

Abstracts for SAA 2020 Seminar #53:
The Supernatural and Transcendent in Shakespeare on Screen
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Abstracts:

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“Haunted (by) media: Hamlet’s cinematic ghosts”

In what must be one of the earliest renderings of Shakespeare’s famous ghost scene on film, Johnston Forbes-Robertson’s *Hamlet* (1913) is brought to his knees by his late father’s towering figure, in appearance translucent, almost hologram-like. This cinematic spectrality is achieved through the use of superimposition, a feat of true technical proficiency that demonstrates an acute awareness of the possibilities of film as a medium. What interests me in particular, and what will be the focus of this paper, is the way in which Hamlet’s Ghost becomes for filmmakers a representational problem and possibility (not unlike the way in which the Ghost functions for Hamlet at the level of the dramatic fiction). This paper will move through the cinematic history of *Hamlet*, encountering its Ghost in various guises: from Olivier’s near-invisible Ghost to Kozintsev’s menacing cloaked figure to Branagh’s almost animatronic statue-brought-to-life. I will argue that this spectral figure functions as a limit-case for the possibilities of the cinematic medium—far from an eruption of the past into the present, it functions also as an insistent embodiment of cinematic contemporaneity, a figure that more than any other marks Hamlet films specifically as films.

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“Technology, Psychology, and the Secular Transcendent in *The Tempest* and *Forbidden Planet*”

In *Forbidden Planet*, a 1956 appropriation of *The Tempest*, the scholar Morbius studies the technological and ethical advances of an ancient race of morally-superior beings, the Krell, who use technology to “[abolish] sickness, and insanity, and crime, and all injustice.” In other words, they use technology as a tool for transcendence, and they ultimately build a machine that will allow them to escape the limitations of the body and corruptions of the mind. Through allusions to a Judeo-Christian God, both film and play nod toward a capacity for spiritual transcendence outside the world of the text, yet both focus primarily on ostensibly “natural” forms of the supernatural. Prospero, for example, practices “white magic,” a form of magic rooted in and abiding by the laws of nature. In *Forbidden Planet*, Prospero’s magic is replaced by Morbius’ scientific and technological accomplishments, achieved through an elevation of his psychological and intellectual capacity using tools designed by the Krell. Even the film’s most “supernatural” element—the Id monster—is merely a psychological projection of Morbius’ baser instincts. Thus, the film suggests that technology can function as a secular tool of transcendence, allowing the individual to bypass the spiritual realm entirely. Yet, as Morbius outlines, this transcendence-through-technology is precisely what dooms the Krell; their technological capacity inadvertently releases the formerly-repressed parts of their psyche, their collective Id, and wipes out the entire race overnight. This paper will explore the film’s argument that tools of transcendence, specifically technology, cannot truly eliminate primal instincts. The film is in conversation with those who see emergent technologies as alternatives to supernatural transcendence, but it presents this utopic view of transcendent technology as a cautionary tale, akin to the limits of knowledge presented in *The Tempest*.

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“Seeking Ritual Transcendence in Vishal Bhardwaj’s Shakespeare Films”

The rich ethnography of *Maqbool*, *Omkara*, and *Haider* brings viewers face to face with many aspects of contemporary India. Not least among these is the continuing prominence of its religions in many aspects of life, from festivals and wedding ceremonies to funerals and the remembrance of the dead. This paper will ask what happens to the supernatural elements in Shakespeare’s tragedies when they are transposed to the religious environments represented in Bhardwaj’s cinematic worlds. In some cases, they can feel like prescribed elements that the filmmaker must exercise his ingenuity to fit into a modern world – even a highly traditional one. For example, the witches’ prophecies in *Macbeth* become horoscopes in the image that begins *Maqbool*, and the astrological chart recurs throughout the film in ways ranging from the comic to the horrific. In other cases, the visual and musical texture of the film’s religious rituals provides the emotional and spiritual depth that in Shakespeare arises largely from the words. For example, the action of *Maqbool* plays out against a series of vividly depicted religious rituals, including a pre-Ramadan visit to a Sufi temple, a celebration of Eid al-Fitr, an engagement ceremony complete with ritual goat sacrifice, a Niyaz ceremony, and a visit to a Hindu temple. But while these scenes of ecstatic epiphany, blissful community, and peaceful mourning promise

transcendence, they are frequently interrupted by terrifying and violent acts that deny the participants the transcendence they seek.

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“Familiars on film”

This essay is concerned with animal familiars and how representations of these creatures change from witchcraft narratives to Jacobean and later drama to screen performance. “Spirits in the shape of” various creatures, which feature so prominently in early modern witchcraft pamphlets, take spectacular form as singing and dancing cats and dogs in the drama of the witch vogue. The figure of the familiar has become a staple of film and television, an object of cultural fascination, indeed, the “sign” of the witch – the black cat, for example, by which we recognize the human agent.

I’m interested in adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, in particular, and how magical and familiar figures are or are not present as the play moves through media. Middleton’s adaptation of *Macbeth* includes spectacular scenes featuring Hecate and her familiar Malkin. These scenes are omitted from many editions of the play, and – to the best of my knowledge – almost never performed on stage or screen.

What does the erasure of animal familiars do for their texts? How does the persistence of animal familiars in the cultural imaginary inflect the portrayal and reception of witchcraft narratives in film and television? This essay will take up such questions with a particular focus on *Macbeth*, and possibly *The Tempest*, alongside 21st-century media influenced by early modern witchcraft and “familiar” narratives.

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“The 1948 *Macbeth* of Orson Welles”

This paper is a catalog of the various ways that Welles portrays the supernatural in his 1948 Republic film adaptation of *Macbeth*. Brief introductory remarks put this film in the context of his three previous productions of the play.

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“Witchcraft, children, and queer chaos in Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth*”

Witches and tropes of witchcraft, as argued by Deborah Purkiss, bring the spectacle of popular culture to the Early Modern stage, and there’s perhaps no witch-play as popular as William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. There have been countless stage and screen adaptations of the Scottish Play, most of which use the characters of the Weird Sisters to stun their audience through spectacular means, while portraying the descent into madness and eventual downfall of Macbeth. Among cinematic adaptation of this play, Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth* (2015) stands out as an unparalleled visual experience of the king’s downfall. However, the stunning imagery falls short for the one aspect we expect to be most remarkable: the witches. Kurzel’s witches are simultaneously too real and earthly, and not real enough, too ephemeral. They lack the usual flare associated with witchcraft, not quite showing extraordinary marks of their supernatural abilities, yet they are as unnerving as one would expect. Moreover, by interposing the presence of the three weird sisters with the image of children, particularly the Macbeths’ dead child, Kurzel’s adaptation provides a new queer reading of the plot. Based partly on Lee Edelman’s queer theory of reproductive futurism and the death drive, this paper will explore how Kurzel’s representation of witches and supernatural children allows us to read the play as a cycle of destruction and queer chaos, ultimately demonstrating that the future is a mere repetition of the past and just as lethal.

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My plan is to write about a French-language, Indigenous, Quebecois adaptation of *Hamlet* called *Hamlet-le-Malecite*, which was first produced as a play in 2004. The same playwright, Yves Sioui Durand, has turned that play into a film called *Mesnak* that came out in 2014. The scripts are slightly different, but they tackle some important subject matter and what I’d like to do for this seminar is explore Sioui’s cultural and environmental politics through the lens of the natural and supernatural (or spiritual) elements in both works. Both the film and the play are deeply concerned with Indigenous identity—what it means to be “Native” in Quebec today (both on and off the reserve)—and the related problem of balancing traditional Indigenous beliefs with the need for economic development (either by exploiting natural resources or through tourism or other cultural initiatives). For this paper, I’m particularly interested in how Sioui uses animal figures (in the play, a Bear, and in the film, an ancient land Tortoise) in place of Old Hamlet’s ghost, and how these animal figures call attention not only to questions of conscience for particular characters (Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Laertes), but also to different ways of relating to the land and to the traditional beliefs or values of the community.

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“Remember Me”: *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and the Mexican Child Migrant as Epic Hero in Disney/Pixar’s *Coco*

In *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017), Valeria Luiselli writes about the dangers, violence, trauma, abuse, prejudice, and exploitation endured by child refugees from Mexico and Central America before, during, and after their journey to the United States to petition for immigration relief. In particular, Luiselli focuses on the rising number of unaccompanied children at the border—up to 10,000 juveniles per month from October 2013 to August 2015, resulting in a crisis to be declared. In this paper I argue that the Disney/Pixar animated film *Coco* (2017) is just as much about the plight of the unaccompanied child migrant as Luiselli’s book is. Conceived and produced from 2011-2016, *Coco* was influenced by increased awareness of the rising child migrant crisis. Like Luiselli, the creators of *Coco* characterize the Mexican migrant child as epic hero. The primary way that *Coco* fashions this representation is by borrowing from Shakespeare, specifically *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

Group 1: Auteurs

Mike — Welles MB

Yan — Kurosawa

Kenneth — Bhardwaj

Group 2: Spectral Effects

Kristin — Tempest & Sci-fi

Amy — Game of Thrones & Lady M

Frederick — Hamlet

Group 3: Supernatural Creatures

Molly — Familiars (MB, Temp.)

Elizabeth — Indig Canadian Hamlet (animals)

Laura — Kurzel MB