

# ORSON WELLES'S GOTHIC CINEMATIC APPROACH TO SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH*

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The cinematic approaches of Orson Welles to *Othello* and *Macbeth* and that of Derek Jarman to *The Tempest* suggest the cosmic sense of three fallen worlds, undermined by jealousy, murder and imperialistic oppression, respectively. In this paper we shall explore the possibilities that the architectural structuring of the settings of those productions and their general gothic atmosphere offer those directors to externalise psychological complexities. Once the relation between the physical and psychological confinement that torments the heroes is established, we shall try to prove that the borderline between the conscious and subconscious worlds of the heroes is the major preoccupation of those directors' cinematic explorations.

When thinking of the term "gothic", a set of characteristics springs immediately to mind, such as a terrifying atmosphere, archaic settings, the presence of the supernatural, highly stereotyped characters and suspense. According to Maggie Kilgour (1995: 4-5), there are some stock characters and devices which are simply "recycled" from one gothic text to the next: as regards characters, we are usually presented with a passive heroine, a sensitive hero and a tyrannical villain, all of them within conventional settings, such as a castle or some gloomy mountains. These are actually characteristics which are common to the play by William Shakespeare whose cinematic production we are going to analyse in this paper, in order to determine to what an extent and how Orson Welles has exploited the gothic material<sup>1</sup> either present -or implicit- in *Macbeth*.

Considering that Orson Welles's cinematic approach to *Macbeth* suggests the

1. Supporting that idea of the presence of gothic elements in Shakespeare's plays, Maggie Kilgour (1995: 4), referring to the gothic novel, affirms that: "It feeds upon and mixes the wide range of literary sources out of which it emerges and from which it never fully disentangles itself: British folklore, ballads, romance, Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy (especially Shakespeare) ...". Jerrold E. Hogle, referring to the origins of eighteenth-century Gothic, agrees with that idea, when he affirms that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the principal literary ancestor of *The Castle of Otranto*:

I want to pay particular attention to this so-called source as showing how and on what basis the eighteenth-century Gothic came about. I am referring, of course, to the *Hamlet* of Shakespeare, the lionized National Poet of England by the 1760s ... and the Bard established as the great 'Gothick' dramatist of the British past in Pope's 1725 Preface to the complete plays, where *Hamlet* is even designated as the Master's most quasi-medieval, supernatural, and therefore 'Gothick' work. (1994: 26-27)

On his part, Victor Sage (1990: 24) reveals that "Mrs. Radcliffe and Lewis were plundering Shakespeare for effects in their novels, and there is a strong cross-fertilisation between Shakespearean tragedy and Milton and the Gothick."

cosmic sense of a fallen world, undermined by murder, we shall explore the possibilities that the architectural structuring of the setting of this production and its general gothic atmosphere –to which the presence of both a gothic woman and supernatural elements<sup>2</sup> contribute– offer this director to externalize psychological complexity. Once the relation between the physical and psychological confinement that torments the hero is established, we shall try to prove that the borderline between the conscious and subconscious world of the hero is the major preoccupation of Orson Welles’s cinematic exploration.

The fates of the human beings merely illustrate the nature of these places, while they themselves make the story and brood over it. The intricate plots of the romances are mainly a working-out of the suggestions of mountain scenery and Gothic architecture. (Tompkins 1980: 74)<sup>3</sup>

David Punter (1980: 5) states that “Gothic became descriptive of things medieval-in fact, of all things preceding about the middle of the seventeenth century”. According to this definition, Welles’s *Macbeth* fits in perfectly as a gothic cinematic adaptation from the beginning, since the setting described in the voice-over prologue to the film evokes early medieval times, or rather, that legendary period known as the Dark Ages: “Our story is laid in Scotland, ancient Scotland, savage, half lost in the mist which hangs between recorded history and the time of legends” (Davies 1994: 87).

The eerie atmosphere which introduces the witches in Orson Welles’s production of *Macbeth* is definitely plagued with gothic horror elements: from the initial shot of cloud and mist effects, the camera moves to a shot of the Celtic cross, which is also obscured by mist and cloud. This clears and reveals the three witches standing on a rock-holding their spindly forked twigs. The mist engulfs them again, clearing this time to expose in medium close-up a bubbling surface of foul and putrid muddy liquid, a grotesque tree skeleton and finally a shot of the witches’ hands shaping from the muddy formlessness a figure of a child which the supernatural creatures are going to use as a type of voodoo doll. In relation to this opening scene, Anthony Davies affirms that:

the juxtaposition of the mist and cloud effects with the glimpse-shots of outlines and symbols, and the final forming of a figure from the bubbling viscous liquid,

2. This gothic characteristic can also be found, in connection with the Stuarts, in the late 16th and early 17th centuries: “six years before he succeeded Elizabeth, King James I had written a work called *Demonology*, and upon becoming the English monarch, he had persuaded Parliament to pass an act condemning ‘conjuraton, witchcraft, and dealings with evil and wicked spirits’ (Battestin, p. 445n)” (Stevenson 1994: 19). Thus it was not by accident that the most important group of actors when the king came to the throne, in 1605 should produce a play based on Scotland and witches: Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* dealt with the genealogy of the Scottish king, the bad influence of witches and, very interestingly, it insists on the idea that the monarchy should be preserved.

3. J.M.S. Tompkins (1980: 74) affirms that the gothic is simplistic in its representation of character, which it subordinates to plot, scenery and moralising. Sir Walter Scott (n.d.: 225) also pointed out this subordination: “The force, therefore, of the production, lies in the delineation of external incident, while the characters of the agents, like the figures in many landscapes, are entirely subordinate to the scenes in which they are placed; and are only distinguished by such outlines as make them seem appropriate to the rocks and trees, which have been the artist’s principle objects.”

taken together with the greater juxtaposition of the simple spoken prologue with the weird sequence of initial visuals, constitutes a clear suggestion that the essence of the film's thematic conflict is to be that of "form" against "formlessness". (1994: 87)

The tension in this polarity between form and formlessness Davies points out, is sustained by the film's suggestion of the world of the dream—a nightmarish sequence of imagined reality in a realm of unfulfilled action,<sup>4</sup> from which there is a desperate desire to escape. The critic has also observed (1994: 88) that the essence of that nightmare which pervades the film is evident in the illogical and a-historical relationship of space and time:

Dunsinane is, in fact, a papier-mâché agglomerate of walls, caverns and rough-hewn arches. In the context of the dream, however, its non-realism is no barrier to our acceptance of it as rudimentary, rock-hewn architecture without style or form, and therefore without period. Its labyrinthine suggestion of *psychological space* is a visualization which isolates and confines man in the torrid secrecy of his own most abhorrent ambitions.

Jean Cocteau (McBride 1972: 112) has described most eloquently the relationship of both spatial and temporal dislocation to the dream: "Coiffed with horns and crowns of cardboard, clad in animal skins like the first motorists, the heroes of the drama move in the corridors of kind of dream underground, in devastated caves leaking water, in an abandoned coal-mine..."<sup>5</sup> Welles's *Macbeth* presents Dunsinane as an extremely complex psychological externalization. In fact, the spatial substance even takes on the involuntary biochemistry of Macbeth, since, in Anthony Davies's words, "its cavernous walls exude drops of moisture just as Macbeth's skin glistens with the torrid sweat of panic" (1994: 89). This confirms the idea that, for Welles, the spatial realism had to be a world consistent with the inner being of the character.

As regards the landscape in Welles's film, it evokes a dramatic world of violent contrasts between the scabrous angularity of wind-stripped trees, the spatial vacuity of the background and the formless, swirling cloud and mist which blurs clarity of outline.

In relation to Gothic architecture, the vertical dimension in the film is further strengthened by high-angle shooting, "sometimes to afford a wider view of action, but more importantly, to assert relationships between Macbeth and other characters, and between Macbeth and his universe" (Davies 1994: 92). Orson

4. In relation to this, Sigmund Freud explains that: "a happy person never fantasises, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of fantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single fantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality" (Strachey 1953-74: 146).

5. Claude Beylie (1972: 72) perceives the stature the film achieves through its temporal ambivalence in the following terms: "Macbeth is a sanguinary madman, a modern Atilla who hears only his own demons and is vanquished by them; he appears then, on the screen dressed in animal skins or bound in a strange harness redolent of both the paleolithic and atomic eras—a cuirass reinforced with metal plates that look like hideous blisters, a steel helmet guarded by nightmarish electrodes, horns or antennas ... His palace is carved into the rock itself, bored full of shapeless windows like the lair of a cyclops. We are transported with him into the very bowels of the earth, or perhaps into some other planet."

Welles's spatial disposition contributes to stressing Macbeth's isolation and his inaccessibility in that isolation.

The Gothic perception of the female body was intrinsically pathological and, as regards the subject inside that body, she was unstable. Kelly Hurley explains that "the disorders of the female body were inextricably linked to the female reproductive system, so that female sexuality emerged as both casual and symptomatic of female abhumanness" (1996: 120).

According to the Gothic tradition, demonic madonnas appear, in the folk and fairy tales, "as the evil stepmother, one of our most familiar cultural stereotypes". In drama, "Lady Macbeth is her prototype. ... In all of her guises, she is amoral and unloving; she is to be read as horrible because unnatural; that is, she belies the loving 'nature' of women, or, even worse, the 'natural' love of mother for child" (Wolstenholme 1993: 114-15).

Kilgour (1995: 9) points out that some recent critics have claimed further that in its potential as a vehicle for female anger the gothic provides a "plot of feminine subversion" (Heller 1992: 2-3). Lady Macbeth needs to be unsexed to be able to machinate a cruel deed, a horrible murder that her kind and gentle woman nature would never allow her to encourage. Thus she is demanding an unnatural thing, for her to be able to do something which goes against woman's nature-she must lead her husband into performing the horrible deed, thus turning him into an unnatural creature as well-, and therefore, her body and mind are going to rebel against that, by making her stage her own fears and remorse within her own mental space, in her nightmares, thus leading her to a nervous break-down.<sup>7</sup> Due to her unnatural behaviour Lady Macbeth is going to be "haunted by her crimes to her death" (Wolstenholme 1993: 15). It is worth pointing out that, from the beginning, she is presented with similar foretelling characteristics to those of the witches-on their part, supernatural and therefore unnatural creatures too-, since she greets her husband with the same words they had addressed him. In fact, at the beginning of the play, similarly to the way in which the witches control Macbeth's fate, Lady Macbeth turns into a

6. Jean Cocteau (McBride 1972: 112) has observed, in the character of Lady Macbeth, that nightmarish quality also in the relationship of spatial detail to time in the film: "At times we ask ourselves in what age this nightmare is taking place, and when we encounter Lady Macbeth for the first time before the camera moves back and places her, we almost see a lady in modern dress lying on a fur couch next to the telephone."

7. As Elaine Showalter (1985: 55-56) argues in her discussion of Victorian medicine in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980*:

women were more vulnerable to insanity than men ... The instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control. In contrast to the rather vague and uncertain concepts of insanity in general which Victorian psychiatry produced, theories of female insanity were specifically and confidentially linked to the biology crises of the female life-cycle ... during which the mind would be weakened and the symptoms of insanity might emerge. This connection between the female reproductive and nervous systems led to the condition nineteenth-century physicians called "reflex insanity in women." The "special law" that made women "the victims of periodicity" led to a distinct set of mental illnesses that had "neither homologue nor analogue in man." Doctors argued that the menstrual discharge in itself predisposed women to insanity.

mother-figure rather than a wife, to control and orchestrate her husband's evil and unnatural deeds.

Anthony Davies supports the thesis that Welles's cinematic approach to *Macbeth* is gothic, when he affirms (1994: 84) that it "is in many ways reminiscent both of the late nineteenth-century melodrama, and of that film genre, the "horror movie".<sup>8</sup>

In *Macbeth*, Orson Welles offers an allegorized conflict between "agents of chaos, priests of hell and magic; sorcerers and witches" and "Christian law and order",<sup>9</sup> opposing the spindly forked twigs of the witches – a symbol of their demonic essence– to the crucifixes of the Scots. Moreover, he even offers Morality-play elements introducing the figure of the "Holy Father", and imagines a ceremony in which the multitude forsake pagan<sup>10</sup> religion: "Welles even goes so far as to invent a primitive but obtrusive ceremony in which the Father leads the multitude in abjuring 'Satan and all his works'", and the embodiment of holiness is only killed "when Macbeth's pagan spear pierces his heart" (Pearlman 1994: 251-52). Orson Welles, in his adaptation of Shakespeare's play,<sup>11</sup> shocks us with a gothic world that makes us abhor it and reject it with horror.

If Shakespeare's *Macbeth* presents us with the choices and decisions made by an individual character within the framework of a medieval Christian universe, Welles's film limits Macbeth's options, and gives the witches a manipulative power over Macbeth which is visually established early in the film when they are depicted with a small crowned voodoo effigy at their feet. In fact, at the end

8. Richard France (1974: 67) wrote about the Lafayette Theatre production of Welles's *Macbeth*, staged two years before the film was released, that he transformed "Shakespeare into a spectacle of thrills and sudden shocks. Audiences were drawn not so much to see the working out of Macbeth's tragic destiny, but to experience the same undefined responses which make horror movies both ridiculous and yet still exhilarating." And he concludes: "The impression it left in the theatre was that of a world steadily being consumed by the powers of darkness." As regards this theatre production of *Macbeth* (1946), it is worth pointing out that "Welles transposed the setting from Scotland to the island of Haiti, since he felt that the force of the supernatural as a dominant and formative element would be more credible in the social context of 'voodoo'" (Davies 1994: 86). In that production Welles turned the stage into a microcosm of a society with a genuine cultural commitment to a belief in tangible supernatural powers.

9. From Welles's voice-over prologue to his cinematic production of *Macbeth* (1948). He continues, emphasizing the supernatural foretelling nature of the witches: "Their tools are ambitious men. This is the story of such a man and of his wife. A brave soldier, he hears from the witches a prophecy of future greatness and on this cue, murders his way up to a tyrant's throne, only to go down hated in blood at the end of it all."

10. As regards the connection between gothic and paganism, Punter (1980: 6) explains: "Gothic was the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to, or was opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilised values and a well regulated society."

11. According to Pearlman (1994: 253): "Shakespeare depicted a world in which dark-age mythology was overlain and perhaps even superseded by Christian morality." It is also worth pointing out that gothic writers admitted their affinities with Elizabethan writing. Walpole himself affirms that there are connections between his work and Shakespearean tragedies: "he wanted to use their example to give himself licence, and this, of course, was particularly necessary in the matter of the supernatural. Here Walpole combines devices from folklore with Elizabethan motifs to produce an armoury of magical helmets, speaking pictures, ghostly giants ..." (Punter 1980: 51).

of the film, when the fight between Macduff and Macbeth ends with a swinging blow aimed to sever Macbeth's neck, the swing of the blade is interrupted by a cut to show the head of the voodoo doll rolling from its body, identifying the figure which the witches had formed from the muddy caldron with Macbeth.

The film insists in connecting shadow and illusion with what is physically insubstantial but psychologically most significant. A proof of that can be found in Macbeth's words when he is confronted with Banquo's ghost, after a concentration of shadow effects: "Hence, horrible shadow!" (3.4.106).

One of the powerful images inspired by the word "gothic" is "that of a shadowy form rising from a mysterious place", and that imagery supports psychoanalytical critics' belief that "the gothic reflects the return of the repressed, in which subconscious psychic energy bursts out from the restraints of the conscious ego" (Kilgour 1995: 3).

In Welles's *Macbeth* the gothic threatening shadowy form is embodied by a huge Macbeth that dominates the foreground of innumerable frames of this production. In fact, when he encounters the witches for the second time, "the camera locates him as a speck in the middle of a distant heath" and then "tracks him with single-minded intensity until the entire frame is filled with the distorted shape"<sup>12</sup> (Pearlman 1994: 252).

*Macbeth's* plot offers the essential elements for the play to be treated as a gothic or horror film<sup>13</sup> in Welles's cinematic production, since his spatial strategy relates perfectly to a genre characterised by featuring some kind of monster given form by unnatural forces in the world where time and place are accorded the dislocations of the nightmarish dream. We agree with Joseph McBride's appreciation that "the change in Macbeth after the murder is almost indistinguishable; he seems to be sleep-walking from the beginning, and his blindness to the possibility of free choice makes it difficult for us to consider him a tragic hero" (1972: 114).

Welles's *Macbeth* is characterised by the isolation of the individual, the sense of disintegration, the obsession with death, and the vertiginous angularity of the camera's shooting angles, which contributes to emphasising the turbulent state of Macbeth's mind,<sup>14</sup> a tormented mind whose alterations are visually translated into space changes.

12. That gothic characteristic of Welles's *Macbeth* is praised by Claude Beylie (1972: 95): "The cinema is only then, the shadow of a shadow, printed upon the wall of a cave, the ragged garments of a clown ludicrously agitated before the light of a projector. Given this, Macbeth in the version of Orson Welles, must be considered one of the most beautiful films ever created, in that illustrates, with maximum rigour and simplicity, this definition (in no way restrictive) of our art. I would venture to say that, at least, we know of few films in the history of cinema which have come so close to what Shakespeare calls 'life's fitful fever.'"

13. Robert Sklar explains that the hallmark of the gothic film "is its sense of people trapped in webs of paranoia and fear, unable to tell guilt from innocence, true identity from false. Its villains are attractive and sympathetic, masking greed, misanthropy, malevolence. Its heroes and heroines are weak, confused, susceptible to false impressions. The environment is murky and close, the setting vaguely oppressive. In the end, evil is exposed, though often just barely, and the survival of good remains troubled and ambiguous" (Prawer 1980: 45).

Orson Welles's film's affinity with the dream vision dissolves the moral polarities which categorize action, thus reflecting the confusion of the "fair/foul" dichotomy equated by the witches in the play's opening scene. In relation to this, André Bazin (1978: 101) discerns the spatial suggestions of "a prehistoric universe, not that of our ancestors, the Gauls or the Celts, but a prehistory of the conscience at the birth of time and sin, when sky and earth, water and fire, good and evil, still aren't distinctly separate."

In the cinematic presentation of such a universe, action is exposed to the irrational response of instinct, in its emancipation from inherent moral judgement<sup>15</sup>. There is no doubt that Welles's *Macbeth* finds his own action repellent and horrifying. "Consequently, we are not presented with a *Macbeth* distanced from us because of his action, but one who remains human because of his instinctive and emotional power" (Davies 1994: 89); a *Macbeth* "who wallows in his crimes, but in whom we nevertheless sense a mysterious spark of innocence and something like the possibility of grace and salvation" (Bazin 1978: 101).

Davies (1994: 90) observes that: "up to a point, the movement of the vapour in the vacant sky asserts its own autonomous symbolic stature, suggestive of 'evolving nebulae at some primal phase of creation'". That vapour, "evolving nebulae" or mist evokes, according to Charles Higham (1970: 125): "*Macbeth*'s stormy soul, shrouded in despair."

Kilgour (1995: 8) affirms that:

The gothic appears to be a transgressive rebellion against norms which yet ends up reinstating them, an eruption of unlicensed desire that is fully controlled by governing systems of limitation. It delights in rebellion, while finally punishing it, often with death or damnation, and the reaffirmation of a system of moral and social order.

Actually, *Macbeth* concludes when Malcolm, King Duncan's son and the usurper's successor, invites home "our exiled friends abroad/ That fled the snares of watchful tyranny" (V.xi.32-3). E. Pearlman (1994: 250) insists that: "The play's satisfaction with the traditional order, though severely tested by the reign of the tyrant, is confirmed when a second exemplary monarch succeeds his father."

To conclude this paper, and after analysing the architectural structuring of the setting, the role of Lady *Macbeth* as a Gothic woman, and the supernatural elements that haunt the general atmosphere in Orson Welles's cinematic production of *Macbeth*, we have proved that the director's spatial disposition stresses the Gothic characteristics of the production as well as the relation between the physical and psychological confinement that torments a hero who has eventually

14. David Punter (1980: 408) suggests that a tormented mind is a gothic characteristic: "in Gothic, we are all suffering from delirium, for delirium is merely the experience of being at the mercy of conflicting and unassimilable impressions: only afterview can construct from these impressions a single model, and in doing so it does violence to the intensity and immediacy of life."

15. Freud (1985: 222) explains that: "The earliest moral precepts and restrictions in primitive society have been explained by us as reactions to a deed which gave those who performed it the concept of 'crime'. They felt remorse for the deed and decided it should never be repeated and that its performance should bring no advantage. The creative sense of guilt still persists among us."

turned into a villain. As a result, Gothic architecture in Welles's *Macbeth*, together with Lady Macbeth's progressive madness and final suicide, assert the Gothic villain's isolation. On their part, the presence of supernatural and Christian elements—the former both foretelling and controlling the protagonist's fate, and the latter punishing him for his evil deeds, contribute both to Gothic horror and to stress the villain's inaccessibility in that isolation.

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