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Fleance and Obscured Scottish Futures in Screen Adaptations of Macbeth by Goold, Kurzel and Coen

Abstract: The play-text of *Macbeth* enigmatically leaves the future of Scotland open. The play ends with Malcolm hailed as the new king, but the rest of the weird sisters' predictions, namely that Banquo's issue will be kings, is left unanswered even though Shakespeare's main source, *Holinshed's Chronicles* (Volume V) (1577) contains a detailed (albeit completely fabricated) sequel as to the future of Fleance. The three *Macbeth* film adaptations examined here – Rupert Goold (2010), Justin Kurzel (2015) and Joel Coen (2021) – all address this loose end of the play-text, leaving clues for the viewer to predict what might happen after the action of the film is over. By opening a door to the future (often literally and visually, as in Goold and Kurzel), and showing Fleance on the move, they all suggest a linear or cyclical continuation of his story and Scottish history. This article considers key elements of the adaptations, focussing on the show of kings and the endings. I argue that the directorial choices of these films, instead of suppressing the line of Fleance, give voice and prominence to his alternative narrative, while also emphasising the cycle of violence that the play suggests.

Keywords: Macbeth, *film adaptations*, *Goold*, *Kurzel*, *Coen*, *Fleance*

The play-text of *Macbeth* enigmatically leaves the future of Scotland open. The play ends with Malcolm hailed as the new king, but the rest of the weird sisters' predictions, namely that Banquo's issue will be kings, is left unanswered even though Shakespeare's main source, *Holinshed's Chronicles* (Volume V) (1577)[1] contains a detailed (albeit completely fabricated) sequel as to the future of Fleance. Here, we read about his rescue by God and friends at court, his escape to Wales, and an extended description of his line of descent, the Stewards, leading up to the then present-day king, James VI, subsequently James I of England. William C. Carroll, in *Adapting "Macbeth": A Cultural History* (2022), traces the evolution of the Banquo narrative in detail.[2] He points out that "Banquo and Fleance were invented by the Scottish historian, Hector Boece in 1527 …; prior to his work, no such persons had ever appeared in chronicles, court records, or any other document",[3] and adds that "Boece's account was largely taken over by Raphael Holinshed".[4] Furthermore, as Carroll points out, "[I]n the chronicle narratives, Fleance was not only never king, he was himself murdered by the father of the Welsh princess. By the time of Malcolm's ascent, the Fleance of the chronicles was probably already a ghost himself (doubly so, since he never existed)".[5]

Even though Fleance's return has no textual or historical authority, filmmakers have consistently engaged with this narrative in various ways, as many critics have observed.[6] The three *Macbeth* film

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[1] Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, vol. V (London: Johnson, 1808), 271-272.

[2] William C. Carroll, *Adapting "Macbeth": A Cultural History*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2022). Also see his earlier chapter "Fleance in the Final Scene of *Macbeth*: The Return of the Repressed", in Sarah Hatchuel et al., eds., *Shakespeare on Screen: "Macbeth"* (Mont-Saint-Aignan: P.U. de Rouen et du Havre, 2013), 261-278, and "Politics, Adaptation, *Macbeth*" in Diana E. Henderson and Stephen O'Neill, eds., *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Adaptation*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 81-99.

[3] Carroll, *Adapting "Macbeth"*, 84.

[4] Ibid., 14.

[5] Ibid., 90.

[6] See Victoria Bladen, writing that "There has been a common trend in film adaptations of *Macbeth* to introduce Fleance to the closing scenes, utilising the mythic founder of the Stuart family line to suggest that the cycle of

adaptations examined here – Rupert Goold's *Macbeth* (BBC/Illuminations, 2010), Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (See-Saw Films, 2015) and Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (A24, Apple TV+, 2021) – all address this loose end of the play-text, leaving clues for the viewer to predict what might happen after the action of the film is over. By opening a door to the future (often literally and visually, as in Goold's and Kurzel's films), and showing Fleance on the move, they all suggest a linear or cyclical continuation of his story and his involvement in Scottish history. This article considers key elements of the adaptations, focussing on the show of kings and the endings. I argue that the directorial choices of these films, instead of suppressing the line of Fleance, give voice and prominence to his alternative narrative, while also emphasising the cycle of violence that the play suggests.

1. Fleance and Visual Ambiguities

1.1 *Goold*

All three filmmakers engage with a key image in the play-text, the show of kings in 4.1. Aiming at structural and visual unity, they establish visual echoes between the show of eight kings and the final scenes of the adaptation. In Goold's version, although Fleance (Bertie Gilbert) does not return at the end of the film, he is the figure appearing in all the images of the show of eight kings (1:41:52-1:44:11). At the beginning of the scene, we see a large door open and Fleance enters impersonating each of the future kings in Banquo's long line of heirs. This contrasts with Shakespeare's play, in which all eight figures look like Banquo. This directorial decision points to the overall importance of children in the film: their silence (Fleance) or innocent yet wise discourse (Young Macduff played by Hugo Docking) often reveal considerable insight and awareness, thus constituting a threat to the Macbeths and reminding them of their lost child.[7] As Víctor Huertas-Martín astutely observes, Lady Macbeth (Kate Fleetwood) keeps a little shoe in one of her drawers as "a *memento mori* of her dead child".[8]

The prophecies are delivered by the witches in the hospital ward with corpses in body-bags covered, uncovered, still and revived, in true horror film style.[9] Although in this adaptation there is no armed head, bloody child or child crowned, the repetition of Fleance's figure in the show of kings (1:42:50-1:44:24) is emphatic enough to the extent that it terrifies Macbeth, who is convinced that the new pages in the history of Scotland are to be written by Banquo's heirs. The strict rectangular frame of the ballroom is loosened up and opened by the doors repeatedly letting in Fleance, approximating the image of the room to an endless corridor, visually underlining the basic idea of the apparition: the succession of Banquo's issue. This linearity is a visual echo frequently recurring in the film, providing a frame and filmic structure. In the opening shot of the film we see a bleeding soldier wheeled along a corridor on a trolley, and in the closing sequence, the camera once more traverses various corridors and tunnels. As Goold states in the director's commentaries on the DVD, he did not tell the story of the eight kings in

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violent ambition for the crown will continue". Bladen, "Performing the Child Motif in Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015)", *Anglistik*, 28.2 (September 2017), 136). See also Carol Chillington Rutter, "Remind Me: How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?", *Shakespeare Survey*, 57 (2004), 52.

[7] Another layer of the child imagery in Goold's film, as Artur Skweres observes, is where the witches perform "a grotesque reversal of birth" when they rip a soldier's heart from his chest, "bringing to mind the unnatural delivery of Macduff" ("Upsetting the Body Politic(s): Witches as Enemy Agents in Rupert Goold's *Macbeth* (2010)", *RANAM: Recherches anglaises et nord-américaines*, 49 (2016), 173-188, 185, *doi.org/10.3406/ranam.2016.1536*).

[8] Víctor Huertas-Martín, "Rupert Goold's *Macbeth* (2010): Surveillance Society and Society of Control", *SEDERI: Yearbook of the Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies*, 27 (2017), 81-103, 93n.

[9] Goold admits in the commentaries on the DVD that this scene was inspired by his favourite scary sequence in film history: the scene of "Sloth" springing to life in David Fincher's *Se7en* (New Line Cinema, 1995).

the earlier stage adaptation (2007),[10] where it was projected up as a film only.[11] In the film, the aim was to make Macbeth (Patrick Stewart) actually see the line of eight kings. The real triumph, however, as Goold adds, was Patrick Stewart's close-up showing his fracturing mind (1:43:49).

For the ending of Goold's adaptation, the camera revisits the main scenes of the film, first showing still images, then panning the eery tunnel, giving perspective to happenings both visually and temporally. We hear a noise, so we know there is something there, but we cannot see anything. The noise, however, is familiar, and, as the next frame confirms, it has been the door of the lift closing. Then we see the murderous couple holding hands taking a ride in the lift. Earlier, in the porter scene, a similar technique is used: we see the same tunnel, from the depth of which the drunken porter emerges, and we hear the porter's voice before we see anything. The same corridor's reappearance at the end of the film can be seen as a metaphor for the Macbeths' transgression[12] or as a visual echo of the dead end of their crime, with no heir to succeed them. The ambiguous corridor also recalls the long walk of kings impersonated by Fleance in the show of eight kings' scene, offering a way out into the light, i.e. the future. After the discovery of Duncan's murder, the lights at the end of the tunnels offer an escape for Malcolm and Donaldbain (0:57:57-0:58:05). When, as a farewell to the Macbeth universe, in the final sequence, the camera revisits the well-known locations of the film, three different corridors are shown, stressing the importance of linearity in this adaptation, making it almost the focal point of the film. First, we see Macduff carrying Macbeth's head along a corridor, then the view of the corridor of the hospital ward where we formerly saw Lady Macbeth's dead body on a trolley. Next, the camera completes its visual journey by reverting to the tunnel of the Porter scene. In the last frame, the camera observes the murderous couple confined behind the bars of the lift.

The comparison of the two perspectives, the closing door of the lift and the tunnel (suggesting the end of the Macbeths) vs the line of eight kings entering the open door and coming towards the camera (suggesting the continuation of Banquo's line), shows a sharp yet subtle contrast, visually connecting the two scenes and thereby reinforcing Fleance's otherwise muted narrative. As Víctor Huertas-Martín observes, Goold "explicitly states that he does not want to conclude the film leaving the impression that a second Macbeth will come to take over Malcom's kingdom",[13] by whom the director probably means Fleance turning tyrant at some point later in his life. Goold wanted to end his film, as he expresses it on the DVD, with a tragic catharsis where the death of Macbeth leaves everyone brutalised and desolate, creating a definite finality to it. As Huertas-Martín discerns, "whether or not Malcom's reign will indeed mean that a different, more transparent, regime will start, the dynamics of the last scenes suggests a video game atmosphere offering alternative interpretations"; and he notes that the final montage revisits the locations once more, as first-generation video-games would do once they were concluded, thus giving viewers "the feeling that the play itself could be a re-enacted ghost-story".[14]

1.2 *Kurzel*

In Kurzel's adaptation, the Fleance narrative is woven into the main plot to the extent of making it almost a coming-of-age story. Earlier in the film, Fleance (Lochlann Harris) seems to be weak and soft, hardly able to lift his father's sword. The script continues with a scene that was not ultimately included in the film: although Fleance tries hard, "even absent-mindedly Macbeth is too quick for him".[15] A moment later, "seizing the opportunity, Fleance lunges forward in frustration and JABS MACBETH IN THE GUT with his father's sword".[16] In any event, what we do see on screen by the end of the film is that Fleance is strong enough to run fast holding Macbeth's sword in his hand.[17] Kurzel presents a narrative of Fleance running parallel with Macbeth's storyline linking the two together in various scenes.

What does Fleance represent for Macbeth in Kurzel's adaptation? In the scene set on the beach (0:56:00-0:57:31), there is an exchange of glances between Macbeth (Michael Fassbender) and Banquo (Paddy Considine), with Macbeth's menacing gaze repeatedly fixed on Fleance, the shot-counter shot frame embracing the ominous question, "Goes Fleance with you?" The query here, as elsewhere in the film, is whether Macbeth sees his own (unborn/dead/imagined/hoped for) son in Fleance.[18] The answer as to what Fleance might mean for Macbeth could be given in Lacanian terms. Fleance can be seen as the *objet petit a*, or object-cause of desire. As Lacan's translator, Alan Sheridan, observes, "The 'petit a' (small 'a') differentiates the object from (while relating it to) the 'Autre' or 'grand Autre' (the capitalized 'Other')…. Lacan insists that 'objet petit a' should remain untranslated, thus acquiring, as it were, the status of an algebraic sign".[19] When asked about the relation between the real and the drive, and the differences between the object of the drive, that of phantasy and that of desire, Lacan explained that the subject is a lacunary apparatus, and "it is in the lacuna that the subject establishes the function of a certain object, *qua* lost object. It is the status of the *objet a* in so far as it is present in the drive".[20] He continues that "[I]n the phantasy, the subject is frequently unperceived, but he is always there, whether in the dream or in any of the more or less developed forms of day-dreaming. The subject situates himself as determined by the phantasy",[21] which is suggested in this adaptation, given the many visions Macbeth experiences.

In Todd McGowan's Lacanian reading, "this special term *objet petit a* indicates that this object is not a positive entity but a lacuna in the visual field".[22] He points out that our visual field is distorted by our desire, and "this distortion makes itself felt through the gaze as object…. The gaze is the *objet petit a* of the scopic drive",[23] which is also called "pleasure of seeing" by Lacan, translating Freud's term *Schaulust*.[24] The *objet petit a* is always a lost object, inaugurating the process of desiring. Macbeth is incomplete or lacking because he does not have this object, a son, so whenever he sees the sons of others,

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[15] Jacob Koskoff et al., *Macbeth: Best Adapted Screenplay*, 29, *www.dailyscript.com* (undated draft).

[16] Ibid.

[17] By comparison, we see Malcolm (Jack Reynor) slowly unsheathing "the sword from its scabbard" and "his arm begins to tremble. Whether from the weight of the ceremonial blade or the realisation of his new responsibility, we do not know" (ibid., 86).

[18] On the relevance of the figure of the child in *Macbeth* on stage and in film adaptations see: Chillington Rutter, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?"; Carroll, *Adapting "Macbeth"*; Bladen, "Performing the Child Motif"; Gemma Miller, "'He has no children': Changing Representations of the Child in Stage and Film Productions of *Macbeth* from Polanski to Kurzel", *Shakespeare*, 13.1 (2017), 52-66, *doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2016.1174728*; Agnieszka Rasmus, "What Bloody Film Is This? Macbeth for Our Time", *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*, 18.33 (2018), 115-128; Edel Semple, "'Seeds of Time': Women, Children, and the Nation in Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015)", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 38.4 (2020), 615-633; and Hanh Bui, "Effigies of Childhood in Kurzel's *Macbeth*", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 48.1 (2020), *lfq.salisbury.edu*.

[19] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 281.

[20] Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 185.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: State U. of New York P., 2007), 6.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 178.

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it triggers his desire for one. In Kurzel's adaptation, the camera frequently shares Macbeth's point of view, and his gaze, repetitively resting on Fleance, betrays what he lacks. Although Macbeth in Kurzel's film may find – for instance, in the young boy soldier – an object of desire temporarily satisfying his lack, the *objet petit a*, lacking any material status, will always remain unattainable. Fleance as the *objet petit a* of Macbeth's gaze reveals the vulnerability of Macbeth's character, the void or hollow that can never be filled and, by implication, this might also indicate the hollowness of the crown itself.[25] For Michael Fassbender's Macbeth, Fleance functions as the point around which Macbeth's visual field organizes itself. As McGowan outlines in relation to the concept of the *object petit a*: "The only satisfaction available to the subject consists in following the path (which psychoanalysis calls the drive) through which it encircles this privileged object", which can be repeatedly seen in Kurzel's movie.[26] Not only is the gaze of Macbeth oriented at Fleance persistently, but the camera also encircles this privileged object recursively, so the spectator needs to acknowledge and recurrently contemplate the significance of the character of Fleance and the gravity of his narrative in the film.[27] Out of the many child characters of the film, it is Fleance who stands out as he is repeatedly shown by the camera, creating a sub-narrative for him within the larger context of the film-text.[28]

In Kurzel's adaptation, Macbeth in his night gown visits the weird sisters, but there is no show of eight kings (1:08:35-1:11:22). Just before this, we see, as the screenplay describes, "ominously, a thick wall of MIST … blocking the plain"; Macbeth calls out to the mist, but "There is no response".[29] Desperate to make contact, he starts running, until he is out of breath. But the mist is still silent: "Fathomless. He is alone. Then, from nearby, the faint peal of bells begins to chime in the mist. He turns, the sound drawing him on towards it".[30] So, first it is the sound that indicates that there is something there, not yet visible. Then, against expectations, the three apparitions do not emerge; instead, their words are reassigned to the witches and the ghost soldiers. Most intriguing among the ghost soldiers is the figure of the young boy soldier (Scot Greenan): the same character that presents Macbeth with the dagger, and whom Macbeth coaches when preparing for battle at the beginning of the film. Significantly, he is the one who is reassigned the lines of the second apparition, the bloody child, "Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth".[31] As the screenplay describes it, "Macbeth reaches out to embrace the Young Boy Soldier, relieved. The Boy accepts his hold without emotion.[32] Then breaks away and marches on. Macbeth's mind whirring".[33]

The young boy soldier here (1:10:25), similarly to the second apparition in the play-text, can stand for or prefigure many things.[34] Agnieszka Rasmus states that at the beginning of the film, "Macbeth coaches a boy soldier who in the film represents his son's alter-ego".[35] In my view, he rather functions as a younger

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[25] See Richard II's speech in *Richard II*, 3.2.155-170. William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. by Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2011).

[26] McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 6.

[27] Also see Bladen, "Performing the Child Motif", 134, 137.

[28] To a lesser extent, the young boy soldier is also given an embedded story: from his being groomed by Macbeth to fight in the battle early on in the film, through his death, to his 'resurrection' presenting the dagger and the prophecy delivered in the show of 'kings' scene.

[29] Koskoff et al., *Macbeth*, 63.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Koskoff et al., *Macbeth*, 64.

[32] This emotionlessness is symptomatic of PTSD, a key-factor in affecting Macbeth's own unhinged behaviour, as actor Michael Fassbender related in 2015, recalling a conversation with Kurzel. See Henry Barnes, "Michael Fassbender: 'Macbeth suffered from PTSD'", *The Guardian*, 23 May 2015, *www.theguardian.com*.

[33] Koskoff et al., *Macbeth*, 64.

[34] Albert R. Braunmuller suggests that the bloody child may represent baby Macduff, Fleance, the phantasmagoric children of Banquo, or any children threatened by Macbeth. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Albert R. Braunmuller (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1997), 194.

[35] Rasmus, "*Macbeth* for Our Time", 124.

version of Macbeth, or as a son and Macbeth's younger self together.[36] Like the young soldier, Macbeth probably also had to learn to cope with war and he might have been similarly prepared by his father; as the script describes: "Macbeth's army checks and re-checks their weapons, the older men doing it for the young boys, like fathers taking their sons through a rite of passage".[37] According to the screenplay, before the fatal battle, this young boy soldier "swallows down panic desperately. More than the others he looks out of place in this battle, unproven. His hands are shaking too hard to grip his own sword and he drops it again and again, hopeless, as thick tears stream down his face".[38] With his hands too shaky and weak to hold the heavy sword, the young boy is at the same time a contrast and a parallel to Fleance.

In Kurzel's adaptation, the mist visually signifies the unknowable and the timeless, as the script spells out in the scene of the show of eight kings: "Macbeth wanders alone in the mist; as though in a dream. As *though out of time* itself.… An army lost to the ages" (emphasis mine).[39] These visual references to being lost and out of time and space with blurred vision and limited visibility might bring to mind the concept of the "stain" in film theory. At the end of Kurzel's film, we see the church-door open and Malcolm, carrying his father's sword, leaves and heads towards an "impenetrable shaft of light", as the screenplay describes.[40] At the same time, in another location, Fleance is shown running with Macbeth's sword towards some mysterious foggy space, underlining the parallel between the past and future of these two characters. The image here is horizontally linear: both Malcolm and Fleance are heading towards some unspecified misty place, which could, for both of them, mean the unknown, i.e., their future.

Lacan's concept of the gaze is a useful lens through which to interpret and demystify this image. In Lacan's words:

> There is no need for us to refer to some supposition of the existence of a universal seer. If the function of the stain is recognized in its autonomy and identified with that of the gaze, we can seek its track, its thread, its trace, at every stage of the constitution of the world, in the scopic field. We will then realize that the function of the stain and of the gaze is both that which governs the gaze most secretly and that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness.[41]

Henry Krips might help us decipher Lacan's statement that the gaze is "governed" by "the function of the stain". A stain blocks vision, Henry Krips explains, therefore, it is a disruption, "a point of indeterminacy in the visual field",[42] lacking a precise identity. The stain's power to evoke interpretation arises from its indeterminacy, "which precipitates viewers into a struggle to read something where, other than an allusion to/illusion of meaning, there is nothing to be read".[43] This also aligns with the end of Kurzel's film.

The filmscript is curiously enigmatic regarding the mist towards which Fleance is running, as if the director and the scriptwriters themselves did not have a clear idea about its nature and origin, which is not necessarily a deficiency, yet significant in its indeterminacy. In a similar fashion, neither the script

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[36] Semple suggests he can be both, writing that "[F]or Macbeth, the death of the Boy Soldier is a heavy blow from which he never recovers. Lady Macbeth is haunted by the death of her son … but Macbeth seems more struck by the loss of the Boy Soldier, a pseudo-son and teenage copy of himself" ("'Seeds of Time'", 619).
[37] Koskoff et al., *Macbeth*, 3.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 64.
[40] Ibid., 87.
[41] Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 74.
[42] Henry Krips, "The Politics of the Gaze: Foucault, Lacan and Žižek", *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 2.1 (2010), 91-102, 94, *cultureunbound.ep.liu.se* (*doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.102691*).
[43] Ibid., 97.

nor the film clarifies the source and meaning of the sharp light that Malcolm is hurrying towards. This accords with the general theme of ambiguity throughout their *Macbeth*. Krips might be helpful here again. He cites the well-known autobiographical story of Lacan about his youthful encounter with a Breton fisherman, "Petit-Jean … pointed out to me something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small can, a sardine can.… It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me – You see that can? Do you see it? Well it doesn't see you",[44] and interprets this phenomenon through Freud, concluding that the scrutiny turns around, i.e., "it switches from active to passive voice – from 'I look' to 'I am looked at'".[45] In other words, a conscious outward look transforms into a self-conscious anxiety regarding the scrutiny of an "externalized anonymous Other".[46]

Malcolm cannot see the source of the light, and because of the light, he cannot see who might be watching him. At the same time, in counter shot, the camera shows Fleance taking a similar linear motion away from the camera. So, Malcolm's externalized anonymous Other can be found in Fleance, the one who endangers his reign and the future of his dynasty.[47] Fleance's escape towards the murmuring mist is illuminated by Krips' second example. At the end of the film, the script describes "A THICK WALL OF MIST"; "Its depths seem hungry, impenetrable. A RUMBLE starts to build from deep within it".[48] Krips comments on Lacan's second idea that sometimes it is an aural rather than a visual object that stimulates the effect of the gaze.[49] We recognize that there is something present although there is nothing to be seen.

In Kurzel's adaptation, the two succession stories, Duncan's and Banquo's, are linked through the juxtaposition of the two sons taking the sword, suggesting a "chain of transmission",[50] from a deceased father and the murderer of the father respectively,[51] and their motion towards something they do not fully know. Nothing is solved with this closure: it maintains and amplifies the original Shakespearean ambiguity, its open-endedness, and the duality of the succession narratives. The mist at the end and the strange rumbling coming from its midst recall the realm of the weird sisters that has always seemed to draw Fleance, rescued by the child witch (Amber Rissmann), and both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Marion Cotillard) inexorably, giving weight to the weird sisters' predictions, yet maintaining its vagueness, rendering it a matter of interpretation.

Logically, and according to the script, the mist at the end of Kurzel's film should be white. However, the filmmakers opted for a more dramatic image of saturated orange-red at the end in post-production. The script reads:

> Fleance looks round to the woods from which he came. As if he is able to see something in them that we can't. And there, we see that A THICK WALL OF MIST has formed, just like in the opening battle. Its depths seem hungry, impenetrable. A RUMBLE starts to build from deep within it. Fleance squares himself up, breath trembling. He begins to walk towards the mist, the sword's tip trailing in the ash behind him. We track with him as he raises the weapon, heavy in his hand, and breaks to a RUN -- a sprint, wild, panting desperately -- when finally we PLUNGE WITH HIM INTO THE WHITENESS and... SNAP TO BLACK.[52]

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[44] Ibid., 92, originally recounted by Lacan in *Seminar XI*, 95.
[45] Koskoff et al., *Macbeth*, 93.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Carroll notes the apocalyptic nature of the last scene: "The implication is that he must take care of Fleance, who has fallen back into the catastrophic natural world, and that this end-of-world setting will be replayed" (Carroll, *Adapting "Macbeth"*, 94).
[48] Koskoff et al., *Macbeth*, 87.
[49] Krips, "The Politics of the Gaze", 94.
[50] Carroll, *Adapting "Macbeth"*, 93.
[51] Bui, "Effigies of Childhood", n.p.
[52] Koskoff et al., *Macbeth*, 87.

Agnieszka Rasmus, writing about the colour-scheme of the film, reflects on the wide shot at the beginning (0:03:08) where, for a brief moment, we see a solitary figure, probably Macbeth, "set against a desert-like scarlet landscape"[53] with fog rising from the ground. Rasmus argues that this functions as a framing device that anticipates Macbeth's bloody end, and she identifies a number of film classics where a similar colour scheme can be recognised, suggesting this shot in Kurzel can be seen as a visual tribute to "Polanski's pre-credit sequence" in his *Tragedy of Macbeth* (1971), or *Laurence of Arabia* (1962, dir. Lean), or *Apocalypse Now* (1979, dir. Francis Ford Coppola), or *The Exorcist* (1973, dir. William Friedkin).[54]

At the end of the film, when we see Fleance running towards the orange fog (1:45:52-1:46:12), recalling this image of the isolated silhouette at the beginning, in retrospect we can also realize that a connection is established between Macbeth and Fleance by the framing of the story, indicating perhaps that Fleance will have to fight his way to reach the crown similarly to Macbeth, a link further underlined by the same colour: saturated orange. As the script testifies, this idea must have come as an afterthought, in post-production, to provide a frame for the story with yet another visual echo: a solitary soldier figure in an orange-reddish mist in the beginning, unconnected, belonging nowhere, yet linked to another one, a younger version of the first, facing smoke of a similar colour. By the end of the film, however, we can identify where the orange fumes come from as the prediction has come true with a slight change: Birnam forest, burning, comes to Dunsinane. Fleance heading towards the burning forest defies logic: why does he not go back to the woods he came from, taking shelter with the weird sisters as the script suggests? Yet the film creates a more picturesque visual representation through this decision. Furthermore, the orange mist establishes a link not only between Malcolm and Fleance, whose motions in the end are crosscut, but also between Macbeth and Fleance, sharing not only a past but implicitly a similar future.

The whiteness of the mist, in contrast, would have implied that Fleance was seeking the protection of the weird sisters as they are the ones he can trust, as he learnt in the hard way when he was running for his life after his father was brutally murdered, and he was saved by a teenage witch miraculously emerging in the forest. With their earlier help he managed to survive, and now, at the end of the film, when in the script he is running towards the white mist, the hint is that he is probably going to be helped by the sisters again, this time to succeed to the throne. The milky whiteness of the mist into which he plunges in the script is evocative of the maternal protection of the sisters, something that he was missing and seeking all along. With the colour switching to orange on screen, in contrast, the maturation of Fleance is shown to be complete: he no longer needs the protection of the sisters; he is able to carry Macbeth's sword and is not afraid to take the road less trodden.

1.3 *Coen*

In Coen's adaptation, Fleance (Lucas Barker) is found and perhaps kidnapped by Ross (Alex Hassel) (1:00:21) and then put temporarily in the custody of the sinister Old Man (Kathryn Hunter, also playing the weird sister/s) – probably in the hope that one day he will be king, and one easy to manipulate. In the last but one frame we once again see Fleance in the saddle with Ross riding towards the camera along a meandering road, suggesting perhaps that Fleance's future is not going to be without hiccups (1:41:23).

In Coen's version of 'the show of kings'[55] (1:08:56-1:1:20), the three apparitions are represented by three children's faces submerged in water, but they are so generic, blurred, and anamorphic that we can

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[53] Rasmus, "*Macbeth* for Our Time", 118.
[54] Ibid., 119-120.
[55] We do not see the line of kings in this adaptation, only the three children's faces.

only know from the script that they belong to three different children.[56] It is the third image that is especially rich in connotations, as the script explicates, "The third child's face breeches the black water which leaves blood dripping from his face",[57] although the blood is not discernible in the film. On screen, there is no tree shown in the frame of the third child, so this rendering differs from the stage direction in the Folio, "THIRD APPARITION, a Child crowned, with a tree in his hand".[58] The lack of a branch in the child's hand in the film renders the identification of the third child with Malcolm slightly ambiguous. Yet, the third child is wearing a crown when saying, "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him",[59] so his figure could refer to either Malcolm or Fleance. Or, by extension, it could also stand for any of Banquo's imagined children, and, as the script perhaps suggests, also for Macbeth, assuring himself that he will never be vanquished.

After the third apparition disappears, and before both the water and Macbeth's mind clear up (1:11:14), according to the screenplay, "[A]s Macbeth leans over to watch it the reflection of his face covers the child's".[60] In the film, one by one, each child's face rises in the water where Macbeth's reflection should appear (but does not), before the image of his own face – he is himself wearing his crown –, almost imperceptibly, or perhaps illusorily, overlays that of the third child, creating a repeated pattern suggestive of an otherworldly experience.[61] One might discover here a subtle homage to Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* where, in the graveyard scene, there is the famous shot of the shadow of Hamlet's head superimposed onto Yorick's skull lying on the ground (1:56:31).[62] Such superimposition in Olivier underscores the close connection between the two characters, as well as the proximity of life and death, and the comic and the tragic,[63] whereas in Coen's *Macbeth*, the significance of children and the concept of children as knowers, as well as the very problem of knowledge, are highlighted by the editing technique. There is no specific show of eight kings in this version to suggest that succession is to be granted to Banquo's issues yet the ambiguity over especially the last apparition is fruitful enough to be taken as a hint at Banquo's succession.

At the end of Coen's adaptation, Ross and Fleance riding a horse disturb a flock of crows that take off and cover the sky with their sinister figures, recalling perhaps the weird sister(s)'s crow-like appearance. What used to be the source of information about the future now becomes a stain, blocking vision at the end of the film, leaving the option open for both Duncan's and Banquo's succession narrative. The lens of the camera is obscured by the dark birds, perhaps suggestive of a gloomy future ahead of Fleance (and/or Ross), once more referencing the Lacanian concept of the stain that obscures the gaze.

Conspicuously, Malcolm (Harry Melling) is not given any more screentime after his coronation, so it is Fleance's image and narrative that the spectators will take away. Yet, Fleance is not an independent agent, so when at the very end of the film, he does reappear, we see him as a completely passive young boy who does not seem to understand what is going on around him. It is his 'guardian', Ross, who is perhaps more likely to capture the imagination of the audience, as he is another enigma, just like the third murderer in the play-text. In Coen's film, this mystery is solved similarly to Roman Polanski's

[56] "The face has fallen back into the depths to be replaced by another that rises to just below the surface", "This child too sinks back down", "A third child is rising, this one wearing a crown...", Joel Coen, *Macbeth: Screenplay* (2020), 65-66, <u>deadline.com</u>.
[57] Ibid., 66.
[58] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Braunmuller, 195.
[59] Coen, *Macbeth*, 66.
[60] Ibid.
[61] See superimposition explained in Kyle DeGuzman, "What is Superimposition in Film — Definition and Examples", *Studiobinder Blog* (2024), <u>www.studiobinder.com/blog</u>
[62] Laurence Olivier, *Hamlet* (Two Cities Films, 1948).
[63] See Sarah Hatchuel's observation in "*Hamlet*: To Be or Not to Be an Action Film" in Victoria Bladen and Yan Brailowsky, eds., *Hamlet in the Twenty-first Century* (Paris: Belin (CNED), 2022), 245-262, 248-249.

merging the two characters into one.[64] Polanski has Ross (John Stride) act as the third murderer, spying upon the first two.[65] In Coen's film, Ross is more like a go-between for Macbeth, first bringing the two murderers to the castle,[66] then joining them at the sinister place around the crossroads and the hut, not only checking whether they perform the deed, but also taking it a step further by seeking out Fleance.

Thus, in Coen's version, one might find a thought-provoking sub-plot woven into the plot: the embedded story of Ross. Ross's point of view is shared by the viewer at certain key moments, e.g., overhearing Malcolm and Donaldbain planning their escape, waiting at the crossroads, finding Fleance, not warning Lady Macduff of the imminent attack, although he knows that the murderers have arrived because he observes them from the window, then catching the crown, and hailing Malcolm as the new king of Scotland. All along, he seems to have a plan, and throughout the film he strikes the spectator as a scheming, Machiavellian character, who carefully chooses who to support and when to do so. In his project for the future, it is not only the crown that is an object in a chain of transmission but the figure of Fleance too.

2. Cycles of Violence

When most modern adaptations present Fleance as returning, there are political implications. It undermines, as Carroll outlines, "the legitimacy of Malcolm's coronation, even as it obscures or reverses the play's succession politics"; he argues that:

> Bringing Fleance back at the end of adaptations produces a 'closed frame' that suits certain aesthetic assumptions and theories, from the neo-classical demands of the seventeenth century to contemporary expectations of coherence, whereas there are other examples, in Shakespeare, of the 'open frame' ending, such as *Hamlet* (the Ghost does not reappear at the end, as he does in *The Spanish Tragedy*), or *Love's Labour's Lost*, with its deferred marriages.[67]

Does bringing Fleance back in many film adaptations impose a closed frame upon an open-ended structure? I argue that these endings do not close the frame but rather suggest further possibilities and uncertainties consistent with the ambiguity of the weird sisters' prophecies. By bringing Fleance back in these three adaptations, Goold, Kurzel and Coen foreground the idea of the continuation of the cycles of violence. As Carroll observes, "[E]ven those adaptations that do not bring Fleance back at the end frequently represent some circularity, the end reflecting the beginning, as the cycle of violence seems to start again, as seen in the more radical interpretations of Kott, Ionesco, and Müller".[68] The idea of cycles of violence as an underlying pattern of human nature is also emphasised by Stephen Prince in analysing Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (Toho Co., Ltd, 1957).[69]

Although it has become a modern topos to make Fleance return at the end of *Macbeth* film adaptations, this ending is not inconsistent with the play-text: references to Banquo's seed and doubts about Malcolm[70] are both inherent in the Shakespearean play-text. While Malcolm's succession in Shakespeare's play can indeed be read as an open frame structure as Carroll argues, it could also be

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[64] Roman Polanski, *Macbeth* (Playboy Productions, Inc., Caliban Films, Ltd., 1971).

[65] See Braunmuller on Polanski's innovations: Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Braunmuller, 87.

[66] In the play-text, it is an unnamed servant who is sent for to call the murderers: see Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Braunmuller, 3.1.47-48.

[67] Carroll, *Adapting "Macbeth"*, 86.

[68] Carroll, *Adapting "Macbeth"*, 94.

[69] Stephen Prince, "*Throne of Blood:* Shakespeare Transposed", *The Criterion Collection: Film Guides* (2014), *www.criterion.com*.

[70] See Braunmuller's list of many equivocative lines of Malcolm, including the 'testing' scene in 4.3 (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Braunmuller, 89-93).

viewed as a closed one: Duncan names him his heir in the beginning, and then in the end, his projected coronation can be seen as a return to the beginning and thus the repetition of the same cycle.

The return of Fleance, on the other hand, might open up the perspective, showing a creative "line of flight" as suggested by rhizomatics theory; Deleuze and Guattari write that "according to" the line of flight, rhizomes or multiplicities "change in nature and connect with other multiplicities".[71] As Lanier explains:

> rhizomatic analysis seeks out which relations, of the multiplicity of relations a work partakes, are particularly creative. Of special value are those relations which effect a conceptual transformation in the larger aggregate and initiate what DG [Deleuze and Guattari] call a 'line of flight', that is, a novel mode of becoming or way of thinking created by a new form of connection, heretofore only immanent or virtual, between two entities.[72]

Lanier's "Shakespearean Rhizomatics" conceives of Shakespeare in an expanded way, one that "includes Shakespeare the text but is in no way reducible to it", so much so that by 'Shakespeare' we should mean a network of adaptations.[73] In accordance with Lanier's theoretical framework of the rhizomatic structure of adaptation, drawing from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, we can view these different adaptations of *Macbeth* in terms of a network where each adaptation is in dialogue with the others. As Deleuze and Guattari stress, Lanier writes, "that potentiality and virtuality, what a thing might become through the inexorability of difference and desire, is in fact its reality, rather than the identity that thing might momentarily seem to take at a moment in time".[74]

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, what do these three screen adaptations bring to their dialogue with Shakespeare's play-text? This examination has illuminated the way that the various structures of the films engage with its open-endedness. In Goold's film, the last image is that of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth behind the bars of the large industrial lift, so their story is implicitly over, and thus seemingly, this version is arguably the closest to Shakespeare's shape of tragedy: a parabola of the hero's rise and fall, permeating an aura of finality. Yet, there is a haunting similarity to first-generation video-games with new levels of action always able to retry with new and different outcomes, as Huertas-Martín points out.[75] Kurzel also maintains the ambiguity, but the final images of the camera are fixed on Fleance. In Coen's adaptation, the most important addition in my view is the character and behaviour of Ross, and how he is shown to have the rein in hand over the destiny of Fleance.

Closely related to the problem of open vs closed-endedness is the representation of Malcolm at the end of the adaptations. What is conspicuous is that two of the three films do not celebrate or give too much screentime to Malcolm, the victor, who in the play-text purges evil from the country, frees time, and restores something of the original order. In Kurzel's final crosscut sequence, alternatively showing Fleance and Malcolm, Fleance is given three times as much screentime as his rival, Malcolm; moreover, Banquo's son is the last figure the camera shows. In Coen, Malcolm does not have a chance to deliver his victory speech, and what the camera shows in the end is Fleance taken away by Ross on horseback, engraving this last ever darkening image in the spectators' minds. In Goold, however, Malcolm is given almost two full minutes during which he captures Macbeth's severed head and holds it, fighting nausea

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[71] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 11th print 2005), 9.

[72] Douglas Lanier, "Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value", in Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin, eds., *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 21-40, 35.

[73] Ibid., 30, 39.

[74] Ibid., 27.

[75] Huertas-Martín, "Off-Modern Hybridity in TV Theatre", 98.

as he delivers his speech of victory.[76] So, while Goold manages to avoid what Fischer calls the "eternal return syndrome at the end with Donalbain"[77] and, we might add, with Fleance, his adaptation also complicates the victor-vanquished as well as the hero-traitor dichotomy, as it is likely to arouse sympathy for the defeated and doubts about the victorious party.

As modern adaptations, these films talk as much about Shakespeare as ourselves and our age, about our cycles of violence and current political crises, "spanning from the Middle East, through Europe and beyond".[78] By visually opening a door to the future or by showing Fleance on the move, all three adaptations present a linear if not exactly straight line of the continuity of his narrative, bringing the film's plot closer to the Kottian endless staircase image of chronicle plays,[79] thereby relativizing the otherwise unique achievement of not only the (villain-)hero's parabola-shaped rise and fall but the moral superiority of the victorious party as well. Even the film adaptation that seems to be the most final, Goold's, contains the seeds of circularity and cyclicity.

Analogous to the open-endedness of the Shakesperean play-text, all three film adaptations contain or imply contingencies regarding the Fleance narrative. In visual terms, it is the final focus on tunnels and corridors in Goold's film that supports the possible continuity of the story. In Coen's adaptation it is the meandering road along which Ross is taking Fleance with him that serves as a visual reminder of the continuity of Fleance's narrative. In Kurzel's adaptation it is the mist that is especially fruitful as a symbol, serving as a multi-layered entity, open to interpretation. The mist, the unknown and the timeless are not evil, neither do they determine the fate of human agents; they only offer possibilities; in themselves they are indeterminacies. Likewise, the endings of the film adaptations are determined only to the extent they have been shot, cut, and edited, but the viewers' readings of the films are open-ended, giving way to speculation, spectator engagement and creativity.

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[76] See Fischer on the theatrical version: Fischer, "*Macbeth* Apropos to Goold's and Doran's Stagecraft", 57.
[77] Ibid., 57.
[78] Rasmus, "*Macbeth* for Our Time", 117.
[79] Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* [1961], trans. by Boreslaw Taborski (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966), 10.