This is one of the great Shakespeare films. There are miscalculations – you shouldn’t show the air-drawn dagger, and you shouldn’t show the murder of Duncan, especially if you can’t do it convincingly, which, one final dagger-thrust to the jugular apart, it seems they couldn’t.¹ If you’re making it for Playboy, and you’ve decided on a nude sleepwalking scene, then do one, don’t allow the beautiful Francesca Annis to have a wig so long that it hides most of her Playboy bits.

If Shakespeare specifies an Armed Head, a Bloody Child, and a Child Crowned with a Tree in His Hand, as the three apparitions, why substitute Macbeth Himself, Two Little Boys Wagging their Fingers, and Malcolm and Donalbain Giggling Sarcastically? None work as well as the original ideas, and the third doesn’t work at all.

But what invention to offset these things! The pause after Macbeth says “Oh, yet I do repent me of my fury that I did kill them!” and the way the camera moves from

¹: The thrusts of Jon Finch’s dagger at Nicholas Selby’s chest appear, in the medium shot in which they’re done, to be missing their target. And yet Polanski and Kenneth Tynan are said to have rehearsed the murder in great detail, with their shirts off on a hot day, in a basement flat through the window of which passers-by watched, assuming they were witnessing a gay sex-orgy.
disbelieving face to disbelieving face as the obvious truth hits home – that he killed them to prevent them from speaking – is terrific. Polanski next has the camera first pan from left to right as they all pass Macbeth by, not listening to his feeble explanation (“Who can be wise …?”) and then follow them all down the corridor to Duncan’s bedroom, pausing only to pan right and look at the guards’ decapitated bodies. I’ve never seen the scene better done in any medium.

The death of Banquo is also superbly imagined and realised. Martin Shaw has one arrow left – he’s about to be attacked from behind by the First and Second Murderers, but there on the other side of a stream he can see that the faceless Third Murderer (it’s a long shot, but we may suspect it to be Ross), is about to intercept and kill Fleance (played by the infant Keith Chegwyn). Banquo has no time to deal with both dangers – so shoots the Third Murderer’s horse from under him, thereby giving the other two Murderers time to hack into his spinal column with an axe. Fleance gallops off. Banquo sacrifices his own life for that of his son. Thus the prophecy begins to be fulfilled. It’s spine-tingling, and it’s not in the script.

Terence Bayler may have rather too much of an English public-school accent for a Scots thane, but his Macduff boasts in addition the finest chinfull of stubble in movie history – and the noise when the tip of Macbeth’s sword scrapes it is the finest sound effect ever. If only Macbeth had known …

Much-discussed when the film came out was the new treatment given to Ross, normally an enlarged supernumerary. Played by John Stride (Romeo to Judi Dench’s Juliet for Zeffirelli at the Old Vic eleven years previously), he is at first neutral, then we think we see him as the mysterious Third Murderer. He bids farewell to Lady Macduff, kissing her and playing with her son. However, as he leaves the Macduff castle, he signs to the gate-porter, who leaves the gate open, and scarpers. As he leaves, the murderers ride around the corner. Ross has betrayed Lady Macduff to her
death, and is a thing of the tyrant, expecting preferment and promotion. But when Macbeth’s major-domo deserts him, his chain of office goes to Seyton – and Ross sees the error of his ways, at least in political terms. We next see him with Malcolm’s army, in the England Scene (played after the Sleepwalking), relating the death of Macduff’s family, as in the text. But here the idea falls down, for we must think of his him in this newly-created context as the most evil of hypocrites, whereas the text presents him as a man so sensitive that he can’t deliver his horrible news until after the moment for it has gone by. In giving him a new dimension in all the scenes where Shakespeare doesn’t put him, the film deprives him of the one superb scene where Shakespeare does put him. Stride has, of course, no lines to interiorise or explain what Ross is doing, and the effect is not so much cryptic and gripping as cryptic and bland.

In the final scene, Macbeth, facing defeat and death, throws an axe at Ross, and we feel he deserves it, not just as a traitor, but as a double traitor, first to the forces of good and then to those of evil.

This final scene is remarkable for another excellent fight-arrangement by William Hobbs (see *Romeo and Juliet* essay elsewhere). Macduff and Macbeth open their fight with swords, but, as soon as Macduff knows that he and no-one else will kill Macbeth, he walks towards him unarmed, not knowing how he will do it, just knowing that he will.

Jon Finch is young and slender, and is above all no Sean Connery, whose failure to get a *Macbeth* project off the ground is the great unsung tragedy of Shakespeare movie-making. But he speaks the verse with great imagination, and gives the bewilderment and pain as well as the violence. Better still is Francesca Annis as Lady Macbeth, playing her not for hardness but for inappropriate sensitivity and inexperience. In the Daggers Scene, she’s not unimaginative and deadened as usually done, but just as wound-up as her husband. Her faint isn’t a fake faint, but a real one, a reaction to seeing the headless bodies of the two guards. Later in the film there’s another new idea, when she, in her near-hysterical insomnia, is seen re-reading his first letter (“They met me in the day of success ...”) and weeping over the horror of what has occurred in consequence of it. An unusual interpretation, and it works.

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2: In the recent (2005) Max Stafford-Clark production, Ross was forced by Macbeth to kill Lady Macduff personally.
The Scots and Northumbrian locations are wonderfully used, giving the tragedy a space it normally lacks. In *Cul-de-Sac*, Polanski had used the Northumberland coastline around Lindisfarne as the setting for tacky, undignified events. Here he atones; although this Duncan isn’t very saintly, and this Malcolm a trifle faceless, so the events may all in a longer perspective seem a mite tacky too. When Donalbain goes off in the end sequence to ask the witches’ advice as to how to start it moving all over again (the final extra-scriptural invention), it’s witty, but tacky. On the other hand, what did the whole original historical action lead up to? The reign of Banquo’s descendant, James VI and I – a tacky old king if ever there was one.

Aleksander Ford was a Stalinist director who didn’t survive the thaw, went into exile, and committed suicide. Polanski knew all about him, and his *Knights of the Teutonic Order* (*Krzyzacy*), a medieval epic made twelve years earlier than *Macbeth*, and a couple of years before Polanski came west, lends several images to the Shakespearean movie. A long pan over a horizon littered with corpses dangling for gallows, with Polish snow all around, instead of Northumberland sand. Castles inhabited by bears as well as people. Lots of coniferous forests. Big feasts, with jovial midgets anticipating Keith Chegwyn’s virginal Fleance. Fake, squeaky-clean medieval costumes and armour.

The Teutonic Knights were a thoroughly nasty set of fellows, who dominated, tortured, pillaged, and decapitated most of Eastern Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Chaucer’s Knight was briefly their Grand Master. They were all the more disagreeable for doing it all in the name of Jesus, and met their end at the battle of Grunwald in 1410, defeated by King Jagiello, whose statue is to be seen in Central Park. Ford’s film charts their barbarity, decline, and defeat (they figure, too, as the bad guys in Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky*); and just as Macbeth falls into deeper and deeper evil as the plot unfolds, so the Knights become more and more horrible the closer the Battle of Grunwald gets. At the nadir of their achievements, one of their Grand Masters does a Cornwall in *King Lear*, and puts out the other eye of the heroine’s noble father. Later we realise that he cut out his tongue and amputated his right hand, too.

The Grand Master tells his evil assistant (who looks a bit like Polanski), that if he tells what happened, he’ll kill him. In *Macbeth*, Polanski takes this idea one stage further, when Macbeth has Banquo’s murderers themselves murdered so they won’t tell.

The battle, when it comes, is much better than the one in *Alexander Nevsky* and much less good than the one in *Chimes at Midnight*: here it contrasts with the battle at the end of Polanski’s *Macbeth*, which, of course, all Macbeth’s soldiers having deserted him, doesn’t happen at all.