

MACBETH – A PARADOXICAL ADAPTATION OF SHAKESPEARE, BY ORSON WELLES

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ABSTRACT. THE ADAPTATION OF WELLES HAS A PARADOXICAL NATURE: IT HAS THE CHARACTERISTIC OF BEING IN SOME WAYS VERY CLOSE TO A PLAY AND YET ITS SUCCESS SEEMS TO BE MAINLY DUE TO THE TALENT AND CINEMATIC INSPIRATION OF ITS DIRECTOR. THE ADAPTATION OF A PLAY FOR THE CINEMA REQUIRES THE DIRECTOR TO ACCEPT FROM THE BEGINNING THE CHARACTERS, THE DIALOGUE AND THE SUCCESSION OF SCENES. *MACBETH* IS THE FIRST AND FOREMOST TRAGEDY OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS: IT EXPLORES THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL, VIRTUE AND CRIME, AND SHOWS HOW THEY ARE BLURRED. THE FILM ADAPTATION OF ORSON WELLES IS A COMPLETE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ORIGINAL THEATRICAL PLAY, INSISTING ON THE EMPHASIS OF THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION, USING CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES.

KEY WORDS: CINEMA, STRUCTURE, DRAMA, ADAPTATION

We are going to try for the beginning of our analysis regarding the film adaptations of the Shakespearean drama, to study an important example carried out by an illustrious director, Orson Welles. It is an adaptation of *Macbeth*. The first question that opens our topic is: which are the advantages of transferring a play from the stage to the cinema? Trying to answer this question leads inevitably to address other questions: what is the value of the performance at the theater? Does a play acquire its real dimension when it is represented? If yes, can the film adaptation achieve this? The choice to focus on a small number of examples is the result of the will not to disperse and lose sight of the objective of our study. This play *Macbeth* has, moreover, the reputation of being a cursed one: its film adaptation would thus be particularly difficult and there is a real interest in seeing how inspired filmmakers proceeded to deal with the double difficulty of adapting a cursed Shakespeare.

The choice of this film was also not made randomly. There are indeed, in addition to Welles and the silent versions, two other adaptations of *Macbeth* at the cinema: *The castle of the Spider* (1957), by Akira Kurosawa, which transposes the story in 16th century Japan, and *Makibefo* by Alexandre Abela (2000), which places the action in a village in Madagascar. We preferred not to mention these films in our study, as they are adaptations directly inspired from the history of *Macbeth* but they do not highlight the original text and the context. This type of work is thus not a proper basis for our study because it involves classical, normal films, without the actual constraints of dialogue, characters, scenario. It only serves as a source of inspiration to create a film and does not use the written text that would impose some unavoidable constraints. This is why we shall confine ourselves to the study of the "real" adaptations, although we must admit from the beginning that each director takes some liberties with the original text. The work is all the more exciting, because we see how from these common requirements and the artistic effort of Welles culminates in a really unique work.

Our approach has as main objective to focus on the film aspect of the research. If a preliminary study of the play itself is of course necessary, anyone who deals with it should do it voluntarily in order to favour the study of film adaptations. It is therefore through the analysis of the films we will study the main themes of the piece. The adaptation of a play for the cinema requires the director to accept from the beginning the characters, the dialogue and the succession of scenes. Another interesting aspect is the parallel between the theatre and the cinema; the main elements that the director of theatre needs to give shape to its interpretation of the play, namely the scenery, the costumes, the lighting, or the music, whereas the film director has purely cinematographic elements provided by the handling of the camera. The film director also has more liberties since he is limited neither in time nor in space. We thus explain the differences between the films obtained through all these criteria.

Macbeth is a tragedy in five acts by William Shakespeare, whose creation date is uncertain. Nevertheless many elements lead to the belief that the first performance of the play took place in 1606. Tragedy of ambition and remorse, it is one of the peaks of the Shakespearean theatre. On the Moor, Macbeth and Banquo, returning triumphant from the battle with the King of Norway, meet three weird sisters. These witches predict that Macbeth successively is going to become thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland, and that Banquo will be father of a future king, without being one himself. However, upon his return, Macbeth is named thane of Cawdor by the King Duncan, in recognition of his warrior prowess, for having saved the kingdom. Bewildered, the latter, who now believes in the predictions of the witches, talks to his wife, whose ambition is unbounded and she convinced him to murder Duncan to fulfill his destiny. After the first murder, Macbeth became King, decides to kill Banquo and his son to remove his prophetic rival. But the attempt fails half and only Banquo dies. Macbeth, plagued by remorse for his crimes, is unable to enjoy its power. Hunted by hallucinations, he believes to see, during a feast, the spectrum of Banquo appear before him. Lady Macbeth suffers the same illness and she eventually dies. While his Kingdom is in decline, Macbeth returns to see the witches who can reveal his future. They predict him that he won't be defeated until the forest of Birnam comes against him, and that "no man born of a woman" will harm him. Macbeth is reassured temporarily, but the troops of Malcolm, son of Duncan eager to avenge his father, advance to the castle of Macbeth. Hidden behind branches, the soldiers give the impression that the forest walk, thus creating the first prediction of the witches. Macbeth throws himself into the fray and is killed by Macduff and this way the second prophecy was fulfilled because Macduff was born prematurely.

We just mentioned here the commonly accepted as fundamental themes in the play. *Macbeth* is the first and foremost tragedy of human consciousness: it explores the boundaries between good and evil, virtue and crime, and shows how they are blurred. The genius of Shakespeare is to portray accurately the weakness and uncertainties of human nature despite the emphasis of the dialogues and the extraordinary events of the story. This explains that during all the play Macbeth connects with the reader, despite his cruelty, in a feeling of sympathy mixed with admiration. His remorse, which torments his spirituality makes him truly human and allows relatively surpassing his deadly follies. Shakespeare portrays a man torn between ambition and loyalty. The final punishment does not entail a sense of accomplished justice. Regarding Lady Macbeth, her character is more ambiguous and remains perhaps more open to interpretation. However, a fact seems undeniable: the fascination that she generates to the reader, which increases after the murder. This explains that she has always been considered as the most exciting female protagonist of Shakespeare.

The genesis of the film is very important, because its conditions of execution explain many of its features. At the time, Orson Welles was extremely active on the cultural area

represented by radio, theatre, magic shows, as well as on the political space, not lacking to express his opinion on many contemporary subjects. Despite its energy and its media coverage, he was not yet popular with producers, as his works often outflow in financial failures. His production company, Columbia, was pessimistic about the success of his last film in date, *The lady from Shanghai*. Even his radio activity, once very productive and successful, began to lose listeners. In fact it is more thanks to its early glory years that his creations of the time remained on the front of the stage. As his personal means, Welles had them almost all invested in his theatrical adaptation of *Around the world in 80 days* by Jules Verne.

To achieve his wish to adapt a theatrical work of Shakespeare, Welles needed the support of a production house. Hollywood houses were reluctant to this type of cinematic experimentation, which did not seem to be able to bring commercial success. The last two attempts for the adaptation of the works of the Renaissance writer dated back to the years thirty with the *Midsummer night's dream* of Max Reinhardt and *Romeo and Juliette* by George Cukor. To convince production companies to join his project, Welles had a theory: he thought that it was possible to achieve a good adaptation of a play by Shakespeare into a film with a limited budget, and so to make the business profitable. Columbia's boss Harry Cohn was not persuaded and refuses to hear about it. Welles then turns to a production house specializing especially in western musicals, the Republic Picture. The Second World War gave a new boost to the film industry, which had greatly benefited the small production houses. It had allowed Republic Picture to produce each year a small number of prestigious films intended to enhance its image, and Orson Welles project was part of this policy.

Welles mocks the jeers that were related to in its subject matter, who criticize its passage of major Hollywood production houses to this factory to manufacture inferior series. On the contrary, the imperatives of Republic Picture corresponded to his project, to make a film with little means and in a short period. He will also directly use the decorations that he had created for previous productions without seeking to build new ones, more consistent with the context of the piece. Another great originality of this film is the preparation of a performance at the theater directly preceding the actual shooting. This feature is even directly at the origin of the project itself. A New York theatre had indeed asked Welles to create a staging of King Lear for the festival of the centennial of Utah in Salt Lake City in May 1947. It was then that after requiring to replace King Lear by Macbeth, the latter asked Herbert Yates, president of Republic Picture, about the film. The estimated budget was limited to 883 467 dollars and the duration of the filming at three weeks. Six performances took place in Salt Lake City, from 28 till 31 May 1947. If their decor is not the same as that of the film, the distribution is largely similar.

Another way to save time, Welles decides to pre-register the majority of dialogues in order to shoot the scenes in playback, allowing him to give stage directions to the actors while they play. He had already experimented with this technique on *The lady from Shanghai*. When recording, Welles required his actors to use the Scottish accent to recreate the atmosphere of a primitive and disturbing Scotland. Jeannette Nolan played the magnificent role of Lady Macbeth. The actual filming can be considered ideal because of the mastery of the text by the actors, recently exercised at the theatre, and the project as a whole by Welles. The latter was able to apply the technique of "filming in continuity". Thus, from the first shooting, he managed the coup to finish at midnight the complex plane for more than ten minutes during which occurred the murder of King Duncan.

Finally, the filming is completed on July 17, 1947, a total of 23 days, and the final budget, estimated at between 700,000 and 750,000 dollars, is even smaller than it was announced. The film was finally released to the United States on the first of October 1948 and

made a total flop, both for the critics and to the public. He had already been very bad received at the Venice Festival, so that Orson Welles had decided at the last moment to step out of the competition. The main problem with the film was the use of the Scottish accent which made Shakespeare's texts incomprehensible to the public. Also criticized were the cuts made in the original text, as well as the dummy costumes and décor of cardboard. It must be said that the film was released simultaneously with the *Hamlet* of Laurence Olivier, who staged a faithful version of the text and of the Shakespearean tradition.

To save his film of the disaster and try to make it more popular, Welles decides to reassemble it to make it more in line with the expectations of the public: the film passes from 107 to 86 minutes and part of the dialogue is re-recorded to remove so much embarrassing Scottish emphasis according to the critic. The result is a film without coherence and unity, a poor sound quality and completely disjointed. This variant of the film released in 1950 also made a total flop. According to Welles his film is "a violently sketched charcoal drawing of a great play"¹. It assumes that the cinema can render the greatness of Shakespeare's plays. The position of Welles is therefore clear: any adaptation of Shakespeare, theatrical or film, is doomed to have a limited scope. It directly opposes the idea that a play (at least in Shakespeare) doesn't acquire its true dimension than through its representations. We'll look at the liberties taken by Welles for the original text taking into account this postulate of departure: without wanting to make wealth, his choices were guided by the desire to render the essence of the piece in a modest movie. In the design of Welles, the film appears as a kind of illustration of the text of Shakespeare, whose quality is conferred by the grandeur and the genius of the original text, that is indeed impossible to completely render.

In his text *Orson Welles and the remodeling of the Shakespearean text* François Thomas establishes fifteen categories in which he tidies the processes of adaptation of the text of Shakespeare in the films of Orson Welles. According to him "In *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Chimes at Midnight*, his three Shakespearean adaptations, Orson Welles thoroughly restructured the text of the plays. He broke lines down in order to give them to several characters instead of one, he altered the meaning of lines by inserting a few words in the middle of them, *Chimes at Midnight* reverses the proportion of prose and verse found in both parts of *Henry IV*, and so on. Above all, he turned the structure of the text upside down: he constantly changed the order of a scene's lines or a play's scenes while most sequences blend lines taken from different scenes".²As already noted, adaptation does not mean at Welles alteration but rather recovery, sublimation. He tries to make the text compatible to the imperatives related to the cinema, in order to screen the power of the literary work. An integral performance or representation of *Macbeth* would last for nearly three hours, or Welles wanted to shoot a short film. For this reason he removed the scene 5 of Act 3, where the goddess Hecate joined the witches. He also cut the visions of *Macbeth* caused by the witches, as the moment where Malcom tests Macduff's loyalty.

He eliminated whole fragments of texts of secondary characters to refocus the film on the lines of the main characters. Another major change that he brings to the text is a decomposed dialogue that accentuates the tragic intensity of the film. Two examples are spectacular: the extremely fragmented decomposition of replicas of the witches and the lively discussion that followed the murder of Duncan. A variation from the original text can be considered the allocation of lines to another character. In this category the most spectacular remains the creation of a composite character, the old priest, which influences in this case more

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2013/apr/29/michael-fassbender-play-macbeth>

² <http://www.societefrancaishakespeare.org/document.php?id=290>

the interpretation than the personal addition to the simple film adaptation. This old man plays a key role because it is supposed to represent the conflict between paganism and Christianity, the basic message that Welles wants to send to the viewers of his film. In total, the text of the old priest is an amalgam of replicas borrowed from five secondary characters (Ross, Lennox, Caithness, the old man of Act 2, scene 4 and the Messenger of the Act 4, scene 2), but also to Banquo and Macbeth. The change of order of scenes is also an important variation than needs to be considered. There is the displacement of Lady Macbeth sleepwalking scene, preceding the announcement of his suicide in the film, besides it is explicitly filmed while in the room it is only suggested. The Welles film brings a single add on the part of the filmmaker, which is not insignificant, the two prayers said by the priest, one in Latin, on the arrival at the Castle. This interpolation is designed to emphasize the opposition between Christianity and paganism, an important idea, as we have seen, in the eyes of Welles.

But this interpolation also has another effect, this time on the psychology of the characters: it accentuates the cruelty of Lady Macbeth, who described the preparations for the murder of Duncan during the prayer, and increased the torment of her husband who was listening frightened. Regarding the staging, in order to adapt a play a director has two options: first the text itself, if it is normally an untouchable support, it may be subject to changes arranged by the Director. Thus, we have seen, Welles is not bothered to crush the original text into a short version and that he considered proper for the screen. On the other hand, nothing prevents the Director to proceed with additions. In the latter case the cinema offers more opportunities than the theatre. The first constraint of theatrical performance is, as its name suggests, to take place in a theatre. This tautology is not without consequences for the developer, since it reduces his room with regard to the setting and the number of characters that may be present at the same time. This imperative requires a fictional setting whose dimensions are limited to those in the scene.

The second essential characteristic of the theatrical performance is the unit of time. Unlike the film adaptation, performed in several times and the time constraint only depends on production house, the play must be performed in the theatre at once, with maximum a break which corresponds to the intermission. More generally, this obligation to represent the play in a quick and sudden period of time significantly restricts the possibilities of the theatre in terms of special effects. It reduces the possibility of changing sets, costumes; it limits the games of lighting and special effects. In total, it restricts the number of fireworks making time to be put in place.

Finally the last fundamental difference between the theatrical and the film adaptation is that the first is performed live before the spectator, while the second is filmed in advance and then broadcast through a screen. The film director has therefore a fundamental freedom in comparison to the director of theatre: he chooses the angle of view by which he wants the viewer to see the scene and can modify it permanently. With the camera he holds at his mercy the eye of the viewer: it can move it where he wants to and show him what he wants. He is also master of the distance between the viewer and the actors. This difference also has repercussions at the level of tricks, because some effects are obtained through the camera and may not be reproduced online.

In our case, at first sight the filming conditions, the short-term and the reduced means, will inevitably give it a theatrical dimension. We have seen, that because of lack of means, Welles made his film in confined space, with totally staggered costumes. And yet the film works and Welles demonstrates the veracity of its initial premise, the possibility to build a captivating adaptation of Shakespeare with little means.

The talent of Welles is to give these poor shooting conditions a powerful expressionistic and symbolic dimension. It should be noted, however, that the elements of setting and the costumes are far from being totally hazardous. Jean-Pierre Berthomé note that two reasons oppose throughout the film: the cross and the fork. This dichotomy symbolizes the opposition, so important in the eyes of Welles, between paganism and Christianity. From the first scene of the film, the priest lance surmounted by a Celtic Cross pushes the forks of the witches. And then the three forks are followed by a multitude of crosses, symbolizing a Paganism on the decline. But this predominance of crosses is misleading and the witches are the ones who lead the dance. In Macbeth Welles also uses cuts of rhythm, breaking the long sequence shots by short shots.

Another tool widely used by Orson Welles in the film is the lighting. Obviously, the games of light are also determinant in the theatre, and elsewhere their use by Welles in his movie often recalls its theatrical origins. But it seems to us that cinema, where adaptation is more spread out at the theatre, offers more possibilities in this area.

The film is very dark and gossips had proclaimed that the darkness was a ploy intended to hide the lack of film. It feels like the double influence of past theatrical and film buff in the way Orson Welles manages lighting. The movie bathes in a darkness that is sometimes occasionally band by rays of white light. These bursts of clarity are limited to very directional lighting, emphasizing both their theatrical origin and the stylization of a genre in which Orson Welles has given a lot: the film noir. They are often used to show that glimmers of hope in the drama might be only short-lived. For example when Macbeth shows his arrogance on the promontory, the whiteness that lights him is the unique mark of his delusions of invincibility.

Finally we cannot finish without mentioning a last possible technique only to cinema: the use of voiceover to express the thoughts of the characters. This technique allows to avoid asides addressed aloud to the audience to the internalization of the actors. The film presents nine interior monologues: eight for Macbeth and one for Lady Macbeth, when she exalts after reading the letter from her husband. Some already were monologues in the piece, other asides or even the elements of dialogue. The mode of appearance of the monologues of Macbeth is always the same: he is isolated in one way or another, his voice is whisper. For the last monologue, which contains the famous tirade of Act 5, scene 5 "life is a story told by an idiot, full of fury and sound, and that means nothing", Welles had the idea to illustrate it by an image of cloud or mist, getting a double utility. There on the one hand, there is an expressionist value that increases for the spectator the impression created by the line. But it also allows avoiding the cliché of a close-up on the actor reciting a famous line.

Since we are in the sound field, we must not forget another prerogative of cinema: the possibility to change the intonation of the voice actors. We have already mentioned in the genesis of the film the distinction made by Welles between the image and the sound recording in advance dialogues. It should be noted that he changed the recording techniques according to the importance of the characters. In Macbeth, this sound processing applies mainly to the monologues: the dialogues are saved remotely, while the proximity of monologues records provides them with an effect of internalization. The use of this technique allows to mark the difference between the dialogues, as found in the theatre, and the monologues, purely cinematic.

Welles bet was to build an adaptation of Macbeth faithful to the spirit of the play with little means. This initial postulate, and the filming conditions, rendered the Welles location close to that of a Director of theatre. Yet the strength of his film is not in this proximity to scenic representation. He excelled in the prerogatives of the director, that of the handling of the camera. It is therefore a purely cinematic talent that confers so much force in his work.

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Online resources

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