

Polanski's interpretation of macbeth

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The Macbeth (1971) film production by Roman Polanski blends this classic Shakespearean tragedy to the film noir cinema genre creating a rich, dynamic combination. Classic film noir encapsulates “ pessimism, bleakness, despair and paranoia which are readily evident [...] shot in gloomy grays, blacks and white, it thematically showed the dark and inhumane side of human nature” (Conard 2006). Literally meaning dark film or black cinema, film noir evokes the moral darkness and corruption, evil, paranoia, mental disorder, fatalistic pessimism, violence and cruelty.

Film noir “ echoes a sense of moral corruption and betrayal in the motion picture industry” (Gazetas 2008). From the opening scenes, the spectator is at once introduced to moral darkness and corruption. The battle, in which King Duncan and Macbeth are embroiled, arises from The Thane of Cawdor's treachery (coup d'état) against the ruling régime. As the herald invests Macbeth with title of Thane of Cawdor, he gives tidings of the former Thane of Cawdor's fate where “ treasons capital, confessed and proved, have overthrown him”. This statement bodes evil for Macbeth and adumbrates Macbeth's future breach of faith and demise. Although the battle served to squelch the treasonous rebellion; however, another one brews in Macbeth's heart. The seeds of corruption already existent in Macbeth, germinate and begin to take root when the Weird Sisters prophecy for him a promotion to Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland. Banquo's fears are also well-founded for the witches' prophecy “ enkindle (him) unto the crown.” The prophecy stokes the Macbeth's dormant ambition for kingship and his latent desire, united with Lady Macbeth's subtle machinations and bold ruthlessness, are a dangerous combination which results in Duncan's regicide.

“ Each film noir film depicts shadowy characters driven by lust, greed or psychotic reasons to lie, betray, kill or be killed in order to obtain what they secretly desire” (Gazetas 2008). The Macbeth duo's hell-bent ambition to usurp Duncan's throne is evident. When Duncan declares the heir-apparent, Prince of Cumberland, the announcement disappoints Macbeth but he is determined to obtain the kingship by whatever means necessary. He describes the Prince of Cumberland as “ a step on which I must fall down or else o'erleap for in my way it lies.” From this statement one observes Macbeth's firm resolve to pursue any means to gain his ends like Machiavelli. Furthermore, Lady Macbeth's ambition exceeds Macbeth's for she is the active catalyst which instigates, masterminds and orchestrates Duncan's murder. She makes known her ambitious desire by her greeting Macbeth as “ Great Glamis, Worthy Cawdor, Greater than both by the all-hail hereafter!” Her anticipation for greatness and her cold calculations for Duncan's assassination without scruple underscore her lust for power. Even after the Macbeths have secured the kingship, insecurity and ambition propel them to kill off the competition by murdering Banquo, the Macduffs and all of Duncan's sympathizers. With a despotic hand, Macbeth bears heavy sway over Scotland manifesting moral corruption and deep darkness.

Moral darkness is compounded by physical darkness and in the film noir genre the prevailing ambience and colour imagery are black and dark. Film noir directors usually merge moral darkness and literal, physical darkness using them as motifs to impress the mind with their correlation. “ The dark and sleazy environment also suggests hidden and malevolent forces lurking in the shadow, stalking their prey” (Gazetas 2008). When the Banquo's paid

assassins make their way to murder him, they observe that " 't'is day and yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp." At the same time of this utterance, Banquo, on his way to Macbeth's banquet, recognizes that " darkness doth the earth entomb." Evil agents are most active during the dark night hence the fusion of moral darkness and physical darkness is appropriate. Little does Banquo know that his own murder is going to take place under the cloak of darkness. For his murder, Lady Macbeth invokes darkness, " Come, seeling night, Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day." Likewise, King Duncan's murder also is staged during the night hours when the household and the entire royal retinue are asleep. In a dramatic soliloquy before Duncan's murder, Macbeth tells the night's stars to " hide (their) fires. Let not light see my black and deep desires." The darkness theme emerges again for when Macbeth pays his visits to the witches' abode in the caves, the darkness is always very thick. In a fit of anger, he calls the witches " secret, black midnight hags" and the irony in this saying is its truth for moral depravity and darkness go hand in hand.

Dabbling with evil has its repercussions and as a consequence, the Macbeths' minds become disordered and mental disease begins to encroach. " Film noir envisions a world where political disintegration and paranoia indicate a continuing disintegration" (Gazetas 2008). Paranoia is brought about by a troubled conscience and lack of sleep and the disturbed sleep results from their evil dealings. Because of their heavy mental burdens and poisoned consciences, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth suffer from sleeping disorders. Their tormented souls are not at peace therefore they cannot move into that relaxed, unconscious state to renew their bodies and minds. "

Film noir displays the hallucinatory, nightmarish criminal world” (Gazetas 2008). After Duncan’s murder, Macbeth reports that he heard a voice saying, “ sleep no more, Macbeth doth murder sleep.” Interestingly enough, he turns insomniac and cannot sleep a wink after assassinating his monarch. In the same way, as consort, mastermind and accomplice of many murders, Lady Macbeth suffers from insomnia. Her physician diagnoses her condition as one “ troubled with fancies that keep her from sleep.” What makes Lady Macbeth’s sleeping disorder worse than Macbeth’s is somnambulism. There is a pathetic sleep-walking scene where her mind unburdens itself and exposes her guilt. While rambling, she reveals past secrets and conniving conversations with Macbeth which substantiate her doctor’s suspicions. As Lady Macbeth’s hallucinations worsen and incidents of somnambulism increase, Macbeth asks her physician, “ Canst thou minister to a mind diseased? Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow? Raze out the written troubles of the brain?” These questions indicate Macbeth’s intense mental suffering, anguish, and traumas and voice his desperation to be rid of them. Nightmares also give evidence of paranoia and Macbeth has several of these. Macbeth complains of “ the terrible dreams that shake us nightly.” In the film, Macbeth dreams that Banquo’s son, Fleance, suffocates him while in bed. After he dies, Fleance seizes the crown and places it on his head. This nightmare tells of Macbeth deep fears and sense of insecurity in his position as enthroned monarch of Scotland. As if wakeful sleep and nightmares were not enough, the Macbeths’ terror is heightened by fearful visitations from the supernatural world. Apparitions are another element of paranoia from which

Macbeth suffers. He alone sees people and objects that are figments of the imagination.

Prior to Duncan's murder, Macbeth sees an imaginary blood-covered dagger before him, however, when he tries to grasp the dagger, his hands go right through the invisible object. At the banquet, after Banquo has been killed and Macbeth gives a toast in his honour, he sees a gory-faced Banquo with several gashes on the face. As Banquo's ghost haunts him, King Macbeth is reduced to a howling, delusional babe. No one else at the banquet table sees Banquo's spirit. Undoubtedly, these psychological tortures make life cease to be worthwhile and throw a negative outlook. In the film noir cinema, darkness, gloomy weather, melancholy characters, and despairing statements all attest to pessimism and nihilism. " Film noir is fundamentally nocturnal: it pursues knowledge that lies behind the truth of the visible [...] a knowledge which is a kind of nothingness, a negativity, death itself" (Harris 6). The first observation Macbeth makes after the battle is that it is a " foul day." Indeed, the day begins with bleak, dismal weather and a downpour of rain, and interspersed throughout the film are thunderstorms and showers. The foul weather becomes a metaphor for the despair, and sadness that the characters experience. The characters are mostly dressed in dark, funereal colours, morose and pensive. As Macbeth sinks deeper into moral decadence, he takes a retrospective look at his life and thinks about the future. Only bleak thoughts enter his mind and to him life becomes a meaningless march of time. Pessimism and nihilism culminates in the act of Lady Macbeth's suicide. When Lady Macbeth dies, a depressed and anguished Macbeth says that he has " lived long enough." " The particular

message of film noir at large is that in the real of our desire, we are all suicidal "(Harris 9). Macbeth then moralizes that " life's but a walking shadow [...], a tale told by an idiot, [...] signifying nothing." The movie even ends on a pessimist note because it ends in evil solicitation. As Malcolm, the new reigning king, travels, he hears witches' chants at the opening of a cave. His curiosity is piqued and he enters the cave. Polanski uses this incident to demonstrate the vicious cycle of evil without hope of redemption. Macbeth's statement, " nothing is but what is not" sums up the concept of Nihilism. Critic John Murphy corresponds with the position that Macbeth is a " bleak, almost overtly nihilistic piece of work" (Murphy).

Violence, cruelty, blood and death constantly recur as themes and motifs in the film noir as in Macbeth. " Film noir develops a cinema of cruelty" (Conley 1987), where " it is a world of violence where all human values are seriously called into question" (Gazetas 2008). The opening scene commences with an eerie burial that the three Weird Sisters undertake. They bury in the sand a dead man's hand with a dagger clutched in its grasp, a hangman's noose, and ashes. After covering the strange grave, they sprinkle over the burial spot some blood. These objects are not innocent but forebode future events in the film such as treachery, violence, bloodshed, execution and murder. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth take center stage in undertaking violent measures to fulfill their evil purposes. Macbeth's lust for power is commensurate with his thirst for blood and as he desires to consolidate his power, he becomes more and more ruthless. Macbeth turns on his own friend Banquo and his son, Fleance, and plots their murder. That end achieved, he attacks a political dissident, Macduff by assailing his castle and

murdering all the occupants therein: wife, child, and servants. Personifying Scotland as one subjected to cruel violence, it is reported that she “ weeps, bleeds, and each new day a gash is added to her wounds. Each new morn, new widows howl and new orphans cry.” Before Duncan’s visit to Inverness, Lady Macbeth shows her resolve to be deliberately cruel by making incantation to the evil spirits to help her accomplish Duncan’s regicide. She desires them to “ unsex (her) [...] and fill (her) from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty.” Lady Macbeth’s violent tendencies crop up when she accuses Macbeth of being too “ full of the milk of human kindness.” Her strong-willed nature to do inhuman and inhumane acts makes her a dangerous being. Since she sees that her humanity and femininity are obstacles to carrying out violence, she therefore wants to be dehumanized and de-feminised. Violence, cruelty and death continue to make their presence felt in the film by their metaphorical representations.

Motifs which convey the image of violence, cruelty and death in Macbeth are the dagger, and blood. The dagger is a tool of torture, an instrument of death and whenever it appears, it becomes a harbinger of the approach of death, likewise, blood signals bloodshed, and death. As aforementioned, the Weird Sisters at the beginning of the movie bury a man’s hand with a dagger clutched in its grasp. After they inter the hand and dagger, they sprinkle the burial ground with blood. Thus from the beginning we are introduced to the motifs of the movie. From this portent, one foresees that many bloody murders will take place. Right before executing the King Duncan’s murder, Macbeth receives an apparition of a bloodied dagger. After King Duncan is stabbed in his sleep with a dagger, Malcolm, one of Duncan’s sons, becomes

very suspicious of the treachery of his subjects, and laments to his brother that "there are daggers in men's smiles." Also, during one of Macbeth's nightmares, he sees Banquo come into his bedroom, pointing a dagger at his chest. Blood is a recurrent image in Macbeth and bespeaks violence, cruelty and death. At dusk, as Banquo's murderers' make their preparation to do the ignominious deed, one cannot help but notice that the sky has a blood-red colour and that the horizon is tainted with the same hue. At Macbeth's final witch solicitation, an apparition, quite unnecessarily, urges him to "be bloody, bold and resolute." Macbeth even compares his murderous education and career to "bloody instructions which turn to plague th'inventor." A pale-faced Macbeth warns the ghost Banquo not to flaunt his "gory locks" and Macbeth, certain of his indelible guilt, affirms that the blood on his hands would the "multitudinous seas incarnadine." As the witches concoct their evil potions their chief ingredient is blood and they frequently add it to the cauldron.

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