

December 1979

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### Recommended Citation

Barasch, Frances K. (1979) "Revisionist Art: *Macbeth* on Film," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 14: No. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol14/iss1/4>

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# REVISIONIST ART: MACBETH ON FILM

Barasch: Revisionist Art: <em>Macbeth </em>on Film

Frances K. Barasch

i

From one point of view, art is a matter of influence and criticism, as Harold Bloom suggests in *The Anxiety of Influence*.<sup>1</sup> Each poet, that is, each "maker" works under the influence of antecedent arts. In creating a new work, the artist reduces the parent work and expands it to a new meaning. As Bloom puts it, "The meaning of a poem can only be another poem," and the two poems are never the same. Every new poem, Bloom continues, is "misinterpretation, . . . is anxiety of influence, is misprision, is a disciplined perverseness," or, in other words, it is "contraction and expansion; for all the ratios of revision are contracting movements, yet making is an expansive one." Bloom's theory of poetry may aptly be applied to the making of literature into film.

When we consider that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is one of the finest verse dramas in the English language, if not the best, then film versions of the play which require serious editing of the text and the introduction of visual effects as substitutions for words mean that Shakespeare's play as verse drama cannot be filmed. Except for films of stage productions, all film versions of *Macbeth* are (to use Bloom's terminology and Shakespeare's) "misprision" : nine silent versions, two adaptations in French and Japanese, and a modern adaptation *Joe Macbeth* have none of Shakespeare's language.<sup>2</sup> Orson Welles, George Shaefer, Roman Polanski, and others borrow some of it, but they also cut, add, and shift the text freely.

Reasonably, no film version should be measured in terms of "textual authenticity," as many critics try to do, or as "interpretations,"<sup>3</sup> if we subscribe for the moment to Bloom's idea that all descendant works are "misinterpretations." Shakespeare's verbal concepts were never meant to be perceptualized; his own stage was very nearly bare. Shakespeare's words set the scenes and depended on declamatory style, gesture, and some elementary stage business. His audience "visualized" the rest. In film, backgrounds are perceptualized for the viewer. Plastic materials substitute for words, and modern acting styles and film techniques convey meaning without language. These visual effects seen in montage, or longshot, closeup, and other camera angles are all as apples in the Jacobean's basket of oranges.

However, that film and literature are discrete forms, irreconcilable, even hostile to one another, and that these forms require different technologies and audience skills will not be belabored here. Instead, the approach I take that may be useful to us all—bardolators and film buffs alike—is an adaptation of Bloom's poetic theory, an evaluation of literature on film as "revisionist art." By "revisionist art," I mean simply new works produced under the influence of antecedent arts—as Shakespeare used Holinshed and other sources and as many filmists use literature—not to imitate or interpret but to re-shape what went before.

When we study Shakespeare's sources, it is often to learn how his imagination turned raw materials into drama, and we study the clusters of his images to learn how his creating mind worked. When we study *Macbeth* on film, it is the "shaping imagination" of the director that concerns us and the director's ability

to unify his revisions and visions into a rich and consistent audio-visual experience of the whole. In Bloom's context, we may see Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as the "parent poem," the films as new works—a kind of "disciplined perverseness." For this reason, I use the term "revisionist art" — a compound that takes into account the contracting and expanding nature of the literary film form.

ii

For purposes of analysis within limitations, I have selected the Welles and Polanski versions of *Macbeth* on film as examples of "revisionist art" which have been artistically successful to lesser and greater degrees. I bypass other versions: with regret, Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, a black and white released in Japan in 1957, for I would say nothing new if I pointed out the visual and thematic consistency of Kurosawa's transcultural *Macbeth* or if I described the fresh symbolism of his forest and tangled branches which pervade the film. J. Blumenthal has already recognized this remarkable work as "recreation," and few critics have disagreed.<sup>4</sup> I have excluded George Shaefer's 1960 color version more readily, on the other hand, because—by his own admission—Shaefer attempted to "produce truer portraits" and "authentic backgrounds," betraying, in more than one opinion, the very "authenticity" he claimed to seek.<sup>5</sup> Filmed on location in Scotland under bright skies and in colorful surroundings and costume, Shaefer's visual atmosphere everywhere belies the text he tried to preserve, and in his effort to transmit some of Shakespeare's language with reasonable accuracy, he invented visual symbols for textual omissions that are intrusive and meaningless in his film: his fair witch and the crown of thorns the witches give Macbeth, as examples. The result, despite excellent performances by Maurice Evans and Judith Anderson, is poor imitation, a far cry from "revisionist art."

In reviewing the films of Welles and Polanski, I reduce the discussion even further to focus on the directors' treatments of the Weird Sisters, among the most problematic and controversial characters in *Macbeth*. Brooks Atkinson summed up their difficulty in a review of Welles' 1936 stage production: "The witches' scenes from *Macbeth* have always worried the life out of the polite, tragic stage; the grimaces of the hags and the garish make-believe of the flaming cauldron have bred more disenchantment than anything else that Shakespeare wrote."<sup>6</sup> Consideration of these film treatments of the witches, it seems to me, can tell us a good deal about the directors' imaginations and, although the focus is limiting, can help to illustrate the general character of film as "revisionist art."

In Shakespeare, as is well known, the witches appear in four scenes: a prelude in I.i where they arrange their next meeting; again in I.iii where they convey the first prophecies to Macbeth and Banquo; on a heath in III.v where they are scolded by Hecate; and in a cave in IV.i where further prophecies are made over the bubbling cauldron, a show of kings is given, and the witches dance. Shakespeare's use of the witches, attributable in part to King James' interest in demonology and his own opportunism, is nevertheless made functional within his deeper conception of the tragic hero as "noble mind o'erturned" by ambition, superstition, and fear.

In the films discussed here, both directors reject the appearance of the witches on the heath and eliminate the show of kings and the witches' dance. The revisions are judicious: the heath scene is suspected as an interpolation by many scholars and critics because it is structurally and aesthetically intrusive; the show of kings has no political relevance to the modern mass audience; and the

In one form or another, however, each film retains, as integral determinants of plot and character, the two prophetic scenes. And each filmist employs a prelude or prologue, as Shakespeare did, to establish the metaphysical atmosphere of *Macbeth*. In addition, as a corrective to what appears to be structural imbalance in Shakespeare, each director ends on the same note as he had begun, thereby adding metaphysical significance that reaches beyond Shakespeare's humanist theme. In these respects, Welles and Polanski contracted or revised Shakespeare's play and expanded or re-created it in the same way. How they visualized the supernatural forces and transmitted their visions in relation to theme and structure are what interests us next.

iii

To begin with Orson Welles' *Macbeth*, a black and white, released in 1948 and again with a new soundtrack in 1949, we may recall that the film opens with a prelude as images cross the screen and Welles is heard in voice-over narration stating the simple theme of a story that happened long ago when the forces of chaos, still at odds with "Christian law and order," used as their tools "ambitious men."

The simultaneous visuals of the prelude include a longshot of a Celtic Cross, a bubbling cauldron, mists rising in the foreground, and a single sere tree. Three witches look down at the viewer, their faces distorted by the camera's angle; hands mold a clay image of Macbeth and decorate the effigy with the medallion of Cawdor and Duncan's crown.

In the opening scene that follows, the witches hail Macbeth and convey the usual prophecies as Duncan's soldiers arrive with Cawdor's medallion for Macbeth. When the camera returns to the witches, they are gone. But as the soldiers depart, they are seen on a headland, each holding the forked staff of the devil. At the end, they are seen in a similar longshot which forms a visual coda to the film.

An excellent start. The opening visuals coincide with Welles' simplified theme of good versus evil—the Celtic Cross versus the forked staves; ambitious Macbeth in effigy is represented as a "tool," literally putty in the witches' hands. The medallion symbol, placed first on the clay image, then on Macbeth, is as compressed as fine poetry.

The clay image, in particular, is an imaginative exercise of "revisionist art," for it is based on Holinshed who tells how witches, always agents of the devil, tortured the Scottish King Duffe by "roosting upon a wooden brooch an image of wax at the fier, resembling in each feature the kings person . . . : an other of them sat reciting certain words of inchantment . . . [which] served to keep him still waking from sleepe, so that as the wax ever melted, so did the kings flesh. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

What Shakespeare rejected in the raw materials of his stage version, Welles adapted wisely to the screen. The clay image is given meaning in the prelude, establishing Macbeth as a tool of evil forces and his own ambition; it is seen again in montage, crossed by a dagger, as a lead into the "dagger" soliloquy of Act II which precedes Duncan's murder; it reappears in Act III before Banquo's murder, and finally at the death of Macbeth in Act V.

The penultimate appearance of the effigy is one of an unusual set of juxtapositions beginning with the "Sleep no more" speech which Welles shifted from Act II to III. The concept of "sleeplessness" is linked to a view of the witches holding their devilish staves and to a closeup of the crowned clay image melting slowly. This image cluster creates an authentic world of black magic from Shakespeare's own source, for in Holinshed, as we have seen, victims tortured in effigy by agents of the devil were kept "still waking from sleepe. . . as the wax ever melted away." The effect of this artful revision is both moving and meaningful.

When the witches speak next, it is without their visualization—a standard interpretation that suggests Macbeth's febrile imagination is now at work. Against a black sky, to the sound of thunder, to the flash of lightning and the rush of wind, a Faust-like Macbeth conjures the dark spirits and bears their warnings against Macduff and Birnam Wood. Although visual cliché, the scene is made integral to the film, for in the final confrontation between Macbeth and Macduff, a witch's voice is heard again, echoing the prophecy of Macduff.

Finally, Macbeth's "offstage" decapitation is brilliantly effected through the clay image whose crowned head is seen brutally severed from its trunk. The film ends as it began, with a longshot of the three witches holding the ominous staves as they stand on a headland gazing at Macbeth's castle now quiet on a distant hill.

Welles' use of the witches is a comprehensive act of revision and artistic vision. What other faults may be found in the film—and there are many—Welles re-shaping of the Weird Sisters (and their related symbols) is the one complete aesthetic conception in the film; their selective reappearances, the forked staves, the effigy, add texture and give a semblance of unity to an otherwise troubled work.

The final view of the Sisters, however, creates a disturbance in the conception (symptomatic of other contradictions in Welles' work) because it implies that, although Macbeth is dead, evil lives on. This thematic ambiguity is nowhere suggested in the prologue narration or the body of the work. Thematic consistency is sacrificed for art in Welles' film. But it is an elevating inconsistency which raises Welles' statement above his simplistic theme and, as in Shakespeare, creates a tension that makes the work philosophically viable. That this tension can be produced without violation of unity, however, may be seen in Polanski's *Macbeth*.

iv

The witches' scenes in Polanski's *Macbeth*, a color film released in 1971, paradoxically, are more cheerless, less real, and yet more credible than their earlier treatments on film. Polanski envisions Shakespeare's witches in the poet's own terms, as monsters, fair and foul, who work evil deeds. But his work is no mere trans-visualization; Polanski's fair and foul images and symbolic equivalencies are unique, and his expansion of *Macbeth's* theme to show that "evil lives on" is developed consistently throughout.

As in Shakespeare and Welles, Polanski's witches appear in a prelude where they are seen against a hazy sky on a desert of sand in which they are burying a human hand. (This setting becomes symbolic of their evil when seen again in

the film.) One of the three witches is young, as in Shaefer's version where the unique percept is given no symbolic meaning. In Polanski, however, the young witch becomes part of the "fair and foul" imagery which pervades the film and is made thematically relevant to the idea of ongoing evil. The young witch in Polanski is made to appear as an apprentice to the older hags, for she wheels a barrow in which, presumably, the witches transport their abominations for burial. When the witches separate, as Normand Berlin observed, the young witch precedes one of the old dams, a piece of "stage business" that signifies the continuum of evil, the young learning by accompanying the old.<sup>8</sup>

Polanski's witches reappear in I.iii near a dark cave which, as metonymy signifying witches and evil, is to be seen again at the middle and end of the film. There the witches hail Macbeth and transmit the prophecies. Later, Macbeth is crowned out of doors on the same sandy desert under the same hazy sky where the witches had first appeared, the coronation thus associated with their devilish work. The same landscape is seen again when Macbeth rides across the sand for his second meeting with the fiends. In this second encounter, Polanski retains Shakespeare's cave and cauldron, but, as Berlin remarked, what he does with them stuns. The witches, seen among their entire coven, are naked, the fair and foul together, young and old with ugly forms and distorted shapes. Into the steaming cauldron, a human hand, a bloody baby are dropped, and a goblet filled with its liquid is passed to Macbeth. When he drinks, we are reminded of Shakespeare's grotesque metaphor: Macbeth has "supped full with horrors." Thus in Polanski, he is literally committed to all that is monstrous and foul.<sup>9</sup> The horrific meaning of the witches, formerly lost to modern viewers, is restored in Polanski's contemporary revision of Shakespeare's early grotesque.

There is a final view of the cave after Macbeth's death and Malcolm's coronation. This time, Donalbain, who had fled to Ireland to escape Macbeth's wrath, rides across the sand and stops at the cave. Early in the film, he had been seen walking with a limp which, to Shakespeareans, must connote the demonic ambition of Richard the Third. As Donalbain stops at the cave, Polanski's earlier hints—that evil lives on—are made explicit.

We are reminded in this ending of Welles' coda to *Macbeth* where the witches on a headland gaze at the quiet castle of the ambitious king. Welles turned against his own theme creating tension in the contradiction for the sake of the visual effect. In Polanski, the same visual tension is generated with no disturbance of theme, for the idea of ongoing evil has been anticipated in earlier views of young witches and the limping young prince. When Polanski's film reaches its firm conclusion, we realize we have been in the presence of a "shaping imagination" that has surpassed its antecedents.

As "revisionist art," Polanski's *Macbeth* is a qualified performance. Unlike his film predecessors—Kurosawa, for example, who worked in an entirely different culture—Polanski had the more difficult task, to re-shape within the same culture a tried and tested work by a great Master. Polanski's film shocks, stuns, and satisfies, his treatment of the witches serving as only one illustration of brilliant conception, visualization, and structural integrity. On the other hand, Welles' treatment of the witches, equally brilliant in its own way, is unfortunately the only unifying element in his film, an aesthetic

achievement which, nevertheless, betrays his theme and is unmatched by other elements of character portrayal and conveyance of plot.

Although some may abhor Polanski's youthful, fair Macbeths, his excessive blood and gore, the ugly nudity, the violence and other grotesquerie, even these critics must concede that Polanski's imagination is fresh, his symbolic patterns well-wrought, his structure consistent with theme, and the film, therefore, an artistically wholesome entity. If we judge the literary film by the criteria of "revisionist art," Polanski's must be acknowledged as the most successful anglophone version of *Macbeth*.

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#### NOTES

1. Subtitled "A Theory of Poetry" (London, 1973), p. 95.
2. Michael Mullin, "Macbeth on Film," *Literature Film Quarterly* [hereafter, *LFQ*], I,4 (Fall 1973), 332.
3. For example, John Gerlach, "Shakespeare, Kurosawa, and *Macbeth*: A response to J. Blumenthal," *LFQ*, op. cit., 352-60; and Michael Mullin, *LFQ*, op. cit.
4. J. Blumenthal, "Macbeth into Throne of Blood," *Sight and Sound*, 34 (Autumn 1965), 190-95; also in T.J. Ross, *Film and the Liberal Arts* (New York, 1970), pp. 122-23. Also see J. Gerlach (*LFQ*, op.cit.) who takes exception to some of Blumenthal's points of praise.
4. Audio Brandon Film Catalog, 1973; also see Michael Mullin, *LFQ*, op. cit.
6. Quoted by James Naremore, "The Walking Shadow: Welles's Expressionist *Macbeth*," *LFQ*, op. cit., 360; and by John Houseman, *Run-Through* (New York, 1972), p. 199.
7. *Historie of Scotland*, 1807 edition reprinted in *Macbeth*, ed. J.M. Manly (New York, 1931), p. 176.
8. Normand Berlin, "Macbeth; Polanski and Shakespeare," *LFQ*, op. cit. 282 ff.
9. *Ibid.*