

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

“Dagger of the mind”:

A study of Kurzel’s *Macbeth* (2015) through the psychologization of the supernatural

Autrice : Magali Denayer
Promoteur : Prof. Guido Latré
Année académique 2020-2021
Master en langues et lettres modernes, orientation générale, à finalité spécialisée: sciences et métiers du livre

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	1
LIST OF CONVENTIONS	3
INTRODUCTION	4
CHAPTER 1: SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND AS A SITE OF ESCHATOLOGICAL DEBATES: <i>MACBETH'S</i> EARLY MODERN CONTEXT	7
PERCEPTIONS OF THE COSMOS AND THE BODY: THE FLUID AGAINST THE STABLE	7
DISCUSSING THE SUPERNATURAL: DEMONOLOGY AND "THE LABILE COEXISTENCE OF SKEPTICISM AND THE DIABOLICAL"	9
INHABITING THE (SUPER)NATURAL SPACE: MATERIALITY, OVIDIAN PHYSICS, AND DOUBLE VISION	12
THE GLOBE: STAGING THE "IMAGINATIVE QUANTUM FOAM"	16
CHAPTER 2: <i>MACBETH'S</i> AMBIGUOUS SUPERNATURALISM: A SOURCE OF CONFUSION	18
<i>MACBETH'S</i> COMPLEX CRITICAL HERITAGE: MORALITY, PSYCHOLOGIZATION, AND THE NEGLECT OF SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS	18
<i>MACBETH'S</i> OCCULT ELEMENTS AND THEIR INHERENT AMBIGUITY	22
CHAPTER 3: JUSTIN KURZEL'S SENSORY CINEMA: SHAPING AN 'AUTHENTIC' <i>MACBETH</i>	37
DEFINING THE AUSTRALIAN SENSORY CINEMA	37
AUTHENTICITY ABOVE ALL: A "SHAKESPEARE FOR REALISTS"	41
CHAPTER 4: A PLAY "STRIPPED DOWN TO ITS CARCASS": HOW KURZEL'S <i>MACBETH</i> EVACUATES THE SUPERNATURAL	52
THE OPENING SEQUENCE: FROM THE (SUPER)NATURAL HEATH TO THE HUMAN BATTLEFIELD	52
"THEY SAY HE'S MAD": PORTRAYING <i>MACBETH</i> AS SUFFERING FROM PTSD AND GRIEF	55
"WHAT ARE THESE?": REPRESENTING THE ENIGMATIC WEIRD SISTERS	62

CHAPTER 5: “ON THE PRECIPICE OF MADNESS”: KURZEL’S OTHERING AND UNCANNY DEPICTION OF MENTAL DISTRESS	72
SUPERNATURAL READINGS OF INSANITY: DIVINE PUNISHMENT, DEMONIC POSSESSION, AND SIN	72
MADNESS AS OTHERNESS: A NARRATIVE OF DIFFERENCE AND UNPREDICTABLE VIOLENCE	75
ECHOES OF STIGMATIZING ACCOUNTS OF MENTAL DISTRESS IN KURZEL’S <i>MACBETH</i> : VIOLENCE, THE ‘VETERAN PROBLEM’, AND THE UNCANNINESS OF MADNESS	78
CONCLUSION	84
BIBLIOGRAPHY	87
PRIMARY SOURCES	87
SECONDARY SOURCES	87

LIST OF CONVENTIONS

All the extracts from *Macbeth* (1606) that are quoted in this dissertation are from Nicholas Brooke's "Oxford Shakespeare" edition, published by Oxford University Press in 2008.

All the extracts from Shakespeare's plays are quoted in the text in accordance with the following standards: (Act. Scene. Line[s]).

INTRODUCTION

Macbeth (1606) is inherently cinematographic, with its medieval Scotland, its bloody plot, its violent characters, and, most importantly, its “supernatural soliciting” (1.3.131). The latter is central to the play’s structure, which depends on a “spectrum of dramatic illusions”¹ consisting of various strange apparitions like the Weird Sisters, the dagger, and Banquo’s ghost, to name only a few. However, this range of occult illusions is presented ambiguously, as it oscillates between “an invitation to credulity” and “an inclination towards scepticism”, a curious mix that Nicholas Brooke relates to the Baroque: “Like the baroque artists, Shakespeare displays a supremely accomplished art to sustain at once credulous amazement and rational intelligence.”² Yet, those sceptical undertones do not necessarily neutralize the efficacy of the supernatural, especially because it is so pervasive.³ In fact, its effects seem to linger even past the stage, since the play itself is riddled with superstitions. Early modern productions of *Macbeth* have indeed popularized the belief that the play was cursed by witches, and that one should thus never pronounce its name inside a theatre (except when performing) to avoid disasters.⁴

Macbeth’s powerful supernaturalism offers filmmakers endless possibilities to play with special effects, sounds and colours. Cinema can take even further the tricks and illusions that structure the play and allows directors to explore the border between imagination and reality. The film medium itself is ideal when it comes to creating illusions, as the silver screen transforms the body of an actor into a shadow, a “celluloid ghost of himself”⁵ which is to be manipulated through editing. This tacit affinity between cinema and the occult, along with “*Macbeth*’s dramatic potential for cinematic sequences of sex and violence”⁶ can explain the play’s increasing popularity among filmmakers (as it has been adapted twenty times between 2000 and 2010).⁷ Such a popularity does not seem to fade: as a matter of fact, Joel Coen recently

¹ NICHOLAS BROOKE, ed., *The Oxford Shakespeare: Macbeth*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 23.

² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ MIRIAM GILLINSON, ‘Is the Word “Macbeth” Really Cursed?’, in *The Guardian*, July 2020.

⁵ DOMINIQUE GOY-BLANQUET, ‘Phantom of the Cinema: *Macbeth*’s Ghosts in the Flesh’, in *Shakespeare on Screen: Macbeth*, Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2014, p. 23.

⁶ PIERRE KAPITANIAK, ‘Witches and Ghosts in Modern Times Lost? How to Negotiate the Supernatural in Modern Adaptations of *Macbeth*’, in *Shakespeare on Screen: Macbeth*, Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2014, p. 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*

announced the release of his upcoming adaptation, *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (with Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand in the leading roles), for this year.⁸

Despite the possibilities of cinema to exploit *Macbeth*'s supernaturalism, some, like Kurzel, would rather erase it. While violence and sex are explored in Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015)⁹, the supernatural is notably pushed into the background and attributed to Macbeth's distressed mind. Although previous adaptations have suggested a similar reading of the supernatural, Kurzel goes further by putting Macbeth's mental state at the centre of the narrative. In fact, he openly diagnoses Macbeth with a war-induced PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)¹⁰, which, along with the intense grief provoked by the loss of his son, will trigger strange visions (which were more decisively supernatural in the original play). Such a different and specific interpretation of the text is definitely intriguing, especially when considering how the occult originally constructed the play. For this reason, this dissertation will explore how and why Kurzel erases *Macbeth*'s supernaturalism by psychologizing it and will investigate various aspects that shaped this particularly disenchanting reading of the Scottish play. By doing so, it will propose more than the simple comparison of an adaptation to its original text, an approach that has been deemed unproductive by a number of adaptation theorists:

[...] the comparative theorists' analyses of adaptations did not fully consider very influential contextual factors that leave traces within the television or film text. These factors include socio-historical, institutional, and intertextual contexts.¹¹

Moreover, comparative studies often rely on the problematic assumption that faithfulness is the only intention behind an adaptation, a pitfall that this dissertation will avoid by considering the adaptation as a meta-text¹² that is not just shaped by its primary source but by other elements as well. Although this dissertation does not claim to be exhaustive in its review of these factors, it will aim at discussing the most significant ones for this particular study of the supernatural (or rather, its absence) in Kurzel's *Macbeth*. To this end, chapter 1 will explore *Macbeth*'s early modern context, a time of contradictory beliefs that permeated the stage. Chapter 2 will delve into the play's ambiguous supernaturalism (shaped by those confusing beliefs) and how it

⁸ BRENT LANG, 'Joel Coen's "Tragedy of Macbeth" With Frances McDormand, Denzel Washington Will Open New York Film Festival', in *Variety*, July 2021.

⁹ Screenplay by Todd Louiso, Jacob Koskoff and Michael Lesslie.

¹⁰ HENRY BARNES, 'Michael Fassbender: "Macbeth Suffered from PTSD"', in *The Guardian*, May 2015.

¹¹ SARAH CARDWELL, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel*, Manchester University Press, 2002, pp. 64-65.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

triggered critical debates surrounding its objectivity, thus encouraging the emergence of psychologizing readings of *Macbeth* that foreshadow Kurzel's. Beyond textual and critical factors, chapter 3 will emphasize how Kurzel's stylistic and generic sensibilities were also decisive in forging his vision for the film. Chapter 4 will then consider how Kurzel actually manages to erase the supernatural through narrative and aesthetic means. Finally, chapter 5 will discuss how Kurzel's psychologization of the supernatural resonates with othering depictions of madness, which displaces feelings of uncanniness towards the distressed mind rather than the supernatural Other. These 5 chapters will offer a multi-layered study of Kurzel's *Macbeth* through his psychologization of the supernatural, exploiting to this end historical, textual, critical, and cinematographic elements.

CHAPTER 1

Shakespeare's England as a site of eschatological debates: *Macbeth's* early modern context

PERCEPTIONS OF THE COSMOS AND THE BODY: THE FLUID AGAINST THE STABLE

It would be quite an understatement to say that the 16th and 17th centuries were a time of great changes in several respects. Luther's Reformation in 1517 and the exploration of the American continent profoundly transformed religious beliefs in England (and Europe in general), but also shaped new perceptions of the world, and more largely, of the cosmos.¹³ Those events provoked what Kristen Poole calls an "imaginative and cartographic fervor"¹⁴ that redefined the limits of not only the physical world but the spiritual one too. As the old geocentric cosmic structure was slowly replaced by Copernicus's heliocentric universe, aided by the works of Galileo Galilei, Kepler and Newton, the Catholic eschatological¹⁵ geographies of heaven, hell and purgatory were called into question.¹⁶ By the mid-17th century and under Protestantism's influence, purgatory was now mostly seen as a fable, while the existence and exact location of hell at the centre of the earth were debated.¹⁷ Those changes were not possible without the growing perception of space as being geometric and mathematical, a shift encouraged by a new "geometric sensibility" fed by the increasing number of geometric texts like atlases and surveying books.¹⁸ However, this new geometric space that would become what Newton called "absolute space" did not easily allow for supernatural interventions, because it "does not bend or curve or allow for aberrations. It contains."¹⁹ The geometric space was in fact directly contradicting the earlier fluid and metamorphic space that favoured the possibility of miracles, witchcraft and other preternatural events.²⁰

While those innovations were indeed contradicting older beliefs about space and the supernatural, they did not erase these, because the possibility of occult interference was still an object of fascination and even of careful consideration: "In order to learn more about the

¹³ KRISTEN POOLE, *Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare's England: Spaces of Demonism, Divinity, and Drama*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Eschatological "here [refers] to matters of the afterlife", *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

construction of the material world, the operations of demonic creatures were subject to intense scrutiny.”²¹ Contrary to what one may think, demonology was a serious topic, central to the field of natural philosophy, and was thus regarded as scientific.²² The simultaneous but paradoxical existence of opposing beliefs not only affected the notion of space but would also come to define several areas of early modern England’s thought. In a similar conflict between the fluid and the geometric, the human body was the subject of contradictory beliefs opposing emerging theories to older ones.²³ At the dawn of the 17th century, two antithetical models of the human body coexisted: the humoral body and the mechanical body. The former was an ancient model tracing back to Antiquity that defined the healthy body as a balance of four humours (blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile).²⁴ Healing was thus achieved through the balancing of these fluids with the help of “diet and drainage (enemas, purgations, blood-lettings, etc.)”²⁵ The humoral body was largely permeable because it interacted with the environment; it contained it and reacted to it since “The humours were themselves influenced by the climate, the season and the motions of the planets.”²⁶ In fact, each of these humours were thought to correspond to one of the four elements; yellow bile was connected to fire, blood to air, phlegm to water and black bile to earth.²⁷ This understanding was reinforced by the omnipresent theory of the macrocosm and microcosm that considered the human body as “a little cosmos that reflected and participated in the large cosmos that was the universe.”²⁸ If the body was porous, so was the cosmos, since the two were closely interconnected.²⁹ These ideas came to be disputed by the emerging model of the mechanical body which was closed to its environment and “self-mastered.”³⁰ It was the anatomist’s vision of a body that is autonomous and functions with “a series of mechanical systems”³¹, which were revealed by the works of da Vinci and Vesalius, and later supported by William Harvey’s findings on the circulatory system.³² The model thus

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁶ MARTHA MCGILL, ‘Everyday Encounters with Supernatural Forces in Early Modern Britain’, in *The British Academy*, July 2019.

²⁷ KRISTEN POOLE, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

not only suggested a more stable cosmos but also “contributed to the gradual demise of the microcosm/macrocosm paradigm.”³³

However, the transition did not go smoothly, as people continued to rely on this understanding of the world throughout the 17th century; perceptions of the body, the universe, and God were thus still affecting one another.³⁴ Indeed, God was also thought through this micro/macro paradigm, and theologians like Calvin considered that knowing oneself and the world was a way of knowing God.³⁵ It created a sense of anxiety and confusion, since both the body and the world were “in a period of rapid if not uneven transformation.”³⁶ Coexisting and confusing perceptions about the body and the cosmos as either fluid or stable would then also affect those about the supernatural, since emerging scientific knowledge and evolving religious beliefs questioned Satan and God’s interactions with the human world.³⁷

**DISCUSSING THE SUPERNATURAL:
DEMONOLOGY AND “THE LABILE COEXISTENCE OF SKEPTICISM AND THE DIABOLICAL”³⁸**

Even though scientific and religious transformations led to reconsider many aspects of the supernatural, the latter was still central to people’s perceptions of the world. Their environment was “saturated with the demonic”³⁹ and its unfixed physical laws allowed for the intrusion of the Devil in ordinary situations. According to Poole, historians often overlooked this demonic environment or only saw it as remnants of childish and irrational beliefs that were to be erased by the emerging modernity that characterizes the Renaissance. Time and history have indeed long been understood as progressing towards development, a theory that engendered “a scholarly tradition of portraying the inhabitants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as immature versions of our more sophisticated selves.”⁴⁰ The works of Jacob Burckhardt have established the Renaissance as a “glorious story of coming-of-age”⁴¹, a narrative that has since changed but continues to deeply influence the critical tradition.⁴² This teleological attitude explains a rather common tendency to focus more on sceptical writings like Reginald Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), an infamous essay arguing against witchcraft

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

persecutions. Scot mostly justified his stance by doubting the reality of those occult events which he attributes either to illusionary tricks or to the ill mind.⁴³ King James VI himself, at that time King of Scotland only, publicly rejected Scot's sceptic views in his *Daemonologie* (1597), and it was believed for long that he even ordered its burning after his accession to the English throne in 1603.⁴⁴ Even though no actual source could confirm that the burning did happen, this historical tradition emphasizes James VI and I's profound distaste for Scot's essay.⁴⁵ The King's interest and defence of witch persecutions are actually not surprising considering his involvement in the North Berwick witch trials of 1590-92, during which several individuals were accused of plotting his murder. The accused allegedly "raised by witchcraft a magical storm in an attempt to sink the king's ship as he and his bride, Anne of Denmark, returned from their Scandinavian honeymoon to Scotland in 1590."⁴⁶ It was believed that James VI was present during the torture-extracted confession of Agnes Sampson, making him an active participant of the first wave of Scottish witch-hunts.⁴⁷

While Scot's writings may seem representative of the period's growing scepticism towards the supernatural, it was in fact "more radical than rational"⁴⁸ since the numerous positions on the matter were mostly tempered, situated between beliefs and doubts.⁴⁹ Demonology, a serious field engaged in the study of various occult subjects such as witchcraft, was in fact inherently sceptical. The various authors constituting its corpus were easily admitting the feeble veracity of the events described, and often included a discussion of different, if not opposite views on the matter. As Stuart Clark summarizes it: "Demonology was always a debate, never a closed system of dogmatic and uncritical thought, and 'credulous' seems rarely the right word to apply to its authors."⁵⁰ As mentioned above, questions surrounding witches or demonic interventions were as meaningful as those surrounding the structure of the cosmos since the occult was seen as a part of the natural world. Supernatural events were thus carefully examined and confronted to the possibilities of the natural world and its laws: "Theorizing about witchcraft was an

⁴³ WARREN CHERNAIK, "Instruments of Darkness": Witches and the Supernatural in Four Versions of *Macbeth*, in *Shakespeare on Screen: Macbeth*, Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2014, p. 41.

⁴⁴ P. C. ALMOND, 'King James I and the Burning of Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*: The Invention of a Tradition', in *Notes and Queries*, vol. 56, no. 2, June 2009, p. 209.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁴⁶ L.A. YEOMAN, 'North Berwick Witches (Act. 1590–1592)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, September 2004.

⁴⁷ ERIC PUDNEY, 'Witchcraft in Jacobean Drama', in *Scepticism and belief in English witchcraft drama, 1538–1681*, Lund University Press, 2019, p. 139.

⁴⁸ KRISTEN POOLE, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ STUART CLARK, 'The Causes of Witchcraft', in *Thinking with Demons*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 184.

occasion for critical thought, supported (as Foucault again would have said) by a particular distribution of the possible and the impossible in nature.”⁵¹ Clark separates this distribution into four categories:

[...] real demonic effects, illusory demonic effects, real non-demonic effects, and illusory nondemonic effects. And among the non-demonic, they had to allow for both the spontaneous workings of nature and those produced by human ingenuity. It was somewhere on the resulting grid of explanations that the phenomena of magic and witchcraft had to be distributed.⁵²

Attributing non-demonic causes to extraordinary phenomena may seem counterintuitive, yet incorporating the sceptics’ arguments into theirs allowed demonologists to provide a credible explanation for the existence of various testimonies and accounts of impossible events.⁵³ Moreover, the occurrence of natural causes did not deny the existence of the supernatural, since the demonic was kept within the realm of nature: “[...] naturalism was no help to atheists if ‘the operations of Daemons’ were ‘kept within the bound of things Natural.’”⁵⁴ In certain cases, demonologists were as doubtful as the ‘sceptics’, thus blurring the boundaries between the two. For example, most authors agreed on the impossibility of metamorphosis, demonic impregnation or ‘transvection’ (travelling by spirit only). Even James VI and I’s *Daemonologie*, which could be considered as a believing take on the subject, still incorporated hints of a more sceptical attitude on certain topics such as lycanthropy, which the author attributed to an excess of melancholy.⁵⁵ What differentiated Scot from demonologists was the degree of scepticism, since he went as far as denying any materiality to the demonic by reducing it to “a non-corporeal condition.”⁵⁶ Rejecting the possibility of a real contact between humans and the demonic was delicate for it could imply a disbelief in the existence of any spiritual contact:

[...] spiritual contact was a prerequisite of Christianity itself and of the whole history of heresy; to deny it, said William Perkins in England, would mean giving up the possibility of covenants with God.⁵⁷

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² ID. ‘The Devil in Nature’, in *Thinking with demons*, p. 167.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

The numerous supernatural elements were in fact intertwined in a system that Gillian Bennett defines as an ‘edifice’, because, as a whole, it was “taken as evidence of the existence of God.”⁵⁸ Doubting the existence of one element was thus impossible without disbelieving the others:

In this system, apparitions are essential evidence for the existence of witches, witches for devils, devils for Satan, and Satan for God, because all are part of the supernatural hierarchy which tops the Great Chain of Being.⁵⁹

Even though Scot “left corners of it [the supernatural edifice] untouched”⁶⁰ and never denied the existence of the Devil, his views of witchcraft as being only a delusion or a mere trickery were perceived as too radical to have a short-term impact on the debate, and his arguments were not reconsidered before a century later.⁶¹ Despite our propensity to see him as such, Scot was thus not the best representative of early modern witchcraft writers, which were definitely not as credulous as one might think. As demonology tradition showed us, the supernatural beliefs of the period were characterized by the coexistence of sceptic and believing arguments, which, when they were not in direct confrontation, were quite often working together. This productive coexistence in the debates would then affect how the supernatural space was perceived, inhabited, and represented in a sort of contradictory duality:

Around the turn of the seventeenth century, English depictions of the supernatural often entailed a duality, a simultaneous presence of the stable and the labile, the seen and the unseen, the material and the fantastic.⁶²

INHABITING THE (SUPER)NATURAL SPACE: MATERIALITY, OVIDIAN PHYSICS, AND DOUBLE VISION

As mentioned above, the supernatural space was not seen as distinct from the natural one and certainly not above its laws, in spite of what the word may suggest. In fact, as mentioned by Clark, it may even seem anachronistic to use the latter in this case.⁶³ Indeed, what was truly thought as ‘supernatural’ in early modern England was mostly attributed to God’s miracles, because it “[...] contravened the laws of nature and could be accomplished only by the divine

⁵⁸ GILLIAN BENNETT, ‘Ghost and Witch in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries’, in *Folklore*, vol. 97, no. 1, 1986, p. 4.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶¹ KRISTEN POOLE, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

hand that had created these laws.”⁶⁴ Events such as witchcraft and demonic interventions were thus believed to be purely natural, because bound to the laws of nature. The Devil was inherently unable to surpass those laws since only God could: “Whatever the scale of his [the Devil’s] intervention, it could never, therefore, turn natural into supernatural causation.”⁶⁵ However, scholars did use the term ‘supernatural’ to describe both miracles and events that their contemporaries rather called ‘preternatural’, namely remarkable events that were natural but “outside of human knowledge.”⁶⁶ For clarity, ‘supernatural’ will be used here in this broader sense (encompassing the ‘preternatural’).

The supernatural space was part of the natural world and was also strongly associated to specific locations, especially those that were untouched.⁶⁷ Wilderness, and thus, nature, was believed to be inhabited by strong forces, and even after the Reformation, “the association between Satan and uninhabited land remained strong.”⁶⁸ The strong affinity did not mean that populated land was empty of otherworldly presence since the cosmos was filled with “an invisible realm of spirits”⁶⁹ that was active on Earth. The supernatural was mostly perceived as invisible because immaterial: “Angels and demons might move constantly among us, but they possessed no physical form.”⁷⁰ They could make themselves material with divine permission, and to this end, used visions or various substances like air.⁷¹ However, their physicality could be very real to the ordinary man or woman, despite scholars’ insistence on their intangible nature.⁷² The supernatural had a material, non-metaphoric presence in people’s lives, and it could interact, and even sometimes sign contracts with men and women. Poole finds in the Devil’s contract the very materiality of the demonic, which goes against our modern metaphorical and psychological perception of the supernatural: “[...] at one time, and for a long time, the devil was perceived as a material presence, one who even participated in the cultural production of text.”⁷³ Nonetheless, this materiality was plastic because the demonic contract could be stored on Earth or in Hell, which suggested the possibility of a fluid space that allowed for such a metaphysical journey. The document was thus peculiar in its materiality because it was “moving

⁶⁴ DARREN OLDRIDGE, ‘Introduction’, in *The Supernatural in Tudor and Stuart England*, Routledge, 2016, p. 1.

⁶⁵ STUART CLARK, ‘The Devil in Nature’, in *Thinking with Demons*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 168.

⁶⁶ DARREN OLDRIDGE, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷³ KRISTEN POOLE, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

through different cosmic spheres”⁷⁴ and was at the same time traceable and untraceable, depending on where it was stored. For that to happen, the universe must allow for what Poole calls ‘Ovidian physics’, which is “an understanding of the world in which matter and space are perceived as fluid and plastic.”⁷⁵ This Ovidian universe tolerates and engages in physical metamorphosis such as the demonic transformation of humans into animals. A material transformation that most demonologists could not accept as possible and that was preferably attributed to the Devil’s tricks on human perception.⁷⁶ While the Devil could morph himself into anything, his powers on humans were believed to be limited by the divine laws of nature. Yet the difference between physical reality and perception was not as meaningful for the ordinary man or woman, who still considered metamorphosis as a very real and inherent ability of the Devil.⁷⁷ Despite the emergence of a geometric conception of the world that did not permit metamorphosis, the plasticity of the universe was still deeply rooted in the collective psyche: “For those living in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [...] belief in a universe that was molten – was a given.”⁷⁸ It was not before the end the 17th century and the advent of ‘mechanistic philosophy’ that these transformative possibilities became archaic. However, as mentioned previously, those two contradicting cosmologies did coexist for long and created a sense of confusion and anxiety.

A similar duality defined the visual perception of the supernatural, which could simultaneously be visible or invisible to different persons in the same given space and time. The Renaissance allowed for the rediscovery of linear perspective, which presupposed the ability to locate bodies within “an abstract, uniform system of linear coordinates.”⁷⁹ It did not only influence pictorial arts, but also how humans inhabited space and saw the others within it.⁸⁰ However, the (often) immaterial supernatural beings were too impalpable to be integrated into human geometry, and their existence also suggested the possibility of being both seen by an individual and unseen by others.⁸¹ This directly contradicts the common assumption in perspective theories that “the objects and persons depicted are visible to all.”⁸² It is what Guverich called the ‘double vision’, a principle at the heart of the prolific *ars moriendi* tradition, which was a visual and dramatic

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁸² *Ibid.*

early modern genre that depicted the deathbed combat for salvation between the dying person and demonic forces.⁸³ This peculiar fight happened to be invisible to all but the *Moriens* ('the dying')⁸⁴: "the demons are at once insensible to the audience, and sensible (not only through vision, but through bodily sensation) to the dying person."⁸⁵ The visual representation of those "incompatible metaphysical realities"⁸⁶ (of the dying person and the audience) in the *ars moriendi* tradition is what defines 'double vision' as the state of both the seen and the unseen.⁸⁷ At first mostly visual, the genre evolved over the course of the 16th century and became more textual and performative with the addition of extensive dialogues that helped the combat to be more accessible to the viewer.⁸⁸ The dying person was thus required to "make evident, through whatever gestures and articulations were possible, the progress of the death struggle"⁸⁹ while the role of the spectator was to interpret these signs. Interestingly, under the Reformation's influence, the genre not only changed but expanded despite its representation of a battle for salvation, which was becoming superfluous in the light of predestination beliefs.⁹⁰ The deathbed battle thus evolved to be an opportunity to prove one's salvation rather than the struggle to obtain it, and both the literary tradition and the human experience actively shaped one another.⁹¹ Dying was a real (often public) performance with theatrical undertones, and *ars moriendi* texts provided the script and lines to every protagonist, even the invisible ones.⁹² However, one should not forget that despite their histrionic nature, deathbed demons were still very real to everyone involved.⁹³ Poole suggests interpreting this tradition not as a dramatization of death or the result of near-death hallucinations, but as being a mediator between conflicting metaphysical realities:

The deathbed exchanges – between *Moriens* and attendants, between *Moriens* and the devil – were about the very real belief in and experience of the demonic. They served to mediate between different ontological and experiential realities occurring in the same space – a doubleness that an emergent understanding of space would increasingly

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 77-78.

disallow, as linear perspective developed into Cartesian mathematics and ultimately Newtonian physics.⁹⁴

As early as the mid-16th century, the deathbed battle was increasingly questioned and doubted. However, the genre still had a long-lasting impact on the representation of the supernatural (especially on the stage), and, more broadly, on cultural perceptions of it, since the *ars moriendi* tradition “was itself reflecting, constructing, and structuring notions about human-supernatural interactions.”⁹⁵ It was especially true for the principle of double vision, which became a “culturally inscribed way of perceiving a space inhabited by the demonic.”⁹⁶

In the end, early modern England was defined by opposing but coexisting cosmologies, a conflict that, along with overlapping religious beliefs, fed a number of eschatological debates. This resulted in a dual supernatural space that oscillated between the material and the immaterial, the fluid and the stable, the visible and the invisible. This spatial duality was especially present on the stage, which Poole characterizes as “a container for examining the container of the cosmos.”⁹⁷

THE GLOBE: STAGING THE “IMAGINATIVE QUANTUM FOAM”

Unlike poetry and narrative prose, early modern theatre was itself a three-dimensional space that allowed “human bodies to enact some of the crises of faith which could result from contradictory epistemologies.”⁹⁸ It could not only stage and discuss the abstract questions surrounding space, but it could accurately give them a physical and sensorial reality through performance.⁹⁹ The stage was thus the perfect place to both discuss and represent ways of inhabiting space. Furthermore, theatre was a particularly adequate vessel for the representation of debated issues because it created and represented characters interacting on the basis of their opposing beliefs.¹⁰⁰ Even though plays cannot be regarded as historical artifacts that attest of specific discourses, for Poole they embody “the imaginative quantum foam – the chaotic, metamorphic, wonderful manifestation of the micro activity of individual beliefs, fears, desires, fantasies, sensations, words.”¹⁰¹ Moreover, the stage’s construction incorporated spatial

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

instability, since the structure and name of the Globe exhibited early modern cartographic enthusiasm while still relying on old eschatological geographies.¹⁰² Indeed, the stage's canopy, which was painted with stars, was unambiguously named 'the Heavens', while devils and ghosts could surface from 'Hell' through a trapdoor. This spatial organization (heaven above, hell and purgatory below), despite being questioned and rearranged by Copernicus's heliocentric system, was still paradoxically structuring the stage.¹⁰³ This peculiar setting is central to a play such as *Hamlet* (1604)¹⁰⁴, in which the Danish prince "inhabits a theatrical space that translates medieval staging (the presence of heaven and hell) even as he seems to reference the new atlas of Mercator."¹⁰⁵ The ghost of Hamlet's father comes and goes through the trapdoor that sends him back to a "prison house" where he must remain until his "foul crimes" are "burnt and purged away" (1.5.12-14). In this case, the 'Hell' underneath the stage transformed into the (debated) purgatory to which Hamlet's binary beliefs ("Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned" [1.4.19]) are confronted. For Poole, Hamlet is "caught between the medieval belief in purgatory and the Reformation denial of this space's existence"¹⁰⁶, a conflict that the Globe was particularly adequate to represent. According to Poole, the early modern stage also efficiently portrayed the struggle between labile and geometrical spaces, in plays such as *Doctor Faustus* (1592) and *Macbeth* (1606). Indeed, she reads the Scottish play as the depiction of a conflict between Hooker's orderly world and the "volatile physics of Calvin's universe."¹⁰⁷ However, beyond cosmological and spatial questions, *Macbeth* also stages the discussions that surrounded the existence and nature of supernatural beings. If one can interpret those as echoes of demonological debates, they also bring to light our own modern critical heritage that preferably chooses to read *Macbeth* as a sceptical stance on the matter.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ G.R. HIBBARD, ed., *The Oxford Shakespeare: Hamlet*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹⁰⁵ KRISTEN POOLE, *op. cit.*, p. 22

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

CHAPTER 2

Macbeth's ambiguous supernaturalism: A source of confusion

If *Macbeth's* supernatural elements stem from a larger spatial confusion that one may relate to early modern England's changing spatial and eschatological spaces, these elements also mirror, in their inherent ambiguity, the confusing debates surrounding the existence and actual powers of occult beings. This ambiguity would then trigger a range of critical debates regarding the objectivity of *Macbeth's* numerous apparitions, encouraged by changing critical views. To better appreciate what may have shaped disenchanted readings of *Macbeth* such as Kurzel's, this chapter will discuss the play's critical heritage and obscure supernaturalism.

***MACBETH'S* COMPLEX CRITICAL HERITAGE: MORALITY, PSYCHOLOGIZATION, AND THE NEGLECT OF SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS**

Macbeth's spatial confusion does not only illustrate early modern England's cosmological debates, but also emphasizes the existence of an environment that is open to supernatural intervention. While the Weïrd Sisters, Banquo's ghost and other spectacular apparitions are viewed as central elements of the play's occult environment, one should not forget the environment itself, with its peculiar and flexible space-time. The Scottish play famously transgresses temporalities, blurring any sense of time progression through what Poole calls "abstract temporal expressions" like Lady Macbeth claiming she feels "the future in the instant."¹⁰⁸ Moreover, *Macbeth* challenges the connection of time to the motion of celestial spheres, thus staging a failing cosmic structure.¹⁰⁹ For example, the sun no longer shines at the appropriate and natural hours, replaced by an uncanny "dark night" that swallows everything up. While *Macbeth's* time ceases to be natural, its space allows for abnormalities such as bubbling earth and corporal bodies melting "as breath into the wind" (1.3.82). In such a malleable environment, man's actions are able to trouble nature (and thus, God), to the point of turning animals wild and making the earth shake in reaction to Duncan's "unnatural" murder. For Poole, "there is no stability in this space-time"¹¹⁰, despite Macbeth's own spatial convictions. Indeed, his "sure and firm-set earth" (2.2.57) and "broad and general" air (3.4.23) are directly contradicted by his reality made of temporal turmoil and fluid space: "He appears

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

to believe – or wants to believe – in Hooker’s world of laws, where time and space are reliable constants. This belief clashes with the time and space in which he actually lives.”¹¹¹ According to Poole, the witches in *Macbeth* could actually be “a symptom of a larger cosmic confusion”¹¹² similar to what Macbeth suffers from (and to what some in the audience may have related to at the time). This could apply to the play’s ghosts and apparitions as well, suggesting that those are to be considered as being only a part (if not a result) of an openly malleable space:

The world of the play is one in which all knowledge is undermined – a world in which nothing is, but what is not. Within such a world, witches and witchcraft are hardly even surprising, let alone impossible; almost everything in *Macbeth* is shrouded in mystery in order to create a suitable backdrop for the supernatural.¹¹³

Despite the undeniable peculiarity of *Macbeth*’s space-time, the objective existence of the play’s most obvious supernatural elements like the Weïrd Sisters and Banquo’s ghost has been questioned and sometimes reduced to the workings of subjectivity. By doing so, those elements do no longer exist as a part of a confusing spatial environment that allows for abnormalities but instead are only a symptom of a confused mind. It thus seems difficult to justify *Macbeth*’s malleable environment while doubting the reality of the Weïrd Sisters or Banquo’s ghost. Although one may think that this disenchanting view of the play is a result of our own contemporary scepticism, it is in fact grounded in *Macbeth*’s Romantic critical and theatrical tradition. From the second half of the 17th to the 20th century, both critical and theatrical interpretations favoured what Nick Moschovakis calls a “dualistic” *Macbeth*, an approach that regards the play as staging a stark opposition between good and evil forces illustrated by the Macbeths’ moral deviation from good.¹¹⁴ Even though this outlook was dominant up until the 20th century, it started to be questioned as early as the Romantic period, during which literary critics “[...] began reading *Macbeth* as a study of the imagination’s ascendancy over the reason”¹¹⁵, thus digressing from moral concerns to focus more on the subjective experience of characters. Simultaneously, critics and readers of the later 18th century were expressing a growing interest in psychology and began questioning Macbeth’s mental health, which further complicated a moral reading of the play.¹¹⁶ A mentally ill Macbeth would indeed be “less

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 161

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ ERIC PUDNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

¹¹⁴ NICK MOSCHOVAKIS, ‘Introduction: Dualistic *Macbeth*? Problematic *Macbeth*?’, in *Macbeth: New Critical Essays*, Routledge, 2008, pp. 2-4.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

culpable than psychologically deviant.”¹¹⁷ Critics such as Hippolyte Taine viewed his character not as a bad man but as an ill man suffering from hallucinations (listing Banquo’s ghost as one of them).¹¹⁸ While psychologizing interpretations of Shakespeare’s characters were not new at the time, the belief that Shakespeare’s tragedies were actually about mental experiences was specific to the Romantic period and the late 19th century.¹¹⁹ On stage, however, performers continued to rely on dualistic readings throughout the 19th century, following in the steps of European moralistic melodramas that prevailed then.¹²⁰ The subjective and psychological approach initiated by critics was then further explored at the turn of the 20th century, a period “preoccupied with depth psychology and the mysterious recesses of the self.”¹²¹ Darwin and Nietzsche’s deconstruction of human morality definitely blurred the moral boundaries that were previously perceived as clear in *Macbeth*.¹²² From that heritage emerged what Moschovakis calls the “problematic” *Macbeth*, namely, a version of the play that rejects moral dualism by blurring the borders between good and evil.¹²³ Problematic approaches appeared on stage during the 1920s and 1930s, and these began “psychologizing *Macbeth* much more deliberately”¹²⁴, turning to expressionist and primitivist styles to this end.¹²⁵ Whether explored by critics or performed on stage, this dive into the human psyche led to a clear neglect of the play’s supernatural elements, which were now often confined within the borders of the subjective mind.¹²⁶ The shortcomings of modern criticism regarding *Macbeth*’s occult elements were underlined and summarized by Brooke as follows:

The obvious problems of sensational credulity – witchcraft, ghost, apparitions – are not discussed, or are assigned to projections of Macbeth’s fevered brain or to the atmospherics of Evil, or – worse – to the supposed credulity of Jacobean audiences.¹²⁷

Nevertheless, a number of critics opposed the psychologizing turn of Shakespeare studies, arguing that these theories were forcing modern views upon Shakespeare’s works, and by doing so, were eclipsing historical understandings of his writings.¹²⁸ Historicist critics “began

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹²⁸ NICK MOSCHOVAKIS, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

emphasizing differences between ‘Elizabethan’ and modern discourses of ethics, character, and politics”¹²⁹, which sparked a prolific revival of dualistic interpretations of *Macbeth*.¹³⁰ Elmer Edgar Stoll, a historicist critic himself, deplored in 1907 how Shakespeare’s supernatural characters were “rationalized away” by his contemporaries, and defended the objectivity of ghosts in *Macbeth*, *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*, using to this end his understanding of early modern stage practices.¹³¹ From the early 1930s to the late 1960s, dualistic interpretations dominated the field, a tendency encouraged not only by historicist theories but also by real-life conflicts that echoed *Macbeth*’s “murder, tyranny, war, unhallowed rites.”¹³² While some dualists focused on the play’s language and imagery, historicists concentrated on *Macbeth*’s ideological and religious background, stating for example that the witches were actually demons or that the play’s occult elements were present to echo King James I’s own beliefs.¹³³ However, those readings would soon be overshadowed by the critical “problematic shift” of the late 1960s, which one may attribute to Jan Kott’s existentialist interpretation of *Macbeth*¹³⁴ and to the difficulty to defend a dualistic vision of war after the US’s brutal bombing of Vietnam.¹³⁵ From that shift followed a number of reinterpretations of the play’s supernatural elements as being subjective, transforming for example the Weïrd Sisters into symbols of a repressed societal unconscious rather than an evil threat.¹³⁶ Today, critical readings of the play are much more temperate, because informed by both dualistic and problematic approaches:

[...] many critics would now argue that even as *Macbeth* seems to endorse binary moral distinctions, it simultaneously deconstructs those antinomies by exposing the rhetorical and ideological artifice behind them.¹³⁷

Nevertheless, what 20th century critics may have had in common beyond the dividing question of morality is a certain neglect for the play’s supernaturalism, as Poole argues: “[...] critics were blind to the drama’s affiliations with elements of supernaturalism carried forward from earlier religious drama [...]”.¹³⁸ According to Bernard Spivack, who discussed this issue in the

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ E.E. STOLL, ‘The Objectivity of the Ghosts in Shakspere [sic]’, in *PMLA*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1907, pp. 201-233.

¹³² NICK MOSCHOVAKIS, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Kott considered that there were no good or bad kings and saw in *Macbeth*’s finale a very nihilistic understanding of life’s absurdity and lack of sense. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹³⁸ KRISTEN POOLE, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

early 1960s, this was the result of a long tradition of naturalism in the critical field, which pushed us to understand Shakespeare's plays as imitating life, despite their roots in religious drama: "[...] our only habituation for three centuries has been to a stage and a literature that imitate [the] familiar motives of human life."¹³⁹ According to Poole, a new type of naturalism supplanted the other, imposing "an interest in considering how texts represented different manifestations of the (racial, gendered, class) Other."¹⁴⁰ Despite the meaningful questions these approaches may raise, the problem remains, since "[...] we still lack a sustained theoretical framework for analysing the supernaturalism of the early modern stage."¹⁴¹ This lack is further complicated because of our tendency to see in Shakespeare an early sceptic, mostly because the Devil is quite absent from his plays.¹⁴² Shakespeare's disinterest in stage devils has been interpreted as a sign of a "secular flowering" by E.K. Chambers, whose work, according to John D. Cox, has created a "narrative of teleological secularization"¹⁴³ that still shapes our understanding of stage practices.¹⁴⁴ However, as highlighted by Poole, "Shakespeare [...] was not the death of the devil" since devils continued to regularly appear on the early modern stage.¹⁴⁵

While it is fair to say that our teleological tendencies and critical heritage shaped our secularizing interpretations of Shakespeare's plays, one cannot deny the supernatural ambiguities that some of these plays show. It thus does not come as a surprise to see how one like *Macbeth* has generated decades of debate about its confusing supernaturalism.

MACBETH'S OCCULT ELEMENTS AND THEIR INHERENT AMBIGUITY

Macbeth's most discussed occult intruders are undoubtedly the Weïrd Sisters, not only because of their equivocal language or sensational entrance, but because their very nature is shrouded in mystery. These strange women are terribly enigmatic, both to the critics and to the characters. This idea is introduced quite early in the play, when Banquo, upon seeing the Weïrd Sisters, asks Macbeth:

¹³⁹ BERNARD SPIVACK, as quoted in KRISTEN POOLE, *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁴³ JOHN D. COX, as quoted in KRISTEN POOLE, *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

What are these
So withered and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' Earth,
And yet are on 't?

(1.3.39-42)

The exchange that then follows between the two men and the strange creatures constantly reiterates the question of their true nature, since no definite answer is available to Banquo and Macbeth:

Banquo: Live you? Or are you aught
That man may question?

(1.3.42-43)

Macbeth: Speak, if you can: what are you?

(1.3.48)

Having no satisfying answer to this question, Banquo insists:

I' th' name of truth,
Are ye fantastical, or that indeed
Which outwardly ye show?

(1.3.52-54)

While at first Banquo questioned their appearance and their humanity, this time he interrogates the Weïrd Sisters' objective existence, since "fantastical" here means "existing only in the imagination."¹⁴⁶ Banquo's doubts certainly echo those expressed in early modern debates, as noted by Stephen Greenblatt:

¹⁴⁶ NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

[...] Shakespeare is staging the epistemological and ontological dilemmas that in the deeply contradictory ideological situation of his time haunted virtually all attempts to determine the status of witchcraft beliefs and practices.¹⁴⁷

If early modern demonologists tried to resolve those questions with a sceptical mindset, Shakespeare left those questions unanswered, as the Weïrd Sisters vanish at the beginning of act four without ever revealing their true nature and powers. Even though the Weïrd Sisters are generally known as witches, Eric Pudney remarked how this status is compromised because “demonologically speaking the play seems a mess.”¹⁴⁸ Their characterization does rely heavily on early modern witch-lore: they are associated to bad weather, they have familiars¹⁴⁹, cook horrible broths, make prophecies, and so on.¹⁵⁰ Yet, they are never referred to as “witches” in the play or in the stage directions, except when one of them reports that she was called a witch by a woman who wanted to insult her. The Folio text, however, names them as such, which, for Brooke, definitely created confusion.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, we never know the extent of their powers, or if they actually have any, especially since “the same set of events might have occurred anyway, impelled entirely by the pressure of Macbeth’s violent ambition and his wife’s psychological manipulation.”¹⁵² Some believe that they are merely ‘village witches’, inoffensive stereotypical ‘old crones’ that are accused of casting spells to satisfy their desire for revenge.¹⁵³ Although they may resemble those, Brooke concludes that they are more “decisively supernatural” than ordinary village witches, while admitting that they remain fundamentally ambiguous.¹⁵⁴ In fact, a number of critics saw in the Weïrd Sisters a representation of the Greek Fates or the Norns (their Nordic counterpart), which are both a trio of women able to see the future.¹⁵⁵ They are indeed quite similar to those mythological figures in their appearance and purpose, and their qualifier, the word ‘weïrd’, had at the time the old meaning of ‘destiny’ or ‘fate’, thus referring directly to their role and probably to their pagan models.¹⁵⁶ Yet, as Pudney notes, the trivial nature of their concerns (killing swine, begging for food, taking revenge on

¹⁴⁷ STEPHEN GREENBLATT, ‘Shakespeare Bewitched’, in *Shakespeare and Cultural traditions*, University of Delaware Press, 1994, p. 32.

¹⁴⁸ ERIC PUDNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

¹⁴⁹ “The familiar was a low-ranking demon that assumed any animal shape, such as a toad, dog, insect, or black cat.” ‘Familiar (demon)’, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, undated.

¹⁵⁰ STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹⁵¹ NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁵² STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁵³ NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ ERIC PUDNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

¹⁵⁶ NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

another woman) “undermines their later representation as Norns or Fates.”¹⁵⁷ Elmer Stoll actually reached a similar conclusion in 1907: “[...] in *Macbeth*, the name and office of vulgar witch and awful Norn are by him so confounded that all possibility of allegory – as of fate or destiny – is quite foreclosed.”¹⁵⁸ An early modern audience would probably identify them as witches (whether village witches or more powerful ones), despite Banquo’s own undecided conclusions.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, after seeing the Weïrd Sisters vanish into the air, Banquo suggests that they are either “earth bubbles” (1.3.79) or even hallucinations (“Or have we eaten on the insane root / That takes the reason prisoner?” [1.3.84-85]), but neither of the two men ever deduce that they might be witches, however obvious this conclusion may be to the audience.¹⁶⁰ At the beginning of the 20th century, which saw the rise of psychologizing theories in the critical field, some started supporting Banquo’s suggestion, believing that the Weïrd Sisters do not actually exist outside of Macbeth’s psyche. For Pudney, the play does provide plenty of evidence to support this theory, since the Weïrd Sisters are closely connected to Macbeth:

The witches suddenly ‘vanish’ according to a stage direction, they anticipate Macbeth’s thoughts, some of their speeches are verbally close to his, and they arguably have no real effect on the outcome of events.¹⁶¹

While some critics still defend this theory, it tends to be rejected by most of them¹⁶², such as Brooke, who insists that the Weïrd Sisters “cannot be reduced to projections of Macbeth’s mind”¹⁶³ since they are visible to the audience, to Macbeth, and to Banquo, who he describes as a “touchstone of common sense, like Horatio in *Hamlet*, even if less solid.”¹⁶⁴ For Pudney, the Weïrd Sisters may in fact voluntarily appear more powerful and evil than they really are, thus mirroring the Devil’s own misleading ways:

The witches in *Macbeth*, like all servants of the devil, mimic their master’s strategies: they pretend to be powerful and mysterious, but when the audience sees them in Macbeth’s absence, they are revealed to be no more than ordinary witches.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁷ ERIC PUDNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

¹⁵⁸ E.E. STOLL, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

¹⁵⁹ ERIC PUDNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ ERIC PUDNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

The elevated speech and tone they use when prophesying are only reserved for the ‘performance’ they play before Banquo and Macbeth’s eyes, since they quickly revert to their more natural, prosaic language when among themselves.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, their resemblance to pagan figures could then be understood as one of the Devil’s known tricks to convince Macbeth of God’s non-existence, while their ability to foresee could be explained by the Devil’s talent for observation.¹⁶⁷ In this demonic narrative, the lack of definition and limitations of the Weïrd Sisters’ actual powers is not surprising since *Macbeth* would be less about witchcraft than about “bringing to life the deceptive power of the devil.”¹⁶⁸ Whether Pudney’s theory is accurate or not, it is fair to imagine that some in Shakespeare’s audience may have interpreted the Weïrd Sisters as demonic, since this reading of witchcraft was encouraged by early modern demonology and James I himself.¹⁶⁹

Ultimately, the Weïrd Sisters’ undetermined and confusing nature has led some to either see them as witches (whether ordinary or supernatural), as pagan figures (Fates, Norns, or other goddesses), as the Devil’s instruments, or even as non-existing outside of the psychological realm, depending on critical tendencies. In the end, one may wonder, like Brooke, if they are not simply a sum of all of these, resulting in an “amalgam which seems to be wholly original.”¹⁷⁰

Unlike the Weïrd Sisters, Banquo’s ghost is not particularly ambiguous in nature, but still somehow experiences a similar, if not stronger, psychologizing reading. As mentioned above, the ghost’s objective existence started to be questioned as early as the 19th century, in a Romantic critical context that was abandoning moral questions for psychology and character studies. This approach would later be revived in the first few decades of the 20th century, to the displeasure of historicists like Stoll, who wrote: “In such matters Shakspeare [sic] knew not reason or symbol, where we moderns know nothing else.”¹⁷¹ For a number of critics such as A.C. Bradley, who Moschovakis describes as “the foremost modern exponent of a psychologizing approach to Shakespeare”¹⁷², Banquo’s ghost simply is an hallucination triggered by Macbeth’s agitated and remorseful state of mind, especially because he appears and disappears at Macbeth’s will. One could easily agree to that, as the ghost is silent, invisible

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁷⁰ NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

¹⁷¹ E.E. STOLL, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

¹⁷² NICK MOSCHOVAKIS, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

to everyone on stage but Macbeth, and finally disappears after being discarded as an illusion, first by Lady Macbeth:

This is the very painting of your fear,
This is the air-drawn dagger which you said
Led you to Duncan.

(3.4.61-63)

then by Macbeth himself (“Hence, horrible shadow! / Unreal mockery, hence!” [3.4.107-108]). Nevertheless, most of these elements can be explained when examining the scene in the light of early modern beliefs and stage practices. As underlined by Stoll, the ghosts of Elizabethan drama cannot be perceived as subjective because they had a purpose that surpassed the “mere uncanny and melodramatic effect”, namely, the purpose of revenge.¹⁷³ This revengeful ghost trope was not only rooted in Senecan tragedy, which was “at the root of the development of national drama in all the main European languages”¹⁷⁴, but was also deeply anchored in folklore. Both the theatrical and folkloric ghost figures shared that same objective of revenge:

That above all, was to wreak revenge by appearing either to the victim or to the revenger; or it was to protect some loved one; or it was to prophesy; or to crave burial; or simply, in the capacity of an omen of death, to appear.¹⁷⁵

According to Stoll, almost each of these motives is represented in Shakespeare’s plays, including in *Macbeth*.¹⁷⁶ Banquo’s ghost appearing to the victim of the revenge, Macbeth, may have prompted critics to see him only as an embodiment of Macbeth’s conscience, when he is in fact here to turn his mere presence into his personal revenge.¹⁷⁷ In fact, Stoll does not see traces of remorse in Macbeth’s reactions but rather the “fear and defiance of the murderer”¹⁷⁸, which encourages the ghost’s ironical apparition. Indeed, Macbeth, knowing that Banquo lies “safe in a ditch” (3.4.26), ironically regrets his absence in front of his guests, while not noticing

¹⁷³ E.E. STOLL, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

¹⁷⁴ M.N. MERCURI, *The Perception of the Supernatural and the Staging of Ghosts in the Early Modern English Theatre*, undated, p. 2.

¹⁷⁵ E.E. STOLL, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

(at first) the presence of his ghost. He finally sees him when, invited to join his guests, he finds himself unable to return to his seat, already occupied by Banquo's ghost:

Ross: Please't your highness

To grace us with your royal company?

Macbeth: The table's full.

Lennox: Here is a place reserved, sir.

Macbeth: Where?

Lennox: Here my good lord. What is't that moves your highness?

(3.4.43-47)

Then, certainly not motivated by remorse but by pure horror¹⁷⁹, he asks "Which of you have done this?" (3.4.49), quickly followed by "Thou canst not say I did it" (3.4.50), as mere provocation. The ghost's presence in Macbeth's chair is purely ironical and emphasizes his vengefulness: "He sits in Macbeth's royal chair as a token that none the less his seed shall sit there hereafter."¹⁸⁰ The scene is then repeated, when, after Banquo's ghost first exit, Macbeth insolently declares: "I drink to th' general joy o'th' whole table / And to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss" (3.4.90-91), which prompts the revengeful ghost to return. Contrary to what some have concluded, Macbeth is not provoking his hallucinations by ironically wording Banquo's regretted absence but is being the victim of the ghost's revenge.¹⁸¹ As stated by Stoll, "It is no uncommon thing on the Elizabethan stage for ghosts and the heavenly or the infernal powers to answer words of appeal, defiance, or blasphemy with outcries or with thunder and lightning."¹⁸² An early modern audience would then easily understand the banquet scene as Macbeth's impertinence being answered by the apparition's vengeful presence. Furthermore, the ghost's invisibility to everyone but Macbeth is not in any sense indicative of his subjectivity, because it was common for ghosts to be only visible to one person, even in the presence of others.¹⁸³ It was not only a common trope on the Elizabethan stage, but it was also deeply rooted in the early modern conceptualisation of the supernatural space, which was founded on double vision, namely, the simultaneous existence of the seen and the unseen in the same given space.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

Moreover, the ghost's taciturn nature is also consistent with the folklore and stage practices, as talkative and crying apparitions were outdated: "Silence and gestures, moreover, were now getting to be the approved demeanor for ghosts on the stage."¹⁸⁴ Banquo's objective existence is thus not only justified by common knowledge and stage practices but is also reinforced by his visibility to the audience, a factor that for Stoll is "the crucial test of the objectivity of any Elizabethan ghost."¹⁸⁵ Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists were generally inclined to only represent on the stage what was actual and objective, which is why it seems difficult to consider Banquo's ghost differently, since his appearance on the stage was specified by Shakespeare himself.¹⁸⁶ For that reason, a lot of modern productions that interpret Banquo's ghost as an hallucination do not put him on stage.¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, beyond our modern tendencies to "'demarvallize' earlier works of literature"¹⁸⁸, there are indeed elements in the banquet scene that seem confusing even to an early modern audience. Macbeth's own reactions to the ghost can be misleading when one tries to identify the apparition. After the ghost's first exit, Macbeth refers to him as a physical body that has returned, rather than an unsubstantial spirit¹⁸⁹:

The time has been
 That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
 And there an end. But now they rise again
 With twenty mortal murders on their crowns
 And push us from our stools.

(3.4.79-83)

He reiterates when, upon seeing the ghost reappearing, he exclaims: "Avaunt, and quit my sight, let the earth hide thee" (3.4.94). For Martin Puhvel, it is likely that Macbeth at first identifies the apparition as Banquo's body being reanimated either by devils or even by divine agency.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, the undead leaving their graves to haunt the living was a common trope in English folklore, which explains why Macbeth's fearful reaction would be easily understood by his

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-221.

¹⁸⁷ NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁸⁸ MARTIN PUHVEL, 'The Perplexing Ghost of Banquo, Ambiguity and its Roots', in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, vol. 94, no. 3, 1993, p. 287.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

audience.¹⁹¹ Shortly after, however, there is a noticeable shift in how Macbeth addresses the apparition: “Hence, horrible shadow! / Unreal mockery, hence!” (3.4.107-108). This line was often interpreted as Macbeth agreeing with his wife that he is in fact hallucinating, since it prompts the ghost to finally disappear.¹⁹² Yet, both Stoll and Puhvel highlight how “horrible shadow” is in fact referring to the ghost’s unsubstantial nature rather than his inexistence, especially since Macbeth just dared the apparition to “be alive again” to fight him (3.4.104)¹⁹³ and since, after the ghost’s exit, he wonders how his guests can keep their countenance while he is “blanched with fear” (3.4.117).¹⁹⁴ For Puhvel, Macbeth addresses the ghost as such to exorcize it, since doing so did not necessarily asked for religious expertise: “[the exorcism] consist in essence of simple, forceful command, usually, as here, combined with invocation descriptive of the beings addressed; similarly, they may respond to quite simple invocation or exhortation to appear.”¹⁹⁵ When, at first, he wrongly identifies the ghost as a physical being, his exorcism does not work, which urges him to resort to defiance¹⁹⁶:

Or be alive again,
And dare me to the desert with thy sword –
If trembling I inhabit then, protest me
The baby of a girl.

(3.4.104-107)

Shortly after, he finally discards Banquo’s ghost as unsubstantial, which successfully causes the apparition to vanish.¹⁹⁷ This leads Macbeth to decisively recognize it as a ghost whose purpose is to obtain vengeance by exposing him as a murderer:

It will have blood, they say. Blood will have blood.
Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak;
Augurs, and understood relations, have

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 290.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ E.E. STOLL, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

¹⁹⁵ MARTIN PUHVEL, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

By maggot-pies and choughs and rooks brought forth

The secret'st man of blood.

(3.4.123-127)

The ghost's nature and revengeful purpose are then reaffirmed when he reappears in act four as part of the apparitions called by the Weïrd Sisters. He proceeds to taunt Macbeth by showing him the royal descendance that the Weïrd Sisters had promised him, thus fulfilling his personal vengeance. Macbeth, when seeing him, immediately recognizes the ghost he saw earlier: "Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo" (4.1.127), which complicates any interpretation of the ghost as being an hallucination:

Perhaps this phrasing of the comparison reflects the dramatist's intent to scatter any lingering wonder in the minds of the audience as to whether Macbeth may on mature reflection think the apparition to have been a hallucinatory fantasy.¹⁹⁸

However, for Puhvel, whether the line refers to Banquo's disembodied spirit or to "Banquo's (ghostly) apparition" (which would rather imply a demonic impersonation), is difficult to know for sure.¹⁹⁹ As the difference relied on religious oppositions, Puhvel suggests that Shakespeare deliberately wrote those lines ambiguously, thus allowing for any interpretation.²⁰⁰ Some may have regarded Banquo's ghost as a true revenant, others, like James I and other Protestants, may have seen in him a demonic deception, and the most sceptic ones may have discarded him as an hallucination, thus distrusting Macbeth's reliability.²⁰¹ While sceptical readings were less likely because considered as radical in early modern England, they certainly flourished in Stoll's days and on modern stages.

Although modern critics mostly re-evaluated the supernatural nature of the Weïrd Sisters and of Banquo's ghost, some of the play's elements that were less evidently occult came to be similarly examined. It is the case for Lady Macbeth's infamous "invocation speech" that a number of critics have regarded as metaphorical rather than literal. It is delivered in act one, shortly after Lady Macbeth receives her husband's letter reporting his meeting with the Weïrd Sisters and his newly gained title. Upon hearing that the King is on his way, she seems to appeal to a supernatural force to assist her:

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty.

(1.5.39-42)

As this passage almost immediately follows her mention of the “Fate and metaphysical aid” (1.5.28) that promised the crown to her husband, it is difficult to not interpret her lines as a literal conjuration of that same occult force, namely, the Weïrd Sisters. For that reason, Lady Macbeth is sometimes called “the fourth witch”, because her invocation does follow the reception of the letter, and also because she directly participates in the witches’ scheme by persuading Macbeth to take action.²⁰² It would thus not seem far-fetched to imagine Lady Macbeth invoking the “spirits” that may be in tune with the Weïrd Sisters themselves²⁰³, right after her husband convinced her that their powers surpass “mortal knowledge” (1.5.3). Although one may easily associate Lady Macbeth to the Weïrd Sisters, she is not to be considered as a witch herself, since her “sorcery seems to be purely verbal.”²⁰⁴ The “spirits” she invokes here are likely to be those that surrounded humans at any time, and that were believed to “wait (like devils) for the invitation of an evil thought to take possession of a human mind, and turn the thought into action.”²⁰⁵ However, it does echo what Stephen Greenblatt suggests is a more figurative use of the same term: “Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear” (1.5.24-25). For Greenblatt, the “spirits” she wants to pour are metaphorical, as they refer to her influence on Macbeth rather than to a literal, poisonous power on his mind and body.²⁰⁶ When she later characterizes the “murdering ministers” as “sightless substances” (1.5.47-48), it is a way, for Greenblatt, to assimilate those to the “metaphorical use of ‘spirits’” she had earlier.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, her ongoing scepticism later in the play (towards the “air-drawn dagger” or Banquo’s ghost)²⁰⁸ may indicate that she does interpret occult power to be only figurative. Greenblatt thus understands her earlier mention of a “metaphysical aid” and her

²⁰² VICTORIA BLADEN, ‘Weird Space in *Macbeth* on Screen’, in *Shakespeare on Screen: Macbeth*, Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2014, p. 100-101.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ ERIC PUDNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

conjunction of spirits as only a “metaphor for her blind and murderous desires, as if the weird sisters were condensations of her own breath.”²⁰⁹ For Inge Leimberg, however, the ‘spirits’ that Lady Macbeth wants to pour into her husband’s ear are nothing but literal, since the act of hearing was understood as the mingling of the speaker and the hearer’s spirits (i.e., ‘the instrument of the soul’) through breath²¹⁰:

In Macbeth's case this is a doubly “infected will”, because it is influenced by the “contagious breath” [sic] of a woman about to commit herself to the Devil. The spirits Lady Macbeth intends to pour into her husband's ear are not “manifestly figurative” but unmistakably literal and there is nothing of the “as if” about her pouring them. She does so.²¹¹

For Brooke, the text suggests both literal and metaphorical readings, but performing it forces the actress to choose between “enacting a ritual appeal to spirits literally invoked, or using the whole passage as the language of autosuggestion to bolster her [Lady Macbeth] own morale.”²¹² Nonetheless, even if a performance does not suggest an actual ritual, an early modern audience would easily see Lady Macbeth as a woman trusting evil powers rather than divine ones: “[...] the mere speaking of the words constitutes an act of blasphemy and expresses trust in the power of evil spirits to aid Lady Macbeth’s nefarious purposes.”²¹³

If Lady Macbeth’s invocation speech is either interpreted as literal or figurative, the “air-drawn dagger” (3.4.62) that leads Macbeth to Duncan’s room at the beginning of the second act is almost unanimously regarded as an hallucination.²¹⁴ Even Stoll, who discards other psychologizing approaches, considers it as such because Macbeth himself recognizes its hallucinatory nature.²¹⁵ At first, while doubtful, the thane still contemplates the idea that the dagger is real:

Come, let me clutch thee.

I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.

²⁰⁹ STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

²¹⁰ INGE LEIMBERG, ‘Shakespeare De-witched: A Response to Stephen Greenblatt’, in *Connotations*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2001-2002, pp. 63-64.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²¹² NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

²¹³ ERIC PUDNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149

²¹⁵ E. E. STOLL, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppresèd brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.

(2.1.35-42)

He reaches the conclusion that the dagger is not real after seeing goutts of blood appear on the real dagger he just seized:

There's no such thing.
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes.

(2.1.48-50)

For Pudney, there is another possibility that Macbeth himself fails to consider: that the dagger is in fact supernatural, and could be either “a warning sent by God, or a further incitement to crime sent by the devil.”²¹⁶ Although Macbeth sees the dagger as a creation of his own mind, he does remark that the weapon seems to guide him to his crime: “Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going, / And such an instrument I was to use” (2.1.43-44). He fails to recognize it as a demonic incitement or divine warning, which is, for Pudney, symptomatic of “his inability to interpret the supernatural apparitions by which he is tormented.”²¹⁷ The dagger scene would then only be another instance of Macbeth failing to perceive the signs from a world that “seems to scream at him not to do what he has set out to do.”²¹⁸ It is plausible that some in *Macbeth*'s audience shared the thane's conclusions, while others did perceive the dagger as a demonic sign. It was indeed admitted that the Devil, in order to conceal his own existence, would make men believe that those apparitions were actually visual deceptions or hallucinations.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ ERIC PUDNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

Furthermore, the play numerously emphasizes the potential unreliability of the senses²²⁰, which would lead some to distrust Macbeth's own interpretations, or see them as a failure to correctly interpret what he sees. As mentioned previously, the Weïrd Sisters and Banquo's ghost could have been easily recognized as demonic by an early modern audience, there is thus no reason to not expand this interpretation to the dagger.

The apparitions that are summoned by the Weïrd Sisters in act four are more mysterious in their symbolism than in their nature. It is thus difficult to read the scene through a psychologizing lens because it presents itself as inherently illusionary. While the whole scene feels surreal because of the profusion of stage tricks²²¹, its illusionary nature is suggested by the Weïrd Sisters' appeal to the demonic: "Say, if th'hadst rather hear it from our mouths, / Or from our masters" (4.76-77). For the Elizabethan audience, the Weïrd Sisters call their "masters" (i.e., evil spirits or devils) to play their part, or more specifically, to impersonate the apparitions before Macbeth's eyes.²²² The apparitions are less confusing than previous ones, because they are clearly demonic. The critical field is thus more concerned about the actual symbolism behind the apparitions because it is so rich and perplexing.

Nonetheless, it does appear that after this scene, the play slowly moves away from its abundant supernaturalism to a more doubtful rationalism. This progress towards disbelief starts at the beginning of act five, when Lady Macbeth's own visions are easily understood as psychological delusions caused by conscience.²²³ This is further reinforced by the presence of the Doctor and Nurse who recognize the scene they witness as the workings of Lady Macbeth's conscience.²²⁴ Then, the mysterious Birnam Wood prophesy ("Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him" [4.1.107-109]) finds its rational explanation as being a rather literal military tactic.²²⁵ Finally, the second prophesy ("For none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" [4.1.94-95]) is revealed as nothing more but a deceptive equivocation, which leads Macbeth to take "a step toward unbelief"²²⁶:

And be these juggling fiends no more believed,

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

²²¹ For Brooke, elaborate machinery could have been used, as well as "simpler" tricks using a cauldron, a trap, and smoke. NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

That palter with us in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear
And break it to our hope.

(4.7.49-52)

Yet, as underlined by Greenblatt, although Macbeth recognizes occult powers as deceptive, it does not necessarily mean that he denies their existence.²²⁷ If it is impossible to safely interpret those lines as utter disbelief, for Brooke:

The movement towards rational explanation in the last act allows the antithetic structure to hint at (but certainly not to articulate) the possibility of rational explanation for supernatural phenomena themselves.²²⁸

In the end, one could wonder if *Macbeth* is to be considered as a doubting stance on the supernatural, given that the play simultaneously incites credulity while also showing “an inclination towards scepticism.”²²⁹ According to Pudney, the play cannot be viewed as sceptical, especially *because* it is doubtful: it never takes a clear stance on the true nature of the Weïrd Sisters or Banquo’s ghost.²³⁰ For that reason, it is the exact opposite of a pure “Scotian scepticism” that leaves no space to doubts about the inexistence of the supernatural.²³¹ Greenblatt reaches a similar conclusion when he states that Shakespeare’s theatre “is on the side of a liberating, tolerant doubt.”²³² That doubt, which may have stemmed from the debates and confusing changes of his time, was taken for scepticism by a number of modern critics who like to see in Shakespeare a fellow sceptic, or an early psychologist. While it remains impossible to know the nature of Shakespeare’s personal beliefs, he did however live at a time during which people debated whether ghosts were souls from the purgatory or devils in disguise.²³³ “Such beliefs”, Stoll highlights, “Shaksperre [sic] took up into the web of his great art without a cavil or a scruple, like an Elizabethan, like the ‘Soul of the Age’ that he was.”²³⁴

²²⁷ STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

²²⁸ NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ ERIC PUDNEY, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

²³³ E.E. STOLL, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 3

Justin Kurzel's sensory cinema: Shaping an 'authentic' *Macbeth*

As highlighted in the previous chapter, *Macbeth*'s ambiguous supernaturalism has led critics to reinterpret some of its elements as subjective, and such readings would later be facilitated, if not encouraged, by our naturalistic views of Shakespeare's theatre. This would in turn inspire a number of disenchanting productions of the "cursed play", whether on stage or on the big and small screens. However, as much as *Macbeth*'s critical heritage participated in this tradition, one should not forget that other important factors may forge an adaptation. It is thus essential to explore various aesthetic aspects like style, mood, and genre, as those elements also shape the direction of the adaptation.²³⁵ Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971), for example, was inscribed "within the naturalistic conventions of Hollywood"²³⁶, which may help to better comprehend the film's brutal realism, and why the Polish director was left "rather lost when it came to the supernatural bits."²³⁷ While Kurzel's *Macbeth* shares certain aspects of Polanski's realism (a similarity that will be more thoroughly discussed in chapter 4), it is embedded in the codes of an Australian style that wishes to reach a profoundly sensorial authenticity. To better appreciate how Kurzel's stylistic and generic sensibilities may have shaped his vision for this adaptation, the present chapter will explain how Australian sensory cinema informed *Macbeth*'s aesthetics but also how its affinities with the war film genre, its medieval mood, and its depiction of PTSD helped to establish a sense of authenticity.

DEFINING THE AUSTRALIAN SENSORY CINEMA

What Henry identifies as "the Australian sensory cinema" is a recent film movement that appeared in the mid-2000s in Australia, and that encourages the production of movies that foreground the "tactility of the film experience"²³⁸ by mostly focusing on haptic perception and sensation. Directly influenced by the French 'cinema of sensation', those films tend to be centred on sensation and textures, using the medium's specificities to reveal the characters' emotions in the most intimate way. Filmmakers participating in this trend adopt various

²³⁵ SARAH CARDWELL, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

²³⁶ NEIL FORSYTH, 'Shakespeare the Illusionist: Filming the Supernatural', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 288.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ CLAIRE HENRY, 'Carving Out an Australian Sensory Cinema', in *Australian Screen in the 2000s*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 261.

techniques that help to achieve this high level of affect, ranging from slow motion/jump cuts and handheld camera work to using shots of their characters touching different textured objects. To these strategies can be added the use of extreme close-ups and alterations in camera focus that create a sense of intimacy.²³⁹ A number of these recent Australian movies also share a lot with the “new extremism” wave that was born in the early 2000s in France and later expanded to European cinema. This range of aesthetics is very similar to the cinema of sensation in its “appreciation of the tactility of the film experience, and through the recognition and manipulation of affect (especially the affective impact of sound).”²⁴⁰ However, new extremism takes tactility and affects even further, through the graphic depiction of violence and sex, directly inherited from genre movies, especially “body genre movies” like pornography and horror.²⁴¹ This combination of art house and genre movies, which defines new extremism, generated a similar disregard for genre boundaries in their Australian counterparts.²⁴² Kurzel’s *Macbeth* (2015) is actually a good example of this peculiar combination of genres, which is already mirrored by Michael Fassbender’s image as an actor. Indeed, Michael Fassbender’s career as a star actor was built on the major roles he took in blockbusters and genre movies like the *X-Men* franchise (2000-2018) or *Prometheus* (2012), but also on the leading roles he played in Steve McQueen’s art house films such as *Hunger* (2008), *Shame* (2011) or *12 Years a Slave* (2013).²⁴³ The German-Irish actor’s career choices not only embody the exploration of genre boundaries specific to sensory cinema but also brings a pre-understanding of the film’s main character. It is in fact quite common for the viewers to read a character through the actor’s past roles: “Resonances of previous roles and real-life incidents encourage the viewers to build up their perceptions of the characters actors are playing in a complex layering process.”²⁴⁴ In this case, the layering process of interpretation is even more encouraged as Fassbender’s *Macbeth* is a clear continuity of his usual roles. The actor regularly plays combative and/or violent men (he interpreted soldiers on multiple occasions²⁴⁵, along with predatory characters²⁴⁶), but also men who have a certain frailty and whose psychological suffering is central to the plot.²⁴⁷ His

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

²⁴⁴ SARAH CARDWELL, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

²⁴⁵ In films and series such as: *Band of Brothers* (2001), *300* (2006), *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), and *Centurion* (2010).

²⁴⁶ In films such as *Fish Tank* (2009), *12 years a slave* (2013), and *Alien: Covenant* (2017).

²⁴⁷ In films such as *Hunger* (2008), *Shame* (2011), the *X-men* franchise (in which he plays Magneto, a Holocaust survivor), *Jane Eyre* (2011), and *Trespass Against Us* (2016).

muscular physique coupled with his expressive and melancholic eyes create the right vessel for these performances to thrive. Even though Fassbender is known for his versatility, his previous roles shaped him the image of an “idol with feet of clay”, as he fully demonstrated his capacities for playing “some unlikely mélange of vulnerability and fortitude”²⁴⁸, a talent for which he is often celebrated and in great demand. The knowledgeable viewer, aware of the actor’s trademark, can thus easily understand the character of Macbeth through this paradoxical image, even before watching the movie. Moreover, his celebrity and multiple roles in popular genre movies make this layering process all the more accessible to the regular viewer.

By featuring Fassbender as the leading role, the film already displays a genre movie’s touch and brings a star image to this experimental version of the Scottish play. This touch is then reinforced by the clear influence of the war film genre which is particularly perceptible during the opening battle scene but also in the depiction of war trauma, which will be discussed in detail in the next few pages. Some reviewers found in this battle scene references to the famous war epic *300* (2006) (in which Michael Fassbender have starred) or to the historical war drama *Braveheart* (1995)²⁴⁹, mostly because of the aestheticization of violence for one and because of the Scottish landscape for the other. However, one could argue that this scene was less of a stylized battlefield and rather the sensorial depiction of Macbeth’s traumatic war experience, which brings it closer to war films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). The latter, whose battle scenes defined the “hyperrealist aesthetic model of the contemporary war film”²⁵⁰, shares with Kurzel’s *Macbeth* an immersive opening battle scene created with different film techniques like handheld camera work, the use of multiple paces and perspectives, and the juxtaposition in editing.²⁵¹ Those not only set an immersive and hyperrealist mood that is standard for war movies, but also give a space to visually tell how traumatic combat really is, insisting on the fearful faces, the bloody wounds and the intensity of stress endured by soldiers. This specific intent is what differentiates *Macbeth* from *300*, in which similar techniques are used, this time to enhance the warriors’ great physical capacities and combat skills rather than to underscore psychological trauma.

It is in fact this exploration of trauma that reinforces *Macbeth* as deeply sensorial:

²⁴⁸ AMANDA PETRUSICH, ‘Michael Fassbender’s Secret: Stop Overthinking’, in *Esquire*, November 2016.

²⁴⁹ A reference which was confirmed by Arkapaw (*Macbeth*’s cinematographer) in: BENJAMIN BERGERY, ‘Battle Tested’, in *American cinematographer*, vol. 97, no. 1, January 2016.

²⁵⁰ LAURA FERNÁNDEZ-RAMÍREZ, ‘Ground-breaking Expressive Strategies in the War Films of Classical Realism’, in *L’Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, no. 27, 2019, p. 106.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105-118.

[...] the haptic visuality of this adaptation is intensified by the PTSD interpretation – the texture of the film becomes palpable through sound and editing that convey Macbeth’s frame of mind.²⁵²

Both sound and editing are especially focused on the characters’ affective states, using the first to create a sense of unease²⁵³ echoing the darkness of the plot, and the other to enter Macbeth’s psyche. The film heavily exploits colour effects and speed variations to this end while bringing a deep sense of intimacy with the help of close-ups and soft-spoken verses. The latter was an important aspect for Kurzel:

[...] how do you find an intimacy with this verse? How do you bring a camera that close and allow the verse to feel more confessional and more of a whisper, feel like it’s almost being said for the first time? That drove a real way of approaching them.²⁵⁴

Furthermore, textures and sensations, which are central to sensory cinema are in *Macbeth* mostly present and emphasized in the natural surroundings and adverse weather conditions like heavy fog, rain, and wind. Furthermore, this Scottish world that Kurzel describes as “organic”²⁵⁵ is made of humble dwellings like tents and wood constructions that feel palpable because of their frailty. It is inhabited by characters wearing handmade costumes with multiple layers and whose “texture and stitching”²⁵⁶ can be felt through the screen. Their bodies, in a sense, are also ‘textured’, especially those of soldiers whose skins are scarred and often covered in mud, dust, war paint and blood. A few interior scenes filmed in confined, candlelit rooms add even more texture to the actors’ faces, the soft lights revealing the detailed aspect of their skins while bringing a feel of warmth and intimacy to the scenes. The natural light, with the help of editing and colour filters, can, in some important sequences like the first and last battle scenes, build up the texture and feeling of the image by making the most insignificant particle of dust, snow or ash visible to the viewer’s eye. If the lighting enhances the diversity of textures, the sounds certainly reinforce the haptic perception of an overly present environment, as “atmospheric” sounds dominate the score.²⁵⁷ Not only does it reaffirm the power of the surroundings over the characters, but it successfully amplifies the sensations that the Scottish

²⁵² CLAIRE HENRY, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

²⁵⁴ M. M. SMITH, ‘Cannes: Justin Kurzel on His Vision for ‘Macbeth’ and Fascination with Violence’, in *IndieWire*, May 2015.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ LOUISE D’ARCENS, ‘Feeling Medieval: Mood and Transhistorical Empathy in Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth*’, in *Screening the Past*, issue 41, 2016, p. 7.

weather can evoke by bringing a sense of authenticity to it. All these elemental sounds blend into Jed Kurzel's menacing soundtrack, whose "affect-inducing tones"²⁵⁸ rely on "thick layers of strings"²⁵⁹ and "low vibrations that resonate in the body and create a sense of unease."²⁶⁰ This manipulation of affect through sound is specific to new extremism and its Australian counterpart but is also generated by a desire to highlight the distinct crafts that constitute cinema, like cinematography, production and sound design.²⁶¹ The latter is often mentioned in reviews of Australian contemporary movies for "sound is central to the sensory evocation of experience, affect and landscape in these films [...]."²⁶² This favouring of "craft production over the industrial manufacture of their respective artforms"²⁶³ is in fact rooted in the movement's aspiration for authenticity, which Henry compares to the 'direct carving' method that shaped modern sculpture.

AUTHENTICITY ABOVE ALL: A "SHAKESPEARE FOR REALISTS"²⁶⁴

Before anything else, direct carving is a technique that emerged in the 20th century and that consists of "producing carved sculpture (particularly stone sculpture) by cutting directly into the material, as opposed to having it reproduced from a plaster model using mechanical aids and assistants."²⁶⁵ While a comparison with the film medium seems at first far-fetched, it is the philosophy behind it that is particularly relevant to the understanding of sensory cinema. Henry describes it as a "philosophy regarding the ideal relationship of an artist to their materials, one that reveals a comparative reclamation of the raw, direct emotional content of the respective medium"²⁶⁶, which could translate into 'staying true to the material'. For sculptors, it means carving directly into the stone to highlight its substance and to reveal the art within it, but for filmmakers it translates into revealing the authenticity of the stories they film, by using the medium's abilities, preferring to this end "pared-back sound, simple narratives, reduced dialogue, limited number of locations and cast members, and the casting of non-actors."²⁶⁷ Because Kurzel worked on a pre-existing text, the direct carving metaphor is even more

²⁵⁸ CLAIRE HENRY, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

²⁵⁹ 'Macbeth - Jed Kurzel', in *The Film Scorer*, April 2019.

²⁶⁰ CLAIRE HENRY, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 272

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

²⁶⁴ MADELEINE DAVIES, 'Michael Fassbender's Macbeth Is an Impossibly Bleak Look at Shakespeare's Maddest King', in *Jezebel*, December 2015.

²⁶⁵ 'Direct Carving', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Art*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

²⁶⁶ CLAIRE HENRY, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

significant; just as a modern sculptor would, Kurzel proceeds to “carve into” the material, namely Shakespeare’s text, to which the regular viewer is familiar. He manipulates and reconstructs the text by mostly cutting it off, but not only, as “the text is fragmented, transposed, rearranged, and even expanded at certain points.”²⁶⁸ This aspect of the film was a subject of criticism in many film reviews, some of them relying on the infamous fidelity question that still haunts the adaptation field. As Henry points out: “‘Truth to materials’ in adaptation means different things to the critic and the filmmaker”²⁶⁹, because film reviews often still adhere to the idea that fidelity to the text is fundamental to any good adaptation.²⁷⁰ It is especially true for Shakespeare adaptations, since the Bard’s language was considered to be the essence of his works up until the 1990s.²⁷¹ This outdated views on adaptation deny that a filmmaker can have other intentions than adapt faithfully.²⁷² In this case, the scriptwriters and Kurzel were certainly not driven by *fidelity*, but by a search for *authenticity*, in a sense that is specific to sensory cinema. This resulted in a need to strip everything back to better reveal what felt real to Kurzel: Macbeth’s PTSD and grief. Kurzel not only carved into the text but also managed to get it delivered in a way that some described as ‘natural’ and ‘realistic’ because of the actors’ quiet voices and pared-back performances. In fact, the director worked quite closely with his leading actors, giving them space to improvise and react on the spur of the moment:

The actors knew the verse inside out when we started, so I directed in a very similar way as in SNOWTOWN, which was to provide an intimate place where the actors could engage with each other in as honest a way as possible.²⁷³

When asked about working with Oscar-winning Marion Cotillard, Fassbender commented on their very spontaneous way of exchanging: “We worked comprehensively in rehearsal, but once we started filming we didn’t discuss things and just presented them when the camera was rolling.”²⁷⁴ Despite the great number of criticism about this aspect of the film, handling the text in such an untheatrical way was, for Huertas, not surprising “considering the emphasis on atmosphere, environment and crudeness.”²⁷⁵ In fact, in Kurzel’s own words, the Scottish

²⁶⁸ VICTOR HUERTAS, ‘Review of *Macbeth*; dir. Justin Kurzel. 2015’, in *SEDERI*, no. 26, 2016, p. 204.

²⁶⁹ CLAIRE HENRY, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

²⁷⁰ M. D. FRIEDMAN, ‘The Persistence of Fidelity in Reviews of Kurzel’s *Macbeth*’, in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2019.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.1

²⁷² SARAH CARDWELL, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

²⁷³ ‘The AFI FEST interview: MACBETH Director Justin Kurzel’, in *American Film Institute*, November 2015.

²⁷⁴ SHIRLEY COBAIN, ‘Cannes 2015: Michael Fassbender: “Marion Cotillard Is the Best Actress in the Business”’, on *YouTube*, July 2015.

²⁷⁵ VICTOR HUERTAS, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

surroundings helped to ground the verse because it “gives it a context that feels visceral and real”²⁷⁶ but also allows “the natural elements to feed into the poetry”²⁷⁷ in numerous exterior scenes.

In fact, the movie’s beautifully filmed landscapes efficiently set an authentic mood and are often pointed out by reviews as the essence of its realism. Searching for authenticity in the depiction of real surroundings is an integral part of Australian sensory cinema, since it “foregrounds the elemental – the forces of nature collide with the tactility of film to reshape the relationship to landscape.”²⁷⁸ This reshaped relationship is built on affect and feeling rather than lyricism, which was typical of the 1970s romantic naturalism that produced a range of “pastoral period films” in Australia.²⁷⁹ Therefore, filming on location becomes a necessity for the filmmaker, as it was the case for Kurzel, who found the script “read like a western”²⁸⁰ and had that same harsh and deterministic landscape. He wanted to highlight not only the authenticity of a raw environment but also its unpredictable and unforgiving nature that can have detrimental effects on humans. He justifies his take on the matter by referring to the “hard country” Western trope while also admitting that his own experience as an Australian shaped his view: “The landscape and communities of Australia definitely have an effect on you. It can be a very alienating and strange place.”²⁸¹ Henry defines Kurzel’s mindset as “An Australian Gothic perspective of the landscape as one of fear, claustrophobia and haunting”²⁸² but also finds in it echoes of “the colonial trope of survival in harsh landscape [...]”²⁸³ It could explain why despite filming during “the worst winter that the UK had had in many years”²⁸⁴, Kurzel insisted on adding various floor effects like mist, rain and smoke²⁸⁵ that had to surround them at any time: “There were also eight guys running around with different types of smoke machines, adding more smoke the entire time.”²⁸⁶ If authenticity means working with “cinematically untouched landscape”²⁸⁷ for a range of recent Australian sensory films, Kurzel’s own

²⁷⁶ RYAN LAMBIE, ‘Justin Kurzel interview: *Macbeth*, *Breaking Bad*, *Snowtown*’, in *Den of Geek*, September 2015.

²⁷⁷ M. M. SMITH, *op. cit.*

²⁷⁸ CLAIRE HENRY, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ STEPHANIE BUNBURY, ‘From *Snowtown* to *Macbeth*: Director Justin Kurzel’s Bloody Journey’, in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 2015.

²⁸¹ ANDREAS WISEMAN, ‘Justin Kurzel, *Macbeth*’, in *Screen Daily*, May 2015.

²⁸² CLAIRE HENRY, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ M. M. SMITH, *op. cit.*

²⁸⁵ PAULA BERNSTEIN, ‘Here’s How the Filmmakers Created Sinister Special Effects for ‘*Macbeth*’, *IndieWire*, September 2015.

²⁸⁶ BENJAMIN BERGERY, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

²⁸⁷ CLAIRE HENRY, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

postcolonial outlook as a white Australian certainly shaped his own idea of a raw environment, leading him to exacerbate an already harsh land.

Despite these added effects, a number of reviews underlined the role of the Scottish landscape in creating a sense of realism, along with the “re-historization” of the story in medieval times. Louise D’Arcens, who specializes in medievalism, points out how *Macbeth*’s “portrayal of medieval Scotland has been widely regarded to have exceeded its Shakespearian mediation, and to have effectively ‘re-medievalised’ the world of the story.”²⁸⁸ Setting the story back to the 11th century Scotland was definitely an important aspect for Kurzel in his search for authenticity: “And that was what he [Kurzel] wanted: to make the film intimate and *authentic*. To keep it in the period in which it was set [...].”²⁸⁹ However, authenticity in Kurzel’s definition does not necessarily mean historical accuracy, as remarked by D’Arcens:

This “re-medievalisation” of *Macbeth*’s world is empathically not a historicist venture. There is nothing in the film to suggest that Kurzel has consulted the fifteenth and sixteenth-century chronicles by John of Fordun, Andrew of Wyntoun, Hector Boece, or George Buchanan, which preceded Shakespeare’s main source, *Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*.²⁹⁰

Considering the absence of references to real historical events throughout the movie, D’Arcens defines *Macbeth*’s medieval setting as a “kind of aggregated background ‘medievalness’”²⁹¹ that foregrounds a “highly stylised, mythic, and broadly conceived ‘Norso-Celtic’ Middle Ages.”²⁹² Moreover, most of the film’s medievalness is based on erroneous modern perceptions that consider the medieval society as primitive and centred around war. Indeed, the film’s omnipresent environment echoes what D’Arcens identifies as a common medieval trope that paints this era as an archaic world in which nature moulds human life (an aspect that Kurzel rather attributed to a common Western theme). Moreover, the period is represented as primitive not only because of its harsh surroundings but also because of its crude violence. In fact, *Macbeth*’s graphic violence and twisted sex scenes send us back to a common aesthetic that historians called “the gothic or grotesque Middle Ages [...] founded on the assumption that anything medieval will involve threat, violence, and warped sexuality.”²⁹³ Considering this

²⁸⁸ LOUISE D’ARCENS, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁸⁹ STEPHANIE BUNBURY, *op. cit.* Italics mine.

²⁹⁰ LOUISE D’ARCENS, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

accumulation of historical inaccuracies, it is fair to say that Kurzel's pursuit of an authentic setting relied on the re-creation of a medieval mood rather than a rigorous historical context. Despite his wish to "keep it in the period in which it was set", he intentionally inserted anachronistic elements while persisting in his quest for truthfulness. During an interview, he unironically detailed his rather conflicting sources of inspiration for the film's visuals:

The design, the look of it, *was inspired by 11th century times*. I wanted it to feel as though things were simple, brutal. There was something desperate about the place. [...] We looked at a lot of *pioneer photographs*. *I was inspired by a lot of westerns*. I was reading a lot of Cormac McCarthy at the time, too.²⁹⁴

Kurzel cultivates simultaneously a desire for authenticity and modernity (despite the medieval setting), which is not that surprising considering that his perception of one is deeply connected to the other: "The idea of doing it as a western, of stripping it back, felt contemporary. That was what drove me. It would feel *modern through its truth*."²⁹⁵ Undoubtedly, Kurzel's Western reading of the play did not just forge the movie's deterministic environment but also its costume and set design. Inverness, where Macbeth's castle is located in the play, becomes a sparse campsite with tents and small wooden constructions, reminding us of a Western town. The Australian director wanted to transform Inverness into a pioneering town: "like a town camped on the edge."²⁹⁶ The same "pioneer feel" was requested for the costumes that had to "look as though the characters made them."²⁹⁷ They were certainly not conceived to accurately represent 11th century Scotland, which Jacqueline Durran, the costume designer, defines as "a source of imaginary space" lacking definite representations.²⁹⁸ Moreover, because the clothing was meant to feel "almost primitive", Durran took the liberty to draw her inspiration from multiple cultures and periods that fitted her vision of the primitive, mixing for example Tuareg and Viking designs (among others).²⁹⁹ What may at first be interpreted simply as creative license is in fact, for D'Arcens, the perpetuation of a common and problematic perception of the medieval and the non-Western as being inherently "non-modern and [...] primitive."³⁰⁰ This resulted in costumes that indeed looked simplified and elemental but also oddly non-specific.

²⁹⁴ RYAN LAMBIE, *op. cit.* Italics mine.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.* Italics mine.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ STEFF YOTKA, 'The Scottish Play Arrives on the Screen: Jacqueline Durran on Her Exquisitely Sparse Costumes for *Macbeth*', in *Vogue*, December 2015.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ LOUISE D'ARCENS, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

Interestingly, the non-specificity of the settings encouraged some to interpret the film as a commentary on contemporary issues like political conflicts and warfare. Agnieszka Rasmus wrote an article exploring this idea, in which she states that “despite its medieval setting and Scottish scenery, the film’s visual code seems to transgress any specific time or place.”³⁰¹ While the “ghost-like, almost faceless” soldiers come to represent any soldier, the bright red filter added to battle scenes transforms Scotland into a “desert-like scarlet landscape” that reminds Rasmus of a common visual trope that is often used to represent the Middle-East in numerous movies.³⁰² The portrayal of children as either victims or successors of the war reinforces her interpretation because this imagery directly refers to on-going conflicts in Syria and Iraq that impact millions of children daily.³⁰³ While the desert-like Scotland could be attributed to *Macbeth*’s Western undertones, it is difficult to ignore how the film connects to recent conflicts, firstly in its aesthetic and narrative ties to contemporary war films but especially through *Macbeth*’s PTSD:

Returning to eleventh-century Scotland, Kurzel engages in a dynamic relationship between Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, Shakespeare’s play and contemporary issues, such as the prevalence of PTSD which has caused concern after the Iraq and the Afghanistan wars.³⁰⁴

Post-traumatic stress disorder as we know it today had indeed increasing rates among US forces after their deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan, which certainly generated general interest in the matter.³⁰⁵ The long duration of the conflict and the dangers of “improvised explosive devices” have left many servicemen exposed to risks of mortality and injuries.³⁰⁶ PTSD having been officially defined and codified in the *DSM-III* (1980), those conflicts allowed for a close and on-going assessment of its occurrence.³⁰⁷ It is thus not surprising that the disorder, even if represented in a medieval narrative, is easily associated to those specific wars by journalists and reviewers. The connection is no coincidence, since Kurzel and Fassbender openly discussed how the experience of Iraq veterans helped to depict *Macbeth*’s sufferings: “The fits, the

³⁰¹ AGNIESZKA RASMUS, ‘What Bloody Film is This? *Macbeth* for our Time’, in *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*, vol. 18, no. 33, 2018, p. 115.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³⁰⁴ VICTOR HUERTAS, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

³⁰⁵ L. A. HINES *et al.*, ‘Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Post Iraq and Afghanistan: Prevalence Among Military Subgroups’, in *Can J Psychiatry*, vol. 29, no. 9, September 2014, p. 469.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

visions, the paranoia of a man who believes himself surrounded by his future assassins, all matched the symptoms reported by contemporary soldiers returning from Iraq.”³⁰⁸

Beyond Kurzel’s wish to add a contemporary feel to the story, this decision could as well stem from the common but somehow incorrect assumption that PTSD is a universal and timeless disease. It is undoubtedly what convinced Fassbender that “Shakespeare understood post-traumatic stress too”³⁰⁹, as he seems to assume that the illness always existed but went unrecognized for centuries. While some found early instances of the disorder in older texts such as Homer’s *Iliad* or Samuel Pepys’ diaries (in which he recounts the symptoms he suffered after the Great Fire of London in 1666), it has since been suggested that some of its characteristics are actually culture-bound.³¹⁰ Remote testimonies are in this case not considered to be hidden cases of PTSD but simply other forms of traumatic responses that were forged by their own historical contexts.³¹¹ There has been evidence pointing out that symptoms of trauma illnesses varied in nature and prevalence throughout history. In fact, it appears that earlier wars mainly generated somatic symptoms; the First World War is especially associated to heart problems or shell shock (that provoked fatigue, tics, and tremor) while Second World War disorders were characterized by gastrointestinal issues.³¹² Conversely, the most recent cases of PTSD are generally described by using “more ill-defined and subjective symptoms such as fatigue, pain and depression.”³¹³ Furthermore, avoidance and intrusion symptoms, which are central to the contemporary diagnosis of PTSD, are significantly less recurrent in previous cases.³¹⁴ The most revealing illustration of PTSD’s evolution lies in the frequency of the flashbacks, which were “virtually non-existent before the First World War and were still rare during the Second World War”³¹⁵, contrasting with today’s “significantly higher” incidence.³¹⁶ To explain such a discrepancy, some suggested the advent of television, for it is a “source of sudden and disturbing imagery in a familiar and apparently safe situation”³¹⁷, a process that the flashback seems to mimic. Kurzel’s *Macbeth* obviously relies on a contemporary (and culture-bound)

³⁰⁸ STEPHANIE BUNBURY, *op. cit.*

³⁰⁹ FRASER MCALPINE, ‘Michael Fassbender: “Macbeth” has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’, in *BBC America, Anglophenia*, 2015.

³¹⁰ EDGAR JONES *et al.*, ‘Flashbacks and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: The Genesis of a 20th-century Diagnosis’, in *British Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 182, 2003, p. 158.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² EDGAR JONES, SIMON WESSELY, ‘Psychological Trauma: A Historical Perspective’, in *Psychiatry*, vol. 7, July 2006, p. 219.

³¹³ EDGAR JONES *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

portrayal of PTSD that probably differed greatly from a traumatic illness experienced by an individual who lived during the Middle Ages. Once again, it reflects Kurzel's paradoxical will to create a historical but contemporary feel while preserving a sense of authenticity and realism. However, the symptoms Macbeth shows are easily identifiable by the regular viewer because they are of common knowledge (and still seen as universal), and it does in the end produce what feels like an authentic experience for the audience.

According to the *DSM-5*'s diagnostic criteria for PTSD³¹⁸, its diagnosis relies on four main clusters of symptoms that appear after a traumatic event and consist of: intrusion symptoms (the experiencing of intrusive memories, nightmares, and dissociative reactions like flashbacks), avoidance (of stimuli associated with the traumatic event), mood and/or cognition alterations (loss of memory about the traumatic event, persistent negative emotional state, feelings of detachment from others) and finally alterations in arousal and reactivity (irritability, self-destructive behaviours, hypervigilance, sleep disturbance). Additionally, a patient may also experience, in reaction to the stressor, persistent or recurrent dissociative symptoms such as depersonalization (a feeling of detachment from one's body) and/or derealization (a sense of unreality of the surroundings).³¹⁹ The less knowledgeable viewer is certainly more familiar with intrusion symptoms (like the flashback)³²⁰ but even more with dissociative experiences, for the simple reason that those are the most relatable to the general audience. It has indeed been suggested that the dissociative experience is actually more of a continuum "ranging from everyday nonpathological experiences such as the phenomena of daydreaming, highway hypnosis, and transient depersonalized experiences, to psychopathological conditions [...]."³²¹ Interestingly, all of these dissociative states function according to the same structure³²² but predominantly differ in degree.³²³ The cinema industry intuitively understood how accessible dissociative experiences could be to the ordinary audience and quickly exploited it narratively.³²⁴ Additionally, the film medium is particularly suited for this purpose, since it depends itself on a dissociative state called "suturing", which could be defined as the

³¹⁸ AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th Edition: DSM-5, American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013, pp. 271-272.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ Which is also a form a dissociation.

³²¹ LISA BUTLER, OXANA PALESH, 'Spellbound: Dissociation in the Movies', in *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2004, p. 63.

³²² It is a "[...] three-factor structure comprised of absorption/imaginative involvement, depersonalization-derealization, and amnesia [...]." Nonclinical groups however tend to mostly experience absorption/imaginative involvement and are less likely to experience the other two steps. *Ibid.*

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

“absorption and suspension of critical judgement that are necessary preconditions to pleasurable film viewing.”³²⁵ In a sort of *mise en abyme*, film viewing can therefore be considered as a positive dissociative experience that is highly effective at evoking similar states in a viewer, whether those states are pathological or not. Considering that the dissociative state is essentially subjective and sensorial, the film medium is particularly adequate (arguably more than the text) to depict its different aspects: “[...] films can portray these internal states, through a montage of sounds, images, visual associations, and well crafted dialogue.”³²⁶

As mentioned previously, *Macbeth*'s sensorial qualities are closely linked to its immersive representation of PTSD, an achievement facilitated by the depiction of dissociative and intrusion symptoms that are indeed easier to render visually. The opening battle scene is an engaging immersion into derealization, which is a common dissociative reaction happening at the time of the traumatizing event. This phenomenon occurs when an individual loses touch with reality, and it can alter his abilities to correctly perceive colours, sounds, objects and even time.³²⁷ In Kurzel's adaptation, it translates into speed variations (alternating between slow motion and accelerations), intense colour effects, abrupt shifts from silence to cacophony and a suddenly blurred camera focus. It is hard not to perceive in this sequence the influence of war films like *Saving Private Ryan*, in which similar effects are displayed for the exact same purpose, namely, representing Captain Miller's dissociative reaction to the horror of combat.³²⁸ Certain aspects of *Macbeth*'s battle scene are also reminiscent of what is called depersonalization, a different (but very similar) dissociative reaction, that provokes a loss of self-perception. It is often described as a feeling of being outside of one's body and being merely a spectator of the traumatic event taking place.³²⁹ This reaction is more difficult to display visually, but directors will usually exploit unusual camera angles and movements (like high overhead shots or rotational motions around the character) to this end.³³⁰ Kurzel's technique is less obvious, since he rather utilizes Macbeth's odd stillness and direct gaze at the camera, which contrast sharply with the confusion of combat and visually renders the thane's loss of touch with himself. The film also cleverly uses the flashback to show Macbeth's intrusive re-experiencing of traumatic events. For example, the sudden and distorted memory of the battle scene minutes before Duncan's murder is able to evoke the invasiveness of an

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68-69.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

unprovoked recollection, a technique which differs from how cinema usually exploits flashbacks:

[...] in film, flashbacks generally involve depictions of all types of memories currently in awareness; some actively called up, others evoked by association, and others still, previously inaccessible, intruding into awareness.³³¹

While *Macbeth* also suffers from mood and arousal alterations (especially outbursts of anger and signs of hypervigilance), avoidance symptoms are non-existent in him, certainly because they are difficult to convey and to integrate into the plot. It is even quite the opposite, since he often oddly manipulates his sword in a sort of re-enactment of his trauma, which could further indicate the severity of his intrusive and dissociative re-experiences. Interestingly, psychotic symptoms like visual hallucinations are central to *Macbeth*'s sensorial and narrative development. Those symptoms are quite frequent in veterans but are associated with greater severity and may in fact "represent an underrecognized and unique subtype of PTSD."³³² Today identified as PTSD-SP (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with Secondary Psychosis), its actual existence as a different entity has been supported by recent studies.³³³ However, psychotic symptoms are indeed part of the *DSM-5*'s PTSD criteria and belong to the intrusion or "re-experiencing" category, described as the situation when an individual "feels or acts as if the traumatic events were recurring."³³⁴ While *Macbeth*'s hallucinations are too complex to be PTSD-related³³⁵, it is clear that they are mostly present to emphasize the severity of his condition but especially to incorporate the play's supernatural elements into it. Moreover, just like dissociative states, re-experiencing symptoms like flashbacks and hallucinations are inherently visual and sensorial and therefore more easily depicted through the film medium.

In the end, *Macbeth*'s PTSD is at the heart of the film's authentic and immersive qualities because it is intuitively relatable to a viewer who is already familiar with its most represented features, namely, dissociative experiences and intrusion symptoms. More importantly, the condition is here treated not as Kurzel's own modern addition to the plot, but as a hidden,

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³³² S. E. LINDLEY *et al.*, 'Psychotic Symptoms in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder', in *CNS Spectrum*, vol. 5, no. 9, 2000, p. 2.

³³³ M. B. HAMNER, 'Psychotic Symptoms in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder', in *Focus*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2011, p. 279.

³³⁴ AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

³³⁵ In fact, "the lack of complex hallucinations, delusions, or formal thought disorder helps differentiate PTSD with psychotic symptoms from schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder." MARK B. HAMMER, *Ibid.*, p. 278.

timeless truth that was revealed by a close reading and ‘carving out’ of the text. It is precisely what Fassbender implies when he states:

I had never thought of Macbeth in that way, but Justin nudged me and said, ‘*it’s obvious, isn’t it*’ and it fell into place. *It’s actually in the text*, in the banquet scene, where he sees the ghost of Banquo, Lady Macbeth has to step in and say, ‘he’s known to have these bouts and fits.’³³⁶

Whether this interpretation is correct or not, one cannot deny that it cleverly creates a sense of authenticity and truth by simply making the text fit this modern reading and by evoking the idea that it was always there but hidden in Shakespeare’s lines.

Kurzel’s adaptation of *Macbeth* is defined by a search for authenticity, which stems from the movie’s strong ties to sensory cinema and war film heritage. Every aspect of the film is exploited to this end, from its tactility, carved out text and pared-back performances to its omnipresent Scottish landscape. Despite its inaccuracy, even the medieval mood participates in it since it appeals to the regular viewer’s common perception of the Middle Ages as being dark and primitive. The contemporary and immersive depiction of PTSD reinforces the creation of a relatable aesthetic and narrative. After a close analysis of Kurzel’s stylistic and narrative sensibilities, it becomes obvious that this authentic feel is not to be mistaken for rigorous accuracy. It is not a product of a traditional sense of realism but rather a will to find truth in the film’s story, sensations, and affects, even if those are fragmentary or flawed. That is why the film tends to be perceived as realist and immersive despite its historical inaccuracies and heavy editing practices; because those are utilized to create sensory experiences that are relatable to the viewer and are able to engage his empathy. In such an immersive and realistic narrative and world-building, there is little to no space left for the play’s famous “supernatural soliciting”, as underlined by Naugrette’s film review:

Pour la productrice Laura Hastings-Smith, le décor naturel témoigne ‘d’un grand réalisme : on est immédiatement plongé dans une autre époque, comme si on y était.’ Le problème est que *Macbeth*, où le fantastique règne en maître, est tout sauf une pièce réaliste.³³⁷

³³⁶ FRASER MCALPINE, *op. cit.* Italics mine.

³³⁷ J-P NAUGRETTE, ‘Le “Macbeth” de Justin Kurzel et Ses Prédécesseurs : Ronde de Nuit Autour de l’Enfant Mort’, in *Positif – Revue mensuelle de cinéma*, no. 657, 2015, p. 72.

CHAPTER 4

A play “stripped down to its carcass”³³⁸: How Kurzel’s *Macbeth* evacuates the supernatural

Kurzel’s search for authenticity emphasizes how a director’s aesthetic and narrative intentions greatly participate in the development of a film adaptation, alongside generic conventions. In Kurzel’s case, the influence of sensory cinema’s authentic style and the film’s affinities with the war film genre definitely complicated the intrusion of the supernatural as depicted in the original play. Because of this difficulty, like many of his predecessors, the Australian director confines the supernatural to Macbeth’s psyche, but he does so by integrating it into a narrative of trauma that is tightly linked to war and loss. This chapter will discuss how Kurzel manages to implement this psychologization of the occult through narrative and stylistic means.

THE OPENING SEQUENCE: FROM THE (SUPER)NATURAL HEATH TO THE HUMAN BATTLEFIELD

Macbeth famously opens with the Weïrd Sisters’ first appearance, accompanied by “thunder and lightning”, which immediately establishes an uncanny mood and appeals to the audience’s familiarity with witch lore. This “non-naturalistic prologue” also marks the beginning of a pattern of dramatic illusions which are foundational to the play, as this first scene already contradicts the natural conditions of a daylight theatre performance.³³⁹ Indeed, while this play was written for daylight theatre, more than half of the scenes were set in the dark with the use of the suggestive power of language³⁴⁰: “[...] the transformation of daylight into darkness is a *tour de force* which establishes illusion as, not merely a utility, but a central preoccupation of the play [...]”³⁴¹

This first entrance directly immerses us into the play’s peculiar world of darkness in daylight, witchcraft, and illusions. Conversely, Kurzel’s *Macbeth* starts with the silence and restraint of a funeral, showing the Macbeths’ public burial of their son. Thunder and lightning are replaced by the fog and cold wind of a grey-toned Scottish landscape, and witch lore is substituted for ancient human death rituals that the audience easily identifies (covering the eyes of the deceased, putting dirt on the body, setting the pyre on fire). The great supernatural forces that

³³⁸ ROBBIE COLLIN, ‘*Macbeth* review: “Fassbender Was Born for This”’, in *The Telegraph*, October 2015.

³³⁹ NICHOLAS BROOKE, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

were understood as the cause of Macbeth's actions in the play are here replaced by the human feeling of grief³⁴², as this first scene already shifts the focus from the external to the internal, and from the non-human to the human.

The witches³⁴³ are introduced right after this short scene, and are presented as discreet bystanders, watching the action from afar, almost merging into the imposing landscape pictured in a wide shot. The symmetrical composition of the shot and the backlighting makes it difficult to notice the surprising addition of two children to the usual three Weïrd Sisters. Once again, a decisive occult element is dissipated through a more human one. In fact, the number three is rich in symbolism and is heavily associated to the Weïrd Sisters' nature, powers, and language. As discussed earlier, the ancient meaning of "wyrð" as fate or destiny implies a connection to the three Fates, or the Moirai, the incarnations of destiny in Greek mythology.³⁴⁴ They are often represented as three women of different ages, embodying the different stages of human life. Unsurprisingly, the Weïrd Sisters are also painted as such in other forms of art, including modern film adaptations.³⁴⁵ Kurzel himself exploited this common portrayal³⁴⁶, but by adding two children to their number, he cancels this layer of meaning that added an otherworldly ambiguity to their nature. Furthermore, their first dialogue, starting with the famous line "When shall we three³⁴⁷ meet again?" (1.1.1) was cut from two important lines that helped to characterize them as witches:

First witch: I come, Graymalkin

Second witch: Paddock calls

(1.1.8-9)

"Graymalkin" and "Paddock" refer to familiars, as the first was a common name for a witch's cat and the second is a toad. The familiars were believed to be demons taking the shape of small animals (often cats, toads, dogs, or insects) or other creatures and attending witches in their occult activities.³⁴⁸ Cutting those two lines may seem insignificant, as a modern audience would probably fail to understand the occult reference, but it still deprives the witches from being

³⁴² M. D. FRIEDMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

³⁴³ I will refer to Kurzel's "Weïrd Sisters" as "witches", because that is how they are called in the script and in most of Kurzel's interviews.

³⁴⁴ VICTORIA BLADEN, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁴⁶ In the script, the witches are named "Older witch", "Middle witch" and "Younger witch".

³⁴⁷ Kurzel kept the word "three" in this line, although they are more than three in the film.

³⁴⁸ 'Familiar', *op. cit.*

decisively identified as such. In fact, almost all of the Weïrd Sisters' occult exchanges will never make it to the final cut. Although the regular viewer would probably still identify these women as witches, the number of cuts in their original lines greatly underplay their uncanniness. Another important change is made in this first scene, when the line "Upon the heath" (1.1.7) is replaced by "Upon the battlefield"³⁴⁹, displacing their first meeting with Macbeth from the natural, uninhabitable barren land to the battleground of human conflicts. In fact, this slightly altered line announces one of the film's central themes: war and its consequences on individuals and societies. The battle scene, which was only described through reported speech in the play, will fully occupy the screen and, as I will point out later on, Macbeth's mind. Titles written in bright red, accompanied by loud and rapid drums abruptly cut this opening sequence to provide context to the battle about to happen (which directly echoes the witch's altered line):

Civil war rages in Scotland

The traitor Macdonwald leads mercenaries against King Duncan

Few remain loyal to the crown

Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, leads a weary army

The king has sent him his last reserves

The war will be decided at the battle of Ellon.³⁵⁰

Kurzel using titles in the first sequence is quite revealing, as Philippe Marion consider them as a useful tool to add a feeling of plausibility when one enters a work of fiction.³⁵¹ He calls it *l'illusion factuelle* (the factual illusion), since it helps to establish a sense of credibility from the very beginning of the story. It usually consists in mentioning the time and/or the location of a scene to serve as an "anchor point" in reality. This is the case here, with the mention of "the battle of Ellon", Ellon being an existing town in Scotland. However, Kurzel's use of the factual illusion works mostly on a surface level, since, as underlined by D'Arcens, the "battle of Ellon" has no historical existence.³⁵² It is in fact inscribed in Kurzel's sense of authenticity, which, as underlined previously, is not necessarily synonymous with accuracy, and yet still manages to evoke a feeling of realism in the regular viewer. The contents of the titles accompanied by the sound of war drums reinforce the early impression that the film will depart from the exterior,

³⁴⁹ TODD LOUISO *et al.*, *Macbeth*, script draft, undated, p. 1.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁵¹ PHILIPPE MARION, *Cours de narratologie médiatique*, Université Catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve, 2018-2019.

³⁵² LOUISE D'ARCENS, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

occult forces involved in the original text to better concentrate on human interiority and conflictual interactions. The highly aestheticized battle scene that follows dives into both, since its various effects (slow motion, hand-held shooting, a shallow depth of field and sound alterations) allow the viewer to simultaneously enter Macbeth's mind and experience the "hurly-burly" of the battle more intimately.³⁵³ It helps to grasp the characters' visceral and emotional experience of war rather than just showing the muddled *mêlée*. Similar audio-visual effects will later be used to uncover Macbeth's deteriorating state of mind, which will greatly influence the audience's own perception of elements that were originally implied as supernatural, such as the Weïrd Sisters and Banquo's ghost. Through a short but effective opening sequence, Kurzel's *Macbeth* already announces its authentic feel while also hinting at a war film heritage that will be continuously alluded to.

"SOME SAY HE'S MAD": PORTRAYING MACBETH AS SUFFERING FROM PTSD AND GRIEF

The "battle of Ellon" not only brings intimacy and affect at the heart of the clash, but also introduces the audience to Macbeth's early symptoms of PTSD, namely, dissociative states (derealization and depersonalization). Those symptoms actually emphasize the unreliability of Macbeth's senses, which will shape the viewer's reading of the numerous uncanny apparitions that will soon follow. In the middle of soldiers who are battling, Macbeth is shown motionless, looking right at the camera. The composition of the picture placing Macbeth in the middle and his direct fixed on the audience while the action is extremely slowed down give us an inside look at Macbeth's distorted sense of time. In fact, up until this frozen moment, the very beginning of the battle was filmed using an alternation of silent slow-motion and a normal, vociferous pace, and helped to build up the tension leading to the clash of swords. When the two armies finally meet, the normal pace and loud diegetic sounds take over, plunging the spectator into the struggles of the warriors. However, soon after, the use of continuous slow-motion while the camera focuses on Macbeth's still stance and gaze actually serves to represent how he personally experiences time, as his mind seems to drift from the battlefield to the four figures of the witches. It also allows to underline war's extreme violence when the camera focuses on fresh wounds and blood spatters. The same contrasting paces will be applied during the murder of Duncan, which fully shows the severe violence of the deed and its consequences on Macbeth's mental capacities. It reflects the thane's confused mind as the editing of the scene mixes images of the actual murder with shots of Macbeth's disoriented reactions after it.

³⁵³ CLAIRE HENRY, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

Blurring any sense of present time, it visually tells how his experience of time becomes altered and unreliable because of his mental state.

The battle scene not only reveals Macbeth's twisted time, but also informs the audience of his deceptive sense of sight. Before the thane's timeline freezes when facing the four witches, he first notices three men isolated from the crowd who will later be identified as the enemies' leaders (and among them, the traitor Macdonwald). While trying to reach them, Macbeth helps a young soldier to get up, only to see four women right where they were supposed to stand. When Macbeth finally regains his senses and resumes fighting, the three leaders are now again seen in place of the four figures. This clearly represents the unreliability of Macbeth's senses, provoked by a situation of intense brutality. It will be confirmed later, during the banquet scene when Macbeth is twice deceived by his sight. In the original text, Banquo's ghost enters, unnoticed at first, and ironically sits in Macbeth's place moments before the king regrets his absence. Macbeth only notices him when he tries to regain his seat, which is occupied by the ghost. As discussed earlier, the irony of the situation originally emphasized the ghost's existence, which cannot be confined to Macbeth's disturbed psyche. Unlike Shakespeare, Kurzel chose to introduce the ghost by placing him among the other guests. Macbeth notices him right after mentioning him, while raising a toast, and he reacts strongly, just like in the play. While Lady Macbeth tries to reassure him by telling him "This is the very painting of your fear"³⁵⁴, Macbeth, once again, becomes aware of the illusion his eyes created: he actually saw the face of Banquo in the features of an unknown soldier, sitting among other guests. His sight will deceive him a second time, in the exact same way, but this time from another place at the table. Banquo's ghost in this scene does not revengefully occupy Macbeth's empty seat but is clearly shown as a delusion of the king's ill mind. This second use of the same narrative technique reaffirms the assumption that Macbeth's senses are deceitful.

The battle scene already evokes how war acts as a catalyst for Macbeth's mental disturbance, by appealing to common depictions of dissociative states provoked by traumatic events, to which the regular viewer is already familiar, whether through personal or previous film-watching experiences. The viewer, informed by this scene and by his own general knowledge, can easily deduce that Macbeth suffers from PTSD, and that the women he saw on the battlefield were created by his troubled senses. The following apparitions are thus impossible to interpret as anything other than psychotic symptoms since they appear to an unreliable, troubled

³⁵⁴ TODD LOUISO *et al.*, p. 59.

character. The dagger scene, which could be either interpreted as hallucinatory or demonic in the original play, is here fully exploited to display how Macbeth's mental state leads him to committing atrocities, which underplays the role of Lady Macbeth in the events that follow. This famous scene is here preceded by Macbeth reliving a triggering memory of the battle of Ellon, through a short flashback of the now accelerated battle scene, the young soldier's death, but also of the witches' still gaze. Shortly after this flashback, Macbeth sees that same young boy standing outside, the blade of a dagger firmly in hand, offering him the handle of the weapon. The following lines Macbeth delivers take a double sense, as his speech is both addressed to the dagger and the apparition. It is particularly noticeable when he tries to touch the boy's face while saying:

I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.

Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible

To feeling, as to sight? Or art thou but

A dagger of the mind, a false creation,

Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?³⁵⁵

Macbeth's restrained tears and trembling voice make this scene deeply emotional, and emphasize once again the extent of his trauma, but above all, the consequences of it. Because the flashback of the battle and the boy's apparition come right before Duncan's murder (the boy leads Macbeth to the old king's tent then vanishes into the night) the audience is clearly invited to establish a connection between Macbeth's PTSD and him engaging in violence. It is even more obvious as the boy was slayed fighting Duncan's war, thus embodying Macbeth's traumatic experience of it.

War continues to occupy the screen even after exiting the battlefield. This shows through the many scars visible on the faces of men, from unimportant to central characters. For example, Macbeth and Macduff are always seen with scars and old wounds on their faces, hands or even on the back in Macbeth's case. Moreover, the soldier whose hand was cut off during the battle of Ellon is later seen again with a tight bandage around his wound, as to remind us of this traumatic experience. Macbeth is also often shown handling a knife or a sword, in the intimacy of his bedroom, as if always ready for the battle:

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Later, Macbeth sits on the floor, cloaked in his royal robes. The crown untouched by his side. He is arranging his weaponry around him on the floor, cleaning all of his knives and swords as if readying for battle.³⁵⁶

One of the most striking instances of the war's omnipresence is Macbeth's second encounter with the witches. Indeed, while in the play, he is visited by three apparitions, Kurzel's Macbeth sees an army of ghost-like, wounded soldiers marching with no purpose, repeating "Beware Macduff. Beware the Thane of Fife!"³⁵⁷ Among them is the young boy, who once again brings Macbeth back to his war traumas. While he delivers the line:

Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn

The power of man, for none of woman born

Shall harm Macbeth.³⁵⁸

Macbeth's only reaction is to hug him warmly, letting his paternal, emotional side show once more. This horrible scene of fallen soldiers haunting the heath reaffirms how "the movie never entirely quits the battlefield"³⁵⁹, echoing the witch's modified line "Upon the battlefield. There to meet with Macbeth." Through visual and narrative devices, the viewer is constantly reminded of war's pervasiveness: it shapes Macbeth's society as well as his psyche. The film's circular ending suggests such a reading, since Kurzel's adaptation ends as it started: first, with the "battle of Ellon", then, with the potential conflict that is implied through mirrored shots of Fleance and Malcolm, both armed with a sword (Fleance's belonged to Macbeth, and Malcolm's to his father Duncan) and walking decisively, as if ready for a duel. Both are traumatized by the violent murder of their respective fathers (Banquo and Duncan), and both turn to violence and conflict, reinforcing the suggestion that trauma engenders violent acts, but also that being born in a warrior society will encourage one to respond with violence.

This final scene, by depicting a child and a young man ready to engage in a violent conflict, manages to evoke the war trauma and grief that brought Macbeth to his end. It reminds the viewer of how the extent of Macbeth's traumas surpasses his war experience, as implied by the lingering child figure that continuously haunts the screen. It acts as a constant reminder of the thane's own loss, which opened the film's first sequence and continues to circulate through the

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁹ PETER BRADSHAW, quoted in AGNIESZKA RASMUS, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

young dead soldier. It adds another layer to Macbeth's trauma, which this time is shared by Lady Macbeth too. The "fiend-like Queen" (5.7.99) is here characterized as a grieving mother, herself psychologically injured by a loss that will bring her to plot Duncan's murder: "They [the Macbeths] use ambition to replace *grief*."³⁶⁰ This alteration of the plot was in fact probably inherited from the wave of psychologizing theories that proliferated in the first decades of the 20th century and culminated with Bradley's essays. The question of Lady Macbeth's children, which Knights attributed to Bradley³⁶¹, was thoroughly debated by critics and would unsurprisingly be tackled in modern productions, such as Wright's 2006 film adaptation³⁶² and Noble's 1986 stage production.³⁶³ Lady Macbeth's grief in Kurzel's version will lead her to murder and, later on, to insanity. It is after witnessing the brutal death of the Macduff children (burned at the stake by Macbeth himself) that she starts to show signs of mental distress. Soon after the burning, she returns to the now deserted Inverness settlements, riding in her nightgown and stopping by the empty chapel where she invoked the "murdering ministers" earlier. Sitting alone in the middle of the chapel, her hair covered like the Virgin Mary, she delivers her "sleep-walking lines" to the void, as tears start to flow down her cheeks. After she pleads:

Come, come, come, come, give me your hand.

What's done cannot be undone.

To bed, to bed, to bed.³⁶⁴

the camera slowly moves to reveal who she was in fact addressing:

A SMALL CHILD on the floor of the chapel. Pale, his skin marred with red sores.

It is her SON. The boy we saw in the opening image, now alive again.³⁶⁵

Right after, still in her nightgown, she walks through the heath and encounters the witches, repeating "To bed, to bed, to bed", a line foreshadowing her upcoming death. The vision of her

³⁶⁰ DANNY LEIGH, 'Macbeth Director Justin Kurzel: "You're Getting Close to Evil"', in *The Guardian*, September 2015.

³⁶¹ L.C. Knights argued against this theory in his famous essay 'How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?' published in 1933 in his book *Explorations, essays in criticism mainly on the literature of the seventeenth century*.

³⁶² VICTORIA BLADEN, 'Performing the Child Motif in Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015)', in *Anglistik*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2017, p. 129.

³⁶³ WARREN CHERNIAK, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

³⁶⁴ TODD LOUISO *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

dead child, triggered by the murder of Lady Macduff and her children, emphasizes the Queen's own traumas and how those may have led her to crime.

Although Macbeth already showed early signs of mental illness during and after the battle of Ellon (thus implying the role of grief and war trauma as triggers), Duncan's murder is central to the thane's mental deterioration, as he will immediately show signs of insanity after the killing. From this moment, he will no longer be the great but traumatized soldier, and rather become an unstable, aggressive, and delusional king. The contrast is even more distinct as he was previously characterized as an experienced warrior with a gentle, paternal side. His role as a father (even though now childless after losing his son) is echoed in his behaviour towards the young soldier: he helps him prepare for the battle, and later mourns his death (reproducing on him the same death rituals he used on his own son). He is also shown helping to hold down a wounded soldier while his severed hand is being cauterized. Macbeth clearly displayed a caring, empathic attitude towards his fellow soldiers and is firstly portrayed as a great warrior whose traumas are starting to get the better of. Duncan's murder is the last blow to his frail mental stability, as his state truly starts to deteriorate immediately after the murder, when Malcolm, Duncan's only son in the film, enters the tent and sees his father's dead body with Macbeth at his side, the bloody daggers still in his hands. Macbeth, showing no emotion, confesses the murder to him. He then says to him "Live you? Or are you aught that man may question?"³⁶⁶, while touching Malcolm's face with the tip of the dagger, as if not sure of the reality of the young man's presence. This line was indeed firstly addressed to the witches, whose actual existence was questioned by both Macbeth and Banquo. Macbeth repeating that question to Malcolm thus clearly exposes his confusion and suggests the possibility of Macbeth being in a dissociative state, either caused by memories of the war or by Duncan's murder, which is itself another traumatic event for Macbeth. While Lady Macbeth is spreading blood on the guards' faces, he is shown rubbing his bloody hands in the rain that falls through the cracks of ceiling, saying "What hands are here?" while laughing and smearing blood on his own face. From that central moment until the final duel with Macduff, he will regularly show signs of incoherence and emotional instability: at times he laughs frantically, cries, or is totally emotionless, rides in his nightgown in the early and cold morning, jogs in his bedroom, spends his time sitting on the floor while manipulating his sword, his dagger, or his crown, stands still for hours. He is also particularly aggressive with his wife and servants and often loses his temper. At first, the

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

bedroom seems to be the space of Macbeth's madness up until the banquet where he loses his senses before his guests' eyes, then when he publicly executes Macduff's wife and children.

Macbeth's descent into madness is also coded through colour variations, which not only enhance the film's aesthetics but also add a layer of meaning by reinforcing a psychologized reading of the witches. In fact, Arkapaw (Kurzel's cinematographer) explains these bold choices in terms of colours as a tool to express Macbeth's state of mind: "Once you're inside someone's head, it's a dreamscape; there really are no boundaries to what you can do."³⁶⁷ The first time the witches appear to him on the battlefield, a yellowish filter covers the screen, adding contrast to the grey tones that dominated the entire battle scene:

You might expect the witches to be colder or more macabre, but we [Arkapaw and Kurzel] wanted them to be warmer. We tried to use the sun and flares to make the image sort of heavenly – more angelic than witchy, I guess.³⁶⁸

This colour, now strongly associated to the witches, will slowly infiltrate the screen while Macbeth loses his mental health. For example, just before Duncan's murder, as Macbeth experiences a triggering memory of war, his face is tinted with warm yellow from the candles' light, and yellow monopolizes the scene when he sees the young boy guiding him to Duncan's bright yellow tent. Moreover, once crowned, he regularly wears a yellow/orange royal cloak over his white clothing. The bedroom, the first space of his madness, is dominated by the same colour that we also find profusely during the banquet, which is, as already mentioned, the first public space where his madness is witnessed by the community. And finally, the last duel with Macduff is saturated with bright orange which becomes vivid red during the last sequence of the film, as if this warm yellow, representing Macbeth's madness, had fully evolved into deeper colours when he meets his end. It is also important to note how this colour was chosen to represent a man who killed his king, knowing that yellow, in our Judeo-Christian heritage, is a symbol of treason and deceit, often associated to Judas. Throughout the film, yellow is thus used at the same time to represent the witches, Macbeth's mental illness and his act of regicide.

³⁶⁷ BENJAMIN BERGERY, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

“WHAT ARE THESE?”: REPRESENTING THE ENIGMATIC WEIRD SISTERS

Shakespeare’s ambiguous characterization of the Weird Sisters has led to a profusion of interpretations regarding their nature and powers, which would be reflected in theatrical, film and television productions. For that matter, it is important to explore previous adaptations of the play, in which various portrayals of the Weird Sisters have circulated and later influenced those that would follow.

Even though this dissertation is not a comparative study of multiple adaptations, it remains crucial to touch upon the inherent intertextuality of an adaptation, which helps to better understand its nature in the context of production. In fact, intertextual readings have been at the heart of more recent approaches to adaptation, and proposes to consider the adaptation “as a gradual development of a ‘meta-text’”³⁶⁹, and not simply a translation of an original source from one medium to another: “This view recognises that a later adaptation may draw upon any earlier adaptations, as well as upon the primary source text.”³⁷⁰ It not only allows to recognize the influence of the televisual/cinematographic context (and the development of specific genres inside the medium) but it also reshapes the source-adaptation relationship as less direct and ahistorical.³⁷¹ This approach is even more useful when studying Shakespeare’s adapted works, since he was himself an adapter and drew his inspiration from pre-existing stories. It is therefore essential to allude to previous adaptations to better comprehend Kurzel’s narrative and filmic decisions, even though he asserted he “was keen to avoid his version of *Macbeth* being lead [sic] by previous adaptations of Shakespeare’s text.”³⁷²

In *Macbeth*’s case, the depiction of the ambiguous Weird Sisters is rather revealing of how the director reads the play and how the film is attached to the codes of a specific genre. As argued in chapter 2, the critical debates regarding *Macbeth*’s supernatural elements would impact stage and film productions of it. The objective existence of the play’s various ghosts and apparitions was already questioned by critics and stage directors who would rather confine these elements to the psychological realm. Kurzel is thus not the first and will certainly not be the last to soften the occult aspects of the Scottish play. It is quite common for modern theatre productions to

³⁶⁹ SARAH CARDWELL, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² HENRY BARNES, *op. cit.*

either follow a tradition of spectacular scenic effects to depict *Macbeth*'s apparitions or to “tone down or eliminate the supernatural elements in the play, in an attempt at realism.”³⁷³

This “attempt at realism” has also been introduced in productions for the big screen, with Polanski's violent and pessimistic *Macbeth* (1971) as the primary example. This infamous version is deeply anchored in realism, not only in its depiction of crude violence and peasantry life scenes, but also in its characterization of the witches. Polanski's Weïrd Sisters fit perfectly in this realist setting because of their marginality and poverty. They are less supernatural beings than outcasts living at the borders of Macbeth's society, since they live in a cave with dozens of other women sharing their occult beliefs.³⁷⁴ The ambiguity attached to their real existence is here erased as the three women are only “devotees of demonism, without being in any sense supernatural beings.”³⁷⁵ Another good example is Nunn's 1978 restaged television production, in which the Weïrd Sisters are just an ordinary family consisting of a grandmother, a mother and a daughter. The supernatural in this production is clearly “emotional and psychological [...] projections of the demons within”³⁷⁶, the witches being present only to allow Macbeth's inner demons to be released. Each of the occult apparitions are made invisible to the audience's eyes, which forces the spectator to solely witness it through the characters' excessive bodily reactions:

Shaking all over and foaming at the mouth, McKellen's *Macbeth* is consumed by “horrible imaginings” (1.3.137), the monsters of the mind, evoking with great intensity the tragic emotions of pity and fear.³⁷⁷

Like in most of the 20th century's adaptations of *Macbeth*, Polanski and Nunn's witches were pictured as the traditional ‘old crones’, namely ugly old women in rags.³⁷⁸ This custom, according to Kapitaniak, recently shifted towards modernization, especially when the medieval Scottish setting is also subject to such an alteration.³⁷⁹ Since the 2000s, the three sisters tend to be portrayed as younger, attractive women without necessarily having them less supernaturally powerful.³⁸⁰ The latter component will actually depend on the genre's openness to the incursion of the occult. For example, Wright's *Macbeth* (2006) puts the classic play in a gang war setting

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁴ WARREN CHERNIAK, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁷⁸ PIERRE KAPITANIAK, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

that obeys to the specific codes of the gangster movie with its share of “gun fights, disco clubs and wealthy villas.”³⁸¹ In such a context, the Weïrd Sisters are transformed into overly sexualised schoolgirls whom Macbeth meets in a nightclub, while being under the influence of ecstasy and alcohol. From their very first meeting, they not only use their prophecies but also their charms to literally seduce Macbeth, which goes from exchanging a kiss to having sex after the cauldron scene. Even though Wright is not the only one to portray the witches as young, sexualised women, his choices were surely prescribed by the gangster film genre.³⁸² Furthermore, the film strongly implies the unreality of their existence since it fully discloses Macbeth’s drug use when they appear. This take on the supernatural as being psychological also includes Banquo’s apparition, which is only visible through Macbeth’s reflection in the mirror. Kapitaniak justifies this narrative decision as being the result of the gangster genre incompatibility with supernatural phenomena.³⁸³ When the film genre does not forge the witches’ specific portrayal, it is quite common to see modern horror genre codes infiltrating and shaping the three sisters’ image in recent adaptations. It is the case with Goold’s *Macbeth* (2010) which transposes the medieval environment to a communist, godless state where the supernatural has no place. Therefore, the Weïrd Sisters are replaced by three relatively young nurses whose outfits remind us of the then religious aspect of the field.³⁸⁴ They become “creatures of a religious world that gradually takes its hold over Macbeth and its godless regime.”³⁸⁵ While they are not painted as supernatural forces, their uncanniness lies in the subversion of the usually caring role of nurses, a trope that is directly inherited from horror films, which often show a fascination for hospital and nurses.³⁸⁶ Wright’s gangster *Macbeth* is not completely unconcerned by this horror genre influence, since his teenage witches certainly resemble the ‘evil schoolgirl’ narrative that was established by the high-school horror subgenre carried by films like the famous *Carrie* (1976) or by series like *Buffy the Vampire slayer* (1997-2001).³⁸⁷

From classical old crones to modern young beauties, the Weïrd Sisters tend to be the focal point of both old and recent adaptations of the Scottish play, however a director decides to film them and position himself in the debate regarding their nature and existence. This brief overview of

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

the most revealing cases showed how essential it is to consider previous versions but also the specificities of film genres when studying an adaptation. To a certain extent, Kurzel's *Macbeth* encompasses elements from other adaptations since it shares Polanski's taste for violent realism and Nunn's interpretation of the supernatural as being psychological. Despite his desire to distance himself from previous adaptations, Kurzel's depiction of the Weïrd Sisters is partly inherited from his predecessors.

As previously mentioned, right from the beginning, Kurzel's witches are estranged from Shakespeare's three Weïrd Sisters by depriving them of their uncanny entrance (accompanied by "thunder and lightning"), but also by adding two children to the symbolic trio. Moreover, their physicality, which is usually an important aspect in adaptations, is here totally undermined by ordinary looks. The only noticeable element about their appearance is their obvious poverty and the scars on their faces. They are neither old crones with hooked noses, warts, and other deformities, nor young attractive seducers. In their appearance and their ability to have viable children, they seem perfectly human, more like Nunn's family of witches. Kurzel explicitly wanted them to feel more human than supernatural:

I wanted to ground them, so that they feel as though they could possibly be real travellers. That they had a kind of dignity, *they felt more human*. My inspiration came from a lot of travellers, and the idea that they were from the land rather than mystic beings. Just underplaying them, really.³⁸⁸

Like Polanski's "devotees of demonism", their physical exclusion from Macbeth's society characterizes them as outcasts. In a more subtle way, they also share pagan beliefs which are made visible through the uncanny scars on their faces, their bone charms, and their strange ritualistic practice of collecting blood from dead soldiers:

MIST swirling around the mountains. FOUR DARK FORMS stand watching the ceremony from afar. Women, all of different ages. One is a CHILD, as young as the dead boy. *Their faces are scarified with unnatural marks -- the decorations of a pagan belief. They hold primitive bone CHARMS in their hands.* They speak quietly. Calmly.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁸ RYAN LAMBIE, *op. cit.* Italics mine.

³⁸⁹ TODD LOUISO *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 3. Italics mine.

This portrayal is quite similar to Polanski's misfits who are more followers of an occult religion rather than a real supernatural force. Beyond their physicality, their mystic language is almost completely cut, and its delivery is greatly underplayed by a quiet, calm tone:

[...] the script's removal of their most famous incantatory lines, as well as their mundane appearance, reduce the extent to which they seem to function as malicious preternatural force.³⁹⁰

It does not only undermine their obscure nature, but also their inherent evilness, as their softened performances have empathic undertones. From their first entrance, they appear concerned, almost worried, rather than explicitly evil. They deliver their prophecies while comforting Macbeth, with a soft stroke on his cheek. This empathetic behaviour is supported by a visible parental posture that is perceived through their nurturing behaviour towards the young child who accompanies them.³⁹¹ Their first scene shows the older witch resting her hands on the child's shoulders in a protective manner, and later she is seen holding her hand when leaving the battlefield. The infant sleeping in the other witch's arms reinforces their caring nature which, added to their ordinary appearances and language, makes it difficult to view them as intrinsically evil. Their pagan practices are never shown as directly harming living humans and their powers seem to be limited to divination. They only interfere once, when the child witch helps Fleance to flee his father's murderers, which contradicts once more the assumption that the witches embody evil forces.

Despite their humanized depiction (which could imply their objective existence out of Macbeth's mind) Kurzel's witches seem to occupy multiple spaces at once, which may in fact suggest more of a metaphorical existence. Shakespeare's Weir Sisters are at the same time central and secondary to the play because they "wield a dramatic power which seems *disproportionate* in comparison with the number of their lines and scenes."³⁹² This effect is created through the lingering presence of their equivocal language which ultimately makes them occupy multiple spaces while not being physically present. According to Bladen, they are often associated with "natural, supernatural, peripheral and inner, psychological spaces"³⁹³, and those spaces are sometimes exploited in adaptations to shape the three sisters' portrayal. If Kurzel's witches are surprisingly ordinary, he still manages to imply that they do occupy some of these

³⁹⁰ M. D. FRIEDMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

³⁹¹ VICTORIA BLADEN, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

³⁹² ID. 'Weird Space in *Macbeth*', in *Shakespeare on Screen: Macbeth*, Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2014, p. 84.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

spaces, while blurring their borders. Despite the absence of thunder and lightning, the witches' connection to the natural space is strongly suggested since they exclusively appear on the heath, surrounded by a thick fog. In fact, the fog is central to their movements because the witches appear and disappear through it almost as if they were created by its vapours. This contrasts with the playtext's allusion to the Weïrd Sisters' ability to control the weather, which was based on an ancient belief that witches had some power over the environment.³⁹⁴ Many adaptations opted for editing to make the witches disappear into the air and thus replacing them in a (super)natural space³⁹⁵, but Kurzel preferred the use of smoke, merging the three sisters with the Scottish landscape. The supernatural space is thus erased in favour of the natural. They not only materialize in/with natural space, but always do in uninhabited borders, far from Macbeth's village or castle once he becomes king. It is also the case in the original play, because according to Bladen "they embody our gaze; like us, the witches are watching the events, agents of surveillance."³⁹⁶ While Polanski used the witches' marginality to depict them as pagans living in a cave like outcasts, Kurzel exploits it to reaffirm their essential bond to the environment. Despite them having children to take care of, we never actually see where they live, which could imply once more their assimilation to natural space. The witches in Kurzel's adaptation are not only attached to the environment but are also invading inner and psychological spaces. From their very first interaction with the thane on the battlefield, it is strongly implied that the witches are a creation of his mind. Just like Banquo's apparition revealed itself to be an unknown soldier, the witches that Macbeth sees on the battlefield are in fact three soldiers. Kurzel discussed in an interview that his intention was to create this layer of interpretation: "I'm allowing them to traverse through the possibility that they're a figment of Macbeth's imagination – created from the shadows of war."³⁹⁷

The witches' connection to Macbeth's psyche is also made clear through the particular use of colour which I discussed previously. The witches are represented by warm, yellow tones when interacting with Macbeth, and this same shade invades the screen to represent Macbeth's madness in numerous scenes. These colour effects could have been used to highlight the Weïrd Sisters' supernatural space³⁹⁸, but Kurzel used it to create a blurred border between Macbeth's inner space and the witches' natural space. It is also important to note how the witches only

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³⁹⁷ RYAN LAMBIE, *op. cit.*

³⁹⁸ Freeston's *Macbeth* (1997) used colour effects to express how the witches are not from the natural world.

appear to traumatised characters: Macbeth and Banquo (traumatised by war and grief), Fleance (traumatised by his father's murder) and Lady Macbeth (traumatised by grief). It reinforces the Weird Sisters' existence in the inner/psychological space and leaves little to no place for their objective presence. Moreover, Macbeth's death clearly puts an end to their interference; as soon as Macduff gives the final blow to the tyrant, they leave the scene and never reappear: "On his knees, Macbeth *sees the Witches finally turn their back on him and walk away*. And, at long last, his eyes lilt to a close. Dead."³⁹⁹ The construction of the different shots makes it clear that Macbeth is the only character seeing the witches on the final battlefield, since neither Malcolm nor the other Scottish lords are simultaneously present in the witches' shots or even taking note of their presence.

According to Eagleton, "the witches can be thought of as society's unconscious"⁴⁰⁰ which is being simply expressed through the Macbeths' own minds and actions. It is the case since they embody "exiled and repressed elements"⁴⁰¹ that live at the borders of Macbeth's violent society. This assumption places the witches in the more global space of the human mind and not simply inside Macbeth's head. This clearly echoes Kurzel's portrayal of the witches since they not only appear to Macbeth and Banquo but to other characters like Fleance and Lady Macbeth, right after surviving or reliving a traumatic experience. Furthermore, the witches clearly embody the exact opposite of a warrior and patriarchal society; their family only includes women and children who are safe from the war's consequences. The child witch is always depicted wandering around, allowed to be just a child, while Fleance already shows signs of aggressive combativeness, a behaviour that his father encourages. This "exiled and repressed" representation of childhood embodied by the little girl will symbolically save Fleance from Banquo's murderers. The witches' presence as a mirrored societal subconscious is reinforced by their first interaction with Macbeth on the battlefield. They quite literally emerge from soldiers, namely, the symbol of this warrior hierarchical order. Every "occult" element is actually linked to a soldier: the dagger is brought to Macbeth by the dead young soldier, Banquo's ghost is revealed to be an unknown soldier and Macbeth's last interaction with the witches brings an army of ghost-like soldiers marching with no purpose. Kurzel highlights how war affects the minds of men like Macbeth by reflecting the image of what his reality is not, namely, a safe space for children to thrive and grow up in: "The women's wisdom is shown to

³⁹⁹ TODD LOUISO, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 85. Italics mine.

⁴⁰⁰ VICTORIA BLADEN, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*

be paying dividends as their offspring is spared in the otherwise male-dominated brutal world.”⁴⁰²

Kurzel allows his witches to occupy different spaces whose borders are blurred, since the natural space is at once peripheral and psychological. The supernatural is erased, to better highlight the force of environmental, societal, and psychological factors. The Weird Sisters exist with and in the natural, uninhabited borders of human society while also inhabiting Macbeth’s inner space. By allowing them to be “from the land” but also a “figment of Macbeth’s imagination” Kurzel creates a bridge between the natural and the psychological, and by doing so he expresses the idea that environment can influence men’s psyche.

One of the movie’s most remarkable aspects is the omnipresence of the Scottish landscape. It visually dominates the screen, from wide shots exhibiting the greatness of the smoky mountains between two scenes to mid shots displaying how the landscape literally dwarves the characters. Even the close-ups are largely occupied by this ever-present environment. As mentioned before, Macbeth’s Inverness castle becomes a modest settlement made of “[...] improvised houses, a graveyard, small wooden cabins and a small community church filled with relics [...]”⁴⁰³ Those frail dwellings are open to the elements, and since most of them lack proper doors, we are visually reminded of the environment’s pervasiveness through the space of the door frame. In the intimacy of interior scenes, we often hear atmospheric sounds like wind, rain, or thunder (during the storm that takes place the night of Duncan’s murder). More than pervading sounds, rain even infiltrates the wooden chapel through its multiple cracks, pouring unto Macbeth’s face. The characters’ bodies (especially the soldiers) are marked by their harsh surroundings; their skin and clothes are stained by dust, their attires are damaged, their hair ruffled by the strong winds. This effect is the most striking when Macbeth’s nightgown and body are stained with mud and rain when he comes back from his second encounter with the witches on the heath. King Duncan is killed in his bright yellow tent, which entry is open despite the menacing storm. The castle which had “a pleasant seat” is transposed to a frail tent open to the harsh weather and to Macbeth’s murderous desires. The harshness of the Scottish land that invades fragile human settlements prevents any idea that the natural order prevailed before Duncan’s murder, or that Macbeth’s committing regicide made the earth “feverous” and shake. Even though Kurzel filmed the scene during a storm, inserting blurry shots of Duncan’s scared horses to depict the agitation of the night, he never really depicts a real shift between Duncan’s

⁴⁰² AGNIESZKA RASMUS, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁴⁰³ VICTOR HUERTAS, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

agreeable Scotland and Macbeth's uninhabitable land.⁴⁰⁴ The natural order is never disturbed because the environment dominates everything and everyone, and cannot be affected by human actions, even Macbeth's. This human-nature connection is inverted in Kurzel's adaptation, since nature's omnipresence on the screen is there to emphasize its capacity to influence human lives, almost in a deterministic manner. The director expressed on numerous occasions how he understands Macbeth's psychology as being a product of his environment: "Macbeth, as a warrior, was *a product of an incredibly brutal landscape* and I was interested in how that landscape and other external factors influence ambition."⁴⁰⁵ It does not only explain the pervading presence of natural space in most of the scenes but also the strong connection of the witches to it: "The characters are defined, *especially through the witches*, by the stories and *the curses of the land*."⁴⁰⁶ The fact that the Weïrd Sisters "emerge from and vanish into the primordial ooze of Scotland"⁴⁰⁷ while triggering Macbeth's mental struggles reinforces the notion that environment is a decisive factor that has power over human life. By doing so, Kurzel transforms the witches from an evil supernatural force to a psychological embodiment of an "uneasy truce between humans and a hard country."⁴⁰⁸

Whether achieved through narrative and visual effects or cuts from the original play, Kurzel's *Macbeth* completely evacuates supernatural elements from Shakespeare's famous tragedy. From the very first sequences, he does so by exposing Macbeth's unreliability (caused by the traumatic experience of war) but also by transforming the witches into a natural and psychological embodiment of this trauma while reinforcing the environment's deterministic influence on human's psychology. In the end, the Australian director tackled *Macbeth* by injecting modern answers into a play that famously illustrates a time of eschatological debates. While Shakespeare's text remained open to interpretation regarding its occult elements (thereby provoking decades of academic debate), Kurzel's adaptation fills in the blanks with a contemporary outlook which, by nature, leaves little to no space to the supernatural. It does so by giving the play's questions definite answers: he attributes the occult to the ill mind, the ill mind to trauma and grief, the trauma and grief to the warrior and patriarchal society and to the harsh environment. However, this adaptation still creates a sense of uncanniness in its ability to

⁴⁰⁴ M. D. FRIEDMAN, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰⁵ 'Michael Fassbender: 'Macbeth' Interview', in *michaelfassbender.org*, February 2014.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.* Italics mine.

⁴⁰⁷ J. R. WILSON, 'Macbeth and Criminology', in *College Literature*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2019, p. 466.

⁴⁰⁸ STEPHANIE BUNBURY, *op. cit.*

catch a furtive glimpse of a man's psychological struggles, mirroring our own fears and concerns regarding mental health.

CHAPTER 5

“On the precipice of madness”: Kurzel’s othering and uncanny depiction of mental distress

Although Kurzel’s *Macbeth* assigns the play’s supernaturalism to the effects of an ill mind, it still manages to establish a sense of unease and strangeness, by mirroring long-established fears surrounding those we call ‘mad’. To better understand how it does so, this chapter will explore earlier othering views of insanity, from ancient supernatural readings of madness to fearful depictions of the mentally distressed as violent. Then, it will discuss how Kurzel’s adaptation echoes those readings but also how it integrates feelings of uncanniness associated to the occult into the depiction of Macbeth’s disturbed psyche.

SUPERNATURAL READINGS OF INSANITY: DIVINE PUNISHMENT, DEMONIC POSSESSION, AND SIN

Attributing supernatural and otherworldly causes to symptoms of mental illness is a long-established tendency that was already present in Ancient Greece, when the world was at the mercy of the gods’ cruelty.⁴⁰⁹ Madness was in fact often seen as a divine punishment for impiety, as reflected by Herodotus’ writings⁴¹⁰ and by early Greek myths and epics.⁴¹¹ If more complex understandings of mental illness were emerging in classic tragedies, “[...] the supernatural accounts of the origins of unreason, seemingly adopted by non-literate peoples everywhere, continue to hold sway.”⁴¹² Simultaneously, a number of severe symptoms like “fits, foaming at the mouth, grinding of teeth and biting of tongues, loss of control of bladder and bowels, and the descent into unconsciousness”⁴¹³ were regularly recognized as signs of possession, either by a spirit or a demon.⁴¹⁴ However, both divine and demonic interpretations of mental illness competed with naturalistic explanations introduced by Hippocratic medicine, which was based on humoral theories. This doctrine, endorsed by an increasing number of Greek physicians, would state that body and mind could affect one another and would situate the cause of insanity in the body rather than attribute it to supernatural interventions.⁴¹⁵ For

⁴⁰⁹ ANDREW SCULL, ‘Madness in the Ancient World’, in *Madness in Civilization: A Cultural History of Insanity from the Bible to Freud, from the Madhouse to Modern Medicine*, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 24.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

example, Hippocrates himself firmly rejected what was then called the “sacred disease”, which he would rather identify as a disorder of the brain (similar to the modern diagnosis of epilepsy) and not as a demonic or spiritual possession.⁴¹⁶ Hippocratic medicine was in fact actively deconstructing the edifice of temple medicine and folk beliefs by openly mocking its founding principles.⁴¹⁷ Yet, alongside the humoral tradition, supernatural accounts of madness would persist through the centuries, albeit in different forms.⁴¹⁸ The Middle Ages would not escape this duality, even though the period is still easily characterized as a ‘dark’ and superstitious age. One cannot deny that Christianity reinforced a demonic understanding of madness through “an apocalyptic narrative of sin and redemption in which the human race was vastly outnumbered by otherworldly spiritual beings.”⁴¹⁹ In such a narrative, reason was considered as divine, while mental derangement was seen as the sign of a demonic assault on the soul.⁴²⁰ However, the introduction of Greek medicine in the Western continent through contact with Muslim territories during the 11th century would soon suggest a different, but not incompatible reasoning that explained insanity.⁴²¹

Actually, both humoral and demonic interpretations were perceived as valid, as physicians would sometimes themselves identify a case as supernatural and thus defer its treatment to religious care.⁴²² Nonetheless, the difficulty lied in the distinction between demonic and natural cases of mental illness, given that symptoms were very similar. Peculiar symptoms such as “abnormal powers, convulsions, blaspheming, abhorrence of sacred objects, and aggression”⁴²³ would sometimes help to recognize a demonic intervention, but it remained a perilous enterprise even throughout the early modern period. In fact, the greater circulation of Ancient medical texts during the Renaissance started to challenge supernatural interpretations of mental illness.⁴²⁴ Yet, simultaneously, melancholy and madness were increasingly deemed to be demonic, reflecting “the gradual demonization of the world that was such a feature of the

⁴¹⁶ ROY PORTER, ‘Gods and Demons’, in *Madness: A Brief History*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 15-16.

⁴¹⁷ ANDREW SCULL, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴¹⁹ ROY PORTER, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴²¹ ANDREW SCULL, ‘The Darkness and the Dawn’, in *Madness in Civilization: A Cultural History of Insanity from the Bible to Freud, from the Madhouse to Modern Medicine*, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 81.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴²³ CLAIRE TRENER, PEREGRINE HORDEN, ‘Madness in the Middle Ages’, in *The Routledge History of Madness and Mental Health*, Routledge, 2017, p. 68.

⁴²⁴ ANDREW SCULL, ‘Melancholie and Madnesse’, in *Madness in Civilization: A Cultural History of Insanity from the Bible to Freud, from the Madhouse to Modern Medicine*, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 121.

Reformation and Counter Reformation period.”⁴²⁵ While a growing number of authors were trying to distinguish natural illnesses from religious ones, some of them, like Richard Napier, failed to do so, as his treatments often mixed medical and religious cures (from traditional blood-lettings to protective amulets and incantations).⁴²⁶ The difficulty to isolate a naturalistic explanation of madness would then be reflected on the health market, which constituted “an eclectic mix of magic, religion, supernaturalism and medicine that seems to have matched the beliefs of both the learned and *hoi polloi* [...]”⁴²⁷ However, distinctions between religious and natural cases and between real and feigned ones would start to appear on stage: “[...] Shakespeare represents distinctions between female hysteria and feigned male melancholy in *Hamlet*, between supernatural witchcraft and natural alienation in *Macbeth*, and between feigned possession and natural madness in *King Lear*.”⁴²⁸ Progressively, naturalistic readings of madness would come to be endorsed by the educated, even though, as underlined by Andrew Scull, “old traditions and beliefs still retained much of their power, and their hold over the human imagination.”⁴²⁹

It is fair to state that the secularization of mental illness, initiated by the Cartesian philosophical separation of body and soul⁴³⁰, is today achieved in our highly medicalized and mostly disenchanting Western society. However, remnants of a supernatural (and mostly demonic) interpretation of mental illness have since frequently circulated in our cultural representations of it. The most obvious occurrences of such traces are to be found in supernatural fiction, in genres such as the Gothic and the fantastic. The Gothic genre integrated the 19th century’s enthusiasm for spiritualism and early developments of modern psychology, which would be perceived through its horrific storylines mingling supernatural terror with symptoms of mental disturbance.⁴³¹ The association of the two is rather revealing of how mental illness was still correlated to evil, supernatural forces and thus narratively exploited to provoke fear.⁴³² Signs of mental confusion and occult elements would sometimes overlap and be hard to distinguish, even though the author would often rationalize the supernatural at the end of the story, like Ann

⁴²⁵ A. P. COUDERT, ‘Melancholy, Madness, and Demonic Possession in the Early Modern West’, in *Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, Walter de Gruyter, 2014, p. 650.

⁴²⁶ C. T. NEELY, “‘Documents in Madness’: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Early Modern Culture”, in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1991, p. 330.

⁴²⁷ ANDREW SCULL, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁴²⁸ C. T. NEELY, *op. cit.*, p. 323

⁴²⁹ ANDREW SCULL, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁴³⁰ ROY PORTER, ‘Fools and Folly’, in *Madness: A Brief History*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 68.

⁴³¹ S. F. CRAIG, *Ghosts of the Mind: The Supernatural and Madness in Victorian Gothic Literature*, Honors Theses, University of Southern Mississippi, 2012, pp. 1-2.

⁴³² HELEN SMALL, ‘Madness’, in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, 1998, Macmillan Press, p. 153.

Radcliffe in the *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).⁴³³ Conversely, the fantastic genre as defined by Todorov would maintain and play on the unresolved ambiguity between a rational (and regularly psychological) explanation and an occult one. This hesitation is in fact what defines the fantastic story: “‘J’en viens presque à croire’ : voilà la formule qui résume l’esprit du fantastique. [...] c’est l’hésitation qui lui donne vie.”⁴³⁴ A similar hesitation can now be found in a number of horror films portraying a blurred boundary between symptoms of mental illness and supernatural interventions. While films like *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Uninvited* (2009) give a psychological resolution to the horrific events taking place, some, like *Hereditary* (2018) and *Daniel Isn’t Real* (2019) reverse this trope by confirming the reality of demonic forces tormenting characters that were previously deemed as mad. Conversely, films like *The Shining* (1980) and *Donnie Darko* (2001) suggest both readings but never truly elucidate the mystery. Whether the ambiguity is resolved or not by the end of the film, these films still “echo superstitions and stigmas that are already deep-rooted in varied cultures and beliefs – including the idea that mental illness is somehow otherworldly or supernatural.”⁴³⁵

This long-lasting construction of insanity as supernatural is not just a product of cultural and religious beliefs but is actually inscribed in a larger narrative that identifies madness as otherness: “The strangeness, the otherness, the fearsomeness of madness – where else was that rooted but in the unseen universe populated by the divine and the diabolical?”⁴³⁶ This narrative, although evolving through time, still colours contemporary portrayals of insanity.

MADNESS AS OTHERNESS: A NARRATIVE OF DIFFERENCE AND UNPREDICTABLE VIOLENCE

Mental illness has historically been pictured as inherently Other, often by portraying those who suffer from it as different and potentially dangerous because unpredictable. However, it is important to first recognize that more favourable representations of madness have existed and still continue to. For example, mental distress has sometimes been linked to creativity, an assumption that was already shared in Ancient Greece, where artists were believed to be animated by a ‘divine madness’ that fuelled their creativity.⁴³⁷ Plato would describe it as the

⁴³³ NATHALIE PRINCE, ‘Diachronies’, in *Le fantastique*, Armand Colin, 2008, p. 44.

⁴³⁴ TZVETAN TODORV, ‘Définition du fantastique’, in *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Éditions du Seuil, 1970, p. 35.

⁴³⁵ ARWA HAIDER, ‘How Cinema Stigmatises Mental Illness’, in *BBC*, August 2018.

⁴³⁶ ANDREW SCULL, ‘Madness in the Ancient World’, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁴³⁷ ROY PORTER, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

“divine fury of the poet”, an image that would later be echoed in Theseus’ speech in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1600)⁴³⁸:

The poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven.
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(5.1.12-17)

The Renaissance would also popularize the association of melancholy and creative genius through characters like Hamlet: “on the stage, there skulked the melancholy malcontent, clad all in black, disaffected, disdainful, dangerous, yet brilliantly discerning and diamond sharp.”⁴³⁹ Another familiar early modern trope was the belief that madness was in fact the only sane response to an alienating society, thus inverting the roles of the sane and insane.⁴⁴⁰ While there are other examples of positive accounts of mental illness, those would still be largely outnumbered by stigmatizing depictions of it: “If historians of madness – and most media critics – agree on one point, it is that madness has been systematically stigmatised in Western culture.”⁴⁴¹ Those we call ‘mad’ have continuously been deemed as Other: they are sinners punished by God, are possessed by demonic and evil forces and are animalized; they are anything but ‘like us’. Their portrayals deeply reflect this otherness, since even their physicality is coded as visibly different:

Thus, a standard icon of madness since classical times has been dishevelment; wild, unkempt, hair and tattered clothing have long provided an influential visual stereotype of madness. [...] These are stereotypical conceptions that make it clear how madness is

⁴³⁸ PETER HOLLAND, ed., *The Oxford Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁴³⁹ ROY PORTER, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴⁴¹ STEPHEN HARPER, ‘Framing Madness: Historical and Cultural Debates’, in *Madness, Power and the Media Class, Gender and Race in Popular Representations of Mental Distress*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 2.

seen: as visible differences of appearance and behaviour, which demarcate a symbolic boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’.⁴⁴²

Although these images are not accurate, they have been internalized by those who suffer from mental illness and still pervade our representations of insanity: “images of madness as difference remain remarkably constant.”⁴⁴³

What lies under this othering narrative is the fear of an unpredictable violence towards others, fed by centuries of depicting the ‘mad’ as sinful or possessed by evil forces.⁴⁴⁴ It became one of the most recurrent themes in film and televisual productions, through the proliferation of ‘mad, bad, and dangerous’ characters:

In film and television drama, for example, they are often presented as unpredictable (and often ‘incurable’) killers, sometimes with a remarkable degree of clinical implausibility. Such images may often create the misleading impression that people in psychological distress are to be feared.⁴⁴⁵

Alongside depictions of mentally distressed characters as engaged in violent behaviour and as visibly other, various film devices such as “the individual point of view, close-up shots, discordant music, atmospheric lighting, setting selection and scene juxtapositions”⁴⁴⁶ are exploited and serve a similar purpose in marking those characters as different and potentially dangerous. For that reason, a number of films (especially horror and thriller features) are legitimately criticized for their fearful and inaccurate depiction of mental illness (whether through the use of the supernatural or the ‘maniac killer’ trope). While data do suggest a potential link between violence and mental illness⁴⁴⁷, it cannot on its own constitute a direct cause for violence, since other important factors like substance abuse and socio-economic conditions must be taken into consideration.⁴⁴⁸ The problem is that media such as film and television tend to over-represent the mentally distressed as violent, often without suggesting the influence of co-factors. Even when not directly portrayed as potentially dangerous, mentally

⁴⁴² SIMON CROSS, ‘Visualising Madness: Mental Distress and Public Representation’, in *Mediating Madness: Mental Distress and cultural representation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 131.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁴⁴⁴ STEPHEN HARPER, ‘Stigmatisation, Violence and Media Criticism’, in *Madness, Power and the Media Class, Gender and Race in Popular Representations of Mental Distress*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 32.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

⁴⁴⁶ JANE PIRKIS *et al.*, ‘A Review of the Literature Regarding Fictional Film and Television Portrayals of Mental Illness’, Program Evaluation Unit, The University of Melbourne, 2005, p. 7.

⁴⁴⁷ STEPHEN HARPER, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁴⁴⁸ HEATHER STUART, ‘Violence and Mental Illness: An Overview’, in *World Psychiatry*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2003.

distressed characters are confined to othering characterizations such as the ‘eccentric, different and rebellious free-spirit’, the ‘nymphomaniac’ female patient or the ‘narcissistic parasite’, to name only a few.⁴⁴⁹ These common mediatic narratives are not only inaccurate, but, as suggested by several studies, they may also contribute to the larger, real-life stigmatization of mental illness.⁴⁵⁰

**ECHOES OF STIGMATIZING ACCOUNTS OF MENTAL DISTRESS IN KURZEL’S *MACBETH*:
VIOLENCE, THE ‘VETERAN PROBLEM’, AND THE UNCANNINESS OF MADNESS**

Kurzel’s *Macbeth* alludes to narratives of otherness and violence in several respects. As discussed earlier, in its early modern context Shakespeare’s play implied the responsibility of evil forces for the series of violent acts committed by Macbeth, whether those evil forces were supernatural (embodied by the Weïrd Sisters) or human (the Macbeths’ choice to trust evil forces to satisfy their ambition).⁴⁵¹ By psychologizing the play’s supernatural forces and by underscoring the Macbeths’ ambitious interests as a cause of violence (undoubtedly more than was the case in original productions of the play), Kurzel displaces this question of responsibility onto Macbeth’s mental distress. This shift forces the viewer to wonder whether Macbeth would have acted violently had he not been mentally unstable, instead of wondering if Macbeth would have acted violently had he never met the Weïrd Sisters. Nonetheless, the Macbeths’ harsh living conditions implied by the frailty of their settlements and by their child’s premature death contrast with their status⁴⁵² and may suggest a co-factor to Macbeth’s violence. This plot alteration indeed reinforces a reading of Macbeth’s violence as a reaction to societal inequalities, an interpretation that Jeffrey Wilson already held of the original play.⁴⁵³ Moreover, the film undoubtedly suggests how the unforgiving Scottish environment may contribute to Macbeth’s distress, as discussed in chapter 4. Yet, those factors may appear as rather contextual to the regular viewer, especially in the face of Macbeth’s mental state, which Kurzel particularly accentuates. The film’s insistence on war violence and Macbeth being characterized as a veteran suffering from a severe case of PTSD adds an important nuance to the question of Macbeth’s violence by emphasizing the responsibility of war, and thus, of the societal system that forces men to engage in violent conflicts. However, pointing at the cause of Macbeth’s insanity does not necessarily erase the film’s problematic connection of mental distress to violence.

⁴⁴⁹ JANE PIRKIS *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁴⁵⁰ JANE PIRKIS *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁴⁵¹ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of moral interpretations of *Macbeth*.

⁴⁵² Especially because the original play had the Macbeths living in a castle and not in a modest, improvised village.

⁴⁵³ J. R. WILSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 453-485.

Furthermore, characterizing Macbeth as a veteran committing violent acts because of his traumatic experience of war creates another layer of stigmatization. Doing so evokes the inaccurate correlation between mental distress and violence but also what many called the ‘veteran problem’, a similarly hurtful narrative that identifies the veteran as a source of a potential and unpredictable violence. This narrative, which one could trace back to the early modern period at least⁴⁵⁴, became a popular sociological and mediatic discourse at the end of the Second World War, expressing public anxieties and fears surrounding the return and ‘readjustment’ (i.e., the transition from military to civilian life) of soldiers.⁴⁵⁵ Those concerns were raised by social scientists who believed that the experience of war had rendered servicemen inapt to civilian life and society.⁴⁵⁶ The veteran was thus intrinsically seen as Other, as a stranger who no longer belonged to the ‘military world’ and who was not yet reintegrated into society: “sociologists often saw the veteran as a dislocated, marginalized figure, as an outsider.”⁴⁵⁷ Just like the stranger and the ‘mad’, the veteran was seen as potentially dangerous towards the community, especially because people believed that the war irreparably transformed him into a violent, cold-blooded killer.⁴⁵⁸ Media attention would then fuel public fears with a proliferation of horrific crime stories involving ex-soldiers: “So many press reports made an implicit connection between the veteran and violent crime that the veteran-criminal became a ubiquitous postwar stereotype.”⁴⁵⁹ Already damaged by the press, the image of the veteran would then be further tainted by the atrocities of the Vietnam war: “The Vietnam veteran became a stereotype as a psychologically damaged and socially isolated character.”⁴⁶⁰ The Vietnam veteran was not only seen as violent and unstable but was also easily represented as psychotic, barbaric and sexually violent.⁴⁶¹ It was only after the Vietnam war that PTSD was introduced in the *DSM-III* and exploited as a political argument against war, which turned the veteran into a victim. A powerful narrative emerged from it, portraying veterans as victims, either of public hostility or of war itself, “which had left them physically and mentally destroyed and alienated from the home front [...]”⁴⁶² While veteran narratives have continued to evolve

⁴⁵⁴ ALENA PAPAYANIS, ‘The Veteran Problem’, in *Mental Illness in Popular Media: Essays on the Representation of Disorders*, McFarland & Company, 2012, p. 111.

⁴⁵⁵ IAN BROOKS, ‘The Discourse of Veteran Readjustment’, in *Film noir: A Critical Introduction*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p. 158.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁰ ALENA PAPAYANIS, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

through media like cinema⁴⁶³, the question of post-war violence still haunts the collective unconscious: “A number of veterans groups say that some employers are afraid to hire veterans because they fear they could become violent, perhaps as a result of portrayals in the media.”⁴⁶⁴ Just like the ‘veteran problem’ pushed harmful othering stereotypes about the mentally distressed onto the image of the returning soldier, Kurzel’s characterization of Macbeth as a veteran acting violently because of his PTSD echoes negative representations of mental illness. Kurzel’s *Macbeth* also integrates othering views of mental distress, mostly by emphasizing the strangeness of Macbeth’s behaviour after Duncan’s murder, an event that marks the breaking point of his psychological deterioration. Minutes after the murder, he is portrayed as both confused and menacing, and the oddity of his behaviour is emphasized by the concerned looks of those who surround him. While the first signs of his PTSD were represented in a rather immersive and empathic way, his descent into insanity alienates him much more from the viewers and is therefore much more othering. For example, while Macbeth tries to wash the blood off his hands under the pouring rain, his incoherence and confusion is emphasized by a high angle shot, followed by a hand-held close-up of him laughing and smearing blood on his face. Soon after, Lady Macbeth joins him and watches the scene with concern and fear before trying to help him regain his senses. Much later, as his symptoms worsen, short montage sequences are exploited to display the extent of his mental distress, each time showing him standing alone in his bedroom with the use of long shots that emphasize his isolation. In both sequences, the strangeness of his conduct is underlined by static camera work contrasting with accelerated images and multiple cuts showing Macbeth behaving incoherently from different angles: standing still for what seems like long periods of time, staring into the void, jogging around his room, manipulating his sword... These sequences create an othering depiction of Macbeth, especially the second one, which is accompanied by a voice over that further reinforces the King’s otherness. The excerpt, as written in the screenplay draft, is quite telling:

Macbeth, dead-eyed, swings a sword in his chamber.

LENNOX (V.O.)

Some say he’s mad. Others, that lesser hate him,

Do call it valiant fury.

⁴⁶³ For example, Gulf war veterans were often depicted as uncompensated, misunderstood, and mistreated victims. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁴⁶⁴ DAVE PHILIPPS, ‘Coming Home to Damaging Stereotypes’, in *New York Times*, February 2015.

Macbeth rocks in a beam of light from a window, alone.

LENNOX (V.O.)

But, for certain,

He cannot buckle his distemper'd cause

Within the belt of rule.

Macbeth jogs around the castle's rooms, on edge.

LENNOX (V.O.)

Those he commands move only in command...

Macbeth drinks wine at dawn, its effects lost on him.

LENNOX (V.O.)

Nothing in love.

*Macbeth stares into space, his crown perched on his brow.*⁴⁶⁵

Macbeth's otherness is also highlighted by his appearance, as he is regularly shown only wearing a nightgown, even when outdoors. Although less grotesque, his demeanour is reminiscent of the standard stereotype portraying the mentally distressed as 'dishevelled' and wild in appearance. As his mental state deteriorates, his physical appearance does too: he rides and walks outside in his nightgown (and, if dressed, he is barefoot), his face has a pale and sickly complexion, and his hair is ruffled. Interestingly, Lady Macbeth will be depicted similarly when she starts to struggle with symptoms of mental distress: she rides to Inverness in her nightgown despite the weather, wearing her hair loose (while it is usually braided and tied back).

Even if Macbeth's early symptoms are explored more sympathetically by means of slow motion, hand-held shooting, and close-ups, Kurzel creates a feeling of uncanniness and unease that tints the depiction of Macbeth's mental distress. The vivid, surreal colours that translate Macbeth's mental state contrast with the dull Scottish landscapes, and the tensed string-dominated score establishes a strange and oppressive atmosphere that renders Macbeth's experience as Other. This impression of otherness is then fuelled by horror-like visions that

⁴⁶⁵ TODD LOUISO, *op. cit.*, p. 72. Italics mine.

were originally supernatural but that are internalized in Kurzel's adaptation. The play's disturbing supernaturalism is here "maintained", but psychologized, which redirects feelings of uncanniness onto Macbeth's distressed mind, in a way similar to how Gothic fiction proceeded:

[...] precisely at the moment reason casts ghosts out of the material world and relocates them in the recesses of the mind, the rational subject becomes prey to the uncanny, unseen, and often unfathomable machinations of the psyche.⁴⁶⁶

By doing so, Kurzel simultaneously presents a disenchanting version of the play's supernatural elements while playing on the aesthetic codes of supernatural horror, which echoes long-established constructions of mental distress as supernatural. Kurzel cannot truly secularize *Macbeth*'s supernatural elements by psychologizing them, since, as mentioned previously, our Western perception of insanity is inscribed in demonic and supernatural narratives of it. Although Kurzel does not leave much space to hesitation, the play's supernaturalism continues to haunt his adaptation and thus revives earlier enchanted accounts of madness.

In the end, Kurzel's psychologization of *Macbeth*'s supernatural elements can be interpreted as a way of actualizing 'outdated'⁴⁶⁷ fears for a contemporary audience. While at first, it may look reassuring to attribute these occult apparitions to mental distress (in Macbeth's case, to PTSD and grief), Kurzel's adaptation still manages to create an uncanny atmosphere that underlines the otherness of the psyche rather than the otherness of the occult. Despite the effects of anti-stigma campaigns, mental illness is still perceived to this day as threatening or dangerous, mostly because of stigmatizing depictions of it in the media.⁴⁶⁸ Kurzel's *Macbeth* is not an exception to the rule, as its plot and aesthetics echo othering narratives of madness and post-war violence and thus reinforce the film's haunting atmosphere. After a closer examination of his filmography, it appears that Kurzel is particularly drawn to such stories, considering how *Snowtown* (2011), his first feature film, and *Nitram* (2021), his latest creation, both depict mentally ill characters engaging in violent, horrific crimes. As he expressed it himself, madness is to him a source of anxiety and unpredictability, and suggests reaching a point of no return:

[...] we're all paper thin. It's almost like we're standing *on the precipice of madness*. I think there's a very small step from opening up a door and sinking into that. I think those

⁴⁶⁶ SCOTT BREWSTER, 'Seeing Things: Gothic and the Madness of Interpretation', in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 483.

⁴⁶⁷ Outdated for a majority of people, in Western countries. I am aware that beliefs in the supernatural (and the fears that result from it) are still shared by a number of people in our Western society.

⁴⁶⁸ JANE Pirkis *et al*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

questions and those *fears about what we could become* – we wrestle with those everyday. There’s something really interesting about Macbeth and the way he opens that door and walks down the staircase.⁴⁶⁹

One could thus wonder if this anxiety actually led Kurzel to redirect fear towards the unpredictable distressed mind rather than supernatural and evil forces, which are now less of a concern to a regular, contemporary viewer.

⁴⁶⁹ RYAN LAMBIE, *op. cit.* Italics mine.

CONCLUSION

Although *Macbeth*'s ambiguous but powerful supernaturalism invites directors to exploit its cinematic potential, some, like Justin Kurzel, decide to interpret it more rationally by confining it to Macbeth's psyche. One could easily attribute this reading to the modern and disenchanting mind, but, as this dissertation has shown, the construction of an adaptation involves a multiplicity of factors, such as textual elements from the source, the critical heritage, the cinematic context, and artistic intentions.

To better apprehend *Macbeth*'s supernatural elements, chapter 1 discussed its historical context, which was characterized by coexisting but contradictory perceptions of the cosmos, the body, and space. Those perceptions oscillated between the fluid, which allowed for supernatural interventions, and the stable, which intrinsically could not "bend or curve". Those paradoxical views would then interrogate understandings of the supernatural, which would be simultaneously regarded with scepticism and belief, a duality that also defined how it was conceived and represented through opposing paradigms such as the stable/fluid, the material/immaterial, and the seen/unseen.

Chapter 2 emphasized how *Macbeth* stages this larger spatial confusion and how it also echoes a certain hesitation between sceptical and believing depictions of the supernatural. The Weird Sisters are never precisely characterized, as they are a strange amalgam of witches, pagan deities, and demonic figures, while Banquo's ghost could either be a revenant or a demonic impersonation. Even the "air-drawn dagger" that Macbeth recognizes as hallucinatory could in fact be a demonic or divine sign that the thane misinterprets. Furthermore, the text hints at the possibility that these elements may actually be subjective, which encouraged critical debates on the matter. Growing interests in psychology, the problematization of dualistic morality, and the development of a naturalistic heritage further supported psychologizing interpretations of the play. Those would soon appear in stage and screen productions of the play, thus facilitating the circulation of such readings through various adaptations.

Kurzel undoubtedly exploited the ambiguities of the original text as much as the psychological readings that they inspired in critics. However, as explained in chapter 3, his own cinematic and generic sensibilities also favoured the erasure of the supernatural by urging a desire for authenticity (not to be confounded with a strict sense of realism). The film's ties to Australian sensory cinema and to the war film genre definitely created the ideal vessel for an immersive portrayal of Macbeth's tortured psyche, which did not leave much space for the intrusion of the

occult. Those stylistic and generic affinities would then serve Kurzel's own interpretation of Macbeth's character as a soldier suffering from PTSD and grief.

Chapter 4 then thoroughly examined how Kurzel erased the play's occult aspects by integrating them into this war narrative. The dagger scene, Banquo's ghost, and the prophesying apparitions are all depicted as hallucinations fuelled by Macbeth's PTSD and parental grief, as suggested by the film's editing (which underlines the unreliability of Macbeth's senses) and by the haunting presence of soldiers and children in his visions. Kurzel's "witches", however, seem to transcend Macbeth's psyche. While they are demystified (through their appearance, speech and demeanour), their objective existence is questioned because they occupy multiple spaces at once: the natural (that they never truly leave, thus suggesting their assimilation to it), the psychological (at once individual and global, as they are closely associated to Macbeth but also appear to other traumatized characters), and the peripheral (as they embody a marginal, repressed social unconscious that is safe from this violent warrior society). Although they are ambiguous because they inhabit those different spaces, they never truly appear as supernatural. Moreover, the film's stable and dominating environment prevents any sense of spatial fluidity, although the latter was central to the play's supernaturalism.

Finally, chapter 5 argued that Kurzel's PTSD narrative suggests a correlation between mental distress and violence, which echoes long-standing fears about mental illness and veteran violence. Moreover, the psychologization of the play's supernatural elements relates feelings of uncanniness and horror to symptoms of mental illness, an impression that is reinforced by the tensed score, surreal editing, and the othering depiction of Macbeth's behaviour and appearance. Kurzel replaces the supernatural Other by the otherness of the disturbed mind, and, by doing so, appeals to contemporary fears that surround mental illness.

Overall, this dissertation has attempted to offer a detailed study of Kurzel's adaptation of *Macbeth* through his peculiar treatment of the supernatural. It allowed to appreciate the different narrative and stylistic means through which Kurzel expressed his vision but also emphasized some of the many aspects that may have constructed his intentions. While this dissertation often relied on comparing the film to its primary source, it tried to avoid the fidelity question by recognizing the importance of historical and intertextual contexts. However, other contextual aspects of this adaptation remain to be explored, such as the reception of Kurzel's disenchanted reading, or the institution of independent cinema that may have encouraged such a re-interpretation of the Scottish play. Furthermore, considering the specificity of its topic, this study certainly neglected other themes that permeate Kurzel's *Macbeth*, like the representation

of children as successors of violence, or his depiction of female characters as mother figures (turning Lady Macbeth into a grieving mother and the witches into caring mothers). If anything, these openings that were left unanswered highlight how the process of adaptation is multi-layered and may be studied from a variety of viewpoints.

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