

**Sound, Fury and Special Effects:  
An Examination of the Magical Illusions in Film Versions of *Macbeth***

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**Abstract**

The *Tragedy of Macbeth* remains a timeless tale of the fatalistic deterioration of an ambitious mind and the destructive path it takes into oblivion. A major fascination with this Shakespearean tragedy is its treatment of the supernatural. Witches, ghosts, and the inner-workings of Macbeth's imagination and hallucinations tempt audiences from all cultures and throughout time to pause and inhale the horror and tragedy faced by Macbeth.

How are different interpretations of Macbeth's relationship with the supernatural expressed through unique directorial choices made by directors of Macbeth films? This paper attempts to answer the question by exploring the treatment of three prominent supernatural scenes: dagger scene (2.1), Banquo's ghost scene (3.4), apparition scene (4.1). Directors Orson Welles, who directed Macbeth in 1948; Akira Kurosawa, 1955; Roman Polanski, 1971; and Trevor Nunn, 1976, approach the supernatural scenes with strong opinions about how to represent otherworldly elements as internal to Macbeth's guilty mind or as physical, external forces willing his demise.

In the dagger scene, Welles' use of filmic techniques give viewers an internal perspective of the dagger. Polanski, however, allows Macbeth to see the dagger before the audience and, later in the scene, the dagger's spatial position makes its power over Macbeth more physical, less internal. For Banquo's ghost scene, Polanski shows the supernatural, although visually implying it is internally projected; whereas, Nunn keeps the ghost strictly within Macbeth's mind, invisible to viewers. Polanski's filmic choices depict the witches' apparitions as a potion-induced hallucination, juxtaposed with Kurosawa's metaphorically staged apparitions that appear in the external environment of Washezoo (Macbeth).

An internal depiction of the supernatural creates a more sympathetic and personal view of Macbeth, as the audience travels inside Macbeth's mind. Macbeth appears dislikable, though,

when the supernatural is shown as existing outside of him because viewers remain isolated from Macbeth's inner-workings.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

It is intriguing that filmmakers are so keen on producing *Macbeth*, a play based on the environment of one man's mind where "nothing is, but what is not." (1:3) Perhaps it is just that nothingness, that internalization, that has allowed for so varied interpretations of the supernatural scenes - a blank slate, so to speak, rendered by Shakespeare and delivered by the unholy Macbeth.

Imagination, hallucination and witchery reign supreme. And it is this inner journey, "inward to Macbeth's heart of darkness. . . where we will find ourselves more truly and more strange, murderers in and of the spirit," (Bloom 523) .

Numerous filmmakers have tackled *Macbeth*, with diverse treatment of the supernatural. How can it happen that given explicit dialogue, the interpretations run so far apart? The lack of specific stage directions leave directors unencumbered, giving more creative freedom to interpret supernatural elements. This paper goes one step further by suggesting that it is the directors' contrasting perspectives on Macbeth's relationship with the supernatural as portrayed as either interior or exterior to his mind that facilitates many differences among the films. It is the freeness created in the script of visualizing hallucination and imagination, two undercurrents that run strong in *Macbeth*, that permit filmmakers to seize unique territory to display Macbeth's "heart of darkness."

## Chapter 2: The Dagger Scene

The dagger scene is an opportunity to depict Macbeth as someone possessed by stress-induced hallucinations. This scene marks the first time Macbeth, along with the audience, questions his sanity:

Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but A  
dagger of the mind, a false creation  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?  
(Mac. 2. 1.47-51)

Already horrifying, both Orson Welles and Roman Polanski exacerbate this gripping fear by "borrow[ing]" from traditions in horror films, with Polanski dousing his film in gore and blood (Jackson, 286). Based on Macbeth's description of the dagger in the original text it would be difficult to present this scene in any other way but that the dagger he sees is merely metaphorical, or at least non-substantial. Welles and Polanski both represent the dagger as non-real, though Welles' film noir rendition of this scene, heavily influenced by German expressionism, is abstract while Polanski adopts a more literal interpretation. Macbeth's relationship with the dagger in both renditions allows for audience sympathy with his character, although Welles gives viewers a more internal and personal perspective of Macbeth's vision and Polanski tends to be more external and tangible. As a result, the audience receives more reason to have concern for the sanity of Welles' Macbeth than for the relatively more thoughtful and controlled performance of the actor Jon Finch in Polanski's film.

Welles' use of visual effects in the expressionist style offers the isolated, internal perspective he intends viewers to develop regarding this scene. Disorienting effects add to the "turbulence in his view of the *Macbeth* drama" (Davies 85). The turbulence of Macbeth's mind is reflected in the "character of space," which is manipulated in relation to Macbeth's state of mind. (Davies 86) In expressionist style, this scene is composed of shots that create a disoriented relationship between Macbeth and the vision he sees. The sequence is punctuated by a series of quick dissolved transitions. These cross dissolve transitions connect the shots just as the shots become out of focus by allowing the focus of the camera to

become distant quickly and then rapidly fading to a new shot as it comes into focus. Out-of-focus-into-focus transitioning draws attention to the effected perspective from which we see. The series of images could be a mirage created by Macbeth's delusional mind as he sinks into a world of unreality. This unique cinematic style developed by Welles "relates *Macbeth* to classic expressionist cinema," through Welles' "violently disjunctive editing" as well as "the isolation of the individual, a sense of endless simultaneity and disintegration, [and] the obsession with death," writes Anthony Davies, author of *Filming Shakespeare's Plays*.

The first fleeting image that swims in-and-out-of focus is that of a blade slipping stealthily into frame directly before the eyes of a hazy voodoo doll. Viewers may not recognize this doll immediately, but on closer inspection this choice of *mise en scene* is revealed to be the same figure of Macbeth that the witches savagely slap together at the beginning of the film, which will return at the end to be smashed as a symbolic slaughter of Macbeth.

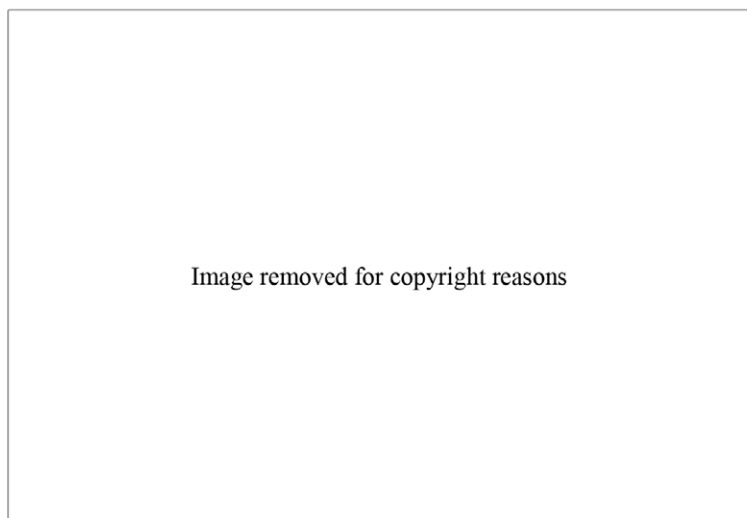
Following this shot, Macbeth's narration continues to describe what he sees through a whispered voiceover, a director's choice that emphasizes interiority of thoughts that bring us nearly inside Macbeth's mind, as if sharing his thoughts. This reminds us that the images we are seeing are internal, though still visible because we take his visual perspective.

Macbeth's internal monologue continues and the camera moves from a close up to an extreme close up so we are even more intimate with Macbeth, his eyes almost filling the screen. Welles gradually manipulated the *mise en scene* to mirror Macbeth's internal conflict by increasing the contrast of light and dark (*chiaro sciaro*) on his face. With the elimination of fill-light, the dark has devoured more than two-thirds of his face, foreshadowing his decision to commit the dark deed. As the view moves in, the music, a pensive, ominous underscore, becomes noticeable, adding emotion to the distraught eyes of Macbeth. Finally, as Macbeth proclaims "there's no such thing," viewers are snapped back to reality, as he is, by a final in-and-out-of-focus transition simultaneous to a swelling of string instruments, bringing us to a

more distant perspective of Macbeth from slightly above him. We return from the transition - the trip from the real world into his mind and back again—in essence a visual soliloquy.

Techniques of disorienting transitions, close perspectives on Macbeth, voiceover narration, and music that corresponds directly to changing images, invites us sympathetically into the mind of Macbeth and show us visually, through fleetingly, expressionistic, suggestive glimpses, his thoughts. Welles' technique keeps Macbeth's delusions from becoming too real in the physical world. Welles' audience is privy to the thoughts of Welles' Macbeth, yet made ever conscious of the fact that these thoughts are only that and not real. Some critics argue that Welles, "who most fully exploited the magic tradition, but in characteristically original ways," has taken Shakespearean theater into the "high art" form of cinema.

(Davies 89)



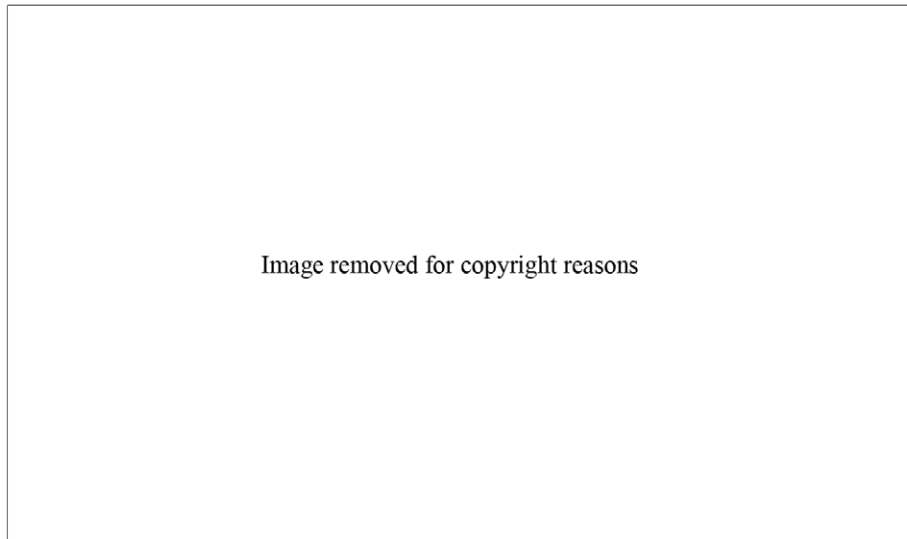
**Finger 1:** John Finch as Macbeth passes his hand through intangible, sparkling dagger. (Polanski).

The first noticeable similarity between Welles' and Polanski's *Macbeth* is that narration is a voice over, which lets us share Macbeth's perspective. A major difference, other than Polanski's scene being in



color compared to Welles' black-and-white, is that Polanski's *Macbeth* sees the dagger before we do. In Polanski's, the scene is captured in only two long shots (Welles used ten), beginning with an average close up, and only after Macbeth looks beyond the bottom right corner of the frame and asks "is this a dagger?" does the camera pan down to show the dagger he has already seen. The dagger that is revealed to us is a visual paradox, appearing solid and fixed in its spatial relationship to the environment. However, clues are given that it is not quite of this world. The dagger is "indeed sparkling with Disney or washing-powder radiance" (Jackson 89) and is illuminated by a singular lighting in a way unique from the rest of the set.

Here the first and only cut in the scene is made. The new shot is a medium close-up of Macbeth, hands covering eyes. In the background Polanski, like Welles, reveals a doorway leading to Duncan. As Macbeth exposes his eyes again and turns to check behind him, the dagger reappears floating before him, pointing its blade toward the doorway. This signifies a new stage in Macbeth's vision, which is the dagger, conveying temptation, coaxing Macbeth toward the bloody deed. The camera follows Macbeth's hand to his belt and back as Macbeth draws his sword, comparing it to the floating one. Now the magical dagger, in a suspenseful manner, draws Macbeth toward the distant doorway, moving away from him as he continues to try to reach it. This movement of Macbeth, "toward his design" (Mac. 2.1.) as instigated by the dagger's spatial position makes its power over him more physically real, not only internal. We see how it effects his physical movement, not just inner will as with Welles' version.



**Figure 2:** Macbeth follows floating dagger as it points toward the illuminated doorway that leads to the sleeping Duncan (Polanski).

At the peak of his temptation, the dagger on verge of entering the doorway, Macbeth's internal dialogue declares he sees "gouts of blood" on the "blade and dudgeon which was not so before". This quality of the dagger is not apparent on the screen, which makes the properties of this fantasy perplexing and mysterious. The audience is privy to Macbeth's vision to the extent that **we** can see the dagger, but the absence of blood to our eyes reveals that Macbeth can see a little more than us. This incites curiosity as the viewer wonders what more we are missing. It separates us from Macbeth more than in Welles' version. Finally, Macbeth breaks the spell by turning away, denouncing the illusion as "preceding from the heat oppressed brain." As he turns back towards the camera, the dagger dissolves for its last time so we are left alone with Macbeth close in the left-hand foreground with the subsidiary contrast leading the eye between him and the temptingly lit doorway in the right-hand background.

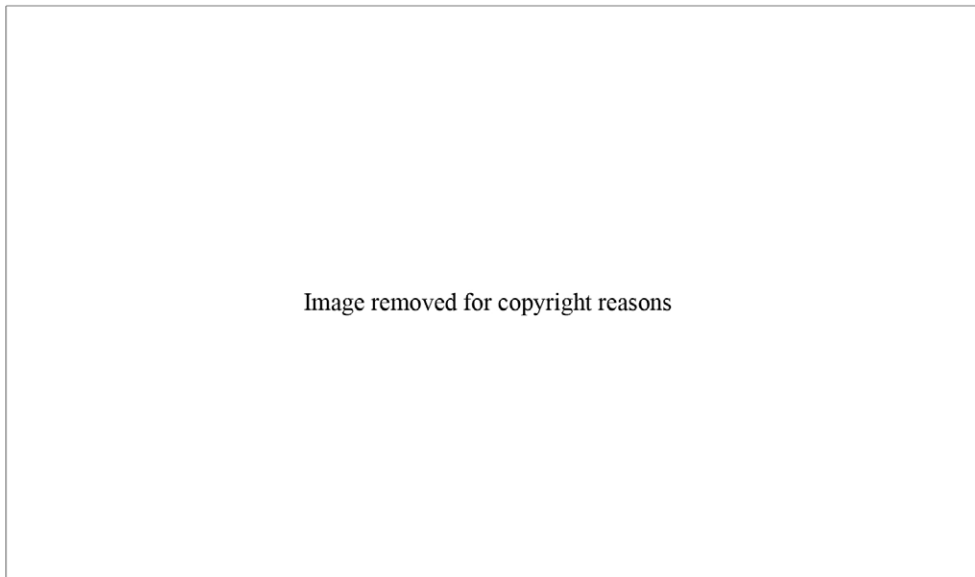
The guiding principle behind the choices in Polanski's dagger scene is that this dagger is merely a projection of Macbeth's mind, but it has brought itself much closer to being physically present than in the Welles' version by interacting with the environment. Polanski has effectively given us the satisfaction of witnessing the illusion of the dagger coming from Macbeth's mind, but has kept us more distant from

Macbeth with an exterior perspective compared to Welles' extreme close-ups and point-of-view shots. In other words Polanski "made [the dagger] supernaturally 'there' for all to see". (Tweg)

### **Chapter Three: The Banquet Scene**

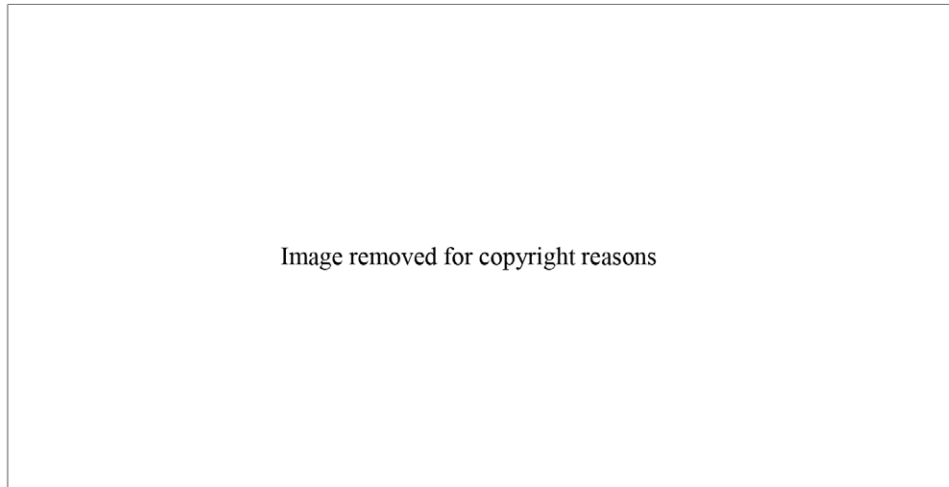
The Banquet Scene, in which Banquo's ghost appears to haunt Macbeth, marks the fruition of Macbeth's fatal prediction, "bloody instruction, which being taught returns to plague the inventor. This even handed justice does commend the ingredients of our poisoned chalice to our own lips." These words mark when Macbeth's actions begin to turn on him and the roles are reversed, casting Macbeth as the terrified victim of guilt and paranoia. Throughout the history of the play, including its staging in theaters, this scene is produced with the audience seeing what Macbeth sees - the ghost of Banquo – or seeing only the empty stool (Jackson 288). What remains important, according to Jackson and others, is the "reactions of Macbeth and the others present," rather than the "objective status of the ghost." (288)

Both Polanski and Trevor Nunn express the mad horror that consumes Macbeth with guilt at the sight of his betrayed and murdered friend's spirit. Polanski, this time, puts us on the side of Macbeth from a perspective of inside his mind's eye. Contrastingly, Nunn emphasizes the insanity of Macbeth's delusions and isolates him from the rest of us by keeping his inner vision concealed.



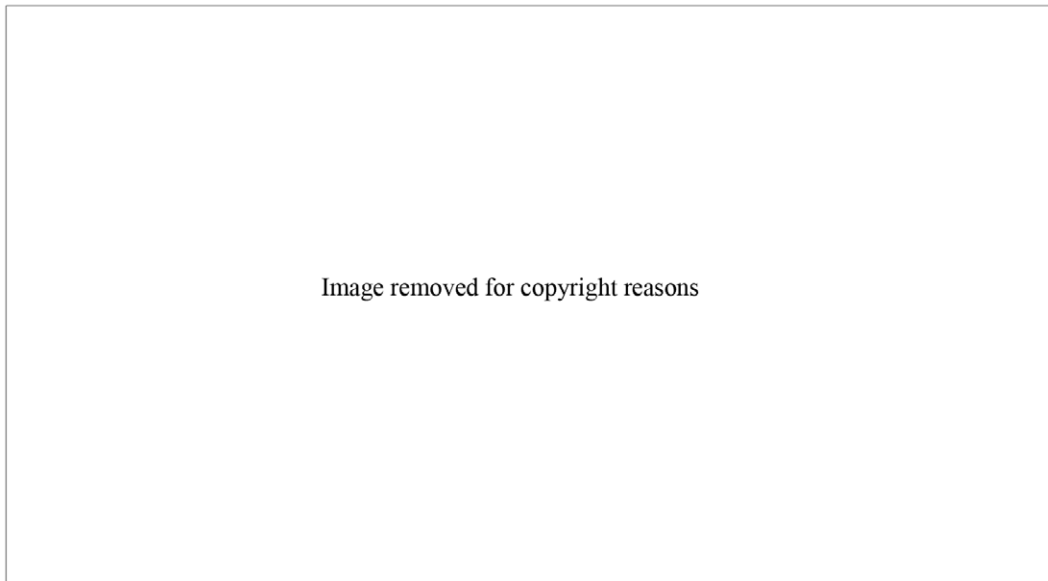
**Figure 3:** Banquo shields an unnaturally motivated light from his eyes (Polanski).

Polanski begins the climatic part of the sequence with Macbeth's point of view in a slow, dolly-in toward the crowded banquet table. There is no dominant focus of subsidiary contrast to guide the eye to a central figure until the view gets close enough to the back of the only guest not facing the camera. As the figure turns and is revealed to be the deathly pale ghost of Banquo, Polanski does not provide many cues that anything is supernatural yet. Only our common sense that Banquo has been killed and a faint, unnatural white light that he shields from his eyes hint of illusion. Banquo appears credibly solid and relates to the environment as realistically as any of the other characters. This effect is intended to convincingly baffle us as much as Macbeth is mystified by what he sees. We are presented the same information as he is and are permitted no more of an enlightening perspective. Polanski's choice allows the audience to empathize with his reasonably bewildered protagonist.



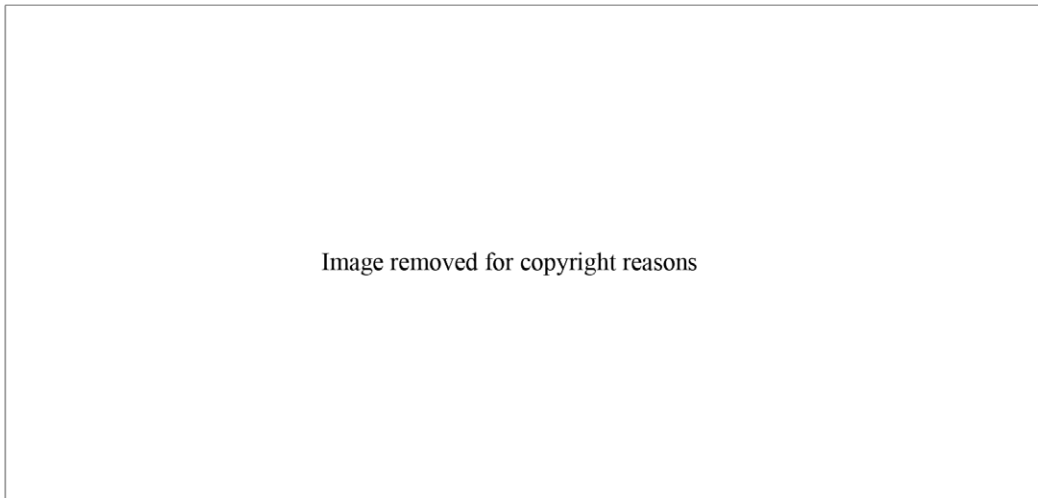
**Figure 4:** Banquo's face is suddenly streaked with blood (Polanski).

As the vision of Banquo progresses, Polanski increasingly alludes to its un-reality through various effects and discontinuities. In the first shot of Banquo that we witness from behind behind Macbeth's eyes, Banquo's ashen throat is only trickling a thin stream of blood. In the next shot of the ghost, gory streaks of blood splatter his face with gashes running through his eyes and now his slit throat is gurgling thick blood. This discontinuity in itself is clearly intentional and achieves the effect of challenging the reality of the figure of Banquo. Polanski feeds the audience a further hint to the lack of substance of the ghost through the visual effect of allowing his form to dissolve, becoming transparent as it rushes towards Macbeth. At the climax of the confrontation, Macbeth has fallen to the floor and is looking up at the phantom as the camera rushes towards him from the ghost's perspective. Next we see Banquo's ghost from a low angle, once again reinforcing Macbeth's perspective and giving Banquo's ghost a menacing presence as it looms above the viewer.



**Figure 5:** Banquo rushes toward camera as his form fades. (Polanski)

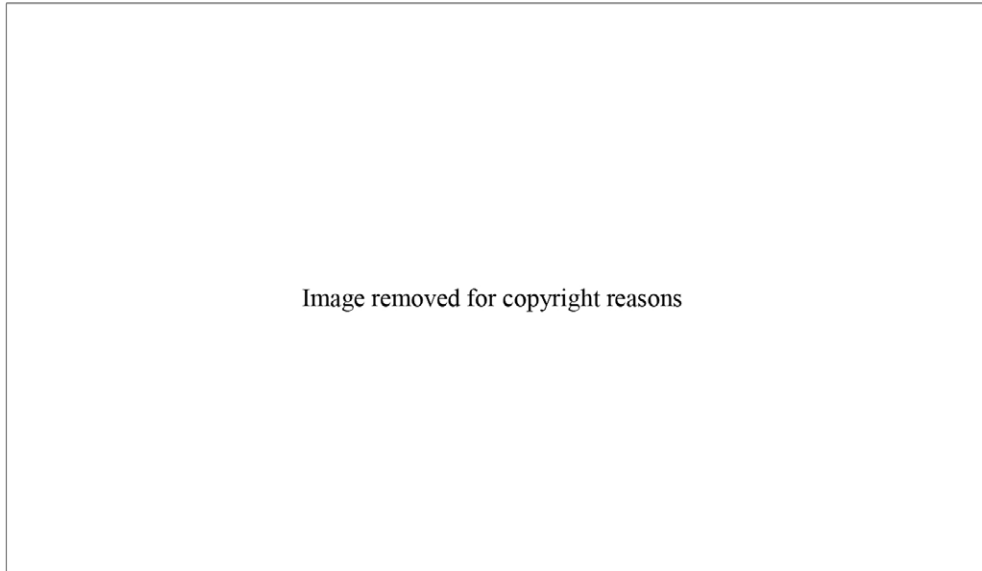
Every shot of the ghost has advanced its menace in a visual way. For this final shot, in addition to the low angle, the ghost appears to be drifting forward while the camera dollies backwards. The smooth movement of the ghost, without the appearance of earthly strides, appeals to the viewer's notion of the classic drifting ghost. This effect is accomplished by placing the actor on the dolly with the camera so that, in relation to the frame, the character is not moving, only relative to the ceiling above it is his forward progression apparent. In terms of the ghost's new physical appearance, its costume has suddenly changed so it is now shirtless and is bearing a falcon, wings spread on its raised arm. This hunting bird may symbolize the predatory nature of Macbeth's guilt.



**Figure 6:** The suddenly unclad Banquo is lit by a flickering projection of shattered shapes and wields a falcon as he looms above the camera (Polanski).

The ultimate reinforcement of the otherworldliness of Banquo is the practically non-diegetic filmic element of the lighting. An indistinct fractured pattern of light, reminiscent of some natural elements like branches, is projected on the ghost and the falcon for this shot. This indisputably unmotivated lighting literally casts the ghost in otherworldly light and finally distinguishes it as something supernatural. By gradually progressing the perception of the un-reality of the ghost, Polanski shows us the ghost from Macbeth's perspective to give us more insight into his perception of things so we can sympathize with him.

Nunn's goal is harsher toward Macbeth's character; a more external approach. We see this in the camera work, which "becomes extremely active, allowing the audience to remain a voyeur." (Mullin 358). Mullin shares notes from the shooting script, which calls for the cameramen to crab, zoom, pan, and crane. Besides the active camera movement, Nunn begins by using simple techniques to alienate Macbeth from everyone, including the viewer. In Nunn's banquet scene, Macbeth, played by Sir Ian McKellen, appears to see something occupying his stool, but the audience is not privy to his sight.



**Figure 7:** Ian McKellan, as Macbeth, glares at the imaginary Banquo which takes the place of the camera as Judy Dench, playing Lady Macbeth, tries to restrain him and banquet guests observe him with shock (Nunn).

Viewers are placed on the side of the banquet guests, the opposite perspective from which Polanski's scene is presented. Macbeth glares into the camera lens as though the viewer were the ghost. By turning Macbeth to face the camera, and thus the audience, head on, Nunn allows us to "see the scorpions that have filled his mind and that impel him to seek by any means to defy fate." (Mullin 358) Such a direct confrontation does little to promote a viewer's sympathy for the character placing himself in opposition to the viewer through his positioning. Because Macbeth continues to spot the invisible ghost in various directions in the location, the audience finds itself sharing the perspective of the banquet guests who are equally not privy to Macbeth's fantasies. Instead, we share Macbeth's guests' horror as we watch him "turn into a snarling, defiant lunatic, beside himself with rage and fear, frothing at the mouth and slashing out with his hands and arms as Judi Dench [Lady Macbeth] tries to restrain him." (Mullin 357) Mullin underscores the point that Nunn, by positioning Lady Macbeth close to Macbeth and "facing him out to the audience," keeps attention on "Macbeth's reaction rather than on the ghost," again tapping into the internalizing focus of the play.



Ian McKellen said that it makes more sense not see the ghost because if the audience sees the ghost that Macbeth sees then something must be wrong with the banquet guests for not seeing it at all, and Macbeth is supposed to be the crazy one. (Nunn DVD Extras) This interpretation concurs with Harold Blooms' notion that the strength of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is in the "radical internalization, and this is his most internalized drama, played out in the guilty imagination that we share with Macbeth." (550)

By excluding the audience from Macbeth's vision, Nunn gives us a less personal, external view of Macbeth that reinforces the unreality of the ghost and the lunacy of the victim while Polanski strengthens the tangibility of the ghost to gain Macbeth our understanding.

#### Chapter Four: Apparition Scene

Prolific Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa adapted the English story of *Macbeth* to a Japanese translation. Despite major changes, Kurosawa's style expresses the apparition scene literally. Polanski is more abstract with supernatural elements, making it clear that the images Macbeth sees are independent from the real world. This differs from his other two scenes where he expresses ambiguity to the audience, as well as to Macbeth, regarding whether the dagger and Banquo's ghost are truly present.

Once again, Polanski presents information through the perspective of Macbeth, suggesting point of view with camera angles, including over Macbeth's shoulder. Polanski eliminates possibility that supernatural elements of the scene are real by beginning with images superimposed over a texture of bubbling liquid from a cauldron, suggesting the contents produce Macbeth's hallucination. Few images in the sequence are stable; most transparent, fleeting, ephemeral. Polanski visuals are symbolic, depict the past, and foreshadow events to come.

Polanski's goal is to reinforce that these are supernatural hallucinations and what we see is the inner view of Macbeth's intoxicated mind. To emphasize the hallucination, Polanski attempts to disorient the audience through certain film techniques: 1) he shows the viewers quick glimpses of things that work on us subconsciously and images that are superimposed on each other, indicating that nothing is stable; 2.) numerous talking heads that speak the prophecies to him are superimposed over frothing liquid, which creates the impression that they are related to the boiling liquid, which is causing them; and, 3) sound is used to disorient the viewers. For example, Polanski shows a young boy speaking, as the voice turns into Macbeth's, which leads to our disorientation and emphasizes the hallucinatory quality of the vision. Rapid, unrealistic motion is used to create a chaotic image, such as the animation of the suit of armor, which is created by a rapid succession of still shots of the armor in different positions.

Polanski uses abstraction. When the armor is stabbed it falls apart as if no one is inside and, as the pieces land on the ground, we are given a fleeting glimpse of Macbeth's head also lying on the

ground, which visually foreshadows the shot at the end of the film, portraying Macbeth's demise. Such images relate to the audience subconsciously. Sped up motion also is used; in one case a time lapse exposure is employed to depict the rapid growth of vines around the crumpled suit of armor, which turns rusty in a matter of seconds. The small garden snake that slithers from the helmet could represent Fleance, "the worm that's fled".

Two white-robed figures who jest about Macbeth remaining king until Burnam Wood comes to Dunsinane cause a flux in tone from dread to eerie elation, reflecting Macbeth's unstable, intoxicated state. The voice of these men echo in a way not realistically related to the environment, suggesting what we hear is distorted by Macbeth's mind.

Polanski disorients our sense of space in the mirror sequence, reminding us that we are journeying through Macbeth's mind. We travel through many mirrors, passing kings descended from Banquo on the way, until we stop at one that reflects a scene already witnessed: Banquo with an ax in his back, but this time he turns to face Macbeth, who is watching him in his dream, and laughs at him. We know the events are delusional because this repeats a prior event, although now in a manipulated way. This illusion is shattered by Macbeth as he smashes the mirror image. A clear division is marked between the chaotic, disorienting world we have been watching and the real world external to Macbeth.

The main difference in Kurosawa's presentation is that the view is entirely external. The scene can be interpreted as metaphorical because there is no explained transition from reality to unreality. Kurosawa's Macbeth, played by Toshiro Mifune, is not shown to be intoxicated and since the camera's point of view does not suggest his direct perspective, we assume what he sees is physically present, external from himself. At the same time Kurosawa makes it clear that what we are seeing is supernatural. Unlike Polanski, Kurosawa keeps the perspective of the audience outside of Macbeth's head so that we witness from more of a third person viewpoint what anyone watching could have seen.

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**Figure 8:** A witch bellows at Takatoki Wasuzi in an unnaturally deep voice while thick fog swirls around her and skeletal remains can be seen in the foreground (Kurosawa).

When we first see the evil spirit in this scene, it is a fleeting form in the distance, lit with a bright light, different from anything else in the rest of the dark shot. This light casts the spirit in an otherworldly glow, setting it apart from the rest of the environment. The mise en scene chosen for this scene also reflects the supernatural aspect of the environment that Takatoki Wasuzi (Macbeth) has entered. Kurosawa uses sound to suggest this presence is unnatural, turning off all the high pitch registers of the voice recording so that the female actress projects an ominously low voice. Visual effects are used to demonstrate the powers of the spirit, such as when a cut is made disguised by a lightening flash, making it appear as though the witch transformed into a powerful warrior. Space is used to show that this spirit is not confined to the natural laws of the environment by having other manifestations of the spirit emerge out of the fog behind Macbeth each time he turns to face a new direction. The innovative use of on-set and editing effects Kurasawa implements clearly expresses his concept that the witch is physically present in the world and not merely an illusion, yet has supernatural powers.

## Conclusion

Whether depicting supernatural elements as physically existing outside of a character for all to see, as Kurosawa does, or isolating a character from the audience by not revealing what they are seeing internally, as does Nunn, film directors are able to separate Macbeth from the audience. This is why the portrayal of Macbeth in both the Trevor Nunn and the Akira Kurasawa are more dislikable, although Kurosawa's Washizi is as much a victim of the tight clamp of the "feudal order and social decorum as of his personal transgression". (Jackson 131)

We sympathize, however, with Welles' and Polanski's character of Macbeth because these director's techniques portray the supernatural elements as internal, showing them to us from Macbeth's perspective. In this way, the director gives the audience a greater understanding of the character's interiority.

It is refreshing to witness the remarkable variety of directors' perspectives of Macbeth from Ian McKellen's portrayal of an alienated lunatic to John Finch's and Orson Welles' depictions of a pitiable and tragic figure to Mifune's rendition of a violently harsh ruler. Aided by a range of filming techniques, all interpretations work to prove that:

**This supernatural soliciting...cannot be good (Mac. 1.3. 143-144)**

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