Light and Blindness: Decoding Truth in *Macbeth*

In art, the vanishing point is the moment when seeing ends and the unknown begins. It marks a point on the horizon when sight ceases but existence does not; just because something is beyond the vanishing point does not mean it is not there, but is simply unknown. A vanishing point and its placement can be used to create perspective in a scene, showing relationships between what a character knows and does not know, as well as illustrating a work’s relationship with Truth. In his adaptation of *Macbeth*, Justin Kurzel utilizes vanishing points for just these reasons. Often, his use of vanishing points helps the viewer to see themes of the limited sight his characters have. Vanishing points also play a role in Kurzel’s interpretation of Truth in the play. For instance, Macbeth’s encounters with the witches are flooded with fog, creating an immediate vanishing point that poses an ironic contrast between the supposed revelations of Truth from the witches and the vast unknown beyond the fog. This same limited line of sight carries over to the scene when Macbeth battles Macduff. Kurzel uses an extremely near vanishing point to show Macbeth’s limited sight and skewed perception of Truth that leads to his downfall. This same concept of limited perspective is repeated in the final scene that parallels Fleance and Malcolm, implying that a similar path lies in wait for them, as well as a similar entanglement with Truth. These near vanishing points that lead to blindness are, ironically, created by light. Kurzel’s use of extremely near vanishing points and visual irony illustrates the theme of the binding and blinding nature of the witches’ prophecy, reveals the complicated nature of Truth in the play, and creates parallels that suggest the continuation of similar events beyond the ending of the narrative.

Any time the witches are present in the film, the surrounding scenery is flooded with fog, creating an atmosphere of mystery and enigma. The irony that the witches are posed as a source
of Truth yet surrounded by fog is heavily evident. In fact, the witches never do push the idea that they are sources of Truth; instead, as J. Lyndon Shanley writes, they show the “danger of the suggestion” (Shanley 307). Shanley continues to say that “the witches force nothing; they advise nothing; they simply present facts. But they confound fair and foul; just so, events may be good or ill” (Shanley 307). Here, Shanley reinforces the idea that the witches are not sources of determinate Truth or deliverers of fate, but rather they simply present ideas for Macbeth to do what he will. While the witches’ statements seem to be definitive, their fruition largely depends on what Macbeth chooses to do with the facts presented. The witches’ prophecies are only able to come true because of Macbeth’s action on his own wishes. The first prophecy, that Macbeth would become Thane of Cawdor, came instantly true, so now Macbeth believes he can have all the witches suggest simply by wishing it and believing it to be true: “Chance may crown me, without my stir” (1.3.143-44, qtd. Favila 8).

The irony that Macbeth seeks guidance from these witches who, in reality, advise nothing, is especially present in Macbeth’s second interaction with the witches out on the moors. While Macbeth journeys to meet the witches, he rides across sweeping moors that provide a distant view of the mountains. The vanishing point is far away and the air is clear. However, when Macbeth approaches the witches, the fog becomes thick and impenetrable, and the witches emerge from the clouds. The irony in this scene is clear; Macbeth seeks out the witches to learn Truth, yet they are surrounded by uncertainty. That Macbeth places so much trust in their words is dangerous, as evident in the extreme shift in the clarity of the vanishing point before and after Macbeth meets the witches. The visual irony continues as the scene shifts from the witches to Macbeth’s visions of the apparitions and the fallen soldiers from the opening battle. The scene is still filled with fog and uncertainty that draws questions about the Truth in the prophetic
statements uttered by the witches and the apparitions, but this time the vanishing point is blocked not only by fog but also by light. This is the first time the witches are accompanied by light as well as fog, showing that this is the first time Macbeth truly puts faith in what the witches have to say. Before departing, Macbeth says, “More shall they [the witches] speak; for now I am bent to know, By the worst means, the worst” (3.4.133-4). Macbeth turns to the witches as a source of knowledge, and even though he acknowledges that they are not the ideal source of Truth (“the worst means”), he still places faith in their prophecies. Additionally, the witches strengthen their appearance of Truth by appealing to a higher power. They demand of Macbeth, “Say, if thou'dst rather hear it from our mouths, Or from our masters”, implying that there is a greater force, divine or at least supernatural, that gives them their knowledge (4.1.77-8). This further convinces Macbeth that what they say is true. However, despite his faith that the witches’ prophecies will lead him to Truth, he fails to see the equivocation in each of their statements. Macbeth’s faith is in his own interpretation of the prophecies, not in the Truth they actually convey. This is shown by the visual irony that the presence of light in this scene is not clarifying but blinding. Though the things the witches say are technically true, placing faith his own interpretation of these double-sided Truths actually blinds Macbeth from seeing the danger in them.
In Macbeth’s second encounter with the witches, he sees visions of soldiers on an open field, with the view of the horizon impeded by fog and light. This scene emphasizes the enigmatic nature of Truth that influences all of Macbeth’s actions.

The visual irony and the blinding nature of the witches’ double-sided truths continues into Macbeth’s final battle with Macduff. The scene begins with Macbeth surveying the burning Birnam Wood and striving to reassure himself of his own safety. The scene is flooded with red light from the fire, preventing the viewer and Macbeth from seeing far beyond what is immediately in front of them. This, like the combination of fog and sunlight in the apparition scene, lends an air of chaos and uncertainty to the landscape. At this point, Macbeth has seen that part of the witches’ prophecy concerning his downfall has come true – Burnham Wood has indeed come to Dunsinane – but the other part, much like the landscape beyond the blinding red light and smoke, remains uncertain. The importance of this harsh scenery is emphasized by lines in Shakespeare’s text that are cut from the dialogue in the film. The action that follows involves Macbeth killing enemy soldiers without speaking to them, but in Shakespeare’s text, a character called Young Seward approaches Macbeth and engages him in conversation. The Young Seward asks Macbeth’s name, saying, “thou call’st thyself a hotter name than any is in hell” (5.7.7). Macbeth provides his name and the Young Seward responds, “The devil himself could not pronounce a title more hateful to mine ear” (5.7.9). Here, this minor character reveals how far Macbeth has fallen due to his intensely misguided actions. The outside world sees him as a devil from hell. Kurzel cuts these lines, but captures the same feeling of Macbeth’s descent to hell by filling the scene with fire, smoke, and red light. The scene itself looks and feels like hell, and Macbeth commandeers the battlefield like he is its king. This hellish atmosphere is again emphasized by a line present in both the text and the film, when Macduff cries, “Turn, hell-
hound, turn”, summoning Macbeth to battle (5.10.3). Just as hell confines to sinner to endless, inescapable torment, this hellish scenery confines Macbeth to the fate he perceives as his own, prescribed by the witches.

When killing the Young Seward and going into battle, Macbeth cries,

“They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly,
But, bear-like, I must fight the course. What's he
That was not born of woman? Such a one
Am I to fear, or none” (5.7.1-4).

Macbeth reveals that, at this moment, he believes he is inescapably tied to the witches’ prophesied path for him, but that he still holds his own interpretation of their words to be Truth. If it is possible for one of the prophecies’ impossibilities to come true, it should be inferred that they are all possible. Yet, Macbeth still reads them the way he wishes to – as omens of his invincibility. Here, Macbeth accepts two Truths simultaneously. He trusts that the witches are right that he is invincible, but he also knows that the witches’ prophecies can come true in exactly the way they are worded. When Macduff arrives, this paradoxical relationship with Truth becomes problematic for Macbeth. Kurzel’s Macbeth fights fiercely and confidently, showing his faith in the possibility of his victory and in his own interpretation of Truth. Macbeth nearly kills Macduff, holding him at knifepoint, but when Macduff reveals the Truth that he “was from his mother's womb Untimely ripp'd,” Macbeth freezes even though he is on the brink of victory (5.11.15-16). The scene is shot very close to Macbeth and Macduff’s faces, limiting view of anything but them, and the scene is still filled with the red light creates an almost immediate vanishing point. By limiting Macbeth’s vanishing point to what is immediately in front of him – to the face of “he that was not born of woman” – Kurzel shows how limited Macbeth has become
by harboring faith not only his own interpretation of the witches’ prophecy, but also in their literal fulfillment. As soon as he hears that Macduff is the man the witches spoke of, he says, “I’ll not fight with thee,” and essentially lets Macduff kill him (5.11.22). Here, the literal Truth of the witches’ prophecy comes to fruition. Macbeth’s denials of what he knows is True are over; he gives in to his fate, realizing the Truth that he refused to see. Despite his efforts to sway the future otherwise, Macbeth is unable to see another reality other than the one presented by the witches. As Sanders writes, “he persists in regarding the future as pre-ordained and Fate as his master” (Sanders qtd. Scott 172). Macbeth’s blind faith in what he sees as Truth, as symbolized by the blinding light and near vanishing point in the scene, limits his ability to see actual Truth and leads to his downfall.

*Macbeth holds Macduff at knifepoint, just before he gives himself up to the witches’ prophecy. The red light all around limits Macbeth’s line of sight, and places his vanishing point immediately in front of him.*

The blinding red light and limited perspective caused by taking witches’ prophecy to be a chosen version of Truth is echoed in the final scene of the film. The final shots change between Banquo’s son, Fleance, and Malcolm, the new king of Scotland, as they find themselves in
parallel situations of potentiality. Both Fleance and Malcolm hold swords – Fleance’s is that of the dead king, and Malcolm’s is that of the new king. This parallel shows that they both have a claim to the throne, one because of the witches’ prophecy (which many in the play take to be Truth) and one because of rightful inheritance (which seems to be the more apparent Truth). This further parallels the conflict between Macbeth, who claimed the crown due to the prophecy, and Duncan, who was rightfully king. This parallel alone is enough to shed light on some of Macbeth’s lines from earlier in the play. In Act 1, Scene 7, Macbeth says, “We still have judgement here, that but teach bloody instructions which, being taught, return to plague th’inventor” (1.7.8-10). Early on in the play, Macbeth sees the potential for the vicious cycle he initiates by murdering Duncan to continue, and the final scene of the film foreshadows the possibility that Macbeth’s suspicions will come true. To make the parallel more concrete, Kurzel uses the same extremely near vanishing point for both Fleance and Malcolm. Fleance’s vanishing point is influenced by the same red light and hellish landscape that limited Macbeth’s line of sight in the battle scene. All Fleance is able to see is Macbeth’s slumped body and his abandoned sword, all shrouded in smoke and flattened by the red light. Malcolm’s vanishing point is also extremely near, though on first glance it may not seem so. While Fleance’s vanishing point is so near due to the closeness of the smoke and pervasiveness of the light, Malcolm’s vanishing point is so close to him due to the closeness of the walls. It is fitting that Malcolm is trapped and limited by the walls of the throne room itself, as earlier in the play he states that he hardly wants to be king. In conversation with Macduff, Malcolm claims to have “scarcely…coveted what was mine own,” implying his lack of desire for the throne (4.3.128). In his final scene, he cannot see beyond the walls of the throne room, and the only view out the door is blocked by a beam of light, showing how he too will be blinded and limited by the effects of the witches’ prophecies.
Though Malcom’s scene appears to be clearer, his line of sight is equally limited. Because the vanishing points in both scenes are so near, the amount that is unknown is great. Both Fleance and Malcolm are existing in a state of potentiality at this moment. They are placed on the precipice of action and surrounded by uncertainty, making their path forward unclear. This potentiality is so apparent at this point in the film because Kurzel has already shown the double nature of the witches’ prophecies that are now working upon Fleance and Malcolm; it is evident that there is not one particular path they can take, and that there is not one definitive understanding of Truth to guide them. However, because both Fleance and Malcolm are blinded by the light and near vanishing points in their respective scenes, Kurzel implies that they will be as bound and blinded by their interpretations of the witches’ prophecies as Macbeth was. Kurzel uses these near vanishing points and blinding light to show uncertainty in the future, as well as the limiting of perspective of Truth that faith in the witches’ prophecy causes.

Fleance, like Macbeth, is blinded by the red light and limited by the witches’ prophecy.
Kurzel’s use of light to create near vanishing points and limited lines of sight also says something about the witches’ prophecies and their relationship to the interpretation of Truth. As mentioned in the above paragraphs, faith in the witches’ prophecies bound Macbeth to a certain course of action and limited his ability to see beyond that one interpretation of Truth. What Macbeth once saw as “happy prologues to the swelling act of the imperial course” become, in fact, limiting and destructive (1.3.126-128). Prophecy is often tied to enlightenment, light, and revelation of Truth. It implies seeing into the future and gaining further insight and knowledge. The witches’ prophecy, however, does just the opposite. Despite the fact that what they say is technically true, the prophecies do not give enlightenment and insight; instead, they limit possibilities for understanding and bind the hearers to certain destructive courses based on their interpretation of the true statements the witches make. Because the prophecies are actually true, Kurzel still symbolically ties them to light. An abundance of light and Truth, ironically in this case, creates blindness rather than sight: Macbeth’s failure (and Fleance’s and Malcolm’s implied future failure) to correctly interpret the prophecies and his complete trust that his interpretation of Truth is the correct one creates blindness to other possibilities rather than
valuable insight into the future. The blinding light in the apparition scene, symbolizing Macbeth’s unquestioning faith in his understanding of Truth, prevents him from seeing the equivocation that lurks in the witches’ words. The prophecy as well as the red light limit Macbeth’s sight in the battle with Macduff and lead to his downfall. The two work together for Fleance as well, foreshadowing that he will be bound to an incorrect interpretation of truth and a prescribed and predicted course of action, preventing him from seeing other options or other interpretations of Truth. Malcolm is similarly blinded by light rather than enlightened, because it is the beam of light that blocks his view out of the door. He too is limited by the witches’ prophecy, though because the vanishing point in the final scene leaves so much to the unknown and poises the ending on the brink of so much potentiality, it is unclear what the outcome of this bloody cycle will be.
Works Cited

