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Filming Shakespeare's Plays

The adaptations of
Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles,
Peter Brook and Akira Kurosawa

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nature and function of the monarchy, which was one of the consequences of the span of Hamlet. If the spirit of the old order with its charismatic politics of opportunism, then Hamlet between the old and new regimes, just strategy stands between the two history and more precisely directed spatial

Shakespeare's Macbeth derives much of its dramatic tension from the choices and decisions made by the individual character within the framework of a medieval Christian universe. Welles's film inevitably reduces this dramatic intensity by limiting Macbeth's options, and by giving the witches a manipulative ascendancy, their power over Macbeth being visually established early in the film when they are depicted with a small crowned effigy at their feet. As a reflection of Shakespeare's play, the film fails more lamentably because of its deviation from the original dramatic perspective. Some scenes (notably the murder of Duncan, the banquet and Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking scene) are overblown and lose their impact while other important action is awkwardly compressed. There is an unsuccessful attempt to keep the Christian dimension of the drama alive through the ubiquitousness of the Holy Father (an additional character invented by Welles). There are seemingly pointless changes in the dramatic action. Macbeth is brought into the latter part of Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking scene, yet she is allowed the run off shrieking, to fall to her death despite the emphatically depicted bars on the castle windows. The ineffective nature of evil is lost when Macbeth appears personally to participate in the murder of the Macduff family. The film's dramatic power suffers, too, from a noticeable exhaustion of acting technique during those scenes which Welles films in long takes.

While all this is true, Welles's Macbeth is, in significant respects, a turning point in the development of Shakespearean cinematic adaptation. Its major effect upon the critical response to filmed Shakespeare was to confront critics with a new territory of adaptive endeavour which had to be accommodated. Many were aghast at the boldness of the assertion which Welles placed before them, and the debacle which culminated in its being withdrawn from the 1948 Venice Festival gives some indication of the strength and the nature of the feelings the film aroused, especially since its obvious contender (in whose favour it was withdrawn) was Olivier's Hamlet. Coming nearly ten years before Kurosawa's much acclaimed Throne of Blood, the significance of Welles's first Shakespearean film lies in its serving as the most 'positive . . . touchstone to discriminate the cinéaste from the Bardolator'.

The film asserts for cinema an autonomous artistic claim for a valid expression and presentation of Shakespearean material in terms of a predominant spatial concept, and, in so doing, it is the starting point of that line of approach which culminates in
Kurosawa's THRON OF BLOOD on the one hand, and in Kozintsev's two masterpieces HAMLET (1964) and KING LEAR (1971) on the other. The film's thematic integration of a specifically cinematic spatial articulation makes it unsurprising that its critical acclaim comes from French rather than English critics. Bazin in his study of Orson Welles writes of the younger generation of French critics, 'who were unstinting in their enthusiasm, and in retrospect I think they were right to prefer Welles's MACBETH, torn between heaven and hell, to Olivier's Freudian HAMLET.  

Claude Beylie, writing in Etudes cinématographiques, proclaims the film's importance:

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

The similarities between Welles's MACBETH and Olivier's HAMLET in fact lie closer to the surface than our immediate perception of the films, or their critical reactions, suggest. Both films were preceded by stage productions from which the films' respective interpretations were developed, yet each has a spatial strategy which is essentially cinematic. The architectural structuring of their settings is used to externalize psychological complexities, and the borderline between the conscious and subconscious worlds of the heroes is the major preoccupation of cinematic exploration. Both films exploit the stark contrasts of monochromatic film to present dramas of light and darkness.

Despite the evolution of both films from original stage productions, the evidence suggests that while Olivier had to evolve an entirely new spatial strategy for the effective transfer of theatrical ideas to film, Welles's theatrical conception of MACBETH was developed with the potential of cinema very much in mind. Where Olivier's film strove to present a Hamlet which was generally within the aesthetic expectations of its intended audience, and one whose textual cuts had to be pre-emptively excused, Welles found no cause to apologize for his approach – which he claimed was an experiment in filming a 'difficult subject' on a small budget and a short shooting schedule.* Nor did he advance any justification for the far more radical textual excisions which he made. Where Olivier's HAMLET was informed by the Freudian interpretation of Ernest Jones, and so based upon the interpretative concept of the Old Vic production of 1936, Welles's film grew from his own staging of MACBETH in Harlem in 1936 and later in 1947 at the Utah Centennial Drama Festival. Unlike Olivier, Welles had no traditional theatrical loyalties to subdue, and his staging of the play is in many ways reminiscent both of the late nineteenth-century melodrama, and of that film genre, the 'horror movie'. Richard France, in an article first published in 1974, writes of the Lafayette Theatre production of Welles's MACBETH, just as Welles was to take Herman Mankiewicz's script for CITIZEN KANE and turn it into a magic show, so too, did he transform Shakespeare into a spectacle of thrills and sudden shocks.

Audiences were drawn not so much to s experience the same undefined response, still exhilarating. The impression it left was consumed by the powers of darkness.

He observes, too, the predominance in Welles's theatrical concept, like the cinematic development. 'His vision was aroused by the production, but, by [Welles directed] their response ...

In three further important respects it relates to the melodrama and to our reaction on fluid transitions which bring the cinema screen. Welles's transitions, and France regards both of these banquets scene (which Welles made it) was accomplished through the fading in of voodoo drums, which visual transition was complete. The image of the cinema dissolve was wrought by

Secondly, while music is related to considerable resources deployed for, it indicate unequivocally the relation to the film. There was a sizeable pit-orchestra and made up in part of brass and kettle- machine. This latter ensemble was accompanying some of the grande, from this widespread deployment of the control to the director. Virgil Thorpe, the theatre production, has commented: 'There rattling, players backstage cannot hear an actor so accompanied changes. The relevance of this reduction of performance and control is clear, as it was associated with Welles's Mercurial Welles'. The implication is that he designer, dramatist and, most often, animated each of them [Welles's productions] were executed in such a way as to feed.

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Orson Welles's MACBETH

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Audiences were drawn not so much to see the working out of Macbeth's tragic destiny, but to experience the same undefined responses which make horror movies both ridiculous and yet still exhilarating. The impression it left in the theatre was that of a world steadily being consumed by the powers of darkness.

He observes, too, the predominance of spectacle over dialogue which distinguishes Welles's theatrical concept, like the nineteenth-century melodrama, as ripe for cinematic development. 'His vision of Macbeth was hardly tragic. Audiences were aroused by the production, but, by stripping the text of its intellectual content, Welles directed their response ... wholly to the spectacle.'

In three further important respects Welles’s theatrical conception of the play relates it to the melodrama and to cinema. Firstly, there is the deliberate concentration on fluid transitions which brought the stage as a space for action closer to the cinema screen. Welles's transitions were effected through both sound and lighting, and France regards both of these as staged 'dissolves'. The transition from the banquet scene (which Welles made into a coronation ball) to the world of the witches was accomplished through the fading out of sophisticated waltzes overlapping with the fading in of voodoo drums, which rose to their climax of volume only when the visual transition was complete. The visual dimension of the composite technique of the cinema dissolve was wrought 'by the use of light on the various levels of the set'.

Secondly, while music is related to place, and therefore has spatial relevance, the most significant result arising from this widespread deployment of sound resources is the actor's concession of control to the director. Virgil Thompson, the musical director for Welles's original theatre production, has commented perceptively on this. 'With all the percussion rattling, players backstage cannot hear the lines, but must depend on light cues; nor can an actor so accompanied change his reading much from one night to another.'

The relevance of this reduction of performance variability to the essence of cinematic presentation and control is clear, as is the implication carried by the credit line which was associated with Welles's Mercury Theatre productions: 'Production by Orson Welles'. The implication is that he not only functioned as the director, 'but as designer, dramatist and, most often, principal actor as well ... The concepts that animated each of them [Welles's productions] originated with him and, moreover, were executed in such a way as to be subject to his absolute control.'

Olivier's impulse was to delegate much more openly than Welles. On the theatre stage, Olivier has often been clearly aware of his own ability to dominate action, but he is not recorded as striving in the theatre for the total control which Welles sought and which found its fulfilment in cinema. Certainly it could not be said of Olivier, as it
has been of Welles, that in his productions 'content served as little more than an obvious vehicle for . . . expressive form. Welles's real statement was contained in his violent imagery. Thus the actor became simply another facet of the imagery.9

Finally there is the question of Welles's use of the space of the stage itself. In his theatre production of Macbeth, Welles transposed the setting from Scotland to the island of Haiti, since he felt that the force of the supernatural as a dominant and formative element would be more credible in a social context of 'voodoo'. In addition to making the stage a microcosm of a society with a genuine cultural commitment to a belief in tangible supernatural powers, Welles also brought the stage closer to the obvious vehicle for the expressionism, if by expressionism is meant the 'shaping of the outside world from within . . . the building of a new world inside itself'.10 Welles's expressionism is, however, much more forceful than Olivier's. Where Olivier projects an Elsinore which is a spatial expression of Hamlet's psychological complexity, Welles develops an entire cinematic style which relates Macbeth to classic expressionist cinema. His violently disjunctive editing rejects a world-view which is based on a 'chain of data'.11

Of the typical features of classic expressionism which are especially relevant to the Macbeth style are the isolation of the individual, the sense of endless simultaneity and disintegration, the obsession with death, and the vertiginous angularity of both the camera's shooting angles and of the line within the frame.12 Welles's pronounced expressionist effects are consonant with the turbulence in his view of the Macbeth drama, and turbulence in which the character of space changes with the state of Macbeth's mind.

The opening of Welles's film employs a technique which, on first consideration, appears not dissimilar from that of the start of Olivier's Hamlet. The elements of Hamlet were shown as a collection of theatrical props, a castle wreathed in mist, and the movement of waves against a sophisticated background. With Welles's initial introduced, but at once we are in a place where the juxtapositions rather than development invites an orientated if sombre culture which promotes a cumulative sense of disintegrated and displaced by quick.

Like Olivier's Hamlet, Welles's Macbeth is given an historical perspective. The spatial articulation to reveal. Welles's Macbeth is given an historical perspective. The building of a new world inside itself.13

Our story is laid in Scotland, ancient and land. Plotting against Christian law and order, sorcerers and witches. Their tools are as much as Olivier's Hamlet. Where Olivier visualizes for film an interpretation of Shakespeare's play, Welles visualizes his own perspective on issues that lie behind the energies of the play.

Both Welles's Macbeth and Olivier's Hamlet can be considered in terms of expressionism, if by expressionism is meant the 'shaping of the outside world from within . . . the building of a new world inside itself'.10 Welles's expressionism is, however, much more forceful than Olivier's. Where Olivier projects an Elsinore which is a spatial expression of Hamlet's psychological complexity, Welles develops an entire cinematic style which relates Macbeth to classic expressionist cinema. His violently disjunctive editing rejects a world-view which is based on a 'chain of data'.11

The juxtaposition of the mist and symbols, and the final forming sequence of initial visuals, constitutes a thematic conflict to be that of for controlled cinematic dissolve with the nature and staves. The swirling mist engulfs the bubbling surface of muddy liquid, hands shaping from the muddy for doll.

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Olivier’s HAMLET. The elements of
props, a castle wreathed in mist, and
the movement of waves against a rocky shore; all suggestive of a metaphorical
sophistication. With Welles’s initial visuals, the film’s compositional substance is
introduced, but at once we are in a pre-sophisticated world of bare elements and stark
juxtapositions rather than developed compositions. Where the opening of HAMLET
invites an orientated if sombre contemplation, the pace of Welles’s opening visuals
promotes a cumulative sense of disturbance; of the flow of ideas being constantly
interrupted and displaced by quick dissolves into unrelated images.

Like Olivier’s HAMLET, Welles’s MACBETH establishes its major poles of conflict
through a spoken prologue. Unlike HAMLET, the conflict for which we are prepared
is given an historical perspective. The psychological dimension is left for the film’s
spatial articulation to reveal. Welles’s prologue runs as follows:

Our story is laid in Scotland, ancient Scotland, savage, half lost in the mist which hangs
between recorded history and the time of legends. The cross itself is newly arrived here.
Plotting against Christian law and order are the agents of chaos, priests of hell and magic;
sorcerers and witches. Their tools are ambitious men. This is the story of such a man and of his
wife. A brave soldier, he hears from witches a prophecy of future greatness and on this cue,
murders his way up to a tyrant’s throne, only to go down hated and in blood at the end of it
all.13

The simple clarity of this spoken exposition is juxtaposed with a montage which
evokes rather than establishes the textures of the film’s spatial substance, and
throughout the opening sequence of images Welles merges the technique of the
cinematic dissolve with the natural revelatory and obscuring effects of the mist which
swirls about the landscape. From the initial shot of cloud and mist effects in an
otherwise vacant sky we move with the camera through a series of dissolves to a shot
of the Celtic cross, which is obscured once again by mist and cloud. This clears to
reveal the three witches standing on an eminence of rock, holding their oddly forked
staves. The swirling mist engulfs them, clearing again to expose in medium close-up a
bubbling surface of muddy liquid, a grotesque tree ‘skeleton’ and finally a shot of
hands shaping from the muddy formlessness a figure of a child – a type of voodoo
doll.

The juxtaposition of the mist and cloud effects with the glimpse-shots of outlines
and symbols, and the final forming of a figure from the bubbling viscous liquid, taken
together with the greater juxtaposition of the simple spoken prologue with the weird
sequence of initial visuals, constitutes a clear suggestion that the essence of the film’s
thematic conflict is to be that of ‘form’ against ‘formlessness’. In his merging of the
controlled cinematic dissolve with what appears to be the natural action of the mist,
Welles gives added emphasis to this polarity. It is as though the formative control in
the film is more at the whim of nature than at the hands of the artist.

It is a significant achievement of the film that it sustains the tension in this polarity
between form and formlessness by its suggestion of the world of the dream, with its
nightmarish sequence of imagined reality without formal logic in a territory of unful-
filled action, from which there is a desperate desire to escape. Joseph McBride, in his
biography of Welles, has suggested that Welles's MACBETH evokes less a struggle of the will for dominance than the struggle of the mind for consciousness. The change in him (Macbeth) after the murder is almost indistinguishable; he seems to be sleepwalking from the beginning, and his blindness to the possibility of free choice makes it difficult for us to consider him a tragic hero. 14

S.S. Prawer, in his book on the ‘horror movie’ genre, observes that the elements of the horror film are pervasive. ‘Terror ... enters as an ingredient into many films that resist classification as “horror-movies” or “terror-films” in the narrower genre sense. It is an essential part of cinema.’ 15 Olivier’s HAMLET is one Shakespearean film which illustrates this with the long slow climb of Hamlet to meet the ghost of his father. There is one sustained shot just of Hamlet’s feet as they move up the stone steps. Welles’s MACBETH, however, holds more sustained generic affinities with the horror film and the film noir, partly because of the ripeness of the Macbeth plot for such treatment.

The hallmark of the film noir is its sense of people trapped — trapped in webs of paranoia and fear, unable to tell guilt from innocence, true identity from false. Its villains are attractive and sympathetic, masking greed, misanthropy, malevolence. Its heroes and heroines are weak, confused, susceptible to false impressions. The environment is murky and close, the setting vaguely oppressive. In the end, evil is exposed, though often just barely, and the survival of good remains troubled and ambiguous. 16

The tendency, too, for the horror film to feature some kind of monster given form by unnatural forces in the world where time and place are accorded the dislocations of the dream, further relates Welles’s spatial strategy to that genre. The essence of the nightmare which pervades the film is evident in the a-logical and a-historical relationship of space and time. Dunsinane is, in fact, a papier-mâché agglomerate of walls, caverns and rough-hewn arches. In the context of the dream, however, its non-realist is no barrier to our acceptance of it as rudimentary, rock-hewn architecture without style or form, and therefore without period. Its labyrinthish suggestion of psychological space is a visualization which isolates and confines man in the torrid secrecy of his own most abhorrent ambitions. Its timelessness makes it universal. Jean Cocteau has observed most eloquently the relationship of spatial detail to time in the film, and of both spatial and temporal dislocation to the dream:

Coiffed with horns and crowns of cardboard, clad in animal skins like the first motorists, the heroes of the drama move in the corridors of a kind of dream underground, in devastated caves leaking water, in an abandoned coal-mine ... At times we ask ourselves in what age this nightmare is taking place, and when we encounter Lady Macbeth for the first time before the camera moves back and places her, we almost see a lady in modern dress lying on a fur couch next to the telephone. 17

Claude Beylie, too, perceives the stature which the film achieves through its temporal ambivalence:

Macbeth is a sanguinary madman, a modern Attila who bears only his own demons and is vanquished by them; he appears then, on the screen dressed in animal skins or bound in a strange harness redolent of both the gold plate that look like hideous black horns or antennas, ... His palace is carved like the lair of a cyclops. We are transported, perhaps into some other planet. 18

Welles’s refusal to locate the spatial gives the film the power of the dream rational interpretation and witho.

Olivier’s HAMLET made Elsinore also a castle which conformed to the dramatic expectation. Welles’s MACBETH externalization which is more complex than that which governs much of HAMLET’s an equivocal presence of stone and familiar places. In Welles’s MACBETH, the context for the drama has the dislocations of the dream, some affinitive way, takes on the inscrutable walls exude drops of moisture, the sweat of panic.

The film’s affinity with the dream and the ‘fair/foul’ dichotomy equated with the ‘true/fake’ of Bazin has rightly noted, this dissolution of innocence. He discerns the spatial and temporal separateness of our ancestors, the Gauls or the Celts in time and sin, when sky and earth, when night and day separate. 19

The important dramatic potential of a universe resides in what it liberates from inherent moral judgement, an instinct. There is no doubt that We, repellent and horrifying. Conceived and distanced from us because of his act of instinctive and emotional power; a man we nevertheless sense a mysterious possibility of grace and salvation. 20

While Welles adopts the usual exterior sequences, there is an interpretive dimension
Orson Welles's Macbeth

Welles's MACBETH 'evokes less a struggle of the mind for consciousness. The change is distinguishable; he seems to be sleepwalking, the possibility of free choice makes the film a genre; observes that the elements of the horror-genre, as an ingredient into many films that are termed as "films" in the narrower genre sense.

It is one Shakespearean film which met to meet the ghost of his father. As they move up the stone steps, Dunsinane are accorded the dislocations of time and space are accorded the dislocations of dream vision; shape without form, presence without rational interpretation and without relative place in the world of conscious perspective.

Olivier's HAMLET made Elsinore the psychological architecture of its hero. But it made Elsinore also a castle which could be accommodated within the conventions of dramatic expectation. Welles's MACBETH presents Dunsinane as a psychological externalization which is more complex, for it is freed from the Freudian symbolism which governs much of HAMLET's spatial deployment. In HAMLET Elsinore evokes an unequivocal presence of stone and its locations become identifiable as consistent, familiar places. In Welles's MACBETH, there are no familiar places. The spatial context for the drama has the disorienting properties of an endless elusiveness of form together with the suggestions of an unstable organism. The spatial substance, in some affinitive way, takes on the involuntary biochemistry of Macbeth. Its cavernous walls exude drops of moisture just as Macbeth's skin glistens with the torrid sweat of panic.

The film's affinity with the dream vision has a major consequence. It dissolves the moral polarities which categorize action, and in so doing it reflects the confusion of the 'fair/foul' dichotomy equated by the witches in the play's opening scene. In contrast to the suggestions of the prologue, the film's spatial articulation plunges the action into a universe which is not only a-historical but also a-moral, and as André Bazin has rightly noted, this dissolves the traditional distinction between guilt and innocence. He discerns the spatial suggestions of 'a prehistoric universe - not that of our ancestors, the Gauls or the Celts, but a prehistory of the conscience at the birth of time and sin, when sky and earth, water and fire, good and evil, still aren't distinctly separate'.

The important dramatic potential arising from the cinematic presentation of such a universe resides in what it liberates through its refusal to define. In its emancipation from inherent moral judgement, action is exposed to the irrational response of instinct. There is no doubt that Welles's Macbeth finds his own action instinctively repellent and horrifying. Consequently, we are not presented with a Macbeth distanced from us because of his action, but one who remains human because of his instinctive and emotional power; a Macbeth 'who wallows in his crimes, but in whom we nevertheless sense a mysterious spark of innocence and something like the possibility of grace and salvation'.

While Welles adopts the usual course of making his film a blend of interior and exterior sequences, there is an imbalance in the overall spatial strategy. The philosophical and interpretive dimensions that are brought into play by a mise-en-
scene which comprises papier-mâché, fur coverings, water, mists and cardboard give
the film its unique stature, yet the interior sets are exploited to the very edge of their
limits. While the exterior shots are effective, their relative briefness fails to give the
film an aesthetic poise. As McBride observes, 'only in the foggy exteriors do we find
the necessary naturalistic counterpoint ... We are thrown back on our sense of drama
as theatrical spectacle.'21 Knowing the background to the film's production, one is
tempted to see the cause of the imbalance as financial, yet it is also clear that Welles
was at pains to avoid what he saw as Olivier's mistake in HENRY V, where the
exterior location for the Agincourt battle was too obviously a counterpoint to the
undisguised artifice and theatricality of the interiors. For Welles the spatial realism
had to be a world consistent with the inner being of the character. Shakespearean
characters are people for whom 'you have to make a world ... in HENRY V for
example, you see the people riding out of the castle, and suddenly they are on a golf
course somewhere charging each other. You can't escape it, they have entered
another world ... What I am trying to do is to see the outside, real world through the
same eyes as the inside, fabricated one. To create a kind of unity.'22

The landscape in Welles's film evokes a dramatic world of violent contrasts
between the jagged angularity of wind-stripped trees, the spatial vacuity of the
background and the formless, swirling cloud and mist which confuses clarity of
outline. Up to a point, the movement of the vapour in the vacant sky asserts its own
autonomous symbolic stature, suggestive of 'evolving nebulae at some primal phase
of creation.'23

The exterior shots are clearly not time signals. Unlike the seasonal change
depicted in HENRY V and RICHARD III which visualized the passing of time, the
seasonal suggestion in MACBETH is static throughout the film and is an enforcement
of the nature of the universe in which Macbeth is placed. Charles Higham, in his work
on Welles, suggests that season in Welles's Shakespearean films is an externalization
of the hero's souls. But his specific substantiation in MACBETH reduces both the
meaning of Welles's symbolism and the stature of the hero's predicament. His
assertion that 'rain and fog, and the dark colours of the dying year figure in
MACBETH, and that the mist evokes 'Macbeth's stormy soul, shrouded in despair',
places Macbeth at the end of a process of judgement rather than at the beginning of
the struggle towards the apprehension of form.24

The shortness of the film's duration is in part due to the substantial cutting of the
dialogue, but also, and more interestingly, to Welles's use of montage which is
responsible for the narrative energy and pace of the early part of the film's dramatic
development. Montage here is effectively achieved through cinematic dissolves
rather than abrupt cuts, so that the fusion of camera technique with the action of the
mist, which we noted earlier, is sustained in the shift from image to image.

The movement of Macbeth from the encounter with the witches to his meeting
with Lady Macbeth is given a compulsive energy through a means only available to
film. The contents of Macbeth's letter are initially dictated by Macbeth to a scribe,
the waist, beating out a
to
Maurice Bessey, in his fascinating study
is a means of visualizing a major theme in
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give stature to the hero, but also to distort perspective on
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both the close-up and the low-angle shooting serve the
The only scene in MACBETH in which the downward pressure of a
Orson Welles's MACBETH
is possible to trace the emphasis which Welles gives to the low-angle character
It
The combination of low-angle shooting and montage gives to the moment of
The function of the montage is not only to give narrative continuity a dynamic
beating abruptly stops, synchronizing the final beat with the axe's fall on Cawdor's
tricity of the hero', and Skoller suggests that the recurrent low-angle camera framing
Cawdor' s execution a memorable dramatic force. Lit from a source right of centre, the
McBride sees the close-ups as 'demonstrating the amoral egocentricity of the hero', and Skoller suggests that the recurrent low-angle camera framing of Macbeth is intended 'to give stature to the hero, but also to distort perspective on him . . . [and to reveal his] grossness and upwardly thrusting ambition'.

The combination of low-angle shooting and montage gives to the moment of
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dramatic world of violent contrasts

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reduce both the
The ceilings descend
to crush those they were meant to protect.'

It is possible to trace the emphasis which Welles gives to the low-angle character
shot through his whole canon, and to apply the often-cited theory that Welles's aim
is to relate the looming force and upward thrust of the main character to the
claustrophobic constraint of the ceiling's downward pressure. 'The ceilings descend
to crush those they were meant to protect.'

The only scene in MACBETH in which the downward pressure of a
celling is emphatic is the banquet scene. The action here takes place under a low-slung ceiling of animal skins, suggesting that only within the context of communal feast is there imposed upon action the constraints of custom and behavioural form. For the rest, the film stresses the openness of the vertical dimension by recurrently giving
and during the reading of this, the action's gathering pace is carried through three
dissolves: from the momentary, static place of the dictation (a soldier's tent) to
Macbeth's powerful and rapid horse-ride towards Dunsinane and finally to the shot
of Lady Macbeth lying on her bed reading the letter. As Skoller suggests, the
bracketing of the dynamic covering of geographical distance between two shots of
static locality reflects 'in graphic energy, the power between the [unexpressed] plan
to murder Duncan, and its execution'. It is a means of visualizing a major theme in
Shakespeare's play, the closing of the distance between idea and deed.

The function of the montage is not only to give narrative continuity a dynamic
pace, but, more importantly, to achieve a level of dramatic complexity through the
shifting of perspective. In the later parts of the film, the relative smoothness of the
dissolved transitions is replaced by rapid cutting, especially cuts from long and
medium-long shots to close-ups and the abrupt changes of camera-tilt to give vertical
dimensions to perception. Both the close-up and the low-angle shooting serve the
purpose of investing the character of Macbeth with cinematic stature in his self-centred isolation. McBride sees the close-ups as 'demonstrating the amoral egocentricity of the hero', and Skoller suggests that the recurrent low-angle camera framing of Macbeth is intended 'to give stature to the hero, but also to distort perspective on him . . . [and to reveal his] grossness and upwardly thrusting ambition'.

The combination of low-angle shooting and montage gives to the moment of
Cawdor's execution a memorable dramatic force. Lit from a source right of centre, the
object of the camera's isolation is a drummer stripped to the waist, beating out a
greeting for Duncan's return. In one of the few instances of camera movement, the
frame closes in on the pounding drum-sticks as they strike the vellum, until the
beating abruptly stops, synchronizing the final beat with the axe's fall on Cawdor's
neck.

It is possible to trace the emphasis which Welles gives to the low-angle character
shot through his whole canon, and to apply the often-cited theory that Welles's aim
is to relate the looming force and upward thrust of the main character to the
claustrophobic constraint of the ceiling's downward pressure. 'The ceilings descend
to crush those they were meant to protect.'

The only scene in MACBETH in which the downward pressure of a
celling is emphatic is the banquet scene. The action here takes place under a low-slung ceiling of animal skins, suggesting that only within the context of communal feast is there imposed upon action the constraints of custom and behavioural form. For the rest, the film stresses the openness of the vertical dimension by recurrently giving
emphasis to the dense concentration of tall, slender crosses carried by the Holy Father's acolytes, and later by Macduff's army which moves in a long procession against the skyline in its march towards Dunsinane.

The vertical dimension in the film is further strengthened by high-angle shooting, sometimes to afford a wider view of action, but more importantly to assert relationships between Macbeth and other characters, and between Macbeth and his universe. A memorable instance of the combination of deep-focus and high-angle shooting is Macbeth's reception of the news that Birnam Wood has moved. With Macbeth's head and shoulder dark, huge and ominous in the right of the frame, the messenger reporting the movement of the wood is distanced and puny, and placed far below Macbeth's apparent vertical eminence. Again, Welles's spatial disposition stresses Macbeth's isolation and his inaccessibility in that isolation. He has taken refuge in his own importance. The shot is followed by another high-angle shot of Macbeth moving with uncertainty upon a strangely mottled floor-surface whose formless patches evoke the merest suggestion of a shadow-figure with arms outstretched. Macbeth, now small, distanced from the camera and alone, calls for Seyton, only to be confronted with the shadow of a man hanging from the rope of the alarm bell. Macbeth's isolation has led him ultimately into the disorientated, surreal landscape of the dream.

Only rarely does Welles move his camera in this film. Whether this is for budgetary reasons, as McBride maintains, or whether the nature of the film's derivation from the original stage production governed Welles's cinematic realization is a matter for surmise. But the theatricality of the film becomes noticeable where Welles films the action in longer, unbroken takes. One example of this is the long take during which Macduff is given the news of his family's slaughter. The décor comprises an area of open ground, with a stone cross and the trunk and branches of a leafless tree in the middle background. As the dialogue progresses, one becomes aware of that distinction between actors and scenery which relegates the scenery to the aesthetic background, so breaking the organic unity of actors and space which is essentially cinematic. Throughout this scene the composition remains static and the actors are held in medium-close shot. The long takes during Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, too, dislodge the film from its earlier cinematic commitment so that the camera gives us a photographed theatre performance without integrating this into an overall spatial strategy.

There are moments during the film's later sequences when it becomes difficult to escape a sense that Welles's inventiveness is exhausted. The suppression of camera movement results in a spatial disorientation which seems to be a resort to sustain the film's cinematic stature. While this suspicion grows on the level of emotional response, it is nevertheless possible to argue the case for thematic validity, in one seemingly uninspired instance. When the doctor and nurse watch Lady Macbeth as she enters, in her trance-like state, the relationship of the characters is established through deep focus with the doctor and nurse in close-up on the right of the frame, and Lady Macbeth distanced, small, giving us a reverse deep-focus shot of a flight of steps in the centre background. On first consideration, little other than to afford another would make on the theatre stage. However, the frame is considered as an articulation of the conscious and unconscious, then in spatial terms on the two-dimensional visualized situation in which the characters are dominant, to a point, overpowering the conscious world of the background. The spatial strategy in the development of Lady Macbeth's standing speechless beside the steps, with its formless caverns and labyrinthine, brings with her the image of the dream.

Camera movement, when it does occur, is for resource. The most interesting case in point. Earlier in the film, the movement of technical competence, to prepare action as the murderers await and prepare for Birnam Wood, and the approach of the camera as movement of Birnam Wood are marked on Macbeth from an overhead long shot, his upward-looking face illuminated by the candle of the sleeper. Moments of the film, the camera treats the scene as a resource. The most interesting case in point. Earlier in the film, the movement of technical competence, to prepare action as the murderers await and prepare for Birnam Wood, and the approach of the camera as movement of Birnam Wood are marked on Macbeth from an overhead long shot, his upward-looking face illuminated by the candle of the sleeper. Moments of the film, the camera treats the scene as a resource. The most interesting case in point.

The battle is depicted against the deployment of torch-flames to give the scene a sense of force. Again Welles emphasizes the movement of the army and to impart dominance to detail of the tree-trunks against the castle background. The battle scene is shown in a flight of steps in the centre background. On first consideration, little other than to afford another would make on the theatre stage. However, the frame is considered as an articulation of the conscious and unconscious, then in spatial terms on the two-dimensional visualized situation in which the characters are dominant, to a point, overpowering the conscious world of the background. The spatial strategy in the development of Lady Macbeth's standing speechless beside the steps, with its formless caverns and labyrinthine, brings with her the image of the dream.
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and Lady Macbeth distanced, small and slightly left of centre. A little later, the camera gives us a reverse deep-focus shot with Lady Macbeth in the frame's left foreground, a flight of steps in the centre background, and the doctor and nurse in the right background. On first consideration, the deep-focus strategy here seems to achieve little other than to afford another angle on the movement which Lady Macbeth would make on the theatre stage. However, if this reversal of spatial proportion in the frame is considered as an articulation within the film's exploration of the worlds of the conscious and unconscious, then what occurs in the scene is ingenious. In purely spatial terms on the two-dimensional screen, the scene reveals a shift from a visualized situation in which the conscious mind - in the form of two minor characters - is dominant, to a spatial composition in which the unconscious overpowers the conscious world of restraint and discretion, and relegates it to the background. The spatial strategy in that sense is a microcosm of the psychological development of Lady Macbeth through the play. The doctor and nurse are left standing speechless beside the steps which lead back to the realm of the unconscious with its formless caverns and labyrinths, the world from which Lady Macbeth has just come, bringing with her the inverted relationship between instinct and reason.

Camera movement, when it does manifest itself, comes as a refreshing spatial resource. The most interesting camera movements are reserved for the final battle. Earlier in the film, the movement of the camera is used, sometimes with singular lack of technical competence, to prepare only for climactic moments. The following of the action as the murderers await and pounce upon Banquo is maladroitly handled. The tracking shot which holds Macbeth in the frame as he approaches the banquet table and the approach of the camera as Macbeth hears the witches' prophecy about the movement of Birnam Wood are more successful. In the latter shot the frame closes in on Macbeth from an overhead long shot to hold him in medium close-up, with only his upward-looking face illuminated in the midst of total darkness. In the closing moments of the film, the camera treats the approach of the army with rapid montages, affording only glimpses of Birnam Wood moving through the mist, though they are sufficient to reveal that Birnam Wood's trees are in full-leafed contrast to the gnarled, bare trees which have been part of the earlier mise-en-scène. With the heaving of the tree-trunks against the castle gates, the camera begins to track in on a low angle to frame the rhythmic thrusts of the battering rams, and with the rush of the incoming army the camera is at last liberated from its earlier constraint, following the action but never abandoning the dominant strategy of montage.

The battle is depicted against darkness and wind-driven violence, with the massed deployment of torch-flames to give the impression of formidable size to the invading force. Again Welles emphasizes the vertical dimension to give expanse to the scene, and to impart dominance to detail with angle-shots which glimpse the massed ranks of tall slaves. Macduff's entry is shown in a most impressive silhouette which, despite the truth of Cowie's assertion that 'Welles's best effects are those that come and go before their artifice can be detected', cries out to be held longer to punctuate the

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hectic pace of the film’s climactic sequences. The penultimate sequence of the fight between Macduff and Macbeth is shot with a rapid succession of high- and low-angle glimpses against a background of light and shadow, with close-ups and medium close-ups of the characters in action. The fight ends with a swinging blow aimed to sever Macbeth’s neck. The swing of the blade is interrupted by a cut to show the head of the voodoo doll rolling from its body, only then identifying the figure which the witches ‘formed’ from their muddy cauldron with Macbeth.

A further issue to be considered here is the relation of the camera to a narrative point of view. It was the camera movement in Olivier’s Hamlet which established for the camera a clear ‘persona’ dimension. Welles is not concerned here to develop any such narrative identity. The insistent fragmentation of sequences into collages of shifted perspective and the spatial disjunction tend to break down any development of a consistent point of view. In this respect, the film has about it a surprising spatial ambivalence. On the one hand, the rapid succession of montaged perspectives is imposed upon the perception of the viewer, while on the other, the camera’s agility affords a sense of omni-directional vision. The narrative function of Welles’s camera is not limited, as Olivier’s was in Hamlet, to the spatial laws of the presented work. Its revelations of quick moments of action operate upon the world of the film like flashes of lightning which create visual essence as they reveal it, and as such, the camera assumes the stature of a cosmic force. In three brief instances, however, the camera does take on a subjective identity. One such moment occurs when Macbeth is confronted by the illusory dagger. As the blade of the dagger is shown to pass across the eyes of the voodoo doll, it pulsates in and out of focus before there is a dissolve to a series of different perspectives on Macbeth, for his question, ‘Is this a dagger...?’ The second is more direct when, during the banquet, Macbeth seated at one end of the long table confronts Banquo’s ghost seated at the other. It is one of the rare moments in the film where Welles’s camera uses a continuous movement through a spatial distance, and here he uses it to relate opposing forces preparatory to a dramatic climax. The camera focuses concentration on Macbeth’s face at the mention of Banquo’s absence. Macbeth delivers his lines: ‘I drink to our friend Banquo, whom we miss. Would he were here’, and as he lowers his arm after drinking, the shadow moves down over his features. He rises unsteadily and points down the length of the table. The camera cuts to frame the dark shadow of the pointing finger on the rough wall of the chamber and then follows the movement of the shadow along the wall, to reveal for the first time the ghost of Banquo seen, as it must be, from Macbeth’s point of view. Banquo’s eyes stare forward and the camera, with a sudden cut, takes Banquo’s point of view to study from the other end of the table Macbeth’s reaction. It is a profound shot, for the camera shows Macbeth viewing the consequences of his action while he is viewed from the point of view of that consequence.

The third instance of subjective camera work recalls the technique used in Olivier’s Hamlet when Hamlet first encounters the Ghost on the castle battlements. The rhythmic, pulsing shift in and out of focus is very similar to the pulsating effect Welles uses at the point where Lady Macbeth is murdered. The fight ends with a swinging blow aimed to sever Macbeth’s neck. The swing of the blade is interrupted by a cut to show the head of the voodoo doll rolling from its body, only then identifying the figure which the witches ‘formed’ from their muddy cauldron with Macbeth.

As so often in Welles’s work, light is so often involved in the creation of the illusion of their plans in semi-darkness (see ‘Come, the blackness of the branches from which Macbeth gasps, ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me? Only at the end of the battlements, does light assert its brandished in the acknowledgment of its momentary lighting, so effective later in The Third Men steady arcs where flickering light works its magic.

To the charge of anachronism in the universe, largely evocative of the light of the film. But Cowie’s general premise that relevance in Macbeth than he applies the knowledge and understanding of the implicit suggestion is beyond light, with their dark side of the universe a post-lapsarian rather than a post-illuminated one. It suggests that the outlines and proclamation of form, and that the endeavour to make clear identification of living organisms and inert matter is a shadow and illusion with what is present significant to this is too interested in this confrontation with Banquo’s ghost, a ‘horrible shadow!’ and it is one that explores through a spatial juxtaposition of the shadow as form without substance.

Ironically, the combination of these elements in the film through a deployment of motifs that run through the film, from the forked staves of the witches form a series to the forces of order and chaos, etc.
Welles uses at the point where Lady Macbeth waits for Macbeth to come down after murdering Duncan. Welles again takes the viewer into the perception of the character – an effect which Skoller suggests is ‘very organic to the labyrinthine and animistic motifs that run through the film’.

If the camera tends to eschew the exploration of horizontal spatial lines and concentrates its disjunctive potential in setting up a vertical consciousness of space through angle-shots, the oppositions established in this way are enriched by the opposed realms of light and darkness. Peter Cowie relates the interplay of light and darkness in Macbeth to Welles’s use of light symbolism in his whole canon.

As so often in Welles’s work, light is seen as a purifying element. Macbeth and his wife hatch their plans in semi-darkness (her ‘Come, thick night!’ is given visible form); there is an emphasis on the blackness of the branches from which Macbeth’s men unsaddle the doomed Banquo. As Macbeth gasps, ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me?’ the images grow blurred, become suffused with gloom... Only at the end, with Macbeth decapitated after a fierce struggle on the battlements, does light assert its strength and honesty as hundreds of torches are brandished in the acknowledgment of Scotland’s new king, Malcolm. But the off-screen lighting, so effective later in The Trial is flagrantly anachronistic in this production, with steady arcs where flickering light would be more convincing.

To the charge of anachronism in the lighting effects, one might reply that a timeless universe, largely evocative of the unconscious, does not demand ‘period’ lighting. But Cowie’s general premise that light has a symbolic value carries a more specific relevance in Macbeth than he appears to recognize. The recurrence of faces against the background of sky, or against the reflection of light from glistening and bright surfaces, results in a reiterative use of whole or partial silhouette: a suggestion that the outlines and profiles which silhouette affords constitute the initial delineation of form, and that the film viewer is involved as a participant in the relation of the camera to a narrative universe a post-lapsarian rather than a pre-formative one.

"I drink to our friend Banquo, whom is his arm after drinking, the shadow adilly and points down the length of shadow of the pointing finger on the movement of the shadow along the Banquo seen, as it must be, from forward and the camera, with a sudden the other end of the table Macbeth’s shows Macbeth viewing the consequence point of view of that consequence. work recalls the technique used in the Ghost on the castle battlements, is very similar to the pulsating effect
series of derivative configurations as the film progresses. The naked trees which recur as elements in the *mise-en-scène* have been seen as hinting at a crucifixion theme, with Macbeth's spiky crown suggesting the Crown of Thorns. Skoller takes this symbolic development further and relates the suggestion of felled trees rising to cleanse the world to the Resurrection. There are, however, grave difficulties involved in trying to integrate a logical development of Christian symbolism with the film's structure. While it is true that Welles introduces the Christian stance both in the spoken prologue and visually, there is not sufficient evidence to show that he really knew how to integrate it. Despite the inclusion of a character not part of Shakespeare's play, the Holy Father, there is no cinematically strong Christian statement in the film. Indeed the film works much better without any such statement, for the symbols are too readily evocative of a traditional philosophy of morality and they are too dynamic in their associative power. The Christian infusion in the film has an historic rather than a philosophical function. As a dramatic element it is something of a loose end, and any attempt to trace a symbolic evolution which is specifically Christian has two detrimental effects. Firstly, it shifts the interest away from Macbeth, and secondly, it bends the rugged strength of the film's imagery away from its stark, primitive impact. Spatial elements that are related within the film achieve a more positive effect. The metallic 'blisters' which festoon the upper part of Macbeth's costume sustain a connection between Macbeth and the mud-like bubbles framed in the close-up during the initial moments of the film.

Also interesting is a symbolic motif which recurs in the later part of the film, after the murder of Macduff's family. It is an inverted 'fish-bone' structure seen first as a window-barrier in Macduff's castle. It is later seen in a much more dominant form at Dunsinane, and its shadow forms a background to the final fight between Macbeth and Macduff. This increasingly pervasive metal configuration embodies features of both the 'Y' of the witches' staves, and the cross. Depicted as it is in increasing size towards the end of the film, it seems to represent the formation of Macbeth's own complexity: a being composed of the self-seeking will to power through destruction on the one hand, and of instinctive revulsion and remorse at his own inability to check the impulse and desire which motivate his action.

The failure of Welles's *MACBETH* to attract much favourable, or even penetrating, critical treatment lies partly in its refusal as a film to project sophisticated gloss, partly in its unorthodox approach and partly in its obvious dramatic and technical inadequacies. But the essential respect in which it baffled some of the critics who tried to approach it seriously lies in its inversion of the expected theatrical order. No Shakespearean film till then had, with such a bold sweep, communicated its thematic substance primarily through its spatial strategy. In this film the actors and the dramatic development of character are relegated to a secondary significance. In taking on the generic characteristics of the horror film and the melodrama, the film quite deliberately, according to Welles, does not arrive at tragic stature. Rather, it presents the predicament of man in an equivocal universe, and it is at its best when it concentrates upon its essential perform as the basis of order, and with world of the unconscious mind.

The film deals essentially with perceiver and orderer of his place necessarily present him with free character as in the evolution and demands the viewer's engagement hian films, for the vigour and pace familiarize place in the film impose.

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Those cardboard sets; those barbarou

lances of knotty wood; those strange
The metallic 'blisters' on Macbeth's costume link him with the bubbles in the witches' cauldron visualised in the opening shots of the film. Orson Welles (Macbeth) concentrates upon its essential preoccupation with the evolution of unsophisticated form as the basis of order, and with the privacy of self-perception in the unstructured world of the unconscious mind.

The film deals essentially with the insistence that man becomes a conscious perceiver and orderer of his place and priorities in a universe which does not necessarily present him with free choice to act. Its drama resides not so much in character as in the evolution and formation of the conscience. As an adaptation it demands the viewer's engagement in a way very different from Olivier's Shakespearean films, for the vigour and pace of Welles's montage and his refusal to identify or familiarise place in the film imposes upon the viewer the need to make connections.

Understandably, there are those who find the film a disappointment in its failure to achieve theatrical stature on the one hand, or to arrive at a filmic spatial realism on the other. To this latter criticism, André Bazin's enthusiastic and penetrating insight would seem to be the most articulate answer:

Those cardboard sets; those barbarous Scots, dressed in animal skins, brandishing cross-like lances of knotty wood; those strange settings trickling with water, shrouded in mists which
Orson Welles's MACBETH

obscure a sky in which the existence of an equivocal universe, as is his dawning conscience and water, in which the spell of the witch may be, at least evoke Macbeth's metaphors whose metamorphoses they reveal."
obscure a sky in which the existence of stars is inconceivable... Macbeth is at the heart of this equivocal universe, as is his dawning conscience, the very likeness of the mud, mixture of earth and water, in which the spell of the witches has mired him. Thus these sets, ugly though they may be, at least evoke Macbeth's metaphysical drama through the nature of the earthly drama whose metamorphoses they reveal.37

9. **MACBETH** (Welles). Welles's papier-mâché set takes on the characteristics of solidified mud and slime—the substance from which the Macbeth universe is formed. At the witches' feet stands the crowned effigy which suggests the power of the witches over Macbeth. Brainerd Duffield, Lorene Tuttle and Peggy Webber (the three witches)
17. Richard III, II. 2. 150.
22. Interpolation.
25. See Jorgens, Shakespeare on Film, p. 212.
31. Jorgens, Shakespeare on Film, pp. 143 and 139, p. 146.
34. Richard III, IV. 2. 117.
35. Jorgens, Shakespeare on Film, p. 137.

5 ORSON WELLES'S Maccbeth
3. Claude Beylie, 'Macbeth, or The Magical Depths' in Focus on Shakespearean Film, ed. Eckert, pp. 72–5 (p. 95).
7. France, p. 76.
9. Ibid.
11. Eduard Schmid quoted in Willett, p. 120.

6 ORSON WELLES'S OTHELLO
3. Eric Bentley, 'Othello of Film and Stage', p. 359.
5. See Prefatory note on the variation of Othello's name.
6. Welles himself points out that he worked on the text of Othello, and sometimes different versions, of the same sequence (The Making of Othello, 1978).
7. Bentley, 'Othello of Film and Stage', p. 118.
Notes to pages 88–105

17. McBride, p. 112.
20. Ibid.
28. Macbeth, v. 5. 19. Welles's technique here would seem to offer an interesting solution to the problem Peter Brook encountered and agonized over twenty years later in the making of King Lear. See Manvell, p. 136.
30. Macbeth, ii. 1. 35.
31. Macbeth, iii. 4. 89–91. Welles amended the dialogue.
32. Skoller, p. 430.
34. Skoller, p. 432.
35. Macbeth, iii. 4. 106.

The Making of Othello

6 ORSON WELLES'S OTHELLO

5. See Prefatory note on the variations in available film prints.
6. Welles himself points out that he worked with many different cameramen in the making of Othello, and sometimes different cameramen were behind the camera for different parts of the same sequence (The Making of Othello, a documentary film by Orson Welles, 1978).
8. Othello, i. 2. 59.
15. Jorgens, Shakespeare on Film, p. 175.