice W. Kliman has remarked that the screen can show horrors that stage performances are not able to "depict . . . in graphic detail" (2004, 192). Exposed to an excess of sight, the spectators risk becoming blinded by a Gorgon of gory images. But this aesthetic choice, which leaves virtually nothing un-shown, can also remind us of our complicity with Macbeth's thirst for violence, for, as Kliman asks, "don't we want Macbeth to get on with Duncan's murder?" (193). The cinema audience's voyeuristic tendencies would thus be acknowledged as the mainspring for the disclosure of horrors in the film. By bestowing the gift of over-explicit sight to the public, Polanski's film may end in a denial of the mind's inventive powers; or, it may indulge in the fascination for violence, only to convey a ruthless condemnation of it.

### Notes

1. All citations from the text of *Macbeth* come from *The Oxford Shakespeare*, edited by W. J. Craig (London: Oxford University Press, 1964).

### Online Resources

Internet Movie Database information for Jeremy Freeston's *Macbeth* [cited 18 December, 2005].  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119591/>.

Internet Movie Database information for Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* [cited 18 December, 2005].  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0067372/>.

Internet Movie Database information for Orson Welles's *Macbeth* [cited 18 December, 2005].  
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