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Specularity in André Barsacq's *Crimson Curtain* (1952)

Patricia DORVAL

- 1 The second half of the 1940s and early '50s, when the Bard was admittedly in favour with French film directors, saw the release of Marcel Carné's much-acclaimed *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945), André Cayatte's *Les Amants de Vérone* (1949), and André Barsacq's *Le Rideau rouge* (1952). Tackling the issue of Shakespearean theatre within a film, all three works resonate with a shared interest in Shakespeare as source material and exploring metatheatrical/metafilmic potentialities.
- 2 A relatively unknown piece, though it stars some of the most popular actors of the time – Pierre Brasseur, Michel Simon, Noël Roquevert, Jean Brochard, Olivier Hussenot¹ – André Barsacq's *Crimson Curtain* is the first and only fling at cinema of a theatre man, co-scripted with a fellow playwright, Jean Anouilh. It is about a troupe of actors setting up *Macbeth* in a reputed Parisian playhouse, the Théâtre de l'Atelier. Rehearsal after rehearsal, as we gather, Ludovic Harn/Macbeth (Pierre Brasseur) and Aurélia Nobli/Lady Macbeth (Monelle Valentin), who have had a long-standing and publicly known liaison, are drawn to the end of their tethers from having to suffer the never-ending taunts of Lucien Bertal (Michel Simon), as both stage director and Aurélia's embittered commonlaw husband. The film opens with a late afternoon rehearsal of Duncan's murder scene (II.2), with Bertal hammering into Ludovic and Aurélia that to play it right they must imagine it is him, the spoilsport – as he nicknames himself – they have done away with. The very same night, shortly before the performance, three shots are heard... Bertal's lifeless body is found sprawling on the floor. The police arrive on the premises in time to give the go-ahead for the performance to start nonetheless, with a keyed-up troupe. For most of the film, the camera will keep shifting from the stage where *Macbeth* is being played to backstage where the police are investigating the crime.
- 3 I have previously examined in depth the multilayering of Barsacq's film.² This layering effect is primarily created by the embedding of a Shakespearean play within the film, but also by having the play-within orbited by Sigurd, an old washed-up actor who keeps quoting lines from former parts to try and land a job, thus strewing the film with fragments of other plays alongside the central one, albeit performed either backstage, onstage when the theatre is closed to the public, or even in a bistro round the corner, displacing the stage further afield.³ My previous study also explored how the

¹ Less known than the first two, Noël Roquevert is credited for 194 acting roles, Jean Brochard 125, and Olivier Hussenot, who turned to TV and TV series after 1955, 118.

² Patricia Dorval. "Macbeth et *Le Rideau rouge* d'André Barsacq (1952): des figures d'enchâssement à la mise en abyme." ["Macbeth and *The Crimson Curtain*: from embedding to *mise en abyme*"]. In Patricia Dorval & Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (eds). *Shakespeare on Screen in Francophonía: The Shakscreen Collection 3*. Montpellier (France): IRCL, Université Paul-Valéry/Montpellier 3, 2014. Online: http://www.shakscreen.org/analysis/analysis_rideau_rouge_figures_enchassement/.

³ On fragmentary screen allusions to Shakespeare see Alexa Alice Joubin and Victoria Bladen. *Onscreen Allusions to Shakespeare: International Films, Television, and Theatre*. Springer International Publishing AG, 2022.

Gaumont editing adds a further layer to the René Chateau one⁴ by relating the plot through the chief police inspector's flashback narration of the case to a new colleague three years after the facts. This is prompted by a column in the morning paper reporting that Aurélie Nobli had just died in prison where she was serving fifteen years with forced labour. My analysis highlighted the profusion of posters and drawings hanging on walls, photographs on dressing-tables, windows, doors and mirrors in the film's "outer setting", as well as arches in the inner stage scenery, which create many framings, and contribute, along with the other devices, to make Barsacq's film an astounding *mille-feuille*. A remaining question is: do these framings make *The Crimson Curtain* a *mise en abyme*? Which takes us to the question of specularity.

I. Reflected plots

- 4 With a play within a film, everything is made double. The structure calls for a *double* picture-frame and viewership: the screen frame and the theatre's proscenium arch from where extradiegetic, "outer" film spectators and intradiegetic, "inner" theatregoers are watching, which the film keeps recalling by having many shots bringing the auditorium into the picture (fig. 1).
- 5 A further original dimension of the *Crimson Curtain* is that the inner viewership is itself doubled within the intradiegetic space by and mirrored in the spectatorship of the police watching the stage from opposite the auditorium, *i.e.* from the wings and backstage (fig. 2), which is echoed in the doubling of the front curtain by the leg curtains or other devices masking the wings.



Fig. 1-2. Double viewership: the playgoers & the police inspector

- 6 These pseudo-spectators are first and foremost the young inspector who, enthralled by his first experience of theatre, sees the play as another case to be investigated, which ironically it is, since the two criminals' mental collapse onstage, as they have to reiterate in the play their real-life murder perpetrated only shortly before, will prove them guilty. Later, the chief inspector will join his subordinate on the fringe of the stage to watch the play as his suspicions of Ludovic and Aurélie grow (fig. 3). Finally, the policemen will cordon off the back of the stage at the end of the performance to make sure Ludovic does not escape (fig. 4).

⁴ There are two versions of the film, one released by Gaumont, the other by the René Chateau film company.



Fig. 3-4. Double viewership: the chief inspector (and police inspector) & the gendarmes

- 7 So taken in by their first experience of theatre-going are the two inspectors that, on leaving the playhouse once the criminals are handcuffed and driven off, they resolve to read all of Shakespeare’s plays, thus doubling, and potentially expanding endlessly, their theatrical experience, and their ability to solve cases from watching a play.
- 8 Apart from the frame and viewership, space is also doubled: the worlds of the Parisian playhouse and the Scottish world of the stage, meeting through the place of the playhouse. The period is also doubled, spanning hundreds of years between eleventh-century Scotland and post-WW2 France. These doublings are added to the actors doubling up as the Parisian troupe and the Shakespearean personae.
- 9 If these reduplications in frame, viewership, space and time, and actors are inherent to the “meta” structure, what about the plot itself? Does the play *Macbeth* reflect itself into the circumstances of the Parisian actors, and if so, to what extent?
- 10 *The Index de la cinématographie française* claims that the “drama [develops] in the same way as *Macbeth*.”⁵ And the film reviews of the time⁶ all emphasise the resemblance between the two story-lines. One describes the film as “*double* tragedy” (my italics), and writes about Barsacq working under “the *double* patronage of Shakespeare and Anouilh” (my italics) – a double authorship – underlining the “analogy of situation between the Shakespearean tragedy and the crime” (*Franc-Tireur*, 1952).⁷ Another explains that it is from watching the performance that the police officer will reconstitute the murder (*Le Parisien Libéré*, 29 May 1952).
- 11 In the Gaumont production, the resemblances are voiced from inside the fiction by the chief inspector relating the case to his new colleague. Once his narration gives way to a flashback visual representation of that famous night, he becomes some sort of Shakespearean chorus, repeatedly breaking in to comment on the events. He sheds light on the likeness between the two sets of events and on the fact that it is the inner plot that triggers the “outer” happenings: “In the play, Macbett is a chap his wife draws into murdering another one so he can step into his shoes. *And in real life, our two clients were to act likewise...* because there were two of them, she and her lover” (my italics) (time

⁵ “[Le] drame [se déroule] exactement de la même manière que dans *Macbeth*.” *L’Index de la cinématographie française. Analyse critique complète de tous les films projetés en France*. Paris: La Cinématographie Française, imprimeurs éditeurs, 1953-B, pp. 165-6.

⁶ Press compilation available at the French Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Reference 8-RSUPP-4003.

⁷ I have looked into all 1952 issues of *Franc-Tireur* online without finding this article, which may have been misreferenced in the press compilation.

code 03.47).⁸ Just as the overreaching Lady Macbeth inveigles her husband into murdering the king who stands between him and the crown, it is in Aurélia's mind that the design to get rid of their tormentor starts brewing, as worded again by the inspector: "The fact is that if you go to the root of things, *it was she who prompted the fellow, Ludovic*" (my italics) (time code 21.58).⁹ Later the voice over will comment ruefully: "How stupid I was not to have stayed with Gobinet in the wings; *all there was to do was to listen to the play to know how they got around it*" (my italics) (time code 41.46-41.52).¹⁰

12 Bertal's interview by two journalists is also a key element to gauge the parallel between the two plots. Just forty-five minutes before the evening performance, two journalists insist on seeing the stage director for a brief interview. Bertal explains into their microphone, "I'd craved to stage direct *Macbeth* for a good many years. It is one of Shakespeare's most mature plays and one of the harshest. *Macbeth* is the squalid story of a crime, that's all. But around this crime there is all of Shakespeare's radiant and sombre poetry."¹¹ But he suddenly feels out of sorts and sends the journalists packing, promising to finish the interview by himself later. Forced into introspection and analysing his own hidden motives for stage-directing *Macbeth*, as soon as he feels better, he peers at himself into his dressing table mirror, and then at a portrait of Aurélia, before resuming, "And what's a crime if not the natural outcome of all human adventure? We are all predators and only our congenital cowardice prevents us from going all the way through – which is why altogether very few crimes are brought to trial. Some murders are brutal, gory but others are slow with every blow well thought out and silent, without a single drop of blood being shed, but which end up killing all the same... sometimes because we are still in love..."¹² (time code 22.51). These words make it clear that Bertal is still infatuated with Aurélia, and has been working at breaking Ludovic by getting him addicted to drugs provided by himself. And when the couple tried to run away, they had to come back to their supplier. By imprisoning them into a toxic *ménage à trois*, Bertal has been destroying them without one drop of blood being shed, and theirs is the "squalid story of a crime". It follows that *Macbeth* reflects Bertal's own turpitude, but this mirror image is to strike back at him, and the play in its turn shapes the actors' lives.

13 It is ironically Bertal himself who contributes to making the inner fiction surge back to the level of the primary plot in his directions to the actors during the epigraphical rehearsal scene of Duncan's murder. As Ludovic as Macbeth and Aurélia as Lady Macbeth play the scene (II.2) over in their everyday life clothes, Bertal rebukes them harshly for their lack of authenticity. He obscenely hammers in that all Ludovic has to do is try and imagine it is himself, his rival, he has to do away with: "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"

⁸ All the translations of the film dialogues from French into English are mine. Original French text: "Dans la pièce, *Macbeth* est un type que sa femme pousse à assassiner un autre pour lui prendre sa place. Et dans la vie, nos deux clients allaient se mettre à en faire autant... parce qu'ils étaient deux, elle et son amant."

⁹ "Le fait est que si on va au fond des choses, elle l'avait poussé, le Ludovic."

¹⁰ "Oh, c' que j'ai été bête de n' pas rester avec Gobinet dans les coulisses; y avait qu'à écouter la pièce pour voir comment y s'y étaient pris."

¹¹ "Il y avait des années que je rêvais de mettre *Macbeth* en scène. C'est une des pièces les plus mûres et les plus dures de Shakespeare. *Macbeth* c'est l'histoire sordide d'un crime et c'est tout... mais autour de ce crime, toute la poésie radieuse et sombre de Shakespeare..."

¹² "Mais qu'est-ce qu'un crime sinon le dénouement naturel de toute aventure humaine? Nous sommes tous de pauvres bêtes de proie et seule notre lâcheté congénitale nous empêche d'aller jusqu'au bout de nos gestes. C'est pourquoi la justice juge au fond assez peu de crimes. Il y a des crimes sanglants et brutaux et il y a des crimes lents aussi où tous les coups qu'on porte sont mesurés et silencieux et où il ne coule pas une seule goutte de sang mais où l'on tue tout de même... quelquefois parce qu'on aime encore..."

(time code 06.21-06.27);¹³ then again, “Just think it’s *me*, the spoilsport, you have just wiped out. 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 07.14-07.41).¹⁴ He mirrors the two worlds even more sharply when adding, this time addressing Aurélia, “This comes from the fact that in real life, Aurélia, you are more wilful than he is – *just as in the play*. Deep inside Macbeth is a coward... and he knows it” (my italics). And Bertal insists without taking his eyes off Ludovic, “And he knows that *I* know” (time code 08.00-08.16).¹⁵

14 How could Macbeth possibly know that Bertal can see right through him and know about his lack of courage? He thus levels out both characters, Macbeth and Ludovic, who become one. Ludovic flings to his face that he is a damned bastard. Bertal retorts, “Yes indeed... and alive! This gets you, doesn’t it?” Unexpectedly, it is Aurélia who cuts into Bertal’s sarcastic remarks with threatening overtones, “Don’t you brag about that! One does not always stay alive”¹⁶ But Bertal just laughs it off and thrusts one final taunt back at her, “But it’s too late to kill, ducky, at our ages, we just turn a blind eye” (time code 08.48-08.52).¹⁷ Although he shrugs off Aurélia’s muffled threats, Bertal identifies with the future victim, thus sealing his own fate. If the role of an actor is to hold the mirror up to nature, that of a stage director is to hand the mirror over to the actor in the first place. Bertal doubles the staging of the play by trusting them, so to speak, with the scenario of their offstage crime and his own murder. Whether his design arises from sheer Poesque perverseness or whether he feels a desire to be done through with life – prior to the performance, as he is making his face up, gazing at length into a looking-glass, he grumbles to himself that he is a damned bastard, and throughout the scene he keeps saying that he feels drained (time code 17.35-20.58) – does not matter.

15 Ludovic and Aurélia leave the stage and slip out through a backdoor, a new screenplay in hand with only the main lines chalked out, and it is for them to draw the details. Aurélia complains in a toneless voice, “These scenes will be the death of me”¹⁸ (time code 11.22). But the thought of removing the old man starts dawning upon her, as it did Lady Macbeth before her, and when Ludovic complains, “This will never end,” she rejoins with dark undertones, “Not as long as he lives” (time code 14.08-14.14).¹⁹ As she rests an expectant gaze upon him, the unspoken thought now starts creeping into Ludovic’s mind too, and will never let go. Another character comes in at this point, who will unexpectedly provide Ludovic with the means of killing Bertal. After a harsh argument with Bertal over a role in the play he has refused to offer him, the intoxicated Sigurd sits at the couple’s table in a bistro, where they are having a quick bite before the curtain rise. He vents his frustration

¹³ “C’est pourtant pas difficile, mes agneaux, vous n’avez qu’à vous figurer que c’est moi que vous venez de refroidir” (time code 06.21-06.27).

¹⁴ “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” (time code 07.14-07.41).

¹⁵ “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, Macbeth est un lâche... et il le sait. Et il sait que je le sais” (time code 08.00-08.16).

¹⁶ “Oui, et vivant! Ça t’embête?!” (time code 08.17-08.21). “Ne t’en vante pas trop! On n’est pas toujours vivant” (time code 08.22-08.26).

¹⁷ “Mais on n’ tue plus, ma cocotte, à nos âges, on laisse faire.”

¹⁸ “Ces scènes me tuent.”

¹⁹ Ludovic: “Ça ne finira jamais.” / Aurélia: “Non, tant qu’il sera vivant.”

and threatens, “What he doesn’t know is that I’m going to knock him off.”²⁰ Ludovic slowly stares up from the bottom of his glass as he glimpses there the means of getting rid of the old man (time code 16.02-16.08). He keeps refilling the disheartened man’s glass, pretending to sympathize with him, to which Sigurd retorts once again, “I’ll knock him off!”²¹ Bitter and cynical, Ludovic wonders out loud, “What puzzles me is that it never occurred to us before...”²² prior to withdrawing into his own reflections again in ponderous silence – a silence that paradoxically speaks volumes, as the sketchy murder scene fleshes out without ever being spoken out (time code 21.06-21.47). Ludovic is then unwittingly echoing Bertal’s words by contemplating a crime that “without a single drop of blood being shed” – at least by himself that is, through resorting to a third party. Clearly the inner production of *Macbeth* eventually strikes back and ends up modelling the outer fiction.

- 16** Not cancelling the evening performance (the public have already taken their seats) and allowing it go through to the very end (even when the police have identified the culprits) will trigger a series of reduplications. Ludovic and Aurélia will be made to go over Duncan’s murder again, only a very short time after slaughtering Bertal, whose blood is still warm, as explained by the inspector in voice-over, “In performing the play, throughout the evening my two clients were to go again over the murder they had just committed one hour earlier”²³ (time code 37.44). But Ludovic is no serial killer and this very repetition will be his demise as he will fall to pieces along the way. The strain is palpable as soon as Macbeth/Ludovic trudges down the stairs; he looks crushed by the unnatural deed (committed offstage just as Bertal’s happens offscreen) holding in his hands the blood-stained daggers, a blood which is no longer only that of Duncan but that of old Bertal as well. As Lady Macbeth/Aurélia walks briskly up to him and clasps him, calling, “My husband!” (II.2.13)²⁴ Bertal’s words from the rehearsal scene unexpectedly chime in in voice over, as if gushing forth from the old man’s corpse, “*Listen, you love your Macbett. ‘My husband’ must come out from deep within your guts. He is your man, and you sent him out to kill. But he is also your young*”²⁵ (time code 57.15-58.40). Lady Macbeth urgingly peers into Macbeth’s face as he is unable to speak. She nestles her head on his shoulder, going over her line again, “My husband!”²⁶ But it is Bertal’s voice which replies, striking up an unwitting dialogue with her, which only Ludovic/Macbeth can hear, “*That’s better.*”²⁷ The camera switches to the theatre director, Laurent (the actor playing Macduff) and the assistant inspector in the wings distraught as Ludovic/Macbeth fails to speak on cue. At last, he shakes off his torpor, “Who lies i’th’ second chamber?” / Lady Macbeth: “Donalbain.” But when he holds out his bloodstained hands, “This is a sorry sight” (II.2.17-18),²⁸ Bertal’s haunting voice is heard yet again, “*No, no, it’s not shit you’ve got on your hands, it’s blood.*”²⁹ The strain eventually wears off and his lines smooth out.

²⁰ “Ce qu’il ne sait pas c’est que j’ vais l’crever.”

²¹ “Je l’ crèverai.”

²² “C’ qui m’étonne, c’est qu’on n’y ait pas pensé plus tôt.”

²³ “Mes deux clients, ils allaient être obligés de revivre toute la soirée, en jouant la pièce, le crime qu’ils avaient commis une heure avant.”

²⁴ “Mon homme!”

²⁵ “*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.*”

²⁶ “Mon homme!”

²⁷ “*C’est mieux.*”

²⁸ “Qui couche dans la seconde chambre?” / Lady Macbeth: “Donalbain.” / Macbeth: “Voilà un triste spectacle.”

²⁹ “Non, c’est pas de la merde que tu as sur les mains, c’est du sang.”

- 17 What will unhinge Ludovic further is Banquo's murder, not only because this is manslaughter yet again, but because Banquo was to be played by Bertal, so that having Banquo killed is tantamount to having Bertal killed one more time. What intensifies the effect is that Barsacq has the couple in full regalia actually witness the assassination from atop a castle tower. Both are unable to tear their eyes off the scene and Ludovic/Macbeth nervously tightens his grip on Aurélia/Lady Macbeth's shoulders.
- 18 The climax will of course be the banquet scene (III.4). After he has had to face Bertal/ Banquo, Ludovic/Macbeth must now confront at once Bertal/Banquo/Banquo's ghost. So distraught is he by the image of his victim coming back to life again and again that he actually steps out of his part and grabs the ghost by the throat in an ultimate and desperate attempt to have done with him once and for all. In doing so, he addresses the original substance, Bertal, not his many reflections, on the stage under everybody's eyes, "Bastard! You bastard! You took Aurélia away from me, you got me addicted to drugs to make a wreck of me and make me lose her, you bastard!"³⁰ (time code 1.08.04-1.08.18). In one final specular inversion, it is Ludovic/Macbeth who seems to be dropping dead as he passes out and collapses. That ghost just will not give it up! And, not surprisingly in a theatre where one does not die as he himself proclaims (see below), Ludovic/Macbeth too will rise up from his death-like fit and resume his part to the end of the play.

II. The doppelgänger

- 19 What makes the film's highest refinement, which I have kept up my sleeve till now, is the fact that Barsacq/Anouilh have chosen the selfsame Michel Simon to play both Bertal and his understudy, *doublure* in French (named Léonard). It follows that Bertal's understudy will actually make the murdered man rise from the dead, even before the banquet scene. And whenever Ludovic will set his eyes on the man he will see the ghost of his victim.
- 20 Léonard claims that he had to wait for two years to have the chance to play the part and feels rusty. At the outset, he looks naïve and his voice has a softer and more faltering touch to it, which marks him off from his boss. One learns from the *Index de la cinématographie française* that another voice was recorded and added at the editing stage.³¹ But step by step Léonard gains self-confidence; his voice becomes firmer, steadier and nothing is left to tell Bertal apart from his dead ringer. Barsacq devises a most cunning dissolve of dead Bertal's face, after his lifeless body has been found, into that of Léonard, who happens to be first seen as a reflection in a tight shot into a mirror whose frame disappears beyond the film picture edge (fig. 5-6). This contrivance makes Léonard a mere reflection with no substance of his own at all. That his name is mentioned only once (time code 27.37), and that he goes about almost nameless works to the same effect. He is no other than Bertal's ghost returned from the dead to torment the conscience of his murderer.
- 21 The striking resemblance between the two men keeps prompting astonished comments from all. When looking into the mirror with his face made up, Léonard exclaims, "It's his mug! It's exactly his mug!"³² (time code 29.31 & 29.26).

³⁰ "Salaud! Salaud! Aurélia, c'est toi qui me l'a prise; c'est toi qui m'a drogué pour que j'devienne une loque et que j'la perde, hein, salaud va!"

³¹ "Michel Simon, qui s'est composé un visage tourmenté d'intoxiqué, interprète un double rôle; celui de Bertal et celui de sa doublure (grâce à une astuce de doublage, la voix d'un autre comédien a été 'confiée' à ce second personnage)."

³² "C'est sa gueule! C'est exactement sa gueule!"



Fig. 5. Léonard's reflection in a mirror



Fig. 6. Léonard from further back in front of the mirror

- 22 Minutes later, he barges in on his mates, taking up Bertal's familiar words, "Still as bad as swines, my lambs?"³³ They all burst out laughing (fig. 7) (time code 30.42).



Fig. 7. Dead Bertal's lookalike, Léonard, startling his mates

- 23 Later, when other actors in more prominent roles dare speak out how they felt about the old man and blame him for his merciless harshness, the young actor Laurent heatedly retorts, "Oh shut up! You are too mean. His body is still warm up there. You were all too scared of him. You were as flat as bugs and *if he were to come back*, you would be the first to grovel on your bellies before him" (my italics) (time code 31.02-31.12).³⁴ By a crushing irony, at this very moment, dead Bertal's double enters behind their backs.³⁵ They swivel round on hearing his characteristic expression in his gravelly voice: "Still as bad as swines, my lambs?" (fig. 8) (time code 31.16).

³³ "Alors, toujours mauvais comme des cochons, mes agneaux?" Animal metaphors are characteristic of uncouth Bertal's language.

³⁴ "Oh, taisez-vous! Vous êtes trop moches. Il est encore chaud là-haut. Vous aviez tous peur de lui. Vous étiez plats comme des punaises et, s'il revenait, vous seriez les premiers à vous mettre à plat ventre" (time code 31.02-31.12). To be as flat as a (bed)bug in French denotes a servile, cowardly attitude.

³⁵ Léonard is indeed a *revenant* (a wraith), which in French means "coming back."



Fig. 8. Dead Bertal's lookalike, Léonard, scaring the main actors out of their wits

- 24 The actors are dumbfounded. One cries out: “Astounding!” The handywoman joins in, “You look so much like him!”³⁶ Shortly after, the theatre director himself comments, “The bloke gets away nicely,”³⁷ to which Ludovic, who feel disturbed, replies, “How the hell has he made himself such a face? One would think it’s him. I won’t be able to play before such a face.” To which Aurélia retorts, “You must. Go.”³⁸ The inspector also wonders, “It’s amazing how this man managed to make himself Bertal’s face!”³⁹
- 25 Ludovic’s plight is far worse than Macbeth’s and reason enough to crumble down: if Macbeth has to face Banquo’s ghost, Ludovic is plagued by a double one: that of Bertal in real life and that of Banquo in the play. Killed, Bertal re-emerges as Léonard⁴⁰ in the part of Banquo who again gets killed but resurfaces as Banquo’s ghost, which makes the chief police inspector compare in voice over the situation to a game of billiards: “The play ghost usually nobody believes in was going to be a real ghost that night for him, the lookalike of the man he had just killed. That night he was not going to sham terror, he was going to be truly scared” (time code 1.05.28-1.05.42).⁴¹ Like the mythological Hydra Lernaia, Bertal seems to have the faculty to keep regenerating despite Ludovic’s many attempts to snuff the life out of him, killing him in the first place, then having Banquo dispatched, and finally trying to strangle Banquo’s ghost/Bertal, which the Shakespearean character never dared to do. And Ludovic’s words, just after Bertal’s assassination, when the theatre director had wanted to know if the performance could be carried out or if it had to be cancelled, “If we can play, we’ll do it. We’ll have to tomorrow anyway... One doesn’t die in the theatre”⁴² (time code 27.32-21.47) have an ironic ring, “*On ne meurt pas au théâtre*” applying to the stage as much as to the playhouse.

³⁶ “Hallucinant!” / “C’que tu peux lui ressembler!”

³⁷ “Il s’en tire pas mal, le cochon.”

³⁸ “34Comment a-t-il pu réussir à se faire cette gueule-là? On dirait que c’est lui. J’pourrai pas jouer en face de cette gueule-là, moi.” / “Il le faut, va.”

³⁹ “C’es36t étonnant à quel point cet homme a pu se réussir la tête de Bertal!”

⁴⁰ Who himself seems to be reborn having been kept barely alive by Bertal, who also castrates old Sigurd, and Ludovic.

⁴¹ “Là, ça dev’nait du vrai billard; le spectre de la pièce auquel personne ne croyait d’habitude, ça allait être un vrai spectre ce soir pour lui, le sosie de l’homme qu’il venait de tuer. Ce soir, il n’allait pas seulement simuler l’épouvante, il allait avoir peur vraiment.”

⁴² “Si on peut jouer, on jouera. Comme de toute façon, on jouera demain... On ne meurt pas au théâtre!”

III. Mirrors

- 26 The mirror is a key prop in *The Crimson Curtain*. As most of the action is set in a theatre, catching the actors busy dressing or making their faces up in front of such an implement is to be expected. But Barsacq revels in playing with it and fathoming all of its potentialities.
- 27 Among the many occurrences, Bertal is found making his face up in front of a mirror with a frame containing a photograph of Aurélia on his dressing table (fig. 9) (time code 19.52); he is again seen washing his hands before another mirror above a washstand (fig. 10) (time code 20.35); he is yet again caught grudgingly mumbling to himself while looking at his reflection that he is a confounded bastard⁴³ (fig. 11) (time code 21.00). Here a reversal occurs as the camera no longer focuses on the real character but on his reflection, the latter taking precedence over the former, although both images keep coexisting in the screen shot.



Fig. 9-10-11. Bertal looking at his own reflection in a mirror

- 28 More compelling is the following arrangement shortly after, when Bertal, about to record his interview, is looking into a mirror that takes up most of the frame (fig. 12) (time code 22.21). Somewhat reminiscent of Velasquez's *Las Meniñas* (1656),⁴⁴ the intricate layout by casting the character and the edge of the mirror offscreen plays at blurring the divide between reality and its reflection.



Fig. 12. Bertal's reflection in a mirror as he sits offscreen

- 29 The four frames (fig. 9-12) testify to a slow disintegration of the character, who ends up losing all substance, within minutes of being murdered. He is a ghost already. Bertal is the character in the film who is most often reflected on glass, which makes him as stage-director a master of mirrors.

⁴³ "... un beau sauld, oui... Et de moins en moins beau d'ailleurs."

⁴⁴ URL: <https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/las-meniñas/9fdc7800-9ade-48b0-ab8b-edee94ea877f>. Consulted 11 November 2024.

- 30** The chief inspector on the phone in Bertal's dressing room is in his turn split into a double image: himself facing the camera and his reflected back in the same mirror, which brings back into the picture a framed drawing standing outside it, offscreen, which may look from afar as another mirror, suggesting that his investigation is caught in an intricate play of mirrors (fig. 13) (time code 36.35-36.59).



Fig. 13. Chief inspector and his reflection in a mirror

- 31** After Ludovic has replied to the theatre director that they can technically perform the play despite Bertal's assassination, if the police will let them, the camera shifts to Aurélia making her face up before a glass that reveals Ludovic in a black dressing gown and bearded like his stage character standing offscreen behind her. He looks framed in the mirror, as he is in the photograph on the table opposite another mirror (a hand glass). The tableau is completed by diverse frames, photographs and pieces of paper pinned to the wall (fig. 14) (time code 27.49). Ludovic has gone and lives now only in his reflected double made-up as Macbeth. This very image as much as that of Bertal in fig. 12 epitomize the fact that the characters are now trapped inside the mirror of the play-within.



Fig. 14. Ludovic imprisoned in his mirror reflection

- 32** Soon after, as has already been described, an extreme close-up catches the face of Léonard, Bertal's dead ringer (fig. 5) (time code 29.31). The frame of the mirror being offscreen, one cannot tell whether the image is a direct one or a reflection until a back shot shows the man sitting before a looking glass. As he swivels round, a larger shot takes in a row of mirrors in a common dressing room where his mates are making their faces up (fig. 15) (time code 29.38).



Fig. 15. Row of mirrors in the common dressing room

- 33 The next instance replicates the image of one of the comedians as he stands in front of a glass (fig. 16) (time code 30.32), and later as his shadow is cast upon a wall (fig. 17) (time code 30.33).



Fig. 16-17. Comedian's reflection and shadow

- 34 Backstage the chief inspector moves close to some actors as if he meant to interrogate them (fig. 18) (time code 34.07) but it turns out that the image is but their reflection on a mirror (fig. 19) (time code 34.09). It is indeed by watching the play as mirror that he will unravel the enigma of Bertal's murder.



Fig. 18-19. Chief inspector facing the mirror image of the actors he is about to interrogate

- 35 It is in front of the same prop that Ludovic/Macbeth adjusts his helmet before walking onstage (fig 20) (time code 34.34). Although there are many more such examples, let us turn to one last

instance where the small convex mirror on the wall is redolent of the one facing the viewer in the Flemish painting, *The Moneylender and his Wife* by Matsys (1514)⁴⁵ (fig. 21) (time code 1.12.48).



Fig. 20. Ludovic adjusting his helmet before the same mirror a mirror



Fig. 21. Convex mirror

- 36 The shot mentioned above of the comedian looking at himself in a mirror (time code 29.48) also shows a poster of the play – and by metonymic substitution the play itself – doubly visible as a primary image partly offscreen and its inverted reflection in the mirror, an arrangement that may conjure up the idea that *Macbeth*, the play, is both contained inside the mirror of the play within and outside it, just as the crime straddles both inner and outer storylines.



Fig. 22-23. Reflection of the play's poster

- 37 If the play-within has widely been compared to a mirror, the mirror itself as prop endows a work, play, film, painting, etc. with a meta-theatrical, meta-filmic, etc. depth. In an article on four modern plays, Adler claims that the mirror is indeed a variation of the play-within-the-play: “[the plays] entail some variation of the play-within-the-play, with the mirror becoming the stage wherein the character, as his own audience, sees himself”⁴⁶ (Adler, 356). It may likewise be argued that the mirror prop that recurs throughout *The Crimson Curtain* becomes “the stage for several little plays-within-the-play, the mirror’s frame the proscenium arch.” (Adler, 359).

⁴⁵ Also called *The Money Changer and his Wife*. URL: <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010061690>. Consulted 11 November 2024.

⁴⁶ Adler, Thomas P. “The Mirror as Stage Prop in Modern Drama.” *Comparative Drama*, vol. 14, n°4, 1980, pp. 355–373. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41152917>. Consulted 11 November 2024.

IV. Repetition devices

- 38 Echoes are themselves factors of acoustic reduplication. Narcissus and Echo are never far apart. The first instance occurs when Bertal first starts recording his interview in the presence of the two journalists. But feeling slightly unwell, he breaks off and rests for a while before the performance begins (time code 17.04-17.39). Minutes later, alone in his dressing room, after he has put on his costume and made his face up, he sets about completing the interview. As he does so, he rewinds the tape to remember where he had stopped. So right after he has visually duplicated himself in a mirror, his own words reverberate a second time but now on the tape recorder (time code 22.38-23.36). Furthermore, towards the end of the performance/film, the police will run the tape and his whole interview will be heard again after his death (1.12.26-1.13.24). The introductory words will resound for the third time and the remaining of his speech a second time. As to the third part of the reel, it holds the circumstances and testimony of Bertal's murder, as the latter had no time to switch the machine off before his altercation with his murderer⁴⁷ and the shots. All the information that had been held from us is there and is testimony enough to send Ludovic to prison where he will serve a life sentence. The last part of Bertal's recording session is metaphorically the post-mortem voice of the victim denouncing his assassin. Like the many narcissistic arrangements above, the echo figure reflects the sounds with a typically specular inversion as, instead of fading off, Bertal's words expand each time more like the concentric circles produced by a stone flung into the water.
- 39 This phenomenon of verbal resurgence is at work anew in Duncan's murder scene (II.2). As explored previously, when Ludovic/Macbeth steps down the stairs and Aurélia/Lady Macbeth runs up to him saying, "My husband!", the words Bertal had flung at them during the rehearsal episode resound again in voice-over, "*Listen, you love your Macbett. 'My husband' must come out from deep within your guts.*"⁴⁸ And when Ludovic fails to speak on cue, and Aurélia/Lady Macbeth has to prompt him again, repeating, "My husband!", it is Bertal's voice which responds, "*That's better.*"⁴⁹ Once Ludovic has managed to resume his lines and comments, looking at his blood-smeared hands, "This is a sorry sight" (II.2.17-18),⁵⁰ Bertal's haunting voice strikes up again, and cuts in sharply: "*No, no, it's not shit you've got on your hands, it's blood.*"⁵¹ Dead Bertal will just not shut up just as he won't remain lying cold in his dressing room.
- 40 Another acoustic device is the use of double-entendre when Gobinet taunts the couple as they walk into the wings at the end of I.5, calling them both bastards and reproaching them with having made up their minds to "croak the bearded scoundrel" (time code 44.12-44.36),⁵² making Ludovic and Aurélia clearly tense up, referring to the upcoming murder of Duncan but also, without his knowing yet, to the assassination of Bertal committed only shortly before.
- 41 *The Crimson Curtain* also plays with recurring forms of anadiplosis (from the Greek "doubling back" also known as redouble), a repetition device by which the same image ends one scene and

⁴⁷ First Sigurd breaks into Bertal's room and tries to shoot him, but his gun jams. He knocks the old man hard on the head with the butt of his weapon. When Aurélia comes in, she finds Bertal still alive. He accuses her and her lover of having sent Sigurd, and tries to strangle her. She calls out for Ludovic who picks up the gun and shoots the man dead.

⁴⁸ "*Tu l'aimes ton Macbett, tu entends. Ça doit te sortir du ventre 'Mon homme'.*"

⁴⁹ "*C'est mieux.*"

⁵⁰ "*Voilà un triste spectacle.*"

⁵¹ "*Non, c'est pas de la merde que tu as sur les mains, c'est du sang.*"

⁵² "*Ben, vous êtes de beaux salauds tous les deux. Alors, c'est comme ça qu'on a décidé de faire couic au vilain barbu.*"

opens the following one. The first instance is that of a timepiece. As two children are seated at a table doing their homework, the camera zooms in on a clock above them (time code 22.13), which gradually dissolves (time code 22.14) into an alarm clock (time code 22.17) sitting in another room, on Bertal's dressing table. Twenty-five minutes have elapsed and the performance is about to start.



Fig. 24-25-26-27-28. Clock anadiplosis and epanadiplosis

- 42 The camera then moves up to show Bertal engrossed in his reflection in a mirror (see p. 10) before going back to the journalists' tape-recorder to resume his interview. The end of the sequence ends with a focus on his thoughtful face (time code 23.34) which in its turn fades out into the initial image of the wall clock back where the two kids are now playing cops and robbers... (time code 23.36). The anadiplosis of the clock is doubled by an epanadiplosis which has Bertal's last words framed by the motif of the timepiece, suggesting, no doubt, that his time has come.
- 43 Another occurrence is the dissolving of the close-up on dead Bertal's face (time code 29.27 & 29.29) into that of his double, Léonard, with the impression that Bertal's lookalike is actually coming out of the dead body, as a ghost would (see above) (time code 29.31).



Fig. 29-30-31. Dead Bertal's face dissolving into that of his lookalike, Léonard

- 44 Yet another skilful concatenation is achieved when Ludovic dashes off the stage at the end of his last scene through a crowd of gendarmes and actors in search of Aurélia. The police chase him and he is soon pinned down. As he is writhing about to set himself free, one of the policemen grabs at his hair and unwittingly snatches his wig off (time code 1.19.06) while another holds a hand tightly around his throat (time code 1.19.09). The scenario turns into a symbolic beheading as the camera cuts to a gory close up on Macbeth's cut-off head held forth at arm's length by Malcolm in the final

scene (time code 1.19.11). Ludovic and his theatrical persona are but one to the very last, (symbolically) sharing the same fate.



Fig. 32-33-34. Decapitation anadiplosis

45 Other less formal duplications include the rehearsal episode of Duncan’s murder performed again later the same evening before a full auditorium. The scene where two children are playing cops and thieves with a fake gun is a crafty reflection of what is going on offscreen in Bertal’s dressing room as he is shot dead; as the kid with the gun shoots at the other one, it is the actual offscreen shots that are heard. Among mirror effects is the epanalepsis by which the film opens and closes on a shot of the theatre, endowing the work with a circularity suggestive of the characters being trapped in their histrionic world. In the Gaumont version, the image of the chief inspector and his assistant three years after the murder redoubles that of the chief inspector and his former assistant, Gobinet. And last but not far from least, in the material edited by Gaumont, the chief inspector reads in the newspaper that the very same theatre is putting on *Macbeth* yet again only three years after the murder, as if the play and its subject matter could never be stifled, prompting the public agent’s surprisingly metatheatrical reflection that life is but a farce (time code 00.03.00)⁵³. Even to him, the world has become a stage... as much as the stage is a mirror of the world.

46 The Scottish play is traditionally believed to be cursed, spilling out beyond the stage as it has done for centuries, and plaguing real life characters. “For centuries,” recalls Gerit Quealy, “historical fact has mingled with unmitigated fiction to augment the power of the curse’s reputation: Charlton Heston’s burned thighs, Laurence Olivier’s narrowly missing being whacked by a falling stageweight, even deaths,”⁵⁴ starting with the play’s premiere at Hampton Court on 7th August 1606 when Hal Berridge, the boyactor playing Lady Macbeth, was suddenly taken ill, and actually died backstage, compelling Shakespeare himself to take on the part at a moment’s notice, as Leonard does. “Other rumoured mishaps include real daggers being used in place of stage props for the murder of King Duncan,”⁵⁵ resulting in the actor’s actual death, which might have inspired Barsacq/Anouilh with casting Bertal as Duncan, but their choice of the doppelgänger trick is so much more far-reaching.

⁵³ “Quelle farce que la vie!”

⁵⁴ Gerit Quealy. “Curse of the Scottish Play – the Opposite of Life.” *Huffpost Arts and Culture*. 30 May 2012. URL: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gerit-quealy/the-curse-of-the-scottish-b-1553818.html>. Consulted 11 November 2024. See also post by Dina Tritsch, April 1984, https://pretaliez.com/onstage/theatre/broadway/macbeth/macbeth_curse. Consulted 11 November 2024.

⁵⁵ Royal Shakespeare Company, <https://www.rsc.org.uk/macbeth/about-the-play/the-scottish-play>. Consulted 11 November 2024.

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