Space/Digital

Designing spatial metaphors in made-for-digital *Macbeth*s

(Pascale Aebischer)

Macbeth has long been recognised as a tragedy that has a vexed relationship with spaces. The play features unspecific natural 'open' spaces that characters move through (a heath, a part of Birnam wood, an undefined outdoor space somewhere near Dunsinane) and highly precise cultured 'closed' places in which characters are pinpointed ('*Enter the* Ghost of BANQUO, *and sits in Macbeth's place*', SD 3.4).[1] The play ranges from the outdoors – spaces of warfare, witchcraft, and ambush – via the liminal space of the porter at the castle gate to the indoor spaces of Macbeth's castle at Inverness, the castle of Dunsinane and the Macduff home, all of which incorporate sites of murder and death and have both a physical reality onstage and a metaphorical dimension.

When understood metaphorically, as Werner Wolf has observed, 'the use of space in this play is remarkable in the sense that it is permeated by an extraordinary tendency to give spaces ambiguous, "equivocal" and unstable meanings',[2] so that the same castle can both have a 'pleasant seat' (1.6.1) and be the 'Hell' whose gate the Porter drunkenly guards (2.3.2). The castle may be breached and the body politic attacked, but some spaces in *Macbeth* remain impenetrable to external view. In a play that begins with the opening up of a body 'from the nave to th' chops' (1.2.22), bringing to view the interior organs that should remain beyond sight, and whose dénouement hinges on a character having been 'from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped' (5.8.15-16),[3] there is a striking reluctance to display the interior of the one room within this castle in which the catalytic act of regicide is committed: like many scenes relegated in early modern dramaturgy to the liminal space of the 'discovery space', Duncan's bedchamber remains offstage but tantalises the viewer – not least through the blood that seeps out of the body and onto the hands of the murderers – with glimpses and

[1] Werner Wolf, 'A Castle as "Hell" and "Heaven": Spaces and their "Equivocal" Meanings in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*', *AAA – Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 44, no. 2 (2019): 85-118, 91. All references to the play refer to William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (Arden 3), eds. Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

[2] Werner Wolf, 'A Castle as "Hell" and "Heaven"', 87.

[3] Muriel Cunin, '"Still keep / My bosom franchised": Macbeth et l'espace intérieur'. *Itinéraires: Littérature, textes, cultures* (2010): 25-43, 32.

accounts of the regicide that is the more forcefully imagined by spectators in its shockingly excessive reality. In that sense, locations such as the bedchamber or the battlefield from which the '*bleeding* Captain' (SD 1.2) who brings news of Macdonald's death can 'extrude' from their offstage positions and be metaphorically carried onto the stage. Blood can thus act as the liminal substance that is both within the body but can pour out if it, making blood the primary vehicle for such spatial boundary crossing from the inside of the body to the outside, and the offstage to the stage.[4] Places and the people within them can be mobile to the extent that they may be unmoored from their 'natural' ordering: Birnam wood *can* come to Dunsinane just as Banquo can lie in a ditch while sitting on Macbeth's stool.

Given *Macbeth*'s preoccupation with mobile, ambiguous and metaphorical spaces, the play lends itself particularly well to adaptation to digital environments that facilitate a non-naturalistic approach to spatial representation. This chapter is dedicated to thinking through the way two recent productions of the play — one Kit Monkman's 2018 feature film and the other Zoë Seaton's made-for-digital theatre production on the Zoom platform in the run-up to another coronavirus semi-lockdown in 2020 — deploy a combination of real and digital spatial designs to reimagine *Macbeth* for a twenty-first-century audience of digital users. The affordances of digital greenscreen backgrounds (using chromakey technology), combined with analogue and CGI design, I will argue, enable these productions to push the play's own spatial rhetoric and metaphorical uses of space onto a new level and re-imagine the play, and its castle locations, as a prison of the mind. Digital design, these case studies show, enables productions to translate into a visual language the claustrophobic, haunted environments Shakespeare maps out for his audience.

At the same time, virtual environments complicate the workings of what Andrew Bozio terms 'emplacement', that is, the 'phenomenological work of perceiving disparate elements of one's environment and assembling those perceptions into a coherent sense of place'.[5] As virtual spaces are used to accentuate the tragedy's own concern with strangeness and shifting environments and make it possible to express the psychological trajectory of the protagonists through spatial metaphors, they also rub against naturalistic environments that

[4] Tim Fitzpatrick, *Playwright, Space and Place in Early Modern Performance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 112-22.
[5] Andrew Bozio, *Thinking Through Place on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2020, 12.

act as bridges to the 'real' beyond the world of the play and to its viewers. Spatial design, and the combination of digital and analogue spaces, I will argue, arekey to structuring the relationship between the viewer and the protagonists.

A digital Panopticon: Kit Monkman's *Macbeth* (2018)

When Kit Monkman's *Macbeth* was released in 2018, it was heralded on its website as 'set in a wholly new type of imaginative space',[6] while on the film's brochure, the director himself spoke of the need to make films that 'celebrate theatricality and thrive on the viewers' co-creation of what unfolds'.[7] Significantly, that theatricality was, in a text written by Judith Buchanan, who acted as the film's 'Co-writer and Shakespeare Advisor', linked to the design of the film's architectural space. Reminding her reader of the way in which Shakespeare, via the Chorus of *Henry V*, 'invites an audience to "make imaginary puissance"' to transform the bare boards of the early modern stage into whatever space the plot requires, she proceeds to contrast this way of involving the audience imaginatively in the creation of the play world with cinema's continuity editing rules, which create 'clear and consistent spatial continuities'. Monkman's film breaks with these cinematic conventions, Buchanan suggests, to the extent that 'space, like so much else in this dramatic world, becomes mutable' and the 'fictive world is partly responsive to the psychological realm'.[8] This, then, promises to be a film that uses digital greenscreen to create a cinematic equivalent of the bare boards of the Shakespearean stage and, that, in doing so, creates a performance environment that is both facilitative of external action in that it contains the props and digital scene dressing required for the plot of *Macbeth*, and is also an 'inner world' that reflects the psychological pressures experienced by the tragic protagonist.[9]

In Tim Gathercole's CGI design for the film, this concept translates into what Buchanan calls a 'floating world' that owes much to science fiction both in terms of design ideas and

[6] Paul Munden, Director, National Association of Writers in Education, cited on the start page of macbeththefilm.co.uk (last accessed 10 October 2022).
[7] Kit Monkman in *Macbeth: A Cinematic Experience: Tuesday March 13th 2018* (Goldfinch Entertainment Limited 2018, http://www.macbeththefilm.co.uk/brochure/), 3.
[8] Judith Buchanan, 'Some reflections on the film', in *Macbeth: A Cinematic Experience*, 4-7, 6.
[9] Buchanan, 'Some reflections', 4.

camera movement, as a gravity-defying crane camera floats through the insides and multiple levels of the architectural structure in long single shots.[10] At the same time as it indexes outer space exploration, Gathercole's design prominently literalises *As You Like It*'s metaphor of 'All the world's a stage' (2.7.240). The external globe-like structure e of the digital set design, supported by sometimes solid, sometimes translucent, longitudinal markings, envelops a polygonal spaceship-like tower of rooms that taper off at the bottom of the globe and spread out in its midst, and whose levels are interconnected by a central staircase that spirals around an empty core. At the top of this structure, two open platforms are covered by a curved planetarium-style ceiling that acts as the 'heavens' of this digital performance environment, while the porter's lodge is at times located as its lowest level, in keeping with the play's invocation of the knocking at 'Hell Gate' (2.3.2). The spherical outer shell with its longitudinal markings repeatedly reappears in *mise-en-abyme* within the *mise-en-scène* of specific scenes in which it functions as the monarch's translucent golden orb: gently fingered by Duncan as he awaits news from the battlefield; more nervously drummed-on and squeakily revolved on its stand by Macbeth, on whose desk it sits. The world is thus a stage and also a symbol of the kingly power that can be acquired through murder, that can be spun on its axis and controlled by those who have seized it for themselves even as they themselves inhabit this world and are subject to forces beyond their control, prompting Alison Finlay and Ramona Wray to wonder: 'Who controls the multi-dimensional globe?'[11]

The chief force of this film is not the human hand that taps or spins the globe, but rather the camera's eye, which is able to penetrate through its inner spaces and float through the CGI environments, moving from chamber to chamber in a restless, intrusive roaming that appears to motivate Malcolm's wish, at the conclusion of the play, that 'the days are near at hand / That chambers will be safe' (5.4.1-2). It is when the camera is drifting through the set's multiple floors and rooms and finds itself at the centre of this architectural construct looking out towards its periphery that the structure reveals itself as a Foucauldian Panopticon: a design facilitating 'total surveillance' and in which 'architecture [is made] transparent to the

[10] Buchanan, 'Some reflections', 7.

[11] Alison Finlay and Ramona Wray, 'A Review of Macbeth (dir. Kit Monkman, 2017)', *British Shakespeare Association* (https://www.britishshakespeare.ws/a-review-of-macbeth-dir-kit-monkman-2017/), 30 June 2017. The 2017 date is due to the reviewers' access to a pre-release screening of the film which was officially released in 2018.

administration of power'.[12] It is not for nothing that Foucault employs a theatrical metaphor when describing Jeremy Bentham's archetypal prison design: the cells are 'like so many cages, so many small theatres'.[13] The Panopticon, in other words, creates the conditions of 'total visibility' which Una Chaudhuri associates with 'the spatial arrangements of naturalism' in drama from the early modern period onwards.[14] Far from controlling the space, as the kings' handling of the orb suggests, Duncan and Macbeth, like the rest of this worlds' inhabitants, are controlled by its compartmentalisation into a floating 'prison-machine' that contains within it multiple 'cell[s] of visibility' in which the play's characters are ruthlessly, permanently, exposed to the surveillance of the camera's eye.[15]

Nowhere is the subjugation of the human body to the dual forces of geometrical design and the camera's all-seeing, judging eye more obvious than in the conclusion to the Macbeths' first shared scene, shot from a camera suspended over the centre of the Macbeths' bed, which is overlaid with the outlines of a square lodged (almost) inside a circle.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1. The Vitruvian couple (Akiya Henry and Mark Rowley). *Macbeth*, dir. Kit Monkman (2018). Image courtesy of Thomas Mattinson.

The geometrical pattern superimposed on the couple replicates the lines of Leonardo da Vinci's 'Vitruvian Man' (c. 1490), the iconic drawing that sets out the geometrical proportions of the idealised male body in two front-facing positions that are in dynamic interaction with one another. Da Vinci's drawing is thought to represent the 'Christianized Pythagorean/Platonic belief in a mathematically and geometrically ordered existence'[16] and to '[fashion] an effective metaphor for humankind's microcosmic relationship with God'.[17] In

[12] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 249.
[13] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* 200.
[14] Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, xii.
[15] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 249.
[16] Charles Carman, 'Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*: A Renaissance Microcosm', in *Quidditas: Online Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 16 (1995): Article 7, 116-160, 129.
[17] Carman, 'Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man',* 136.

Charles Carman's reading of the drawing, 'Leonardo's mankind is rendered fully capable of moral choice and personal action, a condition that reflects the most dynamic aspects of Renaissance thought about mankind's dignity, or potential to be like God.'[18] In Monkman's *Macbeth*, by contrast, the figures on the bed are not mathematically overlaid in a harmonious pattern of iconic masculinity that is fully capable of moral choice. Instead, they are first entangled in a coital moment in which Mark Rowley's Macbeth turns his back to the camera as he lies on top of Akiya Henry's Lady Macbeth, and then separated into a male and a female body who both fail to align with the geometrical design and instead appear trapped within it once they have sealed their immoral pact through intercourse. The space of the bed becomes a site of original (sexual) sin and moral revolt against the divine geometrical pattern. The allusion to Leonardo da Vinci's mapping of the human body highlights the failure of any divine geometry to impose discipline on the sprawling post-coital bodies of the murderers-in-the-making, who both resist the invitation to be God-like in their ability to make moral choices and instead meet the eye of the camera with defiant directness.

As the penitentiary Panopticon constitutes the offender 'as the object of possible knowledge', so Macbeth is thereafter constituted by the film's design architecture not so much as a subject in control of his environment than as the play's chief criminal and the film's principal object of investigation and discipline within the 'artificial and coercive theatre in which his life will be examined from top to bottom'.[19] After the bedroom scene, his trajectory strikingly diverges from Lady Macbeth's, who from that point on recedes into a 'fourth-wall' environment within which she is oblivious of the camera's observation in the same manner in which her sleepwalking self is unaware of the doctor and gentlewoman who watch over her. Only in the depth of her madness does she dramatically break through the fourth wall, as she tearfully reaches towards the camera to plead for it to follow her 'To bed, to bed, to bed' (5.1.68). By contrast, Macbeth is cast as a Foucauldian 'delinquent, a biographical unity, a kernel of danger, representing a type of anomaly' who must be subjected to a penitentiary and quasi-scientific regime of observation, documentation, regulation, and analysis.[20] Not restricted to observing him from the outside, the camera has access to the inner recesses of his mind as it tracks the psychological arc that accompanies his fall from grace.

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[18] Carman, 'Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man',* 141.
[19] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 251-52.
[20] Michel Foucault, 'Panopticism', 254.

The geometrical CGI design of the space that facilitates a total focus on the human figures trapped within it, to the exclusion of all distraction, also enables physical space to morph into a mental space, in line with Monkman's desire to 'weave together the outer material story with the inner psychological narrative that Shakespeare's poetry so deftly achieves'.[21] While Macbeth, following the visitation of Banquo's ghost, looks down the banquet table towards the camera that recedes before his gaze, we first hear the confrontation of the witches which is beginning to play out in his mind. The sound bridge of his encounter with the witches accompanies a journey that takes us past Lady Macbeth sitting at the edge of her four-poster bed mechanically rocking back and forth before the camera moves up through the ceiling and into the depths of the vast pillared space of the heath. Space is here organised digitally: as Tom Cartelli observes, at moments like this, 'Scenes don't so much end as slip into a kind of vertically oriented re-routing, as if the search function on one's laptop were scrolling through a panel of possibilities.'[22] In this psychological architecture of inner turmoil that thus reflects and replicates digital architecture, different spaces and times blend into one another and open up onto external vistas such as the projection, onto the pillars, of the witches' prophecies in Mario Caserini's 1909 silent film of *Macbeth*, which intrude on this moment to trap Macbeth into the inevitability of a cyclical plot structure in which his fate has always already been predicted and taken its course. When he wakes up from this nightmare vision, Macbeth is alone in his four-poster bed, shot from a camera suspended above him. It is only when the camera cuts away to show the whole room side-on that we see Lady Macbeth still rocking back and forth at the foot end of the bed, her mind a million miles from his (and our ability to access it). The film thus manipulates space to juxtapose characters 'according to thematic and psychological distance',[23] visualising the different psychological trajectories travelled by the characters and emphasising their increasingly separate experiences.

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[21] Monkman, *The Making of Macbeth*.

[22] Tom Cartelli, 'Medium Specificity, Medium Convergence and Aliveness in the Chromakey (2018) & Big Telly Zoom (2020) *Macbeths*,' in *Early Modern Liveness: Immediacy and Presence in Text, Stage, and Screen*, ed. Danielle Rosvally & Donovan Sherman (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming, 2023), 63-4.

[23] Peter Kirwan, 'The Environments of Tragedy on Screen: *Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth*,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 79-91, 90.

In such an environment of total surveillance that can even penetrate the innermost recesses of the protagonist's mind, watch over his nightmares, and see into the past and the future, it may seem odd that the film should follow the play in relegating the murder of Duncan offstage and not even affording the viewer a glimpse of that spectacle. Yet here, too, the film follows a Foucauldian logic in that the camera is not so much interested in the crime itself as in the psychological make-up of the criminal of which the crime is merely a product. The film disciplines its own viewers by refusing them access to this scene no less than it refuses them access to the sketchily mapped-out geometrical spaces beyond the virtually constructed environment. The stairs start off as solid structures but gradually become mere lines that disappear into the void, and the viewer does not get to roam beyond the edges of platforms or to enter the incompletely drawn rooms adjacent to the scene in which a piece of dialogue is performed. As Buchanan explains, this decision to leave 'the edges of the playing space … suggestively unformed – a series of geometric lines awaiting colour and design' is indicative of

> the quasi-theatrical laws by which these spaces operate. Summoned into being through the imperatives of the local dramatic moment, each scene claims only as much fully defined space as is required for that piece of action to play out. The rest is merely bare boards, or indicative construction lines, awaiting the next narrative claim on it to become what it then needs to be.[24]

Crucially, that 'narrative claim' is not at the command of the viewer but rather of the invisible force in command of the camera which, in turn, is guided by the Shakespearean plot. As Cartelli puts it: '*how* the succession of scenes progresses and where Monkman's camera lands are never serendipitous or subject to audience intervention, both deriving from the film-maker's conscious choice to have scenes play out in and as reasonable facsimiles of the play's settings and events.'[25]

The juxtaposition of multiple rooms containing different actions, despite being based on a theatrical logic, therefore does not function in the manner of the spatial layout of Punchdrunk's immersive, interactive promenade performances across a multiplicity of rooms that viewers can roam at will. Such immersive theatre practice works 'to resist the frontal,

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[24] Buchanan, 'Some reflections', 7.

[25] Cartelli, 'Medium Specificity', 66-67; see also 69-70.

objectivizing epistemology of modern proscenium theatricality: you are in the event, aware of seeing only part of it, aware – when the actors come into view at the end of a long hallway and disappear – that the event transcends the perspective of any of its participants.'[26] Nor does it function in the manner of a Katie Mitchell-type juxtaposition of different performance areas that invite the viewer to decide 'where to look, what to look *at*'.[27] Those types of theatrical set designs offer the viewer a degree of agency as they work out their own trajectory through a play's multiple simultaneous actions, and as Punchdrunk's Artistic Director Felix Barrett explains, are 'alive' even when uninhabited by a performer.[28] Barrett's and Mitchell's objects and spaces are imbued with a deep humanity that stems from a Stanislavskian naturalistic tradition: they have a past and a future as they are the traces left by the human inhabitants wo have passed through, breathed in, and touched them.

Monkman's sets, by contrast, contain only functional props and their digital backgrounds. They feature only the sterile digital set dressing essential for the scenes staged within them; far from resisting the objectivising epistemology of the proscenium stage, they multiply its force as each room becomes its own proscenium stage, viewed from the outside by an audience that is always imagined as external to the scene. Kit Monkman talks about how his team

> wanted to try and create spatial relationships just as you would have in theatre between the actors on the screen and the audience. So we've treated all of our wide establishing shots as though they are paintings in frames. We cut into that painting throughout the course of the scene but we never change the angle, we never change the perspective. The camera doesn't cross over into the stage space. The close-up shots in the film are the equivalent of detailed zooms in a painting. And so the audience maintains the spatial relationship with the performers on the screen. And the actors, when performing, were aware that they were playing out to an audience.[29]

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[26] W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare Performance Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 83-84.
[27] Kim Solga, *Theory for Theatre Studies: Space* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 112.
[28] Felix Barrett cited in Josephine Machon, 'Space and the Senses: the (syn)aesthetics of Punchdrunk's site-sympathetic work', *Body, Space & Technology*, 7(1), n.pag. DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/bst.151.
[29] Monkman, *The Making of Macbeth*.

With actors framed in this way as part of a 'painting' that is also a 'stage space' from which they perform 'out to an audience', the digital set design overdetermines the symbolic significance of each object within it. The film's viewers are therefore engaged in this rigidly anthropocentric CGI environment not by virtue of their ability to roam through its spaces and interact with them, but as Foucauldian prison warders. This positioning demands that the viewers read each scene and each object within it as an expression of the psychological state of the prisoner before they are rushed to a different space in search of the next piece of evidence about the prisoner's activities and state of mind. Always, they are controlled by the invisible power at the centre of this world: the equivalent of Foucault's prison director, who controls the prison warders as he uses the 'mechanisms of observation' to exert power over every individual in his prison.[30]

Only the porter's lodge escapes such control, by virtue of being a naturalistic analogue space delightfully cluttered with a multitude of objects. This is a space that is 'alive' in Barrett's sense: even without its inhabitant, the lodge speaks of the past and present preoccupations of Dai Bradley's understated porter and invites the viewer's gaze to land on a variety of objects, each of which has a life of its own. As Buchanan explains:

> Though architecturally connected to, spatially part of, and narratively involved with the dramatic territory of the rest of the action, this room is differently configured from any other space in the film. Unlike the principally sparse and stylized painterly spaces inhabited by other characters, this one is banalized by the stuff of the everyday—books, shelves, papers, pigeon-holes, clipboards, a light switch, umbrella, hole-punch, table lamp and waste paper bin. As such, it is more recognizably connected to the extra-cinematic world than any other space in the film.'[31]

The lodge thus acts as a bridge to the viewer, but also as a portal to the supernatural world of the witches (here: a mother and her children), who drop off the reel of Caserini's *Macbeth* at the start of the film. Cinematic access to this space is granted the viewer via the blurred edges of a theatrical fourth wall that enables us to observe the porter even as he is observing

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[30] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 204.

[31] Judith Buchanan, 'Collaborating with the Dead, Playing the Shakespeare Archive; *Or, how to Avoid being Pushed from Our Stools*', in *Adaptation Considered as a Collaborative Art: Process and Practice*, ed. Bernadette Cronin, Rachel MagShamráin and Nikolai Preuschoff (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 323-67, 350.

the goings-on within the world of the play. Significantly, the vast cylindrical tower at whose bottom entrance it is situated at the start of the film matches the huge cylindrical void in the centre of the spiral staircase that connects the different levels of the globe's inner architecture – i.e., the centre of the Panopticon that houses the prison director.

[insert figure 2 here]

Figure 2. The space outside the tower, with porter's lodge. *Macbeth*, dir. Kit Monkman (2018). Image courtesy of Thomas Mattinson.

But that seemingly stable foothold within the floating world that promises the viewer a sense of solid perspective thereafter frustrates this promise of phenomenological 'emplacement'. Like Birnam Wood, the lodge is disconcertingly mobile and reappears in other locations within the prison-castle. It thus ghosts the equally mobile figure of the porter-as-prison-director, who is able to move about the interiors of the castle, appearing in the margins of scenes, discreet and unemotional witnesses to the spectacles of psychological and political turmoil and criminality.

Monkman's film thus deploys the virtual backgrounds made possible by greenscreens and chromakey technology to create a prison-world that, despite the seemingly open-ended platforms from which young Fleance can dangle his legs, is ultimately a closed system from which there is no escape. Fluid spatial design and roaming camera come together to create the inside of a Panopticon whose sole purpose is to focus tightly on the psychological trajectory of the protagonist's criminal mind, around which the entire spatial architecture of the 'floating world' is organised without affording the viewer phenomenological emplacement and stability. That world of heightened emotional turmoil, on which Mark Rowley's Macbeth struts and frets his hour with tremendous commitment, is viewed via a camera that appears as a proxy for the quiet, clinical gaze of the porter-as-prison-director who does not seem to be acting at all but to just 'be', there, in that moment. The only human figure in Monkman's film to have a past made visible through the clutter of his office (thus signalling an existence and world beyond the boundaries of the prison and the film), the porter, with his interested but cool observation of events, also embodies the dispassionate rationality of Foucault's transparent architecture and its alienation from the human emotion

it keeps at arm's length, in the sterile environment of a lab experiment, where impulses are analysed and bodies disciplined by geometrical design.

The victimage of lockdown: Zoë Seaton's *Macbeth* (Big Telly, 2020)

While Monkman's film goes out of its way to use greenscreens to create a closed architectural system that frustrates the process of emplacement, the live production of *Macbeth* directed for Big Telly by Zoë Seaton started off with an interactive sequence that was all about emplacement. Produced on the Zoom videoconferencing platform in the run-up to the second national lockdown of the coronavirus pandemic in the UK in 2020, with set and costume designs by Ryan Dawson Laight, this *Macbeth* involved cast members in different geographical locations in the Irish Republic, England and Northern Ireland, converging on the platform to put on a show for audiences who were similarly dispersed across the UK and beyond. This fact was acknowledged and integrated into the production in its opening scene, which involved a 'daily briefing' by government officials, who asked audience members to produce and hold up 'location cards' that would enable them to be screened for signs of witchcraft in a parody of the NHS Test and Trace system of COVID-19 prevention. From the outset, the production thus engaged with the idea of individuals 'incarcerated' in their own homes and subject to state surveillance.

That same set-up, however, also ensured that the world of the play would never become a closed system but would remain porous to the outside world throughout, as audience members could be found in their own home spaces but could also, through a combination of green screen and vision-mixing technologies, be integrated into the virtual sets of the production. The initially stable emplacement of audience members vis-à-vis one another and the production was rapidly disrupted as locked-down homes were revealed to be permeable and open to contamination by witchcraft, digital incursions and physical danger. Most notably, a pre-recorded sequence in which Lady Macduff's home (the actual lived-in home of performer Lucia McAnespie) was invaded by the murderers demonstrated that no amount of closing of blinds and doors could keep danger at bay. The production thus tapped into what Chaudhuri has identified as the 'dramatic discourse of home', which is governed by two structuring principles: 'a *victimage of location* and a *heroism of departure*.

The former principle defines place as the protagonist's fundamental problem, leading her or him to a recognition of the need for (if not an actual enactment of) the latter.'[32] Home was where characters and audiences alike were trapped behind closed doors and blinds (as they had been instructed at the start of the performance), in a victimage of lockdown as much as of location. Meanwhile Macbeth's ability to move to the heath and the theatre in which he met the witches, while enacting a heroism of departure, also exposed him to the sinister influence of the witches.

Whereas Lady Macduff's home was organised according to naturalistic principles, those same principles only partially governed the spatial set-up of the home in which we discovered Nicky Harley's Lady Macbeth at the start of the play. Initially, Lady Macbeth's attic bedroom was spatially constructed as a naturalistic environment by cameras placed on three sides of the room (the classic set-up for television drama, choppily adapted to lockdown conditions), leading Barbara Fuchs to single out this production for its 'filmic handling of space'.[33] The black-and-white feeds from these cameras mapped out a domestic space that invoked a CCTV aesthetic that was closely allied to the all-seeing eye of Foucault's Panopticon and that facilitated the viewer's emplacement not as an outsider looking in through a virtual fourth wall, but rather as an insider sharing that space with the character and able to observe her from multiple sides.

This spatial coherence, however, only lasted for as long as the character's only access to the world beyond her bedroom walls was the laptop through which she watched a news bulletin. The moment a knock at the front door made her rush down several slights of stairs to pick up Macbeth's letter from the doormat of a narrow doorway, spatial coherence was destabilised in favour of a series of uncanny shifts of location. Another knock on the door brought in a messenger, but now the front door, left ajar to reveal the bay-fronted terraced house opposite, stood in a hallway twice the width of the previously narrow corridor. When Lady Macbeth next came down the same stairs to welcome Duncan to her castle, the hall door was wide open, revealing a spacious modern estate of detached houses in the background. Within just a few minutes, the same fictional hallway thus adopted three different physical layouts, preparing the viewer for the complete spatial disorientation in the scene following

[32] Chaudhuri, *Staging Place*, xii.
[33] Barbara Fuchs, *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 95.

the murder of Duncan, in which the entire cast engaged in a five-way conversation set in a hallway assembled out of segments of the performers' respective home interiors.[34]

Rather than create a coherent space, then, Seaton's approach was to generate a more vague '*sense* of place' out of a hybrid of real and green-screened virtual backgrounds: a loose understanding of location that did not need to follow any naturalistic 'rules' because, as Seaton stressed, '[t]he breaking of conventions is a part of the craic' of this production.[35] The sheer speed of the show – a mere hour and twenty minutes for a fuller text than might have been expected – ensured that such spatial discontinuities could be registered but not dwelt on. Cumulatively, nonetheless, they built to a mounting sense, not so much of physical place, as of a psychic reality-distortion field surrounding Lady Macbeth and connected somehow to the presence of witchcraft.

That even naturalistic interiors might be understood as mental spaces linked to a supernatural dimension was evident as early as when, having read Macbeth's letter, Lady Macbeth switched off her bedroom light and lit a candle for her invocation of the 'spirits' that should 'unsex' her (1.5.40-1). Lit by this single flame, Lady Macbeth's face flickered against a vast black background that, through a jump-cut splice of one of the grinning witches, established the success of her invocation and placed the viewer inside her hallucinating mind. Later, Macbeth joined her in her room, with green-screen technology inserting him into an incongruously flat-ceilinged corner of it that was visibly at odds with the layout of this attic space, making him appear more a figment of Lady Macbeth's fevered imagination than an inhabitant of her room. At the end of the play, her madness was again conveyed through the intrusion of the outside world into her bedroom, as a green cloth wrapped around her neck made it possible for the garish virtual décor of the banquet to make a virtual incursion into her bedroom, so that different spatial and temporal dimensions were simultaneously present in a room that was by now entirely readable as a landscape of Lady Macbeth's fracturing mind.

The spaces associated with Macbeth, too, were subject to strange distortions that signalled the presence of supernatural forces and a psychological rather than naturalistic

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[34] See also Cartelli, 75.

[35] Zoë Seaton and Big Telly Theatre Company in conversation with Gemma Kate Allred and Benjamin Broadribb, 'Present Fears are Less than horrible Imaginings', in *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*, ed. Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb and Erin Sullivan (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 195-206, 202, emphasis mine.

understanding of space. The court scene in which Duncan greeted Macbeth used the lavish interiors of a castle to frame Duncan as small vis-à-vis Macbeth, whose growing ambition was visualised through the disproportionately vast dimension of his head against the virtual background. A sense of subjective space was also conveyed in the dagger scene, where the dagger of Macbeth's mind was the Zoom camera, which he attempted to clutch in vain before his face was overlaid with the image of one of the witches dancing over him, the layering visualising the impact of witchcraft on his mind. Macbeth's proximity to the act of murder was thereafter visualised through his ever greater proximity to the Zoom camera, which captured his and Lady Macbeth's faces at odd angles and in extreme close-ups. The grey tones of the CCTV-type footage gave way to red tints that soaked the murderers' faces in the digital medium's proxy for the blood that digitally extruded from Duncan's chamber to t(a)int the faces of his murderers.

[insert figure 3 here]

Figure 3. Macbeth (Dennis Herdman) and Witch (Dharmesh Patel). *Macbeth,* dir. Zoë Seaton, Big Telly, 2020.

While up to that point, the sober greytones had imbued even the most outlandishly supernatural scenes with the serious drabness of documentary filmmaking and CCTV footage, Macbeth's coronation marked a radical shift towards lurid technicolour. Underscored by a music-hall rendering of Queen's 'We Are the Champions', the witches deployed greenscreen technology as digital magic, as they used the green surfaces of a scarf, a slowly unfolded piece of paper, and paint brushed onto a piece of paper to enable the superimposition of the virtual environment of a garishly golden Dunsinane over the reality of the performers' home environments. Thereafter, the artificiality of Macbeth's hold on power was highlighted through set and costume designer Ryan Dawson Laight's highly stylised colour schemes and his choice of virtual backdrops of the throne room, royal bedroom and state banquet hall. Although these spaces were shared between characters, in that the performers used matching virtual backgrounds to create the illusion of co-presence in a common space, the fact that Lady Macbeth and Macbeth in these shared scenes always appeared on separate screens heightened both the stylised performativity of their royal identities and their growing psychological separation from one another.

The virtual backgrounds in the production's second half furthermore brought with them a new level of porousness to the outside world that both accentuated the isolation of the central characters inside their artificial world of pomp and punctured that world with incursions of both the supernatural forces emanating from the witches and the extratheatrical world of the Zoom audience. Thus, while Lady Macbeth berated her husband in their virtual royal bedroom while they were both getting ready for the banquet, with the couple speaking to one another via their reflections in the 'mirror' of the Zoom camera (a remarkably effective way of providing a spatial anchor that connected the characters in a coherent environment), the intimacy of their discussion was disrupted by a cloud of bats flying from the rear of the room towards the camera, seemingly conjured into existence by Macbeth's injunction 'be thou jocund; ere the bat hath flown / His cloistered flight, … there shall be done / A deed of dreadful note' (3.2.41-5). This prepared the ground for the banquet, which included members of the audience who were virtually inserted into the scene, over which Banquo's ghost was layered, combining supernatural intrusion with the audience sharing the performance space with the performers.

[insert figure 4 here]

Figure 4. The ghost of Banquo (Dharmesh Patel) layered over the feast, with Lennox (Lucia McAnespie) in the centre, among audience members at the banquet. *Macbeth,* dir. Zoë Seaton, Big Telly, 2020.

In the subsequent witches' prophecy, too, which took place within a virtual proscenium theatre, Macbeth was joined by audience members inserted into a side gallery as he watched the witches perform a prophecy that involved additional members of the audience being 'spotlighted' in Zoom with virtual crowns on their heads to create the 'line of kings' descending from Banquo. The 'metatheatrical levity' of such scenes that constantly reminded audience members of each other's presence and of the fundamental theatricality of the production only accentuated the growing psychological anguish of the protagonists, who were subjected to these spatial incursions without themselves being able to escape their appalling isolation within their golden virtual prison.[36]

[36] Fuchs, *Theater of Lockdown*, p. 93.

As it hurtled towards its end, Seaton's *Macbeth* increasingly unhinged both characters and viewers alike from any moorings they may have had in a naturalistic environment. Characters and viewers now appeared within shared frames at different scales and angles and interacted in ever more disjointed ways that suggested a fracturing not only of space, but of society more broadly even as people were forcibly inserted into spaces they did not fit. Only one scene brought unexpected relief from this chaos and the protagonists' overwhelming victimage of location. As Macbeth, lit by a purple lamp and framed by purple cardboard cut-outs of the battlements of Dunsinane, was told the news of Lady Macbeth's death, his despairing 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' speech (5.5.18), delivered live on Zoom, was intercut with a pre-recorded scene, with a purple filter to match Macbeth's purple battlements and create a sense of aesthetic continuity, that took the viewer beyond the confines of the production's oppressive interior spaces. Out in the cold, crisp air, Lady Macbeth, in a series of layered shots that showed her tearful face superimposed over her body and a vast, desolate beach around her, slowly, resolutely, walked over the sand, through the shallows, and into the breaking waves of the Irish Sea that closed over her head. With Lady Macbeth drowned, the purple wash made way for black-and-white once more, as a frenzied collage of superimposed images of Macbeth's face, the witches, and Malcolm conveyed the chaos of battle, bringing the play to its end. The suicide was thus presented as an immersion in the natural world beyond the virtual and domestic environments that had trapped this character, beyond the lockdown environment of the Zoom screen, as the single successful act of heroism of departure. As the production reached the peak of its increasingly oppressive stylisation of digital set design, vision mixing, and performance, it also afforded a chilling, poetic view of a natural world that offered the ultimate self-destructive escape for its locked-down audience and characters.

What Seaton's hybrid spaces mixing live performance with pre-recorded sequences and real with virtual environments facilitated, therefore, was the creation of a fictional world that imprisoned its protagonists within an increasingly artificial environment. For the production's 2020 audience about to enter another winter of lockdown, its spatial design was redolent of the victimage of location they, too, were about to re-experience. Those claustrophobic interior spaces were made more threatening due to the porousness that allowed spaces to interpenetrate in a manner that made a mockery of the notion of home being a safe environment and that also afforded metaphorical insight into the characters'

psychological turmoil. The production thus recreated what Giles Whiteley describes as the 'dark ecology' of the play: one that is 'alive to the strange, to the weird, to the uncanny, to death and violence'.[37] Contrary to the dispassionate observation that was the dominant mode in the transparent CGI spaces of Monkman's Panopticon, and to the sense of that world as closed-off and affording no way out, Seaton's interactive production invited its viewers to virtually inhabit the world of the play, sometimes watching the proceedings literally from the inside of the virtual spaces and allowing it to reach into their own homes just as they themselves were projected into the virtual sets through Zoom's spotlighting function. Observers and observed intermingled, as the production's spatial design created a world in which viewers were deeply implicated.

The two case studies thus demonstrate how the affordances of virtual set designs in made-for-digital film and theatre productions enable an engagement with Shakespearean drama that visualises Shakespeare's spatial metaphors to spectacular dramatic effect. In their different ways, both productions seize on *Macbeth*'s oppositions between natural and built environments, its equivocal attitude towards those spaces and its portrayal of spatial mobilities and ambiguities, to construct fictional worlds that locked the protagonists into rooms that were subject to constant surveillance. Freed from the constraints of purely analogue, naturalistic set design, the productions deployed greenscreen technology to create virtual landscapes of the mind that dramatized the mental breakdowns of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists. Strikingly, both productions also took recourse to naturalistic set design for specific elements of their productions – the porter's lodge in Monkman's film; Lady Macbeth's and Lady Macduff's homes – that served as a bridge to the audience. The handling of these spaces, in turn, determined whether the play was experienced as a world separate from that of the viewer, there to be observed from the safe distance of an imaginary seat in an auditorium, or in which viewers are emplaced as part of their own world, with the audience

[37] Giles Whiteley, 'Shakespeare's Dark Ecologies: Rethinking the Environment in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*', in *Shakespeare's Things: Shakespearean Theatre and the Non-Human World in History, Theory, and Performance*, ed. Brett Gamboa and Lawrence Switzky (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 134-149, 136.

and characters trapped together inside the nightmare world of COVID-19 lockdowns in which physical and mental spaces become indistinguishable and escape spells death. They thus re-energised, for their audiences of digital natives and locked-down Zoom users, Shakespeare's own investment in metaphoric uses of dramatic space and the profound ambivalence of *Macbeth*'s castles and natural world.