Shakespeare on Screen in Francophonia

Macbeth in André Barsacq's 1952 *Crimson Curtain*: *Mise en Abyme* & Transgression of the Metadramatic Threshold [1]

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"What comes out backstage while the play is being performed *behind the curtain just a few feet away* is quite unbelievable" [2]

1 André Barsacq's *Crimson Curtain*, released in 1952, less than a decade after Marcel Carné's celebrated *Les Enfants du paradis [The Children of Paradise]* (France, 1945) and only shortly after George Cukor's *A Double Life* (USA, 1947) is a *film noir* masterpiece all too unfamiliar to modern critics which I have had the chance to retrieve from oblivion. Very little has been written about the film, even at the time it came out. The story involves a troupe of thespians putting on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and concentrates on the evening of the premiere. The main and central inset theatrical element, the Shakespearean play-within-the-film, functions as a reflexive reproduction in miniature of the embedding storyline, making the *mise en abyme* the very bedrock on which the film is built. But Barsacq's work is furthermore fraught with other secondary embedding devices whether they stem from micro-dramatic insets (excerpts of scenes-within), film scenery, stage scenery or shot composition. It follows that *The Crimson Curtain* is first and foremost a formidable multilayered *millefeuille*. [3] Now Barsacq

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[2] My italics. Chief Inspector's words (46.24). All the transcriptions and translations from French into English of the film script are mine. Original French script: "C'est fou ce qu'on raconte dans les coulisses pendant que *la pièce se joue derrière la toile à un mètre de là*." Initially released in VHS by René Chateau in 1992, the film has recently been made available, unrestored, in DVD by Gaumont Vidéo (2011). I shall be using the time coding of the latter version throughout my paper.

[3] See my "*Macbeth* et Le *Rideau rouge* d'André Barsacq: des figures d'enchâssement à la mise en abyme." In Dorval, Patricia & Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, eds. *Shakespeare on Screen in Francophonia* (2010-). Montpellier (France): Université Paul-Valéry, Institut de Recherche sur la Renaissance, l'Âge Classique et les Lumières (IRCL), 2014

strives at making the frontier between the different layers acoustically porous by having the Shakespearean plot-within relentlessly seep through and end up swamping the primary fiction while at the very same time having words and other sounds from the story-"without" gush forth onto the stageboards. He likewise exerts himself at finding ways of exporting actions and visual features of the play-within backstage while having outside elements break through and tramp the staging area. The two worlds never cease dialoguing together, acoustically as much as visually, through a vast array of most intricate devices. However apart from the constant forayings this way and that or to-ing and fro-ing between stage and backstage, which end up welding the two fictions together and hybridizing the different components of the multilayered composition, Barsacq is engrossed in that minute and yet all-important *locus*, the threshold, between stage and backstage which keeps being the focus of the film and being trespassed. He never tires of fiddling with that dividing line, a boundary which he turns into a permeable membrane between inside and outside (embedded and embedding elements), and which confuses them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, in the words freely adapted from John Hillis-Miller. [4]

2 Let us first briefly go over the plot to make the reader familiar with the ins and outs of the film. Ludovic Harn (Pierre Brasseur) and Aurélia Nobli (Monelle Valentin) have been lovers for a great many years. Both act in the theatre company directed by Lucien Bertal (Michel Simon), Aurélia's malignant and hate-cankered [5] common-law husband. Bertal has taken it into his head to come to grasps with a long-rooted desire to stage-direct *Macbeth*. One night, shortly before the performance gets started, three shots are fired, wreaking havoc throughout the playhouse. A few minutes later, the caretaker, on her way to bring up a cup of coffee, hurries up the stairs leading to Bertal's dressing-room, with a number of actors hot on her heels, and comes upon Bertal's lifeless body lying on the floor. Police cars soon come racing through the streets and screech to a halt in front of the theatre. The men hustle in and fan out through the playhouse, guarding every exit and very nearly moving the film *à huis-clos*, *i.e.* behind closed doors. The police officers readily become suspicious of Sigurd, an old actor who threatened to get back at Bertal earlier that evening, waving a gun right in a stagehand's face, for having spitefully been turned down when entreating the director for even a minor part in the play. The old man is found falling down drunk in the pub round the corner. He straightaway confesses to his crime and is at once apprehended. The Assistant Inspector feels thrilled by the Shakespearean performance, which, never having set foot in a playhouse before, he considers straight away as another police investigation to be carried out, naively confusing fiction and "reality." Meanwhile, the Chief Inspector carries on his own informal enquiries and soon feels his own curiosity aroused by the play, whose similarities with the film action are increasingly unsettling. The true culprits, Ludovic

(http://www.shakscreen.org/analysis/rideau_rouge_figures_enchassement/). An English version of this paper is being prepared.

[4] John Hillis Miller. "The Critic as Host." In Harold Bloom, *et al.* (eds). *Deconstruction and Criticism*. 2nd ed. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1992. 219.

[5] After his death, one of the actors reflects : "C'était un homme qui se mourait de haine" (31.00), *i.e.* "He was a man inwardly gnawed by hatred."

and Aurélia, are unmasked at last, and sent to jail. The very last words of the film are voiced by the Assistant Inspector — presumably Barsacq and Anouilh's mouthpiece — who, as will be demonstrated, has never ceased occupying the threshold between backstage and the stage, and who has most contributed to its porousness: "For all that happened, boss, let's admit it's a good play they just performed — Shakespeare, I'll have to remember that name!" (time code 1.20.18). [6]

3 Barsacq's *Crimson Curtain* is a work of in-betweenness and porosity. It is first a work of in-betweenness and porosity between film and theatre. [7] It displays a hybrid aesthetic composition of play-within-the-film tacking together two radically at odds semiotic systems instead of the more homogeneous play-within-a-play or film-within-a-film. But Barsacq's ingenuity reaches even further as he dons the film in the garb of theatricality and conversely clothes the theatrical play in cinematic attire. On the one hand, indeed, one is faced with a theatricalization of the film conveyed in a variety of ways. André Barsacq and his co-scripter Jean Anouilh are known for their theatrical careers. The former started as a stage designer at the Théâtre de l'Atelier in 1927, and then turned his hand to costume designing before setting up his own company, La Compagnie des Quatre-Saisons, in 1937. In 1940, during the Occupation, he took over Charles Dullin at the head of the famous Théâtre de l'Atelier. Apart from a few incursions as a stage designer for distinguished film directors like Marcel L'Herbier or Jean Grémillon, André Barsacq is first and foremost a theatre man, as is the playwright Jean Anouilh, and *The Crimson Curtain* is his one and only film shot on location at the same Théâtre de l'Atelier whose stage and backstage area make up the set of most of the film. It is not by chance either that Dullin is mentioned a couple of times by one of the thespians. The commonly used title, *The Crimson Curtain*, points to the theatrical element of the stage curtain drawn up at the beginning of a performance and let down at the end of the show. But the curtain — whether the stage curtain that parts the stage from the auditorium or the leg curtain that severs the space between stage and backstage — intrinsically forms a paper-thin and almost gauzy dividing line between the inner fiction of the *Macbeth* performance and the "reality" of the primary film narrative of the theatre company — a crimson curtain daubed with the fake blood of the Shakespearean *personae* as much as the "real" blood of the stage director. Thus, the curtain points to the theatricality of the film as much as to the flimsy borderline between the two embedded and embedding entities. The theatrical curtain device is given specific prominence in the film just before the performance gets started as an opaque screen is let down and another filmy curtain is at once slid down in front of the first (clip 1: 31.30-31.46). As a personage gets trapped between the two pieces of material, the composition of the shot underlines the multilayering and complex devices of embedding and *mise en abyme* at play in the film. Furthermore, that the stagehand should be caught between the two curtains dramatizes the threshold *locus* made permeable by the gauzy fabric and placing the half-seen

[6] Original French: "Mais tout de même, patron, avouez que c'est une belle pièce qu'ils ont jouée là... Shakespeare... faudra que j' me rappelle ce nom-là."

[7] See "*Macbeth* et *Le Rideau rouge* d'André Barsacq: des figures d'enchâssement à la mise en abyme." *Op. cit.*

character on the doorstep of perception. Interestingly the film is also known by another title, *Ce soir, on joue* Macbeth (*Tonight's Performance:* Macbeth), which highlights even more the theatrical character of the film. It opens with a deep focus shot from across the square of the playhouse monumentalized by an ever-so-slow zooming in as if the camera impersonated some spectator loitering his way to the building. The film closes in the same fashion with a dawdling zooming out or reverse track away from the building amidst the dispersing crowd of spectators. The playhouse happens to be the first and last image bracketing the footage. The film furthermore abides the formal rules of classical drama, that is the unity of space (but for a very few and brief forays outside the playhouse), of time (it starts with a rehearsal scene just before the evening performance and ends a few moments after the curtain falls) and of action as the framing fiction reflects the framed one which triggers it up. If the film is imbued with theatricality, the inner theatrical performance of *Macbeth* is conversely pervaded with film semiotics. The performance is by no means a video capture recorded from a neutral place in the center of the auditorium embodying the point of view of some imaginary viewer, a "plain record of a stage performance" that "remains purely theatrical," which Kenneth S. Rothwell considers as "embalmed theatre." [8] Close shots are found side by side with medium shots and long shots; stationary shots are endowed with motion by tracking, panning or yet other devices. The single image of the theatrical performance is split up into shivers by the use of multiple cameras using various viewpoints and reorganized by the montage as a series of short shots rapidly put together into a coherent sequence to create a composite picture. [9] The plays of shots/countershots, the crosscutting editing mode shifting back and forth from the inner to the "outer" fiction display equally what is going on onstage, in the auditorium, backstage and outside the playhouse. The stage space is decompartmentalised and absorbed into a larger space which works to breach the dramatic illusion. Another related issue, which may seem at first sight somewhat paradoxical, is Barsacq's consistent efforts to underscore the theatricality of his dramatic art. This excess of theatricality, as the cameraman spends much of his time drawing attention to the business of staging performance making — to the artificiality of the onstage set made of pasteboard, to the backstage tricks — ends up disintegrating the dramatic matter which dissolves all the more into the film medium. What makes for the permeability of originally two distinct media, the play-within and the "film-without," is the trans-semiotization of the tools most ingeniously wielded by Barsacq.

4 Not only does the editing mode undermine the theatrical semiotics of the play-within and make it straddle two distinct media, it also contributes to interweave the two fictions. As suggested before, the filmed theatrical performance of *Macbeth* within the primary fabric of the backstage world and of the police investigation could have been hermetically inserted, compartmentalized, all in one piece. But Barsacq goes for another

[8] Rothwell, Kenneth S. *A History of Shakespeare on Screen. A Century of Film and Television*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 218. The "embalmed theatre" metaphor parallels Patrice Pavis' "mise en conserve," *i.e.* tinning. Pavis, Patrice. "Le Théâtre au cinéma: quelques films et des questions sans fin." *Collection Théâtres au cinéma n°1: Peter Brook, Tennessee Williams, Laurence Olivier*, 1990. Introduction, p. 2.

[9] *Film Terms Glossary* (http://www.filmsite.org/filmterms13.html).

aesthetic venture by doggedly working at hacking at the linearity and wholeness of the inner narrative which is unfalteringly split into fragments spliced into the primary fiction by the conventional film syntax technique of crosscutting, which Barsacq uses most intricately and licentiously (in the sense of "going beyond customary or proper bounds or limits" [10]). Crosscutting (also known as inter-cutting or parallel editing) generally consists in "alternating, interweaving, or interspersing one narrative action (scene, sequence, or event) with another — usually in different locations or places, thus combining the two; this editing method suggests parallel action (that takes place simultaneously); often used to dramatically build tension and suspense in chase scenes, or to compare two different scenes." [11] Such an editing mode, which usually moves between simultaneous events in separated locales, is primarily used for purposes of ellipsis, condensing the action into relevant stepping stones allowing for the spectator's progress through the storyline. Crosscutting brings together two antithetic notions, that of fracture, separateness and that of contiguity — and even fusion. Crosscutting, by segmenting, hacking up the *Macbeth* footage and alternating it with scenes from the primary story, marks a clear cut between the two storylines, keeping them apart (although, as shall be demonstrated, the splicing may be softened and may end up becoming imperceptible). Such break could have been avoided if Barsacq had opted for a lateral movement of the camera this way and that as the localities are here contiguous, which would have mimicked the smooth movements of the characters themselves as they shift from one place to the other. Generally, the cut operates cognitively through other semiotic tools like the perception of a different time and space setting achieved through the use of costumes, set or language, which is also relevant to our case-study. Indeed although the two nested fictions take place in the same spatial and temporal setting (the playhouse on the evening of a performance), the play-within dramatizes another time setting, the High Middle-Ages, more specifically the eleventh century, and another place, Scotland (and briefly England). The costume markers are also distinct, as is the language. The crosscutting technique points to a break, a pulling apart of the two worlds (as one would turn one's head this way and that) throughout the film without having to actually move since the spatial disparity is absorbed into a temporal unfolding. The simultaneity of the two fictions is rendered not spatially by having both fictions unfold in two contiguous places but temporally as they alternate on the reel. The horizontal spatial axis is simply flipped vertically into a temporal one. And yet the crosscutting strategy subsumes the fracture between the two fiction layers entailed by the reel cut and visible splicing, bringing them together through juxtaposition, thus reducing the break to a paper-thin cut, which ends up blurring in the spectators' perception, giving place to a new smoothness and seamlessness in the spooling out of events, all the more so as the locales are contiguous and the characters the same thanks to the magic of theatrical illusion. The contiguity of the two fictions reaches far beyond the simple juxtaposition enhanced by the editing technique. Though the two fictions are alternating and, even, interweaving or interspersing, they actually end up welding together through Barsacq's

[10] *Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary*.

[11] *Film Terms Glossary* (http://www.filmsite.org/filmterms6.html).

shrewd contrivances. A soft transitional device is that of the crossfade, consisting in the dissolving of an image and/or sound into another by which two scenes blend together. Another recurrent technique of splicing is dovetailing [12] the sound track of one fiction with the image track of the other as the voice of a Shakespearean *persona* is made audible for a split second before a cut to a new shot of the play-within, fitting the two fictions into a tight interlocking joint. In other cases, the primary fiction unwinds before the spectator while the sound of the Shakespearean plot wafts in. [13] Although it may be seen at first as a means of fracture, the crosscutting technique in Barsacq's skilful hands turns not only into a medium of continuousness but also of fusion allowing for a constant to-ing and fro-ing between this side and that of the boundary line that separates as much as it unites the play-within and the enclosing primary film fiction.

5 I. EMBEDDING DEVICES AND *MISE EN ABYME*

The poetical device of *mise en abyme* which works at various levels is the very bedrock on which the *Crimson Curtain* rests. The film is indeed all embeddings [14] and specular effects. [15] If the whole film hinges primarily upon the metadramatic insertion of the Shakespearean tragedy and if the growing image of the playhouse in the first few seconds of the shooting forms a frame within the primary film frame, this is but the prelude to a long series of framing devices which make the structure of the work thick with multiple layers. The *feuilleté* or multilayering of the film's fabric looks like a fantastic *millefeuille* aggregating multiple heterogeneous elements. If the different layers are first kept tight, the very first signs of porousness soon start dawning, making the dividing line between the layers dissolve.

6 What is this *millefeuille*? It is first made up of a narrative voice. The 2011 Gaumont DVD version [16] introduces an extra opening scene which radically changes the perspective on the film. This two-minute-long footage introduces the same police inspector with another assistant. He is busy reading the morning paper and comes across an obituary article in a box announcing Aurélia Nobli's death in prison. The box of the article is one of many other frames. Then the Inspector starts recalling the case for the

[12] See my "*Macbeth* et *Le Rideau rouge* d'André Barsacq (1952): phénomènes de porosité sonore." In Dorval, Patricia & Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, eds. *Shakespeare on Screen in Francophonia* (2010-). Montpellier (France): Université Paul-Valéry, Institut de Recherche sur la Renaissance, l'Âge Classique et les Lumières (IRCL), 2013 (http://www.shakscreen.org/analysis/_rideau_rouge_porosite_sonore/). Available in English in a slightly different version as "*Macbeth* in André Barsacq's *Le Rideau rouge* (1952): *Mise en Abyme* and Acoustic Porousness." In Hatchuel, Sarah, Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin & Victoria Bladen, eds. *Shakespeare on Screen*: Macbeth. Presses Universitaires du Havre et de Rouen, 2013. 379-396.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] See my "*Macbeth* et Le *Rideau rouge* d'André Barsacq: des figures d'enchâssement à la mise en abyme." *Op. cit.*

[15] See my "*Macbeth* in André Barsacq's *Le Rideau rouge* (1952): *Mise en Abyme* and Specularity." In Dorval, Patricia & Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, eds. *Shakespeare on Screen in Francophonia* (2010-). Montpellier (France): Université Paul-Valéry, Institut de Recherche sur la Renaissance, l'Âge Classique et les Lumières (IRCL). Forthcoming.

[16] Contrary to the 1992 René Chateau VHS edition.

sake of his colleague before his narrative subsides into the analeptic visualization of what happened three years before with a few more comments on the part of the officer as the film unwinds. It follows that the narration forms a frame through which the original storyline is filtered, adding another layer to the film. As the Inspector's comments become insterspersed and aggregate in voice-over on the unfolding fiction, the framing dividing line is no longer tight and lets the Inspector's voice out into the embedded element.

7 The embedding motif also comes up in the presence of the inner audience who has come to attend the performance of *Macbeth*. Captured by the camera on several occasions, they make up a frame within the perimeter of the film picture, which ends up forming a double-framed image and building a nested gaze or gaze-within-a-gaze in which the two worlds, embedding and embedded, cohabit. They are brought into the picture frame either in a frontal shot or in a shot from behind the audience, either filling most of the image and taking over what is left to be seen of the play-within, or edged to one side of the shot and reabsorbed by the inset element. But besides this new occasion for thickening the fabric of the film, the inner spectators contribute to the porosity between the two layers as they fall on the verge of overstepping the boundary of the auditorium. After the murder of the stage director, Bertal, just before the beginning of the performance, Ludovic Harn feels more and more unhinged, as will be seen more in detail further down. As he performs the Banquet Scene (III.4) and must face Banquo's ghost who is to him Bertal's ghost, he breaks down. Ludovic (not Macbeth) takes it out on Bertal's understudy (Léonard), who is also the old man's double — played by the same Michel Simon — as Banquo's ghost (III.4), calling him a bastard, reproaching him with having wrenched Aurélia from him, and grabbing him as if to reenact Bertal's murder but this time onstage, fully in the view of the spectators and the police. In so doing he drags the primary "reality" after him onto the stage boards during the performance, stepping out of character, and interrupting the inner storyline with an alienating effect that brings the inner audience back into the "real" world and breaks the virtual fourth wall. A rustling indeed runs through the audience. Puzzled, some of the spectators rise to their feet, darting their eyes around (time code 1.08.12), straddling the borderline between inner fiction and film "reality." The scene is one of questioning, of wandering, a moment of in-betweenness as the spectators are wavering and wondering whether they are still watching the play or not, since the stage curtain is up but the stage business belongs no longer to the inner fiction. One is faced with a flattening of the nesting device with an audience that comes alive, and as some of them get to their feet and tilt over the rail to see what is going on, they look as if they were about to topple over onto the stage. Conversely, Ludovic stepping out of his Shakespearean character does not belong to the stage world any longer.

8 There is another type of onlooker unaccustomed to the stage and who walks into the playhouse through the backdoor: the police, who match the conventional spectators, the Assistant Inspector Gobinet, who shows a childish eagerness for the stage fiction he considers as real so that he too has a hand in breaching the dramatic illusion, the Chief Inspector and the policemen who end up cordoning off the stage space. Framed either with their backs to the camera in the foreground or facing the camera from the

background, they too contribute to making the two inner and "outer" worlds coexist inside the same image, the same space without any transgression as yet of the threshold between the boards and the specific "film" space, *i.e.* backstage.

9 The frame-within-a-frame issue is further substantiated by the omnipresence of framed paintings or costume drawings on the walls, of curtains, doors or mirrors which form as many frames within that of the film image even though they do not, but for the mirror, enclose the characters. The stylized stage scenery features many arches which in their turn make up a frame inside the perimeter of the film picture, occasionally one arch fitting inside another larger one like so many Chinese boxes. [17]

10 Embedding devices are also to be found in the many dramatic insets that orbit the central *Macbeth* performance and stealthily creep in, not onto the stage floor, but in the "outer" space of the framing fiction with which they intermingle. Let us introduce here a short parallel with Marcel Carné's classic *Les Enfants du paradis [The Children of Paradise]* (1945) which John C. Tibbetts describes as an unparalleled "theatrical film," in its "variety of theatrical references and allusions" and "complex layerings of reality and illusion" including pantomine, farce and melodrama (161). [18] There are many more parallels between the two films which would deserve a full analysis. Just as Barsacq' film opens and closes on the playhouse, the action of Carné's masterpiece is "framed by the rise and fall of a theatre curtain" (161). The spectators occupying the *paradis* "vent their frustrations and shout their enthusiasms to the actors […], *disporting themselves on the stage*" (161) (my italics). During the performance of *Othello*, "Lemaître/Othello is clearly addressing his lines not to Desdemona on stage, but to his Desdemona in the box with the Count" (162). *The Crimson Curtain* is likewise fraught with theatrical spurts of all kinds. Sigurd, the old actor whom Bertal banishes from the boards, readily turns the backstage area, the local pub or Bertal's dressing-room into a stage, ranting in bombastic tones and gestures excerpts from Edmond Rostand, Victor Hugo or Corneille. Sigurd's compulsively overflowing oratory is relentlessly forced back and the old actor metaphorically gagged by the intractable Bertal, who refuses to allow him the slightest role in the play and roughly dismisses him, but also by a stagehand who is carrying with a colleague a cumbersome piece of setting and finds the old man in his way. He is again curtly interrupted by the pub owner who had rather pour the old drunk one more glass than be in for another ranting tirade and, later, by the Chief Inspector who cuts him short as he pompously bursts into lines from *Cinna*. Likewise, casually questioned by the Chief Inspector, the pub owner renders in a hotchpotch of diegesis and mimesis the exchange between Sigurd and Ludovic that same evening as the old actor joined Ludovic and Aurélia at table. The film also provides a scene in which two boys are playing cops and robbers in the playhouse caretaker's room. They too are interrupted as will soon be detailed. This string of micro-theatrical scenes dotting the uppermost

[17] The multiplication of secondary frames makes for what Denis Mellier terms an aesthetics of overframing ("surcadrage"). Mellier, Denis. *Les Écrans meurtriers. Essais sur les scènes spéculaires du thriller*. Liège: Éditions du Céfal. Coll. Travaux et thèses, 2002.

[18] Tibbetts, John C. "Backstage with the Bard: or, Building a Better Mousetrap." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 29.2 (2001): 147-64.

stratum of the film are just as many enclaves, and Barsacq revels in shifting again and again from one layer to another but also in pushing things further by blurring the distinction between the primary film fiction and the metadramatic insets in that these share the very same time and space and are not pinpointed by any specific costume (but for the boy's scarf hiding his face and Sigurd's cape which he transforms into an impromptu stage piece of costume, flourishing it with a sweeping gesture as he bombastically declaims his poetic lines). These metadramatic elements are no occasion for any transitional cut from the camera either but smoothly unfold in the midst of the surrounding element. But Barsacq achieves a yet bolder *tour de force* by having the two fiction layers not only coexist but actually communicate or engage in a dialogue together as if they belonged to the same level, making their dividing line thoroughly permeable. We have mentioned the motif of an underlying, nearly subterraneous theatrical world which never stops trying to ooze up through the tiniest crevices of the outer plot, which the latter in its turn unremittingly forces back so that the "outer" fiction acts upon the inset scenes. Two more complex instances of encroachment will be reviewed. During the police interrogation, as the Chief Inspector asks Sigurd if he does not repent his act (the murder of Bertal), the latter retorts that he has played Don Dièguе (in *Le Cid* by Corneille) and several other Roman emperors in a number of tragedies and that he feels no regrets. He then launches out into a tirade from Corneille's *Cinna* — "Take a seat, Cinna, take a seat and on all things [strictly abide the law I am imposing upon you]" (V.1.1-2) — whose words insinuate into the primary level and are enacted by a character of the primary plot as the Assistant Inspector has Sigurd/Auguste actually sit down and sign his deposition, namely submit to the law. The porousness between the two nested plots is one more time brought forth by the two children playing cops and robbers in the caretaker's room. One steals into the room, his face covered in a handkerchief, and with his gun motions the other child to put his hands up. At this very moment three shots ring out. The children stand stock-still. The one asks the other holding the gun if he *really* fired. Stupefied, looking at the mouth of his toy gun, the latter bumbles that he did not (time code 23.35-23.54). The gaze, which is that of the camera, dilates and expands outside the cramped room to where a dark figure rushes past and out a door. The youths' game operates as a metafiction before it actually topples into the framing narrative. The gun simultaneously belongs to the different layers of the narrative by an ingenious scheme of dovetailing, making its visual manifestation part of the framed plot and its acoustic reality belong to the framing element which provides the dummy with the sound it is lacking. These examples demonstrate how the inner world keeps seeping out of its own space limits not only backstage but also outside the playhouse. It never stops creeping out of its spatial confinement as if it could not be constrained and as if it were trying to spread out into the primary "reality" and mold it to its own image.

11 I shall now address specifically the *Macbeth* performance at the core of Barsacq's *Crimson Curtain* and the permeability of the normally impassable threshold between the theatrical space (the stage) and the non-dramatic backstage world. This boundary keeps being trespassed, whether the fiction "within" crosses over the line into the framing one, or conversely whether the embedding plot "without" breaches through the curtains and treads the boards. The creeping of the play into the film and the slipping of the film into

the play end up merging both plots together.

12 ## II. FROM STAGE TO BACKSTAGE

The film is virtually a *huis-clos*, unfolding as it does for the most part inside the playhouse but for a few short forays outside into the pub round the corner, until the police invest the place and block all the exits. But inside this theatrical place, it is the offstage area that has the largest share. The very bulk of the story unreels indeed backstage so that the spectacle seems flipped inside out. The film spectator is, as it were, faced with a backstage performance and is made privy to the infrastructure and functioning of a theatre, mainly through the eyes of the police officers. He walks in their footsteps and discovers along with them the exits so called "stage left" and "stage right." He ventures inside this taboo zone, and spends most of his time roaming in the wings and backstage amidst the actors, stagehands and other staff members. There follows a reversal of the perspective, a monumental presence of the backstage area which symbolically sucks in the space dedicated to the inner fiction.

13 ### a) Distancing effects

In so doing, Barsacq never stops working at battering the dramatic illusion down and playing with the techniques of alienation (*Verfremdungseffekt*), [19] distancing the spectator and preventing him from losing himself in the inner fiction, a fiction which is tattered and displayed before his eyes in shreds. Generally, alienation "involves the use of techniques designed to distance the audience from emotional involvement in the play through jolting reminders of the artificiality of the theatrical performance. Examples of such techniques include explanatory captions or illustrations projected on a screen; actors stepping out of character to lecture, summarize, or sing songs; and stage designs that do not represent any locality but that, by exposing the lights and ropes, keep the spectators aware of being in a theatre. The audience's degree of identification with characters and events is presumably thus controlled, and it can more clearly perceive the 'real' world reflected in the drama." [20] Barsacq indeed resorts to several of these devices. He first ostentatiously inserts inner spectators (the audience, stagehands or the police), as has already been demonstrated, which filter [21] the film spectator's perception of the theatrical plot. The police, and above all the Assistant Inspector, play a key role in that the play is seen for the most part from their standpoint offstage. Barsacq draws attention not to the filmmaking but to the theatrical process of the embedded piece. The sounds and lights of the inner performance are consistently derealized and reduced to mere stage effects as the camera shifts backstage. A typically French old man with a beret pounds three times on the floor with a heavy wooden staff to announce the beginning of the spectacle (time

[19] Cf. "*Macbeth* et Le *Rideau rouge* d'André Barsacq: des figures d'enchâssement à la mise en abyme." *Op. cit.*

[20] *Encyclopedia Britannica* online: http://global.britannica.com/art/alienation-effect. Accessed 15 January 2014.

[21] A filter is defined as a "*porous* material through which a liquid or gas is passed in order to separate the fluid from suspended particulate matter" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*) (my italics), which connects with the issue of porousness at stake.

code 32.36) (fig. 1). One stagehand immediately pulls on a rope to draw the stage curtain open (time code 32.48) (fig. 2). Upon hearing the wind howling fiercely across the Scottish moor and the thunder rumbling through the air, the Assistant Inspector turns round, his back to the stage, and sets out looking for the source of the sound. He soon discovers a technician turning the handle of a mechanical wind machine (time code 33.07) (fig. 3); a drumroll offstage heralds Macbeth's entrance (I.3) (time code 34.42) (fig. 4); thunder is no more than a large metal sheet [22] which vibrates as the same technician jerks the handle at the bottom (time code 35.43) (fig. 5); the clattering of horse hooves ushering Banquo and Fleance (III.3) just comes from the striking of two half coconut shells alternately on a hard surface (time code 1.01.53) (fig. 6); the alarm heralding Duncan and his followers is materialized by a horn and trumpet belonging to the offstage sequel (time code 40.23) (fig. 7); torches are brought and lit up behind the leg curtains [23] (time code 37.52) (fig. 8); special light effects are visualized in the offstage area as a technician flickers two pieces of gauzy fabric before a spotlight (III.4) (time code 1.05.02) (fig. 9). Lastly, while shooting the performance itself, the camera commonly frames in stagehands busy on the very brink of the stageboards (I.3) (fig. 10), (II.1) (fig. 11), (II.2) (fig. 12). As these derealizing effects keep breaching the theatrical illusion, the inner performance is made to drift off-centre, tugged wing-ward as it is.

Fig. 1. Stage hand pounding three times to announce the beginning of the spectacle

[22] A thunder sheet in the theatrical jargon.

[23] Leg curtains, also called wing curtains, are used to hide offstage wing space on either side of the proscenium from the audience's view.

Fig. 2. Stagehand pulling on the rope to draw the stage curtain open

Fig. 3. Technician turning the handle of a mechanical wind machine

Fig. 4. Drumroll offstage heralding Macbeth's entrance

Fig. 5. Technician jerking the handle of a large metal sheet

Fig. 6. Technician striking coconut shells to imitate the clattering of horse hooves

Fig. 7. Alarm heralding Duncan and his followers materialized by a horn and trumpet offstage

Fig. 8. Torches brought and lit up behind the leg curtains

Fig. 9. Technician flickering two pieces of gauzy fabric before a spotlight for special light effect

Fig. 10. Stagehands on the brink of the stageboards framed within the shot of the performance

Fig. 11. Stagehands on the brink of the stageboards framed within the shot of the performance

Fig. 12. Stagehands on the brink of the stageboards framed within the shot of the performance

14 **b) Narrativization**

Barsacq relies on yet another device to drag the performance offstage: the narrativization of the Shakespearean play by some characters belonging to the "outer" fiction. [24] Some stagehands, the stage manager of the playhouse and even a play-actor/*persona* waiting for his cue behind the leg curtain narrate scraps of the plot or provide explanations to poor Gobinet who has never set foot in a theatre nor has ever heard of Shakespeare before. The Assistant Inspector is baffled by the preparations of the witches who get settled for the initial scene before the stage curtains fly up. Gobinet: "They look great, don't they?" / Stagehand: "Well—" / Gobinet: "What's on tonight?" / Stagehand: "*Macbett*." / Gobinet: "Funny?" / Stagehand: "Hmm, so-so" (time code 32.15-32.19) [25] (fig. 13) (clip 2: 32.15-32.19). A few moments later, the Assistant Inspector asks: "What are the dolls telling him?" / Second stagehand: "They foretell him he will be Thane of Cawdor, and then king. First the poor fellow is mystified — but since he's won the battle, the king sends him an emissary to tell him he has been made Thane of Cawdor in the place of the traitor he has defeated. Got it? That's how he

[24] We won't come back to the fake or rather hybrid narrative (since diegesis turns into mimesis) that sets up the first layer of the film *millefeuille* as the Inspector relates the story to his new subaltern three years after the facts upon reading in the newpaper about Aurélia Nobli's death in prison.

[25] Assistant Inspector: "Elles sont chouettes, hein?" / First stagehand: "Hof…" / Gobinet: "Qu'est-ce qu'on joue ce soir?" / First stagehand: "*Macbett*." / Assistant Inspector: "C'est marrant?" / First stagehand: "Oh, comme ça."

understands that the old women's predictions will come true, and that all he has to do is bump the old man off to become king in his turn" (35.48-36.05) [26] (fig. 14) (clip 3: 35.48-36.05). The second stagehand explains to Gobinet who the *persona*/actress (Lady Macbeth/Aurélia) he sees in the wings is. Assistant Inspector: "Who is this doll? What a mug she has!" / Second stagehand: "She's Macbett's wife. She's the one who is going to drive him to do the deed." / Assistant Inspector: "I could have bet she would. In our job we have a sharp eye when it comes to this" (time code 37.52-38.01) [27] (clip 37.52-38.01). Again soon after, second stagehand: "In the play, both kick the bucket." / Assistant Inspector: "Serves them right!" (time code 39.00-39.04) [28] (clip 39.00-39.04). In III.1, the murderer complies with Macbeth: "We understand, my lord." / Assistant Inspector: "Well, *I* don't. Who is he going to get done in this time?" / Banquo offstage: "Me of course, you ass!" (time code 1.01.45-1.01.49) [29] (clip 1.01.45-1.01.49). A few seconds later, the indignant Assistant Inspector rails: "Oh, the bastard, back at it, is he?" / Second stagehand: "Of course, his chum knows too much. You see, he was with him when the witches foretold 'm he'd be king, so the devilish Macbett, now he's gotten rid of the ol' man, he feels his friend is getting suspicious of him. All of them will have it, I tell yo' — a downright slaughter" (time code 1.02.10-1.02.25) [30] (fig. 15) (clip 1.02.10-1.02.25). Summoned by the inspector, Gobinet asks the technician to tell him when he returns what he has missed of the performance. In his turn, the Assistant Inspector relates the plot the technician has unfolded to him to his superior with an effect of narrative concatenation or narrative of a narrative: "That bastard Macbett is trying to convince two bloody fools it's the bearded man who is to be blamed for the fix they're in, and that he too must be wiped out" (time code 1.02.32-1.02.39) [31] (clip 1.02.32-1.02.39). The Chief Inspector questions the stage manager: "What's going on now?" / Manager: "The banquet scene. Macbett sees the ghost of his victim coming and taking a seat amidst his lords, and almost becomes mad with terror" (time code 1.05.14-1.05.23) [32] (fig. 16) (clip

[26] Assistant Inspector: "Qu'est-ce qu'elles lui racontent les poupées, là?" / Second stagehand: "Elles lui prédisent qu'il sera Sir de Cawdor et puis roi après; d'abord, il y comprend rien, le frère, mais comme il a gagné la bataille, le roi lui envoie un messager pour le nommer Sir de Cawdor à la place du traître qu'il a vaincu. Tu suis? C'est là qu'il voit que les prédictions des vieilles se réaliseront et qu'il n'a plus qu'à refroidir le vieux pour devenir roi à son tour."

[27] Assistant Inspector: "Cette poupée-là, qui c'est? Elle en a une bille!" / Second stagehand: "C'est la femme de Macbett; c'est elle qui va le pousser à faire le coup." / Assistant Inspector: "Je m'en serais douté; dans notre métier, on a l'œil."

[28] Second stagehand: "Dans la pièce, ils crèvent tous les deux." / Assistant Inspector: "Bah, tant mieux!"

[29] Murderer: "Nous comprenons maintenant, Monseigneur." / Assistant Inspector: "Bah, moi j'comprends plus! Qui c'est qu'il va faire bousiller maintenant?" / Banquo offstage: "C'est moi, eh, tête de lard!"

[30] Assistant Inspector: "Y r'met ça ?!" / Second Stagehand: "Forcément, son copain en sait trop long, tu comprends, il était avec lui quand les sorcières y ont prédit qu'il serait roi, alors le Macbett, maintenant qu'il s'est débarrassé du vieux, il se doute que l'autre se doute; ils vont tous y passer que j'te dis ; c'est un massacre."

[31] "Ce salaud de Macbett est en train de persuader deux pauvres couillons que c'est l'autre barbu qui fait tout leur malheur dans la vie et qu'il faut le descendre lui aussi."

[32] Chief inspector: "Qu'est-ce qui se passe, maintenant?" / Stage manager: "La scène du banquet. Macbett voit le spectre de sa victime qui vient s'asseoir à la table au milieu des seigneurs et en devient presque fou de terreur."

1.05.14-1.05.23). Impatient to lay his hand on the culprit, the Chief Inspector tinges the narration with cynicism: "Has he finished yet?" / Stage manager: "Not quite. Macbett still has to be killed" (time code 1.16.20-1.16.24) [33] (fig. 17) (clip 1.16.20-1.16.24). In these moments, direct mimesis gives way to diegesis and is mediated by an extradiegetic narrative voice imposing its own viewpoint while filling in the gaps in the tattered inner fiction.

Fig. 13. Narrativization — Assistant Inspector: "What's on tonight?" / Stagehand: "Macbett." / Assistant Inspector: "Funny?" / Stagehand: "Hmm, so-so."

[33] Chief inspector: "Il a fini?" / Stage manager: "Pas encore; il reste à Macbett à mourir."

Fig. 14. Narrativization — Second stagehand: “They foretell him he will be Thane of Cawdor, and then king. First, the poor fellow is mystified…”

Fig. 15. Narrativization — Second stagehand: “You see, he was with him when the witchesforetold ’m he’d be king, so the devilish Macbett, now he’s gotten rid of the ol’ man…”

Fig. 16. Stage manager: “The banquet scene. Macbett sees the ghost of his victim coming and taking a seat amidst his lords, and almost becomes mad with terror”

Fig. 17. Insp.: “Has he finished yet?” / Stage manager: “Not quite. Macbett still has to be killed.”

15 **c) Acoustic porousness**

As detailed elsewhere, [34] the film director also strives to make the framed fiction stray backstage within the framing one through a broad range of acoustic devices. He contrives to make the voice of a Shakespearean *persona* audible for a split second before there is a cut to a shot of the play within the film (see above). The minute, infinitesimal dovetailing stemming from the discrepant sound and image editing modes makes the two fictions permeate each other. In other instances, the "outer" story unreels before the camera's eye with the sound of the Shakespearean plot wafting in through a variety of modulations through a loudspeaker allowing the actors and stagehands to follow the performance backstage. Perfectly audible, it subsides into a murmur before being altogether smothered, only to ooze up again through the crevices of the primary fabric in a sort of pointillistic aesthetics. Yet at other moments, the primary fiction is thoroughly hushed and invested by the monologic utterances of the play (see below). Another trick consists in alternating the words of the two fiction layers in some sort of stichomythia, making the two worlds artificially converse together. The camera sweeps down a wall to one side and catches backstage the Chief Inspector busy lighting a cigarette, long enough for the loudspeaker to keep on spewing out the voices from the ongoing performance off-screen: (Malcolm) *"Say to the King the knowledge of the broil / As thou didst leave it"* (I.2.6-7). [35] As the Inspector "sifts" Laurent about Sigurd (in Claudius' words), [36] in between two sentences by the police officer who keeps breaking off to puff on his cigarette, the Shakespearean text resurfaces, as if seeping up from the inner depths of the play-within (time code 0.34.12-0.35.15):

> *Duncan: … of the revolt / The newest state.*
> *Malcolm: Say to the King the knowledge of the broil / As thou didst leave it.*
> Inspector: Did you hear him talk about that Sigurd before?
> Laurent: Yes. This very night, the man threatened him.
> *Captain: Doubtful it stood...*
> Inspector: Could he have had the nerve to kill him?
> *Captain: As two spent swimmers...*
> Laurent: An irresolute chap...
> *Captain: … that do cling together / And choke their art...*
> Laurent: Driven by someone perhaps, but not by himself.
> *Captain: For brave Macbeth…*
>
> (I.2.2-3; 6-7; 8-9; 16) [37]

[34] See "*Macbeth* et *Le Rideau rouge* d'André Barsacq (1952): phénomènes de porosité sonore." *Op. cit.*, or "*Macbeth* in André Barsacq's *Le Rideau rouge* (1952): *Mise en Abyme* and Acoustic Porousness." *Op. cit.*

[35] The Shakespearean text is that of *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*. Ed. Gary Taylor, Stanley Wells, *et al*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005 (1986). Original French script: "Raconte au roi ce que tu sais de la bataille."

[36] "Well, we shall sift him" (*Hamlet*, II.2.58), which Harold Jenkins glosses as "subject him to searching inquiry" (*Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins. The Arden Shakespeare. London & New York: Methuen, 1982).

[37] *King: "... nous donner des nouvelles de la révolte. / Malcolm: "Raconte au roi ce que tu sais de la bataille."* / Inspector: "Vous lui aviez entendu parler de ce Sigurd?"/ Laurent: "Oui. Ce soir encore, cet homme l'avait menacé." / *Captain: "Elle était indécise…"* / Inspector: "C'était un homme capable de se venger?" / *Captain: "Comme deux nageurs épuisés..."* / Laurent: "Un velléitaire..." / *Captain: "Qui se*

16 The spectator is also challenged to a strange scene of polyphony as much as cacophony as the two soundtracks overlap unintelligibly as if they were forced together in some strange alchemy (time code 0.37.45-0.39.12). The Chief Inspector is holding a conversation with his superior on the phone in Bertal's dressing-room, with the corpse still on the floor. It chances he sits down on the edge of a table and unwittingly turns on a kind of loudspeaker allowing the members of the theatre company to keep track of the performance from afar. One hears Macbeth off-screen. As the officer endeavours to turn the machine off, he falls to swearing, thus garbling Macbeth's lines: *"My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical… so my single state of man…"* (I.3.138-39). [38] Perplexed as to how to silence the damned machine, he rattles it roughly while asking his superior to repeat what he has said since he cannot hear him clearly. Macbeth's lines first get chopped up before becoming wholly inaudible as the inspector's words become superimposed upon them. The episode displays a thorough acoustic and semantic hurly burly, where one can no longer make out what is being said and who speaks to whom. The two worlds tightly interlace one more time, and even weld together to an unprecedented extent. The inspector growling at the machine which gives off Macbeth's lines addresses him in a certain way when the superior believes he is being talked to. The Chief Inspector ends up banging on the machine to silence it. He tells his superior he need not worry and can go to the theatre without a care that night. But as the Chief Inspector hangs up, the loudspeaker unexpectedly goes off again: *"O worthiest cousin…"* (I.4.14). The inspector goes back to swearing and calls for the policeman posted outside the room to come in and "smash" "this contraption." [39] This is one more testimony of a play-within which cannot but overflow its own boundaries and pervade the "outer" world which must keep forcing it back. As the Inspector leaves the room, the voice goes on and on: *"Thou art so far before / That swiftest wing…"* (15-16). [40] The words are partly covered up by the policeman's hopeless efforts to tear off the machine's wires. It follows that the techniques used to make the inner signifier penetrate the embedding piece rely on the one hand on the editing mode and on the other on the loudspeaker, a key contrivance in the film. Let us focus on two more sequences which induce a dramatic reversal of the perspective as if the inner world of performance had been turned inside out and had thus toppled backstage into the "outer" space. It is first a stagehand who beckons a colleague to come and see something. They pull a door open a crack and silently stare down at four men carrying dead Bertal's body, costumed and made-up, away on a stretcher. Meanwhile Macbeth's words reach us all the way from the stage through the loudspeakers, and reverberate backstage*: "the innocent sleep, / Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care, / […] Still it cried 'Sleep no more!' to all the house: / 'Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more…'"* [41]

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cramponnent l'un à l'autre et se paralysent..." / Laurent: "Poussé par quelqu'un peut-être mais pas tout seul." / *Captain: "Mais le brave Macbett..."*

[38] *"... pensée où le meurtre n'est encore qu'un rêve... à quel point le royaume de mon âme..."*

[39] In French "bousiller […] ce truc-là."

[40] *"Oh, mon très digne cousin... tu vas si loin dans la victoire que l'aile la plus..."*

[41] *"L'innocent sommeil, le sommeil qui dévide l'écheveau embrouillé des soucis et la voix criait à toute la maison 'Ne dormez plus! Glamis a assassiné le sommeil! C'est pourquoi Cawdor ne dormira plus…'"*

A man draws a blanket over the corpse. *"'Macbeth shall sleep no more'"* (II.2.34-35 & 39-41) [42] (fig. 18-19) (clip 59.48-1.00.20). The fact that the corpse is dressed in its stage costume works to making the distinction between the two worlds dissolve while the door pulled ajar by the stagehand is like a stage curtain drawn open on a theatrical performance with the two stagehands as spectators. One is faced indeed with a reversal of the perspective, a turning inside out between the inside (the stageboards) and the outside (backstage), the embedded and the embedding scenarios. The second example is just as significant. Ludovic (Macbeth) all made up with costume and cosmetics tramps down the stairs from his dressing-room to the heroic narrative of the wounded captain offscreen who extols his derring-do on the battlefield under Laurent and the Chief Inspector's muted gaze: *"For brave Macbeth, doubly redoubling strokes, carved out his passage through the enemy. He faces that most disloyal traitor, the Thane of Cawdor, in single combat, and to conclude the victory fell on us"* (reshuffled lines from I.2.16ff.). [43] (fig. 20) (clip 0.34.24-0.34.40). The Shakespearean text and *persona* (Macbeth) thus move backstage in their turn, where they weld with the non-theatrical stratum.

Fig. 18-19. Stagehands opening a door to witness the carrying away of dead Bertal's costumed body

[42] *"'Macbeth ne dormira plus!'"*

[43] *"Mais le brave Macbett, frappant à coups redoublés, se taille un passage à travers l'ennemi. Il affronte le plus déloyal des traîtres, le Sir de Cawdor, en combat singulier, et pour finir la victoire nous échoit."*

Fig. 18. Stagehands pulling a door open as they would a curtain to catch the offstage spectacle of dead Bertal's costumed body being carried away

Fig. 19. Offstage, dead Bertal's costumed body taken away to the sound of the Shakespearean play: "[…] Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more…"

Fig. 20. Ludovic/Macbeth offstage getting ready for his entry to the extolling words of the wounded captain (I.2) onstage: "*For brave Macbeth, doubly redoubling strokes, carved out his passage through the enemy...*"

17 **d) Scene continued from the stage boards into the wings**

Another form of permeability arises from Act V, Scene 10, which shows Macduff and Macbeth fighting sword to sword with such extreme violence and veracity that one already wavers as to whether the action still pertains to stage business or "reality." In the Shakespearean source, Macbeth is slain offtstage. Macduff consistently pursues him into the wings (fig. 21). There, a reverse angle shot viewing the action from the opposite side, *i.e.* the wings, catches the two men continuing their "inner" fight with as much fierceness to the resounding of clapping hands (fig. 22) (clip 1.17.59-1.18.48). The inner fiction is thus driven offstage where it is Macbeth and Macduff who are crossing swords with their fake weapons as much as Ludovic Harn and the young Laurent, who suspects Ludovic of having had a hand in the murder of his benefactor (Bertal). The referential blurring is all the more pregnant as the characters pursue the dramatic action within the "outer" film with at first the same weapons and in the same costumes. The audience's thick clapping offscreen definitely contributes to pulling the signifier apart between theatrical illusion and film "reality" in that the spectators' applause corresponds and does not correspond all at once to the events. The two men finally tear off their helmets and discard their fake swords for hand-to-hand wrestling. The pasteboard scenery shakes under their assaults before they end up crashing through a wooden handrail separating the upper projection of the stage in the wings (characterised by its in-betweenness) from the lower floor of the backstage area. The inner fiction has now altogether toppled into the primary plot.


Fig. 21-22. Fight between Malcolm/Laurent & Macbeth/Ludovic exported offstage

Fig. 21. In their fight, Malcolm pursues Macbeth offstage (V.10)

Fig. 22. As they rush offstage, discarding their fake helmets and swords, while retaining the remainder of their stage costumes, to the clapping of the audience, the assailants become simultaneously Malcolm/Laurent and Macbeth/Ludovic

18 **e) Bertal's advice to the actors**

Bertal himself plainly prompts the inner events to slip back to the primary level by his advice to the actors. The film starts indeed with a rehearsal scene between two performances. [44] Ludovic as Macbeth and Aurélia as Lady Macbeth are rehearsing in their everyday clothes the scene in which Duncan is murdered (II.1) under Bertal's spiteful gaze and pungent criticism. He reproaches them with being too stagy and unconvincing, scathes them with his harsh remarks, and ends up insisting with unwholesome cynicism: "But it is not so difficult, my lambs, all you have to do is try and imagine that it is *me* you've just done in" (time code 06.21); then again: "Just think it is *me*, the spoilsport, you have just bumped off. You have done with the past, done with old Bertal; he is no longer in your way to hinder you from loving each other. You can have Aurélia all to yourself. It is easy to imagine, isn't it? It is *my* blood, poor Ludo, you have on your stained hands" (time code 07.18). [45] Bertal overlaps the two inner and "outer" fiction layers even more forcibly when he comments with sharper sarcasm yet: "This

[44] In the 1992 René Chateau VHS version.

[45] "C'est pourtant pas difficile, mes agneaux, vous n'avez qu'à vous figurer que c'est moi que vous venez de refroidir." "Figurez-vous que c'est moi que vous venez de zigouiller, l'empêcheur de danser en rond. Fini le passé, évanoui le père Bertal, il n'est plus là pour vous empêcher de vous aimer. Tu peux avoir Aurélia enfin à toi tout entière. C'est pourtant facile à imaginer. C'est mon sang, mon vieux Ludo, que tu as sur tes mains bien rouges."

comes from the fact that in real life, Aurélia, you are more willful than he is — *just as in the play*. Deep inside Macbett is a coward… and he knows it," he hammers in without taking his eyes off Ludovic. "And he knows that *I* know" (time code 08.00) (my italics). Ludovic calls him a damned bastard. Bertal retorts: "Yes indeed and alive! This gets you, doesn't it?" (time code 08.19). Unexpectedly, Aurélia butts in with grim overtones: "Don't you brag about that! One does not always stay alive" (time code 08.22). [46] Bertal just laughs it off disdainfully: "At our ages, it's too late to kill, ducky. We just turn a blind eye" (time code 08.48) [47] (clip 06.21-08.53). The inner murder of Duncan thus spreads out — at least verbally and within the protagonists and spectators' minds — to the primary layer. Once outside the playhouse just before the performance, Aurélia complains wearily: "These scenes will be the death of me" (time code 11.22). [48] The thought of getting rid of Bertal starts dawning upon the couple. Later that evening, as Sigurd bitterly walks into the pub and sits at Ludovic and Aurélia's table, his repeated pledge to avenge himself: "I'll make him kick the bucket!" prompts Ludovic's dispirited remark: "How come we didn't think of it earlier?" (time code 21.23-39; see also 14.11). [49] These lines make it quite plain that it is the inner *Macbeth* performance which seeps in and shapes the event sequence of the "outer" plot.

19 **f) Hybridization of the signifier**

The slipping of the inner fiction off the stage boards into the backstage space is also perceptible in those film shots or sequences in which the Shakespearean *dramatis personae* come into interaction with the characters of the embedding piece. For instance, the Assistant Inspector asking a stagehand: "Who is he going to get done in this time?" is answered by the costumed Banquo himself standing behind him in the wings: "*Me* of course, you ass!" (time code 1.01.45-1.01.49) [50] (fig. 23). The officer swivels round with a start to find himself so addressed by someone offstage speaking in the first person. Is the murder to affect someone "real" or a fictional play character since Léonard/Banquo is costumed? The fact that the man then swings round back facing the stage and round a second time points to his being pulled this way and that between the two worlds. It also testifies to his having a pivotal position and function (see below) besides showing the inner theatrical world unflaggingly inching its way off the boards within the framing plot (clip 1.01.26-1.01.52). It is also the Chief Inspector questioning the costumed thespian Laurent as Macduff (fig. 24). One last example, although there are many more, is the Chief Inspector who receives, in Bertal's dressing-room, both Ludovic/Macbeth and Aurélia/Lady Macbeth in their stage costumes. These different shots make up as many hybrid signifiers, some sorts of live oxymorons, in which are pulled together the two

[46] "Cela vient de ce que dans la vie, Aurélia, tu es plus décidée que lui… tout à fait comme dans la pièce. Au fond, tout au fond, Macbett est un lâche... et il le sait… et il sait que je le sais;" "Oui, et vivant! Ça t'embête?!"; "Ne t'en vante pas trop! On ne l'est pas toujours vivant."

[47] "Mais on n'tue plus, ma cocotte, à nos âges, on laisse faire."

[48] "Ces scènes me tuent."

[49] Sigurd: "Je l'crèverai." / Ludovic: "C'qui m'étonne, c'est qu'on n'y ait pas pensé plus tôt."

[50] Assistant Inspector: "Qui c'est qu'il va faire bousiller maintenant?" / Banquo: "C'est moi, eh, tête de lard!"

heterogeneous inner and "outer," primary and secondary worlds. They look entwined, twisting back upon themselves as the inspector is now framed with his back to the camera as if he were a spectator watching the inner play shifted backstage (fig. 25), now facing the camera, between the two play actors as if he belonged to the same mimetic fabric (fig. 26). Eventually the film shot seems to stage the *mise en abyme* enclosing the two actors between the Assistant Inspector full-face in the background and the Chief Inspector with his back to us in the foreground (fig. 27).

Fig. 23. Hybridization — Banquo addressing Assistant Inspector:
"Who is he going to get done in this time?" / "*Me* of course, you ass!"

Fig. 24. Hybridization — Inspector questioning Malcolm/Laurent

Fig. 25. Hybridization — Inspector facing and interrogating Macbeth/Ludovic & L.M./Aurélia

Fig. 26. Hybridization — Inspector interrogating from behind Macbeth/Ludovic & Lady Macbeth/Aurélia

Fig. 27. Staging of the mise en abyme as Macbeth/Ludovic & Lady Macbeth/Aurélia are bracketed between the Inspector & the Assistant Inspector

20 ## III. FROM BACKSTAGE TO THE STAGE

We have surveyed how shifting the inner stage world is and how it consistently contrives to seep up into the embedding space which it eventually overflows or, to use another image more appropriate to some of the devices used, how the play-within never ends striving to cross over the borderline between stage and backstage and how it keeps foraying into the enclosing fiction's area. Conversely, the film events keep transgressing the wings' threshold and sallying out onto the stage boards so that the kinetics of the work looks like a constant to-ing and fro-ing from this part and that of the expectedly tight dividing line of the embedding device.

21 ### a) Rehearsal in everyday-life clothes

After a long zooming in on the playhouse, the film starts *in medias res* with a rehearsal scene in everyday-life clothing prior to the evening performance (time code 04.00-09.09) [51] (fig. 28). The rehearsed sequence five days after the dress rehearsal is that of the murder scene (II.1). The stage director, Bertal, is unsatisfied with Ludovic and Aurélia's performance as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, which he finds underplayed and unconvincing. He is asking for more realism. But as the rehearsal keeps being infringed upon by Bertal's disparaging comments, a dialogue engages between stage and offstage. Seated in the auditorium, Bertal is no longer a would-be spectator but is flinging his words over the footlights onto the stage and having a hand in the development of the characters' performance. What with Bertal who keeps battering at the Shakespearean *personae*, the actors' performance in their everyday clothes and the stage being strewn with odd bits and pieces, ladders, ropes and all the theatrical paraphernalia in the background not masked by any backdrop, one cannot but wonder if the scene is a rehearsal of Duncan's murder at Macbeth's hands in the Shakespearean fable which will be enacted later that evening or of Ludovic's killing of Bertal offstage that same evening in the framing storyline… Or both since the spectator is once more confronted with a visual oxymoron: uncostumed characters in a space meant to be dedicated to theatrical illusion, and yet jolted out of it by the scattered bits and pieces that expose the technology of the theater.

[51] At least in the René Chateau 1992 version.

Fig. 28. Aurélia and Ludovic rehearsing *Macbeth*'s murder scene (II.1) in everyday-life clothes

22 **b) Ebbing of the Shakespearean text from the wings**

Another compelling circumstance is that having to replay the fictitious murder of Duncan (which Bertal, let us not forget, urged Ludovic to imagine was his) and to face Bertal's understudy (Léonard) and double (played by the same Michel Simon) in the role of Banquo (II.1) less than an hour after the "real" murder of the stage director is a particularly nerve-racking experience for Ludovic. He insists he will not have the guts to play "in front of such a face" (time code 53.30). [52] Aurélia tries to hearten him and pushes him onstage. Aghast in front of his victim's ghost-like double, Ludovic's mind goes blank and he stands speechless for several ticking seconds. The sequence then falls into a rapid succession of very short close-ups provided by a tight editing mode. The shots focus in turn on Macbeth's face in full frame with beads of sweat showing on his forehead (fig. 29), the stage manager side by side with Aurélia on the very brink of the stage, Macbeth and a tense and uneasy soldier accompanying him, the audience hanging upon Macbeth's halting words, Banquo and Fleance, their eyes darting this way and that, Aurélia with the stage manager who has grabbed the prompt-book and fretfully flicks through the pages to find out Macbeth's cue in the Shakespearean text, and finally a shot with extended depth of field framing Banquo with his back to the camera in the foreground, the soldier and Macbeth facing the film viewers in mid-ground, and Aurélia with the stage manager in the background. The editing technique has a destructuring quality which picks up on the wave of panic that sweeps the whole playhouse. The

[52] "J'pourrai pas jouer en face de cette gueule-là."

staccato succession of shots is also a visual rendition of Ludovic/Macbeth's pounding heart. But the interpretation can be carried out further. The tight editing with its succession of cuts conveys a sense of kaleidoscopic hurly-burly bringing together all the protagonists of the film in their respective areas, the stage with the Shakespearean *personae*, backstage with an actress and the stage manager and the auditorium with the inner spectators. The film technique throws pell-mell together all the protagonists and the different locales confusing inner fiction and "outer" fiction, just as Ludovic/Macbeth has, and is jumbling anew his role as "inner" murderer in the play and that of "outer" murderer in the primary story. Aurélia prompts Ludovic/Macbeth with his missing cue (fig. 30). Still unhinged, Macbeth falters through his line before regaining his fluency (fig. 31) (clip 53.23-54.56). The scene verges on the breaching of the theatrical illusion. The words of the Shakespearean text flow back from the offstage area and are reappropriated by the stage through Macbeth, reduced in the very first moments to a mere mouthpiece or bullhorn amplifying the offstage whispers. The device dramatizes once more the permeability of the intra-/extrafictional threshold.

Fig. 29. Ludovic/Macbeth's mind goes blank on facing his victim's ghost-like double

Fig. 30. The Shakespearean text ebbs from the wings
as Aurélia/Lady Macbeth prompts Ludovic/Macbeth with his missing cue

Fig. 31. Macbeth reduced to a mere mouthpiece amplifying the offstage whispers

23 **c) Visual resurgence of Bertal**

Although primarily pertaining to the film's phenomena of specularity, [53] that Léonard, Bertal's understudy as Banquo, should look like his double, played by the very same Michel Simon, is a remarkably bright idea. Since Bertal was shot while in costume and make-up, the mirror effect between the two men is all the more stunning, and all the characters (actors as much as police officers) are struck by the resemblance. Thus whenever Macbeth faces Banquo in the play, Ludovic finds himself gazing upon what looks to him like his own victim's phantom (Bertal) in the person of his double (Léonard). To cap it all off, in the banquet scene (III.4), Ludovic sets his eyes on Banquo's ghost, himself Bertal's specter, so that, staring at the ghost of a ghost, Ludovic eventually falls apart. This trick enhances a visual resurgence from the backstage area (Bertal) over to the stage boards (Léonard/Banquo).

24 **d) Acoustic resurgence of Bertal**

Likewise, dead Bertal's voice rises back while Ludovic/Macbeth is playing the murder scene (II.2). Macbeth is seen pounding down the stairs, holding the daggers in his bloodstained hands. Lady Macbeth hastens towards him and embraces him: "My husband!" (II.2.13). Just then, dead Bertal's scathing words, which he had hammered in during the rehearsal episode at the beginning of the film, spurt up lugubriously as if from beyond the grave: "*Listen, you love your Macbett. 'My husband' must come out from deep within your guts.*" (time code 58.29). [54] Lady Macbeth peers into Macbeth's face as he stands dumbstruck. She presses her head on his shoulder and goes over her cue again to prompt him: "My husband!" Bertal's voice responds bluntly: *"That's better."* [55] The camera shifts to the stage manager, Laurent and the Assistant Inspector behind the leg curtains. They inquiringly stare at each another, thinking Macbeth's mind has gone blank as in the episode described above. After a few ticking moments, Macbeth starts back to life, pulling himself together: "Who lies i'th' second chamber?" / Lady Macbeth: "Donalbain." Macbeth holds out his gory hands: "This is a sorry sight" (II.2.17-18). The dead voice resounds again, cutting in sharply: "*No, no, it's not shit you've got on your hands, it's…*" (time code 58.50). [56] Thus does Bertal's posthumous voice issue forth from the embedding sphere to dialogue onstage with the inner play protagonist (clip 58.22-58.57).

25 **e) Breaching of the "outer" fiction into the stage performance**

The last, climactic element which points to the extra-dramatic world taking hold of the inner fiction is the banquet scene (III.4). Banquo's ghost walks eerily in and takes a seat at the table among Macbeth's guests. The scene conveys gripping intensity so much so that the actors playing the parts of the noblemen may very well be staggered with real

[53] Cf. "*Macbeth* in André Barsacq's 1952 *Crimson Curtain*: *Mise en Abyme* and Specularity." *Op. cit.*

[54] Lady Macbeth: "Mon homme!" / Bertal: "*Tu l'aimes ton Macbett, tu entends. Ça doit te sortir du ventre 'Mon homme'. C'est ton mâle et tu l'as envoyé tuer. Seulement c'est ton p'tit aussi."*

[55] Lady Macbeth: "Mon homme!" / Bertal: "*C'est mieux*."

[56] Macbeth: "Qui couche dans la seconde chambre?" / Lady Macbeth: "Donalbain." / Macbeth: "Voilà un triste spectacle." Bertal: "*Non, c'est pas de la merde que tu as sur les mains, c'est...*" / Lady Macbeth: "Sotte pensée que de dire que c'est un triste spectacle."

dread before Ludovic/Macbeth. Banquo/Bertal's ghost himself is taken aback and steps back under Ludovic/Macbeth's verbal onslaught and bodily threat. A close-up catches a nervous twitch on his face. I shall zoom in on the end of Macbeth's lines to Banquo, whom he bids to vanish out of sight: "What man dare, I dare. / Approach thou like the ruggèd Russian bear, / The armed rhinoceros, or th'Hyrcan tiger […] and my firm nerves / Shall never tremble. Or be alive again, / And dare me to the desert with thy sword. / If trembling I inhabit then, protest me / The baby of a girl. Hence, horrible shadow!" (III.4.98-105) (time code 1.07.35). [57] He grabs Bertal's double (Léonard) (fig. 32) and goes on: "You, bastard! Bastard! *You* took Aurélia from me! *You* got me into drugs and turned me into a wreck so I'd lose Aurélia. You, bastard, you!" (time code 1.08.03). [58] Ludovic passes out and collapses at Léonard's feet. The referential shift, or rather break, is stunning. Macbeth definitely reverts to Ludovic as he steps out of character, dragging the extra-dramatic "reality" after him onto the stage boards. As to Léonard, he is no longer Banquo (or Banquo's ghost), [59] neither is he allowed to become his own self again. To Ludovic, he is a downright reincarnation of Bertal. A series of countershots catching the reactions of the police officers and Laurent standing in the wings just behind the leg curtains, as well as those of the spectators who jump to their feet, brings to the fore the paroxysmal breach of the theatrical illusion (clip 1.07.35-1.08.19).

[57] "Ce qu'ose l'homme, je l'ose. Approche, pareil à l'ours hérissé de Russie, au rhinocéros cuirassé, au tigre attiré de sang, mes nerfs ne trembleront pas. Ou reviens à la vie et défie-moi dans le désert, l'épée au poing. Si je tremble, alors proclame-moi la poupée d'un enfant. Hors d'ici, ombre horrible!"

[58] "Salaud! Salaud! Aurélia, c'est toi qui me l'as prise; c'est toi qui m'as drogué pour que j'devienne une loque et que j'la perde, hein, salaud, va!"

[59] The downcrested understudy, Léonard, complains that he had to wait for ages for an opportunity to play and that now Ludovic has just spoilt his part.

Fig. 32. Ludovic/Macbeth stepping out of character and taking it out on Banquo's ghost *cum* Bertal's understudy and double played by the same Michel Simon

26 ## IV. DRAMATIZATION OF THE THRESHOLD

After the survey (whether at the extrafictional or intrafictional levels) [60] of the ceaseless movements to and fro between stage and backstage, the embedded and embedding fiction layers, which keep trespassing, infringing [61] time and again upon the threshold between the two worlds, what remains for exploration is this thin and flimsy, almost indefinable and ungraspable *locus* and the way Barsacq handles it.

27 ### a) Assistant Inspector's interferences with the inner fiction

A key character in the film, the Assistant Inspector, Gobinet, acts as a fulcrum or hinge between the two (embedding and embedded) fictions. He keeps standing on that infinitesimal line which both draws apart and brings together the intra-dramatic fiction and the backstage area. He looks as if he were wavering between the two worlds he is very nearly part of, as demonstrated by those many framing devices already evoked (see I. Embedding Devices and *Mise en Abyme*) (fig. 33). More salient still is the fact that Gobinet, who has never set foot in a theatre, as he moves about, starts and abruptly turns on his heels, makes the link between the howling of the wind or the rumbling of the

[60] The study of the trans-semiotization between film and theatre and of the crosscutting technique belongs to the extra-fictional level.

[61] The verb "to infringe" is interesting since although its etymology comes from the Latin *infringĕre*, meaning to break, injure, damage, it is reminiscent of the word "fringe," akin to the concept of border, threshold or margin.

thunder and the offstage sound effects, contributing to the derealization of the theatrical fiction, as has been demonstrated (see II. From Stage to Backstage, b) Distancing Effects), but also testifying to his bestriding both fictions (time codes 34.43 ; 35.44 ; 40.21). Let us recall briefly these examples to substantiate this part of the issue and grant it the full importance it deserves. Upon hearing the mournful wailing of the wind across the Scottish moor, he undertakes to look backstage for the source of the sound and discovers a technician wielding a wind machine (time code 32.53-33.12). After the first witch scene, Gobinet directs his steps back to the stage brink behind the curtain to watch the following scene and swivels round as he hears a flourish of musical instruments heralding the king and his train (time code 33.47-33.54). The same Assistant Inspector leaning against a post and facing stageward suddenly spins round as he is startled by a lusty drumroll prompting Macbeth's entrance in I.3 (time code 34.42-34.44). As the three witches predict Macbeth's destiny to the clapping of thunder, Gobinet looks back to the stagehand jerking the thunder sheet before shifting his gaze to the stage again (time code 35.26-35.45). At the opening of I.6, Gobinet jerks his head back for one last glimpse of the stage as he is driven away by his superior and then reels round again at the shrill sound of trumpet and horn that call for Duncan's entrance at Macbeth's castle (time code 40.16-40.23). If these scenes most convincingly dramatize the Assistant Inspector's pivotal stance on the threshold between stage and backstage, even more original and far-reaching are his countless interferences with the theatrical world, which he keeps infringing on, not knowing where his place should be. He starts with inadvertently grabbing and leaning onto the rope that works the stage curtain, which sparks the stagehand's hasty reaction as he takes hold of the rope: "Hey, be careful! This is the curtain!" (time code 31.45-31.56) [62] (clip 31.45-31.56). Driven by his curiosity, he draws close to the witches onstage awaiting the opening scene. After his three measured clops on the floor, the stagehand catches sight of Gobinet standing idly by the witches. He calls to him to dash off the stage to avoid being seen by the audience as the curtain is about to go up (time code 32.17-32.45) (clip 32.17-32.45). Soon after, Gobinet questions the stagehand to know what kind of a machine he is busy with, but the latter quickly hushes him for fear he might be heard from the auditorium (time code 32.54-33.12) (clip 32.54-33.12). Backstage, the police officer is jostled to one side as he stands in some stagehand's way (time code 33.34-33.38) (clip 33.34-33.38). Duncan and his followers stalk up from the back of the wings and the dignified king with a firm grip whisks the inspector off on his way to the stage (time code 33.51-33.56) (clip 33.51-33.56). Likewise, a soldier pushes him out of his way to get through to the boards and at the very same time a stagehand shoves him back to prevent him from jamming the wind machine (time code 36.05-36.10) (fig. 34) (clip 36.05-36.10); he is thus symbolically stuck on the very borderline between the actor of the inner fiction and the stagehand of the "outer" one, belonging to neither and yet reaching out into both. As he leaves the wings, being summoned by his superior, Gobinet calls out to Duncan, who is about to walk on stage, to pay attention so as not to get hurt when he falls under Macbeth's stabs later, which the king receives with a gruff shrug (time code 40.12-40.20) (clip 40.12-40.20). After Sigurd

[62] Stagehand : "Eh, attention, c'est l'rideau!" / Associate Inspector : "Oh, pardon!"

has confessed to having murdered Bertal and signed his deposition, the Chief Inspector allows Gobinet to attend the remainder of the stage performance. The overexcited officer audibly bursts into the wings and then stumbles noisily; a stagehand testily gestures him to be quiet. Meanwhile Macbeth, awaiting his cue on some stairs onstage (unseen from the audience), starts as the noise reaches out to him (time code 57.15-57.28) (clip 57.15-57.28). On inquiring from a stagehand whom Macbeth is about to "do in" this time, it is Banquo who replies from the rear part of the wings ("Me of course, you ass!"). Gobinet flips around: "Oh, I beg your pardon," turns back to the stage, and spins round again in surprise (time code 01.01.46-01.01.54) [63] (clip 57.15-57.28). *The Crimson Curtain* plays on a dramatization of the threshold *locus* embodied by the Assistant Inspector. Gobinet keeps occupying the borderline between stage and backstage, enclosing film fiction and play-within, and holding a pivotal position, revolving again and again, hinge-like, this way and that while actually interfering with the two worlds. Thus he dramatizes the threshold *locus* and the concept of liminality, and he too ends up making the borderline between the two permeable through his alienating about-turns and countless encroachments. He is another Janus figure, but the doors and gates which the double-faced god impersonates, looking in and out, are here a (crimsoned) theatre curtain.

Fig. 33. Assistant Inspector hovering on the threshold between stage and offstage

[63] Banquo offstage: "C'est moi, eh, tête de lard!" / Assistant Inspector: "Oh, pardon."

Fig. 34. Assistant Inspector pushed back on the thin borderline between the actor of the inner fiction and the stagehand of the "outer" one

28 If *Hamlet* has become the exemplum of show-within and metadrama, involuting, coiling the gaze back upon itself as in these famous fifteenth- and sixteenth-century paintings by Memling, Van Eyck, Metzys and Velasquez, [64] in reproducing within itself the main element in miniature, its structural analogy with Barsacq's film reaches even further. The Prince of Denmark sets up his mind to hold a mirror up to both his uncle and his mother, sending back to them the respective image of their murder and unfaithfulness by putting up a play-within known as *The Murder of Gonzago* (III.2.129-258). But the inner-performance does not unfold unbreached or sealed off. Not only does Hamlet step into the shoes of a playwright, composing and splicing into the original play text of the *Murder of Gonzago* "some dozen or sixteen lines" (II.2.542-44), [65] but he acts as stage director in the so-to-speak rehearsal scene (III.2.1-45), presumptuously counselling the professional actors as to the most appropriate way to enact the play prior to the court performance. More astonishing is the fact that the Prince keeps interfering with the play-within, filling the gaps between the dumbshow and the prologue (III.2.130-41), between the prologue and the beginning of the performance proper (145-47) and then again more unexpectedly while the Player King drifts off into sleep without the stage being cleared, between the Player Queen's exit and Player Lucianus' entry (218-231). At some points

[64] Jan Van Eyck, *Arnolfini Marriage* (1434); Hans Memling, *Martin Van Newenhoven Diptych* (1487); Quentin Metsys, *The Banker and his Wife* (1514) on display at the Louvre museum; Diego Velasquez, *Las Meniñas* (1656).

[65] "You could for a need study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines which I would set down and insert in't, could ye not?" (II.2.542-44).

as the players are actually in the midst of their acting, he drops sour interjections like "Wormwood, wormwood" (172) or "If she should break it now!" (213). In all these he taunts Ophelia with embittered remarks and sexual puns and likewise ironizes at his mother and uncle. The bursts can either be delivered as asides or as loud speeches interweaving with the lines of the secondary play. However, Hamlet's increasing state of excitement emboldens him to step over the dividing line between play and play-within as he takes on the role of Chorus, in Ophelia's words (233), introducing the argument of the show and the characters. In so-doing he becomes part of the inserted drama. It would be more accurate to claim that the status of the classical chorus is that of a go-between bestriding the world of the play, play-within, or show-within and the outer sphere of reality or main play, gazing at and throwing his lines over to the audience (or inner audience) [66] while donning the artefacts of drama, poised most likely on the verge of the (inner) stage-boards. Hamlet further trespasses the borderline between play and play-within, putting on anew during the public performance this time the role of stage director as he orders Lucianus to begin and meddles with his way of acting, requiring him to leave his "damnable faces" (240). Finally he gives him his cue, possibly speaking the player-within's first line — "the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge" — and getting him started. [67] In playing the chorus, giving Lucianus his cue and making the actor's

[66] At some points in his historical overview, French theatre specialist Patrice Pavis argues that the chorus comments on the action *to which he is variously integrated*. Its interventions are reduced to *marginal* comments (warnings, advice, entreaty). As an artificial element *outside* the 'dramatic debate,' *i.e.* the dialogues between the characters, he *stands before the spectators as another spectator/judge of the ongoing action* which he is entitled to discuss. He *embodies onstage the audience and its gaze*. The critic insists on the fundamentally *ambiguous* status of the chorus (my italics) (Pavis, Patrice. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. Trans. Christine Shantz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1999).

The notion of *para*basis is quite thought-provoking. Parabasis is the part of ancient Greek comedy where the chorus steps forward and addresses the audience to expose through the corypheus the author's views. The prefix 'para' conveys the notion of "at or to one side of, beside, side by side" or "beyond, past, by." I shall recall this favourite quotation of mine by J. Hillis Miller who argues that "'Para' is an 'uncanny' double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something at once inside a domestic economy and outside it, something simultaneously this side of the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it, equivalent in status and at the same time secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in 'para' is, moreover, not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and outside. *It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside, confusing them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out*, dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other. Though any given word in 'para' may seem to choose unequivocally or univocally one of these possibilities, the other meanings are always there as a shimmering or wavering in the word which makes it refuse to stay still in a sentence, like a slightly alien guest within the syntactical closure where all the words are family friends together" (emphasis mine) (Miller, J. Hillis. "The Critic as Host." *Theory Now and Then*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. 144-45). See also Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (Literature, Culture, theory)*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge University Press, 1997. The chorus, and Hamlet more specifically, is a double-faced Janus-like figure poised in a fragile equilibrium astride the threshold between the play-within and the play itself, looking this way and that, and time and again straightforwardly trespassing the boundary line, bringing both dramatic and metadramatic elements together.

[67] "(*To Lucianus*) Begin, murderer. Pox, leave thy damnable faces and begin. Come: 'the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge'" (III.2.240-42), discarding prose to fit into the play-within's pentameters although the line is slightly irregular.

opening line his, Hamlet unmistakenly steps over to the inner element, whether he actually moves to the stage-within or not. None of the classical film adaptations of the Shakespearean tragedy dramatizes these trespassings, whether Sir Laurence Olivier's (1948), Sir John Gielgud's starring Richard Burton (1964) or Franco Zeffirelli's with Mel Gibson (1990). In Sir Laurence Olivier's film, after the troupe's arrival, Hamlet jumps onto the platform designed for the evening performance, crying out "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (II.2.606-607); in the rehearsal scene he likewise climbs onto the boards to play his part as stage director. Another more striking feature is that during the performance of the dumbshow Claudius displays such signs of uncontrolled emotion that all the spectators of the show-within turn their gazes back onto him so that the king becomes the focus of the spectacle. The nested story then creeps outside its limits to invade the "play-without," testifying to the permeability of the borderline between inside and outside. Furthermore, as Claudius upstages the professional actors, these are left gaping and are changed into spectators. Dramatic and metadramatic elements are flipped inside out. Sir John Gielgud's screen adaptation offers no relevant element to the currently developed issue. In Zeffirelli's work, Hamlet is seen moving his lips as he murmurs the lines, which makes the inset play's verse his, which it is since he has had some of his own lines inserted in the original text. But the trick also works at dragging the inner-spectacle in the subdued way of the character's half-audible utterances over to the main play. Although none of these examples do so, Hamlet might very well during the dumbshow or the actual play-within step onto the stage and shadow the play actors as he speaks out his remarks or comments on the spectacle. All these assessments show how porous the borderline between play and play-within is, letting the inside out and the outside in.

29 *Hamlet* and *The Crimson Curtain* in its wake both combine the metradramatic insertion whose function is to set up a mirror between the two fictions, that is a *mise en abyme*, with a most compelling infringement of the would-be hermetic borderline between enclosing and enclosed elements.

30 **b) The stage as a place of investigation**

To revert to Barsacq' film, if the Chief Inspector devotes all his energies to the "outer" investigation of Bertal's murder, Gobinet shifts his inquiries over to the inner world. A layman in the dramatic arts, he regards the stage as another place for investigation. He is quite unable to distinguish between "reality" and drama, which he confuses, interfering time and again, as has been demonstrated, with the staging of the Shakespearean play. When he asks whether the play is fun and the stagehand answers that it is the story of a murder, Gobinet rejoins: "Well then I know how to handle these things. I'm curious to see how you guys go about it on the stage, not being in the trade" (time code 33.45). [68] Gobinet sets himself up as the most skilled to see a crime investigation through as if he wished to step into the shoes of the theatre people who do not know the ropes. All they need is not so much actors as a shrewd police officer. A few minutes later, Gobinet responds to the stagehand's expanations: "Don't waste your breath, I've got it. Just

[68] "Ben alors, ça me connaît; j'serai curieux de voir comment vous goupillez ça, vous, au théâtre, qui êtes pas du métier."

looking at his face, I knew he [Macbeth] was the one who was to do the job" (time code 36.08). [69] Then, "Who is this doll? What a mug she has!" / Second stagehand: "She's Macbett's wife. She's the one who is going to drive him to do the deed." / "I could have bet she would. In our job we have a sharp eye when it comes to this" (time code 37.52). [70] A few minutes later Gobinet adds: "I told you, I've seen thousands of dolls like her; all the same." [71] The Chief Inspector comes back to fetch his assistant. He grumbles: "You confounded rascal! Is this how you go about your job?" / Assistant Inspector: "'Beg your pardon, boss, *I'm on a new case*. This doll there is to drive her man to do in the old fellow on a week-end in their lovely little bungalow of the time" (my italics) (time code 38.52-39.12). [72] When Macbeth and Lady Macbeth get back to the wings after they have made up their minds to murder Duncan (I.7), Gobinet meets them with bitter reproaches: "You're a right pair of bastards, you too!" (time code 44.12). [73] The two actors are on tenterhooks, faltering as to whether Gobinet has his mind set on the inner crime or the "outer" one, which would take them straight to jail. He carries on: "So then you are set on wiping the old bearded fellow out! Come, the boss wants to interrogate you during the interval" (time code 44.33). [74] Although at this point, the police are unsuspicious of the couple as yet, Gobinet's wording is twofold, with as it were one foot in the inner fiction and the other in the "outer" one. Some time later, after the snap apprehension of Sigurd in the nearby pub who readily owns up to Bertal's murder, it is for the Chief Inspector to turn his inquisitiveness to the play that is being performed: "Mind you, Gobinet, *I don't know if it's theatre that's getting into me*, but I feel that life solutions are rather too simple. With a touch of imagination, it could have been far more interesting." […] / Assistant Inspector: "Well, *my concerns are with the play*. I do wonder how these two bastards will get nabbed" (time code 51.24-51.50) (my italics). [75] Soon after, Gobinet meets his superior as he leaves the pub: "That bastard Macbett is trying to convince two assholes that it's the old bearded fellow who is accountable for their misfortunes, and that he too must be bumped off." / Chief inspector: "How curious! Such thoughts came to my mind while I was gobbling up my omelette. Maybe *life* is *as subtle as theatre*, after

[69] "Te fatigue pas, j'ai compris; d'ailleurs rien qu'à voir sa tête, j'ai vu tout de suite que c'était lui [Macbeth] qui allait faire le coup."

[70] Assistant Inspector: "Cette poupée-là, c'est qui? Elle en a une bille!" / Stagehand: "C'est la femme de Macbett. C'est elle qui va le pousser à faire le coup." / Assistant Inspector: "Je m'en serais douté. Dans notre métier, on a l'œil!"

[71] "Des poupées comme cela, j'en ai vu mille dans mon métier, toutes les mêmes."

[72] Chief inspector: "Dis donc bougre de cochon, c'est comme ça que tu fais ton boulot?" / Assistant Inspector: "Faites excuse, patron, je suis sur une autre affaire; c'est cette poupée-là qui va pousser son homme à refroidir le vieux au cours d'un week-end dans leur gentil petit bungalow de l'époque."

[73] "Vous êtes de beaux salauds tous les deux!"

[74] "Alors c'est comme ça qu'on a décidé de faire couic au vilain barbu! Venez, y a l'patron qui voudrait vous interroger pendant l'entracte."

[75] "Mais, tu vois Gobinet, je ne sais pas si c'est la contagion du théâtre qui me gagne, je trouve que c'est un peu sommaire les solutions de la vie. Avec un brin d'imagination, ç'aurait pu être mille fois plus intéressant." [...] / Assistant Inspector: "Moi, ce qui m'inquiète, chef, c'est dans la pièce, j'me demande bien comment ils vont se faire coincer, ces deux salauds-là."

all" (time code 1.02.32) (my emphasis). [76] Now that he has deviously "sifted" the pub owner, the Chief Inspector has an inkling that Ludovic and Aurélia might have had a hand in the affair. He spurs his subordinate back to the playhouse: "Let's go and see the play together. *I'm myself getting quite interested in drama*" (time code 1.03.54) (italics mine). [77]

31 **c) Resorption of the "outer" world**

All these examples convey an involution of the police gaze from backstage to the stage, in other words a flipping "outside in" of the embedding fiction and the embedded one. From centrifugal, the police moves become centripetal. Their steps had first taken them to the parts of the playhouse furthest from the stage, like the dressing-rooms and other parts such an intricate edifice is made up of. They had even forayed briefly outside the building into the nearby pub where old Sigurd had got arrested and where the Chief Inspector had taken his supper, "grilling" the owner without his knowing. Besides the latter had not shown the least interest in the performance or the theatrical world, grumbling to the stage manager that he had no clue what *côté cour* (stage left) and *côté jardin* (stage right) might mean (the two collocations being more abstruse in French than in English), showing a half-hearted surprise when his superior had told him on the phone that *Macbeth* is a good play, and casually suggesting he did not care a whit for theatre: "Oh? *Macbett* is a good play, is it? I had never heard of it. You know, boss, the theatre is not quite my cup of tea…" (time code 37.13-37.20). [78] But from then on, the Chief Inspector, his adjunct hot on his heels, draws closer to the stage and will no longer walk away from the threshold (cf. fig. 16 & 24). Like the public facing the stage from the tiers, all the characters standing either at the back or on the sides of the stage — actors, stage manager, stagehands and the inspectors in charge of the investigation — become in their turn spectators of the Shakespearean play, closing in around the inset performance. It follows that the "outer" fiction becomes thoroughly absorbed, sucked in by the inner element so as to become no more than a paper-thin frame around the play-within. And as the "outer" fiction shrinks around the inner one, becoming no more than a porous membrane, the embedded theatrical element starts fleshing out and expanding. Presently Ludovic, the murderer, thins out into the *dramatis persona*, Macbeth; Aurélia, who urged her husband to take the fatal step, becomes one with Lady Macbeth (in the more extensive Gaumont version, the inspector explains to his colleague that Aurélia's sentence was particularly harsh because of her role as Lady Macbeth), [79] the assassinated Bertal with Banquo, and Léonard, Bertal's understudy and spitting image, is now no other than Banquo's ghost back from the dead to haunt his murderer. Without ever

[76] "Ce salaud de Macbett est en train de persuader deux pauvres couillons que c'est l'autre barbu qui fait tout leur malheur dans leur vie et qu'il faut le descendre lui aussi." / Chief inspector: "Comme c'est curieux, il m'est venu des idées dans ce genre-là en bouffant mon omelette. Peut-être que la vie est aussi subtile que le théâtre, après tout."

[77] "Allons voir la pièce tous les deux; je commence à m'intéresser sérieusement au théâtre, moi aussi."

[78] "Ah? *Macbett*, c'est une belle pièce? Je n'connaissais pas. Vous savez, moi, patron, le théâtre…"

[79] "Everybody brought all possible evidence against her at the trial because of her part as Lady Macbeth in the play which was dislikeable" (time code 21.52). Original French script: "Tout le monde l'a chargée au procès à cause du rôle de Lady Macbeth qu'elle jouait dans la pièce et qui était antipathique."

encroaching on the taboo stage threshold, the police edge in, as we have seen, to the point of adhering to the dramatic fabric of the play-within. Not only do the officers become spectators, as already mentioned, but their men eventually take part in the action and merge with the *dramatis personae*, backing up Malcolm and Macduff's troops camouflaged behind lopped-off boughs (V.6) with extra forces as they fan out at the back edge of the platform while keeping back a step from the inner theatrical space. They are actually doubling up Macbeth's enemy forces and hemming in the theatrical fiction. To cap it all off, the cordon of policemen standing on the brink of the stageboards, *not* Malcolm/Macduff's army, becomes the receptacle of Macbeth's words which he actually very clearly flings at them over the staging area as if still attempting to reach outside the play: "They have tied me to a stake. I cannot fly, / But bear-like I must fight the course" (V.7.1-2) [80] (fig. 35) (clip 1.17.34-1.17.52).

Fig. 35. Macbeth throwing his "They have tied me to a stake. I cannot fly" speech over and off the stage to the police

32 Conclusion

It would be reductive to consider that the play-within exports itself backstage and ends up modeling the "outer" plot, Ludovic's murder of Bertal being triggered by Macbeth's, just as the ghost of Macbeth's victim coming to torment his assassin sparks dead Bertal's reincarnation in Léonard. My conclusion will be that both fiction layers feed each other and that through the transgression this way and that of what should be a hermetic

[80] "Ils m'ont lié à un poteau. Je ne peux plus fuir mais, comme l'ours, je dois subir l'attaque."

boundary between the two worlds, the fiction-within informs the fiction-"without" just as the latter fashions the former. The investigators' task will be to unravel and pull apart these intricate strands of fiction and restore the tightness of the line that divides the two areas and storylines. The police will do their utmost to make the plot-within ebb back to its original place. The cordon of police that fans out at the back of the stage on the very brink of the performance area, just like the police officers who creep in behind the leg curtains on the outer edge of the boards, close in as the film unreels around the theatrical space.[81] Such forcible drive to enclose the stage space is pregnant with meaning. It conveys the police's efforts to hold the dark Shakespearean fable back, a fable which never stops seeping visually as much as acoustically through the tiniest crevices, brimming over its borderlines, and eventually permeating the "outer" fabric throughout. We have seen how all the embedded elements compulsively gush forth and spill over the primary fiction and how these spurts are relentlessly forced back, whether these belong to minor insets like those of the old actor Sigurd forcibly silenced by Bertal, a stagehand, the pub owner or the Chief Inspector, or the curtailed scene of the two children playing cops and robbers, or more importantly the main play-within, which keeps spilling over the backstage area through the loudspeaker on the wall or the machine which the officer inadvertently trips and then desperately tries to hush by rattling it and pulling on the cords. He finally succeeds as he strikes it with the flat of his hand, but the machine will not be silenced, and a few moments later it unexpectedly goes off again. The inspector goes back to swearing and calls for the policeman posted just outside the door. The latter walks in and is left wrestling with the stubborn contraption for a few ticking seconds before the camera cuts back to the wings. This never-ending struggle to force the intradramatic action back where it belongs is again highlighted by the Chief Inspector who grabs Macbeth's arm as he leaves the stage to gain the wings (fig. 36).

[81] On the opposite side, it is the audience who delimit the theatrical space, thus closed in on all sides.

Fig. 36. Chief Inspector grabbing Macbeth's arm as he leaves the stage

The image is of paramount symbolic importance. The gesture conveys the police's efforts to drive the *dramatis persona* Macbeth back and prevent him from breaking loose out of the virtual theatrical world to roam the "real" world freely and cause irreparable harm. The police insist that all the cracks between the boards and offstage be caulked and that the borderline between embedding and embedded worlds be made tight, keeping apart once and for all the inside and the outside, the theatrical world where the dead come back to life at the end of the performance and the "real" world where a corpse stays a corpse, as the Chief inspector's words suggest: "In my job, we haven't got much time for reading. We have a concern mostly for live things, live characters. In drama, the characters may kill whoever they wish, as long as the body comes back to life at the end of the performance, this is none of our business. The moment when it becomes intriguing is when the body fails to get up once the curtain is down… like tonight" [82] (time code 45.48-46.09).

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[82] "Dans mon métier, on n'a pas beaucoup le temps de lire. On s'intéresse surtout aux choses vivantes, aux personnages vivants. Les personnages de théâtre, ils peuvent tuer qui ils veulent, du moment que le cadavre ressuscite à la fin de la représentation, nous, ça ne nous regarde pas. Là où on commence à devenir curieux c'est quand le cadavre s'obstine à ne pas se relever une fois le rideau tombé... comme ce soir."

Filmography

The Crimson Curtain [*Le Rideau rouge*]. Dir. André Barsacq. Scr. André Barsacq & Jean Anouilh. Perf. Michel Simon, Pierre Brasseur, Monelle Valentin, Jean Brochard, Olivier Hussenot, Noël Roquevert. 1952. René Chateau, 1992. VHS.

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