

“Stands Scotland Where it did?”: Re-locating and Dis-locating the Scottish Play on Scottish Film*

Alfredo MICHEL MODENESSI
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

For Sarah, with all my heart—and the mirrors of ice and fire
In memoriam María Vilchis de Rodríguez

Shakespeare’s “Scottish play” is cursed. There is ample proof and we all know it. And yet, despite its reputation, *Macbeth* is probably a play more sinned against than sinning. Nondescript performances of it have contributed as often as sheer prejudice—and more than bad luck and unsolved mysteries—to scare or bore audiences away from theatres, movie houses, and even TV lounges the world over.¹

Of the best, and best-known, filmic versions, only Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu-Djo*, 1957) has received positive recognition from a majority of shakespeareans and civilians—and even there the role of adaptation in its history of critical success cannot be underestimated: “Without worrying about fidelity to the original, we can easily enjoy it for itself” (Barnet, in Coursen, 1997: 183). At least one similar thing may be said of seemingly “straightforward” versions of *Macbeth* that have employed Shakespeare’s playtext as the basis for their filmscripts: presumably given—and certainly *despite*—the expectations of “realistic representation” that cinema unfortunately too often invites, films that at least superficially try to be “faithful to the original” have usually tried either to *locate* or, more significantly and accurately, to *re-locate* the setting of Shakespeare’s play, itself already a problematic fiction named “Scotland” (supposedly in the 11th century) constructed from an early modern English

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the seminar “The Scottish Play” during the 34th meeting of the *Shakespeare Association of America* in Philadelphia, april 2006.

¹ We’re supposed to have had our share of weird accidents south of the border. The most memorable, and lamentable, instance of a Mexican urban legend in this regard is said to have occurred during a 1950’s production. A forgotten Macbeth was fighting some forgotten Macduff when the tip of one of the swords broke clean off and flew straight into the eye of an unfortunate first-row beholder. Needless to say, that was the last performance of that production, to the emotional—and financial—distress of the company. Nothing else is known of the poor fellow who lost his eye except that he lived to tell of his disgrace and never again set foot in a theatre. Another “thick tale” for the black record of the unmentionable play. Fact, fiction? “What care I?”, says the protagonist to Banquo’s ghost.

playwright’s perspective chiefly through his reading of a black legend that developed along 400 years of violent re-arrangement of national powers and identities in Great Britain. With the dubious exceptions of Orson Welles’s film (*Macbeth*, 1948)—which may generously be said to have something of “Scotland” in it, even if that means mostly fake, and ugly, moors and accents—and Roman Polansky’s picture (*Macbeth*, 1971)—a pastiche of all things Polansky himself, Kenneth Tynan, and the art director could imagine as providing “medieval” and maybe “Scottish” flavour to their allegory of a world mired in modern political corruption—whenever Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* has been turned into film, its setting has been *Anyland* tagged “Scotland” in the fiction at hand—e.g. the apocalyptic, post-industrial, Mad-Maxian wasteland of Michael Bogdanov’s *Macbeth* (1999); or the anachronistic retro-American suburbs of Billy Morrissette’s *Scotland PA* (2001), to name only two—but hardly ever something like “Either exterior or interior, any time before sunset. Somewhere (the heath?), Scotland, 11th century. *Thunder and lightning. Enter three witches*”.

Unlike most other MacMovies, however, Jeremy Freeston’s *Macbeth* (1997) claims, even on the jacket of its DVD case, to be “authentically set in eleventh century Scotland” and to “conjure a world of grim battlefields, desolate moors, forbidding castles and haunted caverns”. Freeston’s *Macbeth* is a low-budget Scottish film of the Scottish play that was ultimately pushed down to premiere on television due to insufficient support for a theatrical release—despite earning the main prize at the 30th US International Film and Video Festival. It was pointedly designed, financed, set, and shot in Scotland with a majority of Scottish actors playing against Scottish landscapes and historic landmarks for backgrounds and locations (Blackness Castle, Dumferline Abbey), and with expressly researched and carefully reproduced period costumes and props. In short, Freeston’s movie was devised as the ultimate *Scottish* version of Shakespeare’s “Scottish play”. To date still almost totally overlooked by both general and specialized critics, Freeston’s *Macbeth* may be viewed on the one hand from a, say, “theoretical-filmic” perspective and very likely found “foul”, as well as, on the other, from a broader, more contemporary “cultural” stance whereby it may turn out to be rather “fair”. Although we all probably know where *that* leads, it may yet be worth the while to explore both options, since this picture is, more than a rarity, the one filmic take on *Macbeth* that dared look for ways to relate to Shakespeare’s greatest monster strictly from within its site of origin.

1. “...in form as palpable...”

Both as co-writer and director, Freeston at first seems excessively “worr[ie]d about fidelity to the original”, or perhaps excessively worried about a *notion of fidelity* that in the end may somehow do little justice to *Macbeth*—or to any text that may be called poetic drama, for that matter. At first glance, Freeston’s choice of a setting purportedly reproducing the material conditions of 11th century Scotland may not be a particular-

ly apt one with regard to “doing” Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, a play conveying a fiction of Scotland constructed by an early modern English mind working under the pressing conditions and tensions of the recent succession of a Scottish king to the throne of England after the 45 year rule of the last of the Tudor monarchs. Shakespeare created such fiction on the basis of a long-in-the-making black legend that had already and conveniently transformed Scottish history into an English-friendly self-fashioning of British history.² To be fair, however, other practical factors incided on Freeston’s choices —and the artistic flaws emerging thereof.

Freeston’s movie is a well-meaning low-budget effort, largely funded by public subscription, filmed and processed almost entirely in Scotland by Cromwell Productions and La Mancha Productions in association with Grampian Television. *Macbeth* was Freeston’s first film as a director and also his first as co-writer; before and since he has had extensive experience in directing, producing and editing, mainly for TV. For *Macbeth*, he shared writing credits with executive producer Bob Carruthers, who also produced and co-wrote the screenplay of *Chasing the Deer* (dir. Graham Holloway, 1994), a previous release by Cromwell funded and shot in similar ways, where Freeston played a minor acting part. Connections between *Chasing the Deer* and *Macbeth* are neither few nor fortuitous. Apart from the obvious links in terms of production and writing, the two films focus on crucial episodes in the history of Scotland (*Chasing the Deer* deals with the Jacobite rebellion of 1745), and despite evident budget constraints, both likewise seek to reproduce their historical contexts “accurately” by using natural and historical locations and recreating costumes and props as faithfully as possible. In both cases there seemed to be a will to “document” Scottish history (or legend) as film.

Resorting to Shakespeare’s “Scottish play” for that purpose may be risky, however. Not only Shakespeare’s script has little to do with historical and cultural *facts* about the actual MacBeth (as opposed to Shakespeare’s Macbeth) and *his* Scotland, but it may also be argued that his playtext hardly tolerates —let alone demands— a “historically accurate”, or simply “accurate” approach.³ *Macbeth* is a deceptive poetic drama where, deliberately or as a consequence of his clashing sources, Shakespeare enables an exploration of the meeting points of, and interstices between, a variety of discourses in highly contrasting ways: chronicle, legend, history, Christian and Germanic mythology, contemporary politics, royal fixations, his own most twisted moments of dark or perverse poetry —these and more collude and collide into a play where “sound and fury” prevail over sense, and atmosphere is deeply intertwined with action. *Macbeth* is never “done when ’tis done”. It is a play of voices originating in private “fears and scruples” violently thrown against a frame of public conflicts and interests —a tale of shaken minds engaging the affairs of state and beyond.

² For a detailed discussion of this see Michel (1998).

³ I derive the notion of “accuracy” from a review of *Chasing the Deer* by Jim Jackson (1994), available from imdb.com: “the quality and accuracy of the costumes and scenery belies this low budget production”.

On stage, *Macbeth* is usually more effectively performed “upon the heath” —the more austere, the better. Productions that try too hard to ground it on specifically referential scenarios often fail to achieve anything at all. And the same seems true for the screen. *Macbeth* may “enkindle you” to period recreation only to “betray [you] in deepest consequence”. It may work better set against a vague atmosphere than on the large canvas of epic, or the still too large, and yet narrow, territories of realism —especially if those territories are close in spirit to some place in Southern California. *Macbeth* seems more a business for the late Kozintsev or Tarkovsky than for the present Spielberg, Scott or Howard. Still, Freeston’s stress on displaying the play “accurately” and “realistically” is significant in more interesting ways. He offers ingenuously “filmic” solutions to some of the play’s most famous staging problems that are stimulating in as much as they keep the action anchored on solid, material grounds, as well as unglamorized and yet free from overdone crudeness, while offering options for creative interpretation.⁴ Accents —native or not— are pointedly and legitimately “Scottish”, not innocently fake and inconsistent as those in Welles’s film, but strong and intriguingly capable of making well-known lines sufficiently alien to the ear. Thus, they provide a hint that in this film the narrative inscribed in Shakespeare’s playtext is not so much “authentically set” as it is *re*-located, curiously, unto its “original” setting, and at once *dis*-located with regard to Shakespeare’s fiction of Scotland.

To carry out his project of an “authentic” *Macbeth*, Freeston counted on mostly consistent performances by an undistinguished but capable supporting cast. Of the leads, Helen Baxendale, then 27 years of age, was clearly equipped for the part of a young, “cribbed and confined”, ambitious and at once deeply frustrated Lady, and reached high points, especially in her early bits —although her sleep-walking scene is cliché-ridden and lukewarm. Unfortunately, since “the whole [narrative] strategy of the film [is] to immerse the spectators into Macbeth’s subjectivity and personal world” (Hatchuel, 2005: no pagination), despite its many commendable achievements in terms of performances and direction, the film ultimately goes south and finally sinks, mostly on account of the wretched acting of Jason Connery (son of a much better known Scottish actor needless to identify) as the title character. To call him inexpressive would border upon flattery — he is not only miscast but resourceless: by turns he is flat, leans on commonplace, looks firsty, or seems anxious to prove that he belongs in the cast of a famous tragedy. Thus, a great deal of Freeston’s good directorial ideas are affected by the stiffness of his main player, and flounder where they might have thrived on the chosen path of “filmic realism”. Unlike her husband, Baxendale’s Lady (whose costumes, hairdo and make-up at some points make her resemble Sargent’s portrait of Ellen Terry, doubtless deliberately) is all business and pointedly disregards conventional delivery in favour of intensity. The rest follow suit, although the Weird Sisters are both strangely lame

⁴ For instance, Freeston materializes the “dagger of the mind” as the shadow of a cross on the floor of a chapel where Macbeth seems to be seeking spiritual comfort before committing his “deed”.

(or at least oddly tame), so that their scenes, like the general performance by Connery, are a heavy contrast to the Lady's or the rest of the lords'.⁵

Co-writers Carruthers and Freeston do little to help the chief member of the crew from sinking, perhaps looking to keep the playtext's complexity under control by means of character simplification. For instance, they omit the opening and closing sections of I.3, and dismiss I.4 altogether, thereby depriving Macbeth of his soliloquies about "horrible imaginings" (I.3) and "black and deep desires" (I.4). Hence, Lady Macbeth is introduced immediately after the Generals receive the Sisters' salutations at a sunny and green spot—nothing like your average "heath". As she finishes a good combination of mischievously youthful and sexually charged delivery of the "murdering ministers" speech, her husband arrives, at first amused and then more bewildered than troubled, somewhat mindless, bluntly seeking to find comfort from the recent hurlyburly in her body. A young and attractive couple, they perform the now perhaps excessively familiar let's-initiate-sex-while-we-talk-of-murder routine, not without rendering it interesting still, as she makes clear who is the leader of this gang of two. This is *not* a problem, of course; she certainly *may be*—and for all I know, she *must*. However, something may not be totally satisfying here: given the absence of Macbeth's "horrid image" and "black and deep desires", she is the only one who seemingly *can*. So, what could have simply failed as a poor performance by an unimaginative actor is at risk of becoming an uninteresting tale about an unimaginative character who never even has the shadow of a wish to kill Duncan before getting back home to be simply manipulated by his wife, "burning in vnquenchable desire to beare the name of a queene".⁶ Conflicting with Freeston's directorial ideas, maybe in search of a statement, there is a severe simplification of Macbeth and of his relationship with the Lady.⁷

Disregarding the practical truth that no production in the world could have survived Jason Connery's (un)playing of the main role, the most interesting point for debate in this film is still whether performing a play like this against a "realistic" or "historically accurate" setting, evocative, unwittingly or not, of a "major" Hollywood "epic" (namely *Braveheart*, dir. Mel Gibson, 1995), is conducive to anything. What should be expected of a film-maker who endeavours to do Shakespeare "accurately" with regard to "setting", considering that it will inevitably mirror his/her artistic concepts and principles?

⁵ Perhaps surprisingly so, since they were specially coached by the best known performer involved in this project: Brian Blessed, a veteran from Branagh's Shakespeare films, main actor in *Chasing the Deer*, and husband to Hildegard Neil, who plays First Witch. By the by, although he appears in the cast as having played Edward the Confessor, the final cut of the film did not include the scene.

⁶ This is, of course, the single most important line in Holinshed's *Chronicles* referring to Macbeth's wife, therein unidentified, which both documents and testifies to Shakespeare's enormous abilities as a playwright: it is from this particular observation that the entire character matrix of Lady Macbeth derives. Her actual name was Gruoch, and her history—somehow in Holinshed turned into "a blank", and then in Shakespeare into one of the greatest female parts ever, though still "without a name"—is of enormous interest. See Michel (1998).

⁷ Freeston seems intent on transferring a greater amount of true agency to Lady Macbeth. This will become more relevant below.

Instead of a show mechanically mimetic of the “realism” and the narrative rhythms that characterize Hollywood products, I would not ask for more nor less than an intelligent response to some of the play’s fundamentals —an awareness of the demands made by the nature of the universe of fiction or “possible world” (see Eco, 1981, 1990) chosen by the director, which in the case of Freeston at this point seems illusionistic of concrete material circumstances that purport the effacement of the very conditions of filming, *i.e.*, a film seeking to immerse the audience in an illusion of thorough photographic “naturalness”. However, “being a cultural artifice, a possible world cannot be identified as the *linearly realization of the text* which describes it” (Eco, 1990: 218).⁸ In the case of *Macbeth*, “the text which describes” the “possible world” determined by Freeston is one of Shakespeare’s most disturbing. For the sake of argument, let us quote a not-so-recent description of the kind of difficulties often identified in *Macbeth*:

Macbeth [...] explores the relationship between crisis in the “state”, or the social order, and disruption in the “single state” of the subject. Once the structures of Duncan’s kingdom are wrenched from their place in “nature”, Macbeth himself becomes a plurality, a process rather than a fixity. [...] The Macbeths, with the sisters, spill over the limits of “character” to constitute the text’s “nothing” which, in turn, constantly erodes and undermines the hierarchies of irreducible “some-things” proposed by metaphysics. To define this space of “nothing” quite simply as “evil” is to reprocess the text through a moral discourse it renders problematic (Evans, 1986: 116-117).

Regardless of what may be up for debate in Evans’s view, thus described, the “possible world” of *Macbeth* could be classified within Eco’s category of “*impossible possible worlds*: worlds of which the reader tends to conceive only enough to understand that they are impossible to conceive” (1990: 230); or, to use a more descriptive taxonomy, within Dolezel’s categories of “self-voiding texts”, and “self-disclosing metafiction” (1989: 238ff).

Instead, the “possible world” of Freeston’s film, his “accurate setting”, meets Eco’s description of “believable possible worlds” (1990: 228), or Jorgens’s “realist” filming, (1977: 7). Of such productions Peter Holland comments: “What particularly marks realist film versions is their design, their fascination with objects, with the things that make up the worlds of the plays” (1994: 53). This fascination can lead one to forget that the possible worlds of poetic drama are not constituted either by objects or by subjects, but by dynamic relationships between objects and subjects as inscribed in the text and effected in self-disclosing performance.⁹ Performance, in turn, may take the form of film —of which photography (cinematography) is but a part. An awareness of the issues triggered by *Macbeth* with regard to “setting” implies realizing how the actors (in a greimasian sense) relate to the universes of dramatic discourse and

⁸ Quotations from Spanish or Italian are given in my own (rough) translations.

⁹ This elaboration follows Karel Kosik’s considerations on the nature of objective reality (1979).

semiosis (see Elam, 1980: 126ff). To put it topically, while reading *Macbeth* we are more likely to recognize that its parts coexist in a “frame” which is “disjoint” rather than in a world meeting our usual coordinates of “measure, time, and space” —and routine. An overtly and emphatically “realistic” setting for— and therefore an overall “realistic” approach to—this play may hinder complex performance. From this stand, Freeston pays too much attention to *things* and their translation into mere photography. “The problem is not one of finding means to speak the verse in front of the camera, in realistic circumstances ranging from long-shot to close-up. The aural has to be made visual.¹⁰ The poetic texture has to be transformed into visual poetry” (Kozintsev, in Holland, 1994: 56).

For instance, in *Macbeth* soliloquies are unlike those in other plays by Shakespeare. In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus’s soliloquy at the beginning of 2.1 may be safely assumed (and played) so as to present his “train of thought” while conveying a state of anxiety—all within a near-realistic style (*cf.* Manckiewicz’s, 1953 version). Instead, in *Macbeth* speeches like the omitted “Two truths are told...” of I.3 do not really fall into an even remotely “realistic” category, although they may be mistaken for such, given their ambiguities. Polansky, for instance, resorts to voice-over, leaving at a narrative level what might go much further. This particular speech, then, with its apparently logical structures (“if ill, why [...] if good, why...”) may be easily, and merely, interpreted as a mimetic aside, a revelation of “thought”. Nonetheless, such an interpretation disregards the fact that the poetry in nearly all of *Macbeth*’s soliloquies is first of all deeply disturbing, and only then paradoxically meaningful.

The poetry of I.3 is a poetry of fragmentation which does not only “inform” us that *Macbeth* is having “bad thoughts” but conveys the full horror and paralysis that the image of murder brings about as it flashes through the “heat-oppressed brain” before being rapidly dismissed or repressed. The “aside” is bracketed within Banquo’s warning to *Macbeth* not to trust the “instruments of darkness” and his remark that his “partner’s rapt”; this bracketing is a hint that the time-space of the performed fiction—merely a fraction of a second in “real time”—may be split into coexisting, though not coextensive, territories of totally different kinds: the time-spaces of poetic fiction, the record in artistic terms of what would otherwise be impossible to convey. This speech is an example of a poetic-dramatic way of representing the “possible world” beyond conventional realism—the complex performance, through poetic exploration, of an instant where horror is simultaneously condensed and expanded, and fictionally analyzed, and then gives way to relief by dismissal (“if chance will have me king...”) beyond the limits of naturalism. Following Shakespeare’s frequent and favorite game of “nothing is but what is not”, however, the entire speech is framed within, and *belied* by, a *seemingly logical* structure of discourse in *apparent* “real-time” that actually overlays a poetic representation through the breakdown and exploration of but *one instant* of utmost horror. The speech is thus an intense and deeply disturbing poetic-dramatic record of

¹⁰ And the aural should be truly aural, especially in the case of filming Shakespeare, I dare add.

an often experienced emotion hardly ever so or otherwise captured—a moment of violent, though ever so brief, self-confrontation and self-denial happening almost at once. Hence, in that crucial speech there is a contrast, a tension, that may be played to advantage either with great intensity or with extreme detachment, instead of being lost in the rhythms of “realistic thought” or delivery. The shortcoming involved in interpreting such a complex artistic procedure superficially as merely the “revelation of a thought process” is also at the core of Baxendale’s failure in the sleepwalking scene—which ironically could be commended for attempting a more filmic approach. Like many actors before her, Baxendale segments her speeches into “micro-scenes” which she plays as if what she says were “happening” around her as figments of a deluded mind. She looks at, and converses with, things that are not there, instead of creating a hell of her own out of the overwhelming hell that Lady Macbeth has *become*.¹¹

“Only film has the resources to present the stream of consciousness of a disturbed mind”, said Eisenstein (1959: 123) discussing the problem of representing the world inside Clyde Griffiths as he murdered Roberta in the screenplay of *An American Tragedy*.¹² Looking for a way to film the paradox of the killer who becomes such without finally knowing whether there was a will to it, and seeking to transcend Dreiser’s “primitive rhetoric” in describing Clyde’s “internal murmurs”, Eisenstein envisioned “wonderful designs” instead of “natural” processes:

Like thoughts, [designs] sometimes proceeded from visual images. With sound. Synchronic or not. Then *as* sound, without images. Or with sound images: sounds objectively represented. Then, suddenly, definite words, intellectually formulated; as “intellectual” and dispassionate as pronounced words. A black screen, a visual torrent without images. Then a passionate, incoherent speech. Names only. Or verbs only. Then interjections. A zigzag of forms without an object, spinning around in unison. Then an accelerated movement of visual images in total silence. Polyphonic sounds. Polyphonic images. Both things at once (1959: 124).

Clyde’s situation is not unlike Macbeth’s at the door of Duncan’s chamber. The dagger has come and gone, and the rhythms of his speech become more and more obscure and introspective, until they reach a regularity that suggests a state of mechanical behavior prior to the commission of the crime. By this process, the assassination of the King becomes one more of the scores of things in *Macbeth* that cannot be explained, attributed, or judged comfortably. In order to provide performative correlatives to the poetry, it indeed seems better to “upset” the apparent time-space of *Macbeth* than to “accurately set” it.

¹¹ Such hell is reached by Judi Dench in Trevor Nunn’s 1977 stage/TV production. She allows one basic note of anxious fear and pain to run through the scene, and plays intense variations on it, without ever really “looking” at, or “interacting” with, “things” around her.

¹² A project killed in the egg by the executives of Paramount, and later filmed by Von Sternberg.

A final example of how the search for a “realistic” *Macbeth* may render an honest effort pointless, at least with regard to its poetic potential within this particular frame of critical reference, is Freeston’s decision to “actually” film what is reported to have happened in I.2 instead of having actors deliver all the bombastic speeches that constitute the report. Is such thing as performing “straightforward” Shakespeare possible? Inscribed in a tradition where any performance of a playwright’s work is by definition an act of authorial agency, I would think not. Even Freeston’s “accurate” approach would be an *auteur*’s statement—howbeit nondescript. But his approach implies a lukewarm interpretation of what film can do when deriving from poetic drama. To film I.2, Freeston transforms the Captain’s and Rosse’s descriptions of Macbeth’s deeds at war into a B-minus version of a *Braveheart* battle, with a little touch of Branagh’s *Henry V*-ish slow-motion (semi)violence at the end. The seeming rationale for this could be that I.2 serves merely as a source of information about the general state of Scotland at the beginning of the play, as well as about Macbeth and Banquo’s great desserts. Shakespeare, so the same mind would have it, lacked the resources to stage the horrid battle in full, and had to take refuge in dramatic narrative to get the play off the ground, whereas film can translate it all into exciting “actuality”.

The minor problem with this treatment of the text on film is to assume that the Elizabethan theatre-maker ever “lacked resources”, or designed a scene “as a mere source of information”, or even had the slightest interest in staging a battle “in full” at this point. But that doesn’t really matter. The *true* problem, rather, seems to be that therein Macbeth is introduced as an individuated subject within a “realist” “possible world;” *i.e.*, that Freeston shows a character performed by an actor as the direct object of filmic narrative, instead of presenting him as the subject of verbal narratives performed by others—the Captain, Rosse, Duncan. Seemingly, Freeston did not believe that you can make an exciting piece of film out of dialogue. This makes a world of difference, for Macbeth is the only major tragic character in Shakespeare whom we meet *only* in the form of a narrative before he is radically transformed by another narrative of him (the Sisters’), and yet another (his wife’s construction of him as a strange sort of child in I.5—see Michel, 998). That is, from Shakespeare’s text we do not get to know the Captain’s Macbeth “in the flesh” before he becomes whatever he becomes with the Sisters’ revelations: this implies, in fact, that we never know Macbeth *in any other way* than as a series of conflicting narratives, not even in the end, when he impossibly tries to go back to his original *name*. In *Macbeth* we get, in lieu of a character, signs displayed in the absence of their signified, only never to perceive that signified as such, for it immediately becomes another, and another—actually, a permanent fluctuation, something *not* to be recorded but impossible to conceive of: a “nothing”. Freeston’s choice, despite its purported elaboration, lacks the power to construct a possible world where fiction may be performed as fiction beyond mere illustration of plot; thus, it falls close to what Barthes identifies as the essential qualities of photography:

In the photograph the relationship of signifieds to signifiers is not one of ‘transformation’ but of ‘recording’, and the absence of a code clearly reinforces the myth of photographic ‘naturalness’: the scene *is there*, captured mechanically, not humanly. The type of consciousness the photograph involves is truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing, but an awareness of its *having-been-there*. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*. It is thus at the level of this denoted message or message without code that the *real unreality* of the photograph can be really understood: its unreality is that of the *here-now*, for the photograph is never experienced as illusion (1985: 200).

A text of the complexity of *Macbeth* would be intrinsically opposed to the good intentions of Freeston—as well as to those of the loyal subscribers of Cromwell Productions—if those intentions really were to film a major work of literature with a deceitful Scottish “accent” as an “authentic” version of a major event in the history of Scotland, or as one of its popular legends, by an early modern playwright. If that were the case, Freeston’s film could not escape the constraints set by its own failure to upset the play: “The photograph must be related to a pure spectatorial consciousness and not to the more projective, more ‘magical’ fictional consciousness on which film by and large depends. Film can no longer be seen as animated photographs” (Barthes, 1985: 201). The suffocating and disruptive poetry of *Macbeth* belongs more “upon the heath” than against the walls of Blackness Castle or Dumferline Abbey: more in the halls of intimate horror than in the spaces of epic battling. *Macbeth* demands more than being the (un) subject of mere photographing, where it ends up not even “signifying nothing”.

Still, there is the definite chance that the premises assumed above are not what Freeston, Carruthers and the rest of the production crew and society had in mind. It is nowhere written in stone that to signify *by Macbeth* you have to try and “do” *Macbeth*. Should we not only fault the film for failing to render a more aesthetically and intellectually complex performance of Shakespeare’s playscript, but also ask whether that was in principle what the film-makers sought to do, a different picture might emerge.

2. “Alas, poor country, almost afraid to know itself..”

From a wholly different vantage point with regard to its driving forces, Freeston’s film may be located politically within the Scottish nationalists’ movement and aesthetically within the British tradition of the heritage film. It is the type of film that belongs in the “period” genre. Among its characteristics are narrative realism and an emphasis in representing the past in a visually accurate manner—in other words, they “record” the past on film “neutrally”, with photographic “naturalness”, even to the illusion of effacement of the very material signs of filmic production. The moments to which the heritage film returns are generally sites or texts of decisive significance to the British

sense of nation: Austen, Forster, World Wars I and II, the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare. As the film turns the past into a site of visual fulfillment, the politics of the original texts may be completely lost or understressed—in the case of filming Forster, for example, his incisive class critique; in that of filming the World Wars, their very facts *as wars*—for these films are not interested in history in the same way as a historian might be, but in using history to inform a present version of the nation.¹³

In a sense, then, Freeston's filmic version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (not Shakespeare's *Macbeth* directed by Freeston), is an act of appropriation and as such it may be said to respond in a rather refreshing way to "certain historiography that is quick to take the agents of imperialism as exclusive players of the only game in town" (Sahlins, 2000: 477)—*i.e.*, the kind of agents that appropriate major sites of predominant culture, such as Shakespeare, to re-over-write the narratives of self-construction of subordinate cultures. Since "the main historical activity remaining to the underlying [culture] is to misconstrue the effects of imperialism as their own cultural traditions" (Sahlins, 2000: 477), one of the best counter-tactics is precisely to simplify and re-direct the inherited agent in overt appropriation of its prestige for specifically local aims. In this case, Freeston's *Macbeth* *dis*-locates the conventional narrative inscribed in Shakespeare's text as a misrepresentation of Scotland by *re*-locating it as "authentically" Scottish.

Thus, the filming of 1.2 may now be regarded as politically motivated. Instead of seeking to capture the nuances of a dramatic text that operates on the extremely complex non-construction of a dramatic/theatrical fiction through conflicting narratives, Freeston's rendering of the battle, *Braveheart* style, re-locates Macbeth in a heroic stand—however ultimately tragic—but at the same time problematizes his originally straightforward violence towards the otherwise "merciless Macdonwald, worthy to be a rebel", by visually stressing complex implications inherent in every form of internecine struggle, in preparation for a narrative that employs Shakespeare's textuality for reflection on national identity. During the battle sequence, after establishing shots underscored by Paul Farrer's powerful music (reminiscent of Patrick Doyle's work in Kenneth Branagh's Shakespeare films, yet quite good), Macbeth is shown to aptly "carve his way till he face[s] the slave" (*i.e.* the traitor Macdonwald) whom he somewhat easily brings to his knees despite many grunts and wild threatening gestures. At this point the visual narrative makes a notable pause. Motion slows down as Macbeth places his hand on Macdonwald's mouth and looks around, perhaps bewildered. Characters we will later identify as Banquo, Macduff, Seyton—these two significantly introduced from the start as warring on the same side, against the grain of Shakespeare's text—Lennox, and Rosse, stop their own fights to focus on the inevitable ending of the central confrontation. The aural input is also heavily modified, for we now only hear the sounds of nature (the wind and the screeching of sea birds), although the men surrounding Macbeth are clearly shown to shout and cheer.

¹³ I owe much of this and the following elaboration to the kind insight of Jim Ellis, through personal communication.

In this state of modified consciousness, before he delivers the blow that should “unseam” the traitor “from the nave to the chops”, Macbeth seems to become vaguely aware —under the scrutiny of the Weird Sisters, who are briefly shown to look down on the battlefield with satisfaction— that his act will import much more than the righting of a common wrong of transient disloyalty. In this battle there is much confusion and wrath on either side of the field, and a good portion thereof seems to revolve around a sense of ongoing communal self-annihilation, the same that will ultimately grow, not decrease, to a brutal reiteration of even worse self-inflicted and self-destructive violence in the immediate future —led by Macbeth in practice, but originating in deeper processes of historic aggression, frustration and inequity now unleashed and well allegorized in Lady Macbeth, or rather, in Helen Baxendale’s performance as the Lady behind the Thane and the throne. Through to her debacle, she endows her character with a notably persuasive touch of power, that finally cannot help but lead to negative ends, stemming precisely from an accumulated history of repression and muting, not of perversion or evil —which provides for a rich field of afterthought to the chaotic situation in which the males of Scotland are involved at starting within a world that, as I will explain more pointedly below, is shown to be far from *being* “foul and filthy” but rather *made* so by means of the quintessential fashion of (dis)organized human violence, namely war, especially *internecive* war. Her commitment to the forces of “murdering ministers”, aptly designed to take place inside her chamber before a distorted looking glass —well in keeping with the quality of self-images that mirrors could afford at the time— comes right after an eloquent, if low-budget, demonstration of just how strongly and definitively some legitimate “ministers” of death can operate, among them her own sweet(brave)heart of a husband. For, as mentioned above, though from a totally different perspective, in this film the original battle threatening to destroy Duncan’s Scotland is *filmed as happening*, not *reported to have happened*, as in Shakespeare’s script.

The fact that the battle is filmed, then, and thus its violence is explicitly, not reportedly, conveyed —*i.e.* communicated without the mediation of an ideologically determined narrative filter, the “epic” quality that characterizes the Sergeant’s narrative of “our two captains, Macbeth and Banquo”— lays the grounds upon which the entire perspective of the film will operate: not as the complex artistic rendering of the complex accumulation and self-voiding processes inscribed in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (as suggested in the first section of this paper) but as a re- and dis-location (as defined at the start of *this* section) of its now too familiar historic overdetermination as a work of “high art” by the “greatest of writers” (as opposed to “playwrights”) involving the worst of evil tyrants ever to have been —only incidentally set in Scotland. For one thing, there is virtually no way for any British, and in this case Scottish, spectator of *Macbeth* to ignore the general plot of the play, and the co-writers seem to be taking advantage of such phenomenon, crucial to any project contemplating the filming of a “major” Shakespeare play nowadays. In other words, Freeston and Carruthers seem to be counting on the overdetermined response to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in the over-

all British context to re-inscribe old assumptions within new and *local* performative discourses. A revealing detail is that, doubtless on purpose, nowhere in the film are we made aware that, according to Shakespeare's script, the rebellion against Duncan includes an attack by the Norwegian King and his army. For Freeston and Carruthers, apparently, the initial turmoil in the "Scottish" play is strictly *Scottish* business, hence the stress on "authenticity" and "accuracy" on the historically objective and objectual levels becomes more justified.

In the battlefield, then, the soundtrack seems to register Macbeth's baffled state of mind and perception as he looks down and strikes home to kill the traitor — the notion of "man" that he himself will eventually become and Macduff will ultimately kill again, but now in a completely transformed Scotland. The dull but strong sound of metal-in-action accompanying the deathblow presides over the next shot, together with the equally blunt drop of Macdonwald's inert body; then Macbeth holds his sword high at eye level and salutes all around to the still muted cheering of his brothers in arms, among whom Banquo stands out, clearly mouthing out the name of the hero. With Macbeth's final turn, we come back to "real time" and the sound of elation from the King's faithful and triumphant music in Farrer's score. And then, after a cut, we are made to witness the elation, also, of the Weird Sisters, who gather by the sea to perform the first scene of the play. In it, the youngest Sister intimates, with a knowing, longing and erotically loaded look, that the role of warriors in this male-defined and male-driven world is about to undergo a severe transformation propelled by these powerful female figures, and from another one —though perhaps only temporarily, exactly as impulse.

It is important now to point out that after the battle —which in this film occupies the opening slot— and after the ensuing, and somewhat lame, performance of 1.1 by the Sisters, their talk of "fog and filthy air" is followed by long and pointedly ironic shots far from showing a "foul" atmosphere —shots of beautiful Scottish landscapes, of clear, unpolluted brooks and hills with peaceful fauna, perhaps to highlight what will be "lost and [not] won" henceforth, not so much as a result of the evil designs of powerful forces beyond comprehension, but as the consequence of human inability to break away from the cycles of blood— more specifically, of a flaw identified in the film as *Scottish*. Correspondingly, thus, in the closing sequence of the film many of the same actions and gestures that accompanied the death of Macdonwald at starting will be recovered, now to underscore the death, by beheading, of Macbeth. When Macduff kills Macbeth —once again a "sight" that supposedly unwritten rules of the Elizabethan theatre supposedly precluded from staging— the two men are all alone in a battlefield where no battle is being fought anymore and outside a castle —which may allegorize Scotland— that has significantly surrendered "before young Malcolm's feet", and his English roots and army. The isolation of the warriors indicates that most men fighting on either side are now down; that the struggle of the two Thanes standing last is more than a fight; that they stand for concepts and codes of cultural behaviour now at practical odds but essentially very close in the recent past; and more importantly, that *both* have

inevitably come to their end in a scenario of violence between former mutual loyals. On his knees, Macbeth looks up at his old brother in arms, nearly begging for deliverance (certainly resigned and relieved that all should have come to this), a deliverance that Macduff also nearly in sudden understanding concedes. With Macduff’s blow—only heard, unseen—a chapter in Scottish “history” seems over. A significant prologue to this end is visually and emphatically provided by the amount of impaled heads and mutilated bodies around them—perhaps metaphoric of the ongoing dismemberment and disarray of a whole society and of its previously whole and wholesome leaders, its now self-destructed warriors, its *men*.

With this in mind, it may be interesting to re-examine some of the aspects of the film raised above from this very different perspective. The performances of the Third Sister and of Lady Macbeth, both defined by their youth and evident intent to employ seduction as a power tool to incite in a world where their agency is confined to cave and chamber—if for no better reason than they could hardly wield any other type of power tool in this wilderness of male bonds and rivalry—beg the question: what does the portrayal of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth—supplemented by the correlative seductiveness of the Third Sister—convey about the construction of Scottish masculinity—especially of the kind that historically constitutes concepts of national identity and leadership?¹⁴ As good an answer as any would be: a radical challenge to the shortcomings of that notion of masculinity and their noxious effects upon the rest of humankind—and of “human-kind-ness”, it may be added—in the face of a radical change deep inside the social fabric of Scotland; a challenge miserably met by the *men* of Scotland as shown to exist in the “11th” century or, surely more likely, in a 20th century film *supposedly* set in 11th century Scotland. As mentioned earlier, Freeston seems intent on transferring a great deal of agency to Lady Macbeth, with a clear agenda to support the weight of the transfer. For example, like Polansky before him, Freeston chooses to show the killing of the King, and does it with a similar coreography: Macbeth looks down on the “unguarded Duncan” until he wakes up between stupor and surprise to recognize the traitor and be stabbed by him. Yet, while Polansky makes Macbeth the sole and bloody executor and does not care to show the Lady inside the chamber, Freeston actually makes us follow *his* Lady Macbeth back to the murder scene, where we will watch her frantically, and finally, stab Duncan to death when he unexpectedly shows that he was merely left for dead. If Shakespeare dictates that *his* Lady Macbeth simply *cannot* “do the deed” because Duncan “resembled [her] father as he slept”, Freeston and Carruthers decide that *theirs* nonetheless *will*, though unexpectedly, “do the deed”, significantly at the point where she shows to be more innocently inquisitive and surprised, almost childish: at the sight and touch of the blood of a man that has just been stabbed and whom she approaches with curiosity and unfamiliarity—a sight and a feeling evidently strange *to her*, except in fiction, thought and maybe imagination, that will eventually stay *with*

¹⁴ This is likewise a major concern in *Braveheart*, a film that, deliberately or not but surely ironically, underlies Freeston’s *Macbeth*.

her, *in* her, and then rip her apart. An ironically defined “fiend-like queen”, not the ineffectual “butcher”, brings closure to the “sacrilegious murder” in very stimulating and significant—and filmically accomplished—fashion.

Árkai (1999) provides an interesting reading of the way Freeston represents the power correlation between the Macbeths, especially as she identifies the strong hold of the Lady on the Thane’s insecurities, particularly erotic. Nevertheless, this correlation may be nicely supplemented by reflecting not only on how much Baxendale’s portrait of the Lady hinges around defiance and self-assuredness throughout, but also on how much those attitudes are self-infused after and through her reading of the husband’s letter and her ensuing invocations as tokens of an equally, or worse, abject positioning in the film. Baxendale’s Lady is far from being the perversely motherly figure that Shakespeare’s play intimates (see Michel, 1998) but rather acts like a power-starved young newlywed whose understood role must needs rise above her equally young and perceptibly thick husband’s inherited ideas of loyalty, in search of the privilege and realization (clearly limited by her gender definition) of her dreams of becoming queen—dreams never as close as now, but always threatening to disappear for good any instant. This achievement will ironically be available only through the efficiency of the male partner, her demonstrably stolid husband. All in all, hers is an unsolvable, indeed circular, circumstance.

Why is the film more interested in showing rather than telling, then? Showing offers less room for ambiguity or interpretation, indeed, and should certainly contribute to sustaining the film as a fiction of national identity and nationalistic narrative. In this regard, the emphasis on “authentic” props and sets also contributes to and satisfies a desire for the fetishes of a constructed or invented Scottish history. In turn, the relocation of the “Scottish play” within Scottish grounds, immaculate landscapes and historic sites reinforces an effort to re-identify and enshrine back certain aspects of national heroism and national heroes (failed, as they are mostly shown to be in this film, or otherwise), or else of the definitiveness of the crossroads at which the early configuration of the modern Scottish nation took place: under the rule of its historic hegemonic rival. All this filmed in the context of late 20th century Scotland, a nation at present actively and excitingly in need—and in search—of transformation from what it became not only in the English-friendly chronicles that provided Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* with plot and general dramatic input, but in its history and self, mainly since the 11th century: a site of constant struggle between original and incoming powers. Thus, Freeston’s *Macbeth* is aesthetically and politically closer to films like *Braveheart* than it is to being a ‘faithful’ adaptation of Shakespeare; it is probably more interesting for what it deliberately *misrepresents* than for what it represents. It may be appropriate to note that *Trainspotting* (dir. Danny Boyle, 1996), a film that takes a highly critical look at contemporary Scotland, was embraced by the Scottish nationalistic movement simply because it was an internationally successful Scottish film. What the film was saying on the narrative level meant nothing, all that mattered was its political significance.

The producers of this *Macbeth*, then, were not only interested in historical accuracy but had the goal to treat Shakespeare’s own inaccuracies ironically. Where Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* may be said to have opportunistically exploited a fiction of Scotland by dis-locating it unto the English stages for diverse political purposes (and later on those of the entire world), Freeston’s *Macbeth* may be said to seek to bring that fiction to its point of origin and literally *re-locate* it—that is, locate it back where it may be grasped anew for political purposes, just as it was by Shakespeare after a long chain of the same. Above I argue that resorting to Shakespeare’s “Scottish” play to “document” Scottish history or legend may be risky. But it is a risk that Freeston and company, in this interpretative scenario, may have taken with pleasure, if not in totally successful fashion as regards the artistic values of their product in connection with Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* “as is”—whatever *that* may be. What the numerous people behind this *Macbeth* (and behind *Chasing the Deer*, too, as well as behind other similar enterprises) were probably after instead of enabling an aesthetically complex experience, was the legitimate manipulation of a prestigious work that could participate in the contemporary manufacture of a version of Scottish national identity.

If this was their aim, then there are good reasons to avoid performing Shakespeare’s playtext with any psychological or aesthetic complexity. “Socio-reality [...] an ideological-based reality continually asserted as if it is part of the first order of objects and the everyday” (Fuery, 2000: 125)—that is the kind of reality that an endeavour like Freeston’s *Macbeth* would like to challenge by means of turning one of its strongest supporting apparatuses against its own grain: the story conveyed by the camera is in constant controversy with the narrative inscribed in the textual exchanges of the actors, and perhaps more importantly, with the received, overdetermined readings, complex as they may be, that *Macbeth* has had and promoted in its 400 years of cultural history—all nearly without exception at once “rooted” in, but virtually oblivious of, “Scottishness”. What does the reception of this film tell us about the interests of its primary target or audience? Given the strong support that it received from the literally hundreds of subscribers duly (if somewhat exasperatingly) listed on its closing credits, at least as an *idea*, Freeston’s *Macbeth* responded rather tellingly to the needs and expectations outlined in the considerations above. It seems also at least curious if not downright ironic that in the end this film could not obtain the financial support required to ensure its theatrical release, and more importantly, worldwide distribution as a mainstream *film*. But that way of thinking may be wrong, for the ultimately limited reach of this film actually rings appropriate: only too often the best products of locally oriented endeavours are best precisely for not travelling too far away from its own territories—there is really little need of that. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* as we know it—as we *imagine* that we “know” it every time we imagine knowing it—must always remain a matter for “tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow”, otherwise we’d lose all sense of its “nothingness”. Still, this “Scottish play” turned Scottish film may clear the way for its largely overlooked “Scottishness” to tell us more, much more,

than “nothing” beyond our own “black and deep desires”, our frequently over-, mis-, and un-informed assumptions.

Works cited

- ÁRKAI, Marta. 1999. “The [transvestite] Play: Is It the Thing? A [two-dimensional] literary-psychological re-reading of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* with Jeremy Freeston and Henry Fuseli”. *AnaChronist*, 1999, 1-15 (also available at <http://www.btk.elte.hu/englit/anachronist>).
- BARTHES, Roland. 1985, “Rhetoric of the Image”. Robert E. INNIS, ed., *Semiotics. An Introductory Anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- COURSEN, H. R. 1997. *Macbeth: A Guide to the Play*. Westport, Conn., / London: Greenwood Press.
- DOLEZEL, Lubomir. 1989. “Possible Worlds and Literary Fiction”. Sture ALLEN, ed., *Possible Worlds in Humanities, Arts, and Sciences*. Proceedings of Nobel Symposium 65, Berlin: De Gruyter.
- ECO, Umberto. 1981. *Lector in fabula*. Barcelona: Lumen.
- _____. 1990. *I limiti dell’interpretazione*. Milano: Fabbri, Bompiani, Sognozo, Etas, S.p.A.
- EISENSTEIN, Sergei. 1959. *Teoría y técnica cinematográficas*. Madrid: Rialp.
- ELAM, Keir. 1980. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London / New York: Methuen.
- EVANS, Malcolm. 1986. *Signifying Nothing: Truth’s True Contents in Shakespeare’s Text*. Brighton: The Harvester Press.
- FUERY, Patrick. 2000. *New Developments in Film Theory*. London: MacMillan.
- HATCHUEL, Sarah. 2005. “‘Prithee, see there! Behold! Look!’ (3.4.69): The Gift or the Denial of Sight in Screen Adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*”. *Borrowers and lenders: The journal of Shakespeare and appropriation*, 2005.
- HOLLAND, Peter. 1994. “Two-Dimensional Shakespeare: *King Lear* on Film”. Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells, eds., *Shakespeare and the Moving Image: the Plays on Film and Television*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- JORGENS, Jack J. 1977. *Shakespeare on Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- KOSÍK, Karel. 1979. *Dialéctica de lo concreto*. México: Grijalbo.
- MICHEL MODENESSI, Alfredo. 1998. “‘A deed without a name’: *Macbeth*, uno y ninguno”. Introduction to William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, translated by Enriqueta GONZÁLEZ PADILLA. México: UNAM.
- SAHLINS, Marshall. 2000. *Culture in Practice*. New York: Zone Books.