Nudity, Blood and Scopophilia

Disgust in Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*

Giulia Argentieri Federzoni

giulia.argentieri@gmail.com

In 1971, only two years after the massacre of his family on behalf of Charles Manson and his "disciples", Roman Polanski directed a controversial film adaptation of William Shakespeare's Scottish tragedy produced by the *Playboy* tycoon Hugh Hefner. The result of this peculiar combination of intents is a raw, often visually brutal film in which the concepts of evil and disgust overlap repeatedly in the form of uncanny images that the audience will hardly forget.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how Polanski uses and modifies the original Shakespearean material and the horror of his personal experience, with particular attention to nudity, blood and scopophilia, to evoke uneasiness and disgust. The analysis will focus on some specific choices that emphasize pivotal moments of the tragedy mostly through a process of over showing.

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The aim of this paper is to illustrate how Polanski uses and modifies the original Shakespearean material and, even if not admittedly, the horror of his personal experience, with particular attention to nudity, blood and scopophilia, to evoke uneasiness and disgust. The analysis will focus on some specific choices that emphasize pivotal moments of the tragedy mostly through a process of over showing.

The film opens with the weird sisters performing a ritual on a desert beach that will soon be the set of a ferocious battle. The three women dig a hole in which they bury a noose and a severed arm whose hand is clutched around a dagger; then, they cover the items, spit, and pour blood on the sand to end the ceremony. Two of them are old, deformed and covered in wrinkles. The eldest lacks both orbits, perhaps a reference to the mythological blind prophet Tiresias who, besides having the power to foresee the future, was transformed into a woman for several years. The third witch is young but bears the marks of an unknown disease on her face. This scene anticipates most of the plot in relation to murder and bloodshed using mutilation, deformity, and sickness. Polanski seems to be warning his audience that nothing will be spared, regardless of its degree of disgust. There is in fact no trace of such horrifying images in the first scene of the Shakespearean tragedy, which makes the director's choice even more emblematic of the aim to which his film tends. As the critic Norman Silverstein points out in a 1974 article: «This long

take presents with remarkable brevity the theme of the play, the interaction of supernatural and natural elements, as well as the outcome of man's struggle with the supernatural. The whole story is told, as it were, in miniature »[1].

The first outpouring of blood occurs with the murder of Duncan. In the original text, the scene takes place off stage, a necessary authorial choice aimed at preserving the Jacobean audience from a crime against Nature and God. Yet, as noted by William C. Carroll in his volume *Adapting Macbeth: A Cultural History*, most of the cinematic adaptations of the Scottish tragedy show the assassination of the king in the attempt to recreate the same sense of horror evoked by the sole idea of regicide in the early 1600s[2]. Polanski's version of the first of the many violent deaths of the tragedy abounds in gore. Macbeth, hesitating and tormented by the act he is about to perform, enters Duncan's bedchamber and uncovers his naked body. The king only wakes when the edge of the dagger is pressed against his skin. The two exchange one long look, then, when the victim whispers his aggressor's name, Macbeth stabs him repeatedly in the chest. Duncan, agonizing and half-naked, rolls on the floor and reaches for the dagger, but Macbeth disarms him and pierces his jugular. As Sara M. Deats points out in an article, «this action opens flooding arteries of gore and the spectator, like Macbeth, sinks deeper and deeper into blood»[3]. The death of Duncan is followed by the murder of Banquo, stabbed in his back with an axe and left to drown in a brook, and by the execution of the two murderers who failed to kill young Fleance. At this point, Polanski shows his audience that cruelty and blood extend also to the animal realm in the fictional world he has created. The scene of the banquet following the coronation of Macbeth opens with a very realistic reproduction of a bear-baiting, a medieval form of entertainment in which a chained bear was forced to fight against a pack of dogs until he died. The sequence ends with the servants dragging the corpses of the animals out of the castle and leaving a trail of blood behind them. Shortly after, when the ghost of Banquo makes its appearance at the dinner table, Macbeth runs to the cloister trying to escape his hallucination and falls in the same spot where the chained bear was fighting for his life minutes before. Once again, Polanski plays with foreshadowing by

[1] N. Silverstein, *The Opening Shot of Roman Polanski's Macbeth*, in "Literature/Film Quarterly", 2/1, Winter 1974, p. 88..
[2] W. C. Carroll, *Adapting Macbeth: A Cultural History*, The Arden Shakespeare, London 2022.
[3] S. M. Deats, *Polanski's Macbeth: A Contemporary Tragedy*, in "Studies in Popular Culture", 9/1, 1986, pp. 84-93.

drawing a parallel between the chained bear and Macbeth, who will end up alone, a prisoner in his own castle, surrounded by his enemies and killed by a vengeful Macduff.

The execution of Lady Macduff and her children represents the tragic climax of the film, not only for its brutality, but also for its inevitable resonance with Polanski's personal experience. Yet, before reaching this peak of horror, the director takes a closer look at the witches, this time portraying them as a shapeless and deformed mass of naked bodies, gathered around a cauldron in a promiscuous and hallucinatory ritual alluding perhaps to some extreme aspects of the hippie counterculture associated with Manson and his adepts. The cauldron scene thus becomes a display of breasts, bellies and female genitals that move breathe and mumble as one body, in a redundancy of nakedness that is the negation of eroticism and projects the audience into an orgiastic nightmare. Plenty of elements contribute to evoke disgust in this sequence: the repeated close-ups on the empty orbits of the older witch, the various manifestations of disease on the women's faces, and the ingredients of the potion served to Macbeth, which include severed limbs, dead animals and human organs.

On the opposite edge of nudity, but with equally disturbing effects, as the majority of critics observed at the time, stands young Macduff in the scene at Fife. Among the various comments on the minor's frontal nude, Kenneth Rothwell's is perhaps the most explicit: «pederasts can feast on the naked body of Macduff's young son»[4]. The critic's assertion gives voice to the diffused uneasiness that part of the audience at the time felt towards something considered as gratuitous obscenity. On the other hand, others saw the naked boy as an innocent child, bathed by a nurturing mother in what might appear as baptismal purification, particularly if seen in light of the tragic epilogue of the sequence. The domestic routine is in fact interrupted by female voices screaming around the castle. Lady Macduff runs out of the room but finds two armed men who force her back inside where she embraces her son until the boy runs and kicks one of the men for calling his father a traitor. When he turns, the murderer stabs him in the back and little Macduff stumbles and dies in his mother's arms. The same man throws the child's body on the floor and attacks Lady Macduff who manages to escape into the corridor, where a group of men is raping a young servant. The woman runs to another room, opens the door and finds her

[4] K. Rothwell, *Roman Polanski's Macbeth: Golgotha Triumphant*, in "Literature/Film Quarterly", 1/1, January 1973, p. 71.

two other children slaughtered and covered in blood. The camera then shifts to the intense orange of the flames burning the castle, as if evoking the infernal atmosphere permeating the dramatic action.

The style of Roman Polanski had already gained popularity for its horror and sensationalism before 1971, as David Sterritt points out in his 2014 review of *Macbeth*[5]. However, the majority of critics has almost unanimously agreed on the resonance between the director's personal tragedy and the sequence of the Macduffs' slaughter. In a critical essay published on *Social Semiotics*, scholar Bryan Reynolds provides a thorough analysis of the Fife sequence and its analogies with the Manson murders:

> Unlike Shakespeare, who includes only one on-stage murder, that of the Macduff's boy, Polanski highlights five victims, just as there were five people murdered by the Manson devotees at his residence. The band of assassins first kill Macduff's (approximately seven year-old) boy in front of his mother, and, like Duncan, the boy is naked (with the exception of a blanket wrapped around him) when he dies. On the *Macbeth* set, Tynan recalls that when he «queried Roman's estimate of the amount of blood that would be shed by a small boy stabbed in the back» Roman replied, «You didn't see my house in California last summer… I know about bleeding» (Esquire, 1971: 189). A relationship between the Manson murders and the murders at the Macduff castle is obvious, and this relationship becomes more impressive as the nightmarish scene continues. […] Finally, like Shakespeare, Polanski leaves the termination of Lady Macduff to the wild imagination of his audience; the audience is transformed into both the victim and the psychic instrument of terrorism.[6]

The Polish director has always denied any intent to draw inspiration from his personal tragedy. In a 1971 interview on the *Dick Cavett Show* Roman Polanski accused most of the press of being cruel and only interested in selling, and claimed his film was not bloodier than any other violent film released in the same period[7]. These statements did not persuade critics, journalists and scholars who, over the course of more than forty years, have reiterated the many ways in which the slaughter of the Macduffs reflects the brutality of the August 1969 massacre. Without indulging in further speculations on the correlation between life and art for this particular case, it is yet relevant to notice how effectively the experience of horror and disgust translates into Polanski's adaptation. Once again, as for Duncan's murder, he chooses to show something that Shakespeare had relegated to his

[5] D. Sterritt, *Cinéaste*, 40/1, 2014, pp. 60–61.
[6] B. Reynolds, *Untimely Ripped*, in "Social Semiotics", 7/2, 1997, pp. 201-208.
[7] Simon, T., *Roman Polanski Interview – 1971*, 7 August 2021, online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=KV296LFjBnM.

audience's imagination. In the original tragedy, in fact, only the death of young Macduff occurs on stage, while the other homicides are reported to the only survivor by a contrite Ross. The display of such horrifying images on a big screen amplifies the weight of the tragic climax, and, with it, the cruelty of actions that become indelible.

If the scenes we have discussed so far expand the most brutal traits of Shakespearean and Senecan gore, it is in the final sequence, ending with Macbeth's death, that Polanski unleashes his taste for horror in what could be seen as the manifesto of sensationalism and the ultimate spectacularization of violence. The tyrant's beheading is the last act of a long duel. When Macbeth is mortally wounded, he reaches a staircase, tries to climb the steps in a desperate attempt to escape his destiny and then falls on his hands and knees. At this point, Macduff cuts off his head, which rolls on the ground crystalized in a facial expression evoking the pain and the realism of a Caravaggio's portrait while the mutilated body falls down the stairs. This sequence magnifies its grotesqueness when the camera shows Macbeth's point of view from his severed head, speared and triumphantly carried like a flag amidst a roaring crowd. Polanski seems to imply that the tyrant is not dead yet and that his eyes can still take in and marvel at the disdain of his opponents and the rapidity of Malcolm's coronation. The film ends with a limping Donalbain, youngest son of Duncan and brother of the new king, entering the witches' shack and possibly starting a new circle of envy, ambition and murder.

Whether inspired by the violence of real life or simply following the lead of Senecan and Shakespearean gore, Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* stands out for its almost obsessive urgency to show some remarkable manifestations of disgust. From the generous display of physical deformities, to the outpouring of blood, to the disturbing acts of violence and atrocities committed against men, women and children, the director takes the audience on a journey into the deepest horror of which humans are capable. The vision of the Polish director follows an aesthetics of disgust that scrutinizes the body, stripping it down for what it really is: a powerful mean that can become the horrifying mirror of one's corruption and decay, the sacrificial flesh of innocent souls, or the useless shell of a distorted mind. Forcing the spectators to witness nudity in its many forms, mutilation and murder, Polanski seems to attempt at shocking and, at the same time, desensitizing them to prove that horror can in fact be enjoyable, even when its resonance with real life appears to be inevitable.