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What bloody film is this? *Macbeth* for our time

Abstract: When Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* hit the screens in 1971, its bloody imagery, pessimism, violence and nudity were often perceived as excessive or at least highly controversial. While the film was initially analysed mostly in relation to Polanski's personal life, his past as a WWII child survivor and the husband of the murdered pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, in retrospect its bleak imagery speaks not only for his unique personal experience but also serves as a powerful comment on the American malaise, fears and paranoia that were triggered, amongst other things, by the brutal act of the Manson Family. We had to wait forty four years for another mainstream adaptation of the play and it is tempting not only to compare Kurzel's *Macbeth* to its predecessor in terms of how more accepting we have become of graphic depictions of violence on screen but also to ask a more fundamental question: if in future years we were to historicise the new version, what would it tell us about the present moment? The paper proposes that despite its medieval setting and Scottish scenery, the film's visual code seems to transgress any specific time or place. Imbued in mist, its location becomes more fluid and evocative of any barren and sterile landscape that we have come to associate with war. Seen against a larger backdrop of the current political climate with its growing nationalism and radicalism spanning from the Middle East, through Europe to the US, Kurzel's *Macbeth* with its numerous bold textual interventions and powerful mise-en-scène offers a valid response to the current political crisis. His ultra brutal imagery and the portrayal of children echo Polanski's final assertion of perpetuating violence, only this time, tragically and more pessimistically, with children as not only the victims of war but also its active players.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Polanski, Kurzel, mise-en-scène, children, politics, location, conflict, Brexit, ISIS.

When Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* hit the screens in 1971, its bloody imagery, pessimism, violence and nudity were often perceived as excessive or at least highly controversial, earning it an 'X' rating. While the film was initially analysed mostly in relation to Polanski's personal life, his past as a WWII

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child survivor and the husband of his murdered pregnant wife, Sharon Tate,¹ in retrospect its bleak imagery speaks not only for the director's unique personal experience but also serves as a powerful comment on the American malaise, fears and paranoia of the time that were triggered, amongst other things, by the brutal act of the Manson Family. For Polanski it was a strictly personal loss. For the Hollywood community, however, it meant an end to a happy/hippie era and the beginning of a new one with people locking their doors at night and looking at strangers with distrust. 60s counterculture literally ended on that fateful night. As Deanne Williams observes, "For Polanski's personal tragedy was a potent symbol that heralded the end of the sixties" (153). Seen together with other prominent English-language titles of the time, *Macbeth* seemed to symbolise the beginning of some "dark ages" to come, which Polanski epitomised quite literally by depicting medieval Scotland, but other films of the era addressed as well through their focus on a thin line between good and evil. Polanski's *Macbeth* is therefore just as much a period piece offering "a wide-ranging meditation upon the larger political and social events of the sixties" (Williams 146) as are such prominent American and British productions as *Dirty Harry* (1971), *The Godfather* (1972), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Performance* (1970), *Get Carter* (1971) and *The Wicker Man* (1973), to mention a few.

We had to wait forty four years for another mainstream adaptation of the play and it is tempting to compare Kurzel's *Macbeth* to its predecessor in terms of how more accepting we have become of graphic depictions of violence on screen. Viewed from our post-Tarantino era's perspective, Polanski's work, initially criticised for its high levels of brutality, no longer raises eyebrows. Its profusion of blood stems as much from Polanski's experiences as it takes cue from Shakespeare's own bloody imagery. Kurzel's violence, though quite graphic in detail, appears more stylised and aestheticised by comparison. It follows in the footsteps of Zack Snyder's *300* (2006), a Hollywood adaptation of a comic series, which also depicts battle sequences in slow motion as if to suggest, as Manohla Dargis of *New York Times* aptly notices: "that there's a timeless aspect to this slaughter and, perhaps by extension, an inevitability to such violence."

Whereas numerous reviewers point to this and other visual effects in an attempt to trace Kurzel's artistic heritage,² they leave a more fundamental question unanswered: if in future years we were to historicise the new *Macbeth*,

¹ Deanne Williams addresses this tendency in her article "Mick Jagger Macbeth" in *Shakespeare Survey* Vol. 57 (2002) dedicated to the play and its afterlives.

² For example, Manohla Dargis mentions *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Matrix* as influences. Mark Kermode in his review for *The Observer* sees the affinities with *300* (2015) and Leslie Felperin compares it to *Game of Thrones* in a review for *The Hollywood Reporter* (2015).

what would it tell us about our present moment? The paper tries to provide an answer to this question by focusing on two aspects of Kurzel's adaptation. First, it analyses Kurzel's mise-en-scène not only in an effort to trace its artistic lineage but also to show how despite its medieval setting, Scottish scenery and apparent historical accuracy, the film's visual code offers a possibility to read it in a twofold way: symbolically, as it seems to transgress any specific time or place, and as a more specific reference to the current political crisis. Second, the film's most powerful and dominant theme is discussed in support of the latter interpretation of the mise-en-scène. Children provide it with a visual frame and become a driving force for the protagonists' actions. Both Kurzel's landscape and his emphasis on the motif of children and violence open up the film to more radical readings and situate this version of *Macbeth* quite firmly in the discussions about contemporary political crisis spanning from the Middle East, through Europe and beyond. Thus, this paper takes issue with Lars Kaaber's statement in his book *Murdering Ministers* that Kurzel's *Macbeth* has "few moral or political messages to convey" (xix).

A short synopsis of Kurzel's film will help picture its overall atmosphere and thematic preoccupations. The film opens with a funeral of the Macbeths' toddler on a heath. The grieving couple together with just a handful of mourners are being watched by the witches from a distance. Macbeth then prepares a young boy soldier for combat. The youth together with numerous others dies on the battlefield, leaving Macbeth victorious but shaken. The battle is observed by the three witches with a small girl and an infant who then approach Macbeth and Banquo with their prophecy. When the king visits Macbeth's humble dwellings to thank him for the victory, Macbeth, persuaded by his wife, decides to take his life. On the way to the king's tent, he is handed a dagger by the ghost of the dead boy soldier, urging him to take action. After Macbeth brutally kills Duncan, Malcolm enters the tent, sees the carnage and flees. Following Duncan's murder, the couple's mental disintegration progresses quickly. Banquo is murdered in front of Fleance, who escapes into the woods aided by the girl witch. Macbeth's growing cruelty culminates in his order to burn Macduff's wife and children at the stake. Lady Macbeth's remorse and grief grow proportionately to his violence. Distraught, she talks to another one of her deceased children in a chapel and then is last seen dead in her bed. During the final battle Macbeth keeps seeing the apparition of the dead boy soldier. He lets Macduff deliver a fatal blow towards the end of the duel. Prophecy fulfilled, the witches, who have been watching the fight from afar, leave the battlefield. Fleance picks up Macbeth's sword and runs towards the setting sun. In a parallel motion, the young Malcolm leaves the throne room as if to meet the challenge.

Kurzel's work is visually striking due to its colour pattern which alternates between cold blue and grey and saturated red and orange. The contrast is powerful and the film hardly ever offers anything in-between. During the first

battle sequence predominantly shot in the cold blue palette, soldiers appear to emerge from a mist which entombs them, giving them an eerie and ghost-like quality. The fog also creates another effect. It turns the location of the action into a place lacking concrete and tangible substance. Even though Kurzel has repeatedly emphasised in interviews that he brought *Macbeth* back to where it belongs, meaning Scotland,³ the end result is that we see a netherland populated by ghost-like figures. The soldiers' identical black war face painting and beards prevent easy recognition or differentiation. Ghost-like, almost faceless, the two armies emerge from the mist and immediately collide and blend in the first one-to-one physical combat. The difference between the two sides of the conflict becomes blurred as we cannot say with any certainty who is the winner and who is the loser ("when the battle's lost and won") but, more importantly, who is on the right and who is on the wrong side of this war ("fair is foul and foul is fair").

Thanks to its fluid character and colour scheme, Kurzel's 11th century Scotland comes to represent any location characterised by never-ending conflict. This can be further shown on the basis of the second equally powerful colour motif that one does not typically associate with the Scottish landscape. After the opening scene showing the funeral of the Macbeths' child, we read an inscription about a civil war raging in Scotland, which is supposed to pin the action down to this one specific location. However, the imagery that follows seems to give "Scotland" from the film a more metaphorical dimension. In the next wide shot we see a lonely figure set against a desert-like scarlet landscape (fig. 1).⁴



Fig. 1.

³ For example, when interviewed by Cassam Looch from HeyUGuys at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxcvzFth1Ho> or by Henry Northmore for *The List* at <https://film.list.co.uk/article/74987-interview-justin-kurzel-it-was-the-vision-of-michael-fassbender-as-macbeth-that-first-intrigued-me/>.

⁴ All the images from the films are screen grabs publishable under Fair Dealing.

Even though the shot lasts approximately five seconds and is immediately superseded by the battle sequence filmed in cold grey and blue filter described above, the impact of this small fragment is undeniable. When placed between the two dark sequences, that of the funeral and the battle scene, it stands out and creates a lasting impact. Its purpose becomes clearer towards the end of the film when similar imagery is repeated again with Birnam wood moving towards the Macbeths' castle in the form of floating red ash from the burning trees. The red setting thus functions as a foreshadowing device with the lonely figure, probably Macbeth, from the opening frame already anticipating his own bloody end at the film's closing as well as playing the role of a framing device (fig. 2, fig. 3).



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

Moreover, whereas the saturated red and orange may also be a visual tribute to Polanski's pre-credit sequence which starts with a wide shot of a desolate landscape immersed in red, purple and pink of the glowing sunrise, it may just well reference other, perhaps more surprising, titles including *Apocalypse Now* (1979) (fig. 4), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) (fig. 5) and the opening sequence of *The Exorcist* (1973) set in Iraq (fig. 6). In the case of the first example,



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

it alludes to the carnage of war. In the last two, the red burning sun becomes a visual attribute of the desert, identifying the location as “somewhere in the Middle East.”

Thus, the film’s Scottish and medieval location extends and expands via its visual referencing and colour pattern to encompass other similarly coded war films but also the geopolitical region which is in the thralls of war. Through its subtle visual allusion to the imagery we have come to associate with the Middle East, it is a painful reminder that what we watch is not just 11th century Scotland whose internal disputes we can observe with curious detachment but something much larger and at the same time closer to home, a conflict that touches us all and knows no geographical or national borders.

Whereas Polanski’s version offered the viewer some relief by presenting normal everyday life activities, laughter and play, Kurzel’s landscape does not feature such frivolous behaviour. As Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* notices: “The movie never entirely quits the battlefield (‘heath’ is replaced with ‘battlefield’ in one early tinkering with the text) above which the air finally becomes blood red in a dusty fog of war – a Scots Outback, maybe.” Anthony Lane of *The New Yorker* expresses a similar opinion, noticing the omission of Duncan’s line about the Macbeths’ castle being “a pleasant seat” with delicate air or that of the porter: “The problem is not that Kurzel cuts the words, which is his absolute right, but that he destroys the conditions from which they might conceivably have sprung. We need *some* reminder, however fleeting, that there was a time when the natural order prevailed.” He then concludes: “Kurzel is weaving a nightmare, and nothing is permitted, in the heroine’s phrase, to peep through the blanket of the dark.”

Indeed, Kurzel’s vision is probably the darkest of all *Macbeth* adaptations we have seen so far. It belongs to the post 9/11 world whose media landscape has been perpetually bombarded by the news of war and terrorist attacks in Syria, Turkey as well as major European cities from Berlin, Brussels, and Paris to London and Manchester. Even though it was made in 2015, its pessimism seems to be a response to the growing divides and spread of nationalism and radicalism affecting America and Europe where the idea of wall building has literally won the day as right-wing politicians promise to safeguard their nations from alien invaders. In this regard, it is useful to address one more aspect of Kurzel’s visuals although this time moving on to its paratextual rather than textual aspect. A poster designed for 2015 *Macbeth* is particularly interesting in the context of the politics of location. While it clearly alludes to the poster for Polanski’s adaptation (fig. 8) as in both we can discern the shape of Great Britain, the 2015 poster explores the idea of divides more poignantly with Fassbender’s face pointing left towards The Hebrides, and Cotillard’s face pointing right towards Europe (fig. 7). The map shows a country split by war, which is symbolised by the couple who are torn in pain, looking in opposite



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.

directions, clearly facing an imminent divorce. Marion Cotillard's presence in the film introduces an interesting dynamics. Being a foreigner in a strange land gives her character more vulnerability and her actions more urgency. We can also analyse her in the context of European women who have travelled to war zones (see: Syria) to meet, accompany and marry contemporary "warriors" to then shockingly discover that their levels of cruelty was more than what they had bargained for. The image does not just reflect the content of Kurzel's *Macbeth* but seems to represent the current political situation in Europe with its growing divisions. The map of the conflict-torn Great Britain is a post-Brexit Britain with Scotland being pro EU and France seen as the last bastion of hope in the process of a possibly spreading European disintegration. This is interesting in the context of the recent French presidential elections and the pro-European Macron's hard position on Brexit, suggesting a tough future divorce.

Discussing Kurzel's film and Shapiro's book *The Year of Lear* in May 2016 before the results of the Brexit referendum, Todd Landon Barnes commented:

Today, as we remember last year's Scottish Referendum and await the Brexit Referendum this June, European unions may seem shakier than ever. Shapiro's book informs current debates when he narrates how King James spent 1606

similarly frustrated by his unsuccessful attempts to unite the kingdoms of Scotland and England as “Great Britain.” This was the year Shakespeare’s plays became distinctly “British,” rather than “English,” as he and his fellow players joined James’s political architects in rewriting, performing, and plotting a distinctly British history.

Rather ironically, then, Kurzel chooses *Macbeth*, which originally served as a tool in the process of unification and was meant to be King James I’s pleaser, to show a country in the state of a mounting disintegration. Even though the film came out a year before the Brexit vote, its pessimism almost prophetically foreshadowed the results of the referendum which showed divisions not only within the “united” Kingdom of Britain, but also within the “united” Europe. Last but not least, the map of Britain discernible in the poster comes significantly in the shape of individuals to bring home the idea that behind grand schemes of politicians often performed in the name of and for the sake of nations there lies personal suffering and that every tragedy has a human face.

Despite the fact that Kurzel’s *Macbeth* takes place in Scotland, it manages to create an impression of an never-ending conflict spreading like a virus, affecting everyone involved, men, women and, as the film purports, especially children. The opening image shows a close-up of the Macbeths’ dead toddler (fig. 9). Even though we do not know the cause of the child’s death, the shot recalls images of innocent war casualties in Syria whose little bodies are dressed in white and adorned with green leaves (fig. 10).



Fig. 9. (“The innocent casualties of civil war: 320 dies in Syria massacre”).



Fig. 10.

The camera then cuts to reveal the grieving parents together with just a handful of mourners, standing in the middle of an unwelcoming and harsh landscape with a merciless wind blowing from every direction. It seems like a hostile environment to bring up a family where loss is common and life precarious. The Macbeths’ grief informs the protagonists’ actions as they try to give meaning to their life and translate their pain into action. The decision to

murder Duncan thus stems from their personal tragedy. In her book *Precarious Life*, Butler asks a fundamental question “whether the experiences of vulnerability and loss have to lead straightaway to military violence and retribution” (xii). She develops the notion of precarity and grievable lives in her next book *Frames of War* in which she discusses the function of military power used to “maximise precariousness for others while minimising it for the power in question” (25). The Macbeths seem to operate according to this mechanism. They appear to have lost more than one child. We see one buried and another one appears in Lady Macbeth’s hallucinations. Instead of her famous “sleepwalking scene,” she is depicted talking to her dead child (who appears to have died from smallpox) to emphasise her growing mental distress (“Wash your hands. Put on your nightgown. Look not so pale. To bed.”). Claire Hansen is of the opinion that a great number of children in this version of *Macbeth* derives from Shakespeare’s text since “*Macbeth* is a play famously preoccupied with succession—and of course, with the interruption or disturbance of primogeniture. Justin Kurzel’s recent film adaptation of *Macbeth* (2015) hones in on this concern by highlighting the role of children amidst its bloody, dramatic landscape.” I wish to propose that instead of the term “succession” the word “survival” fits Kurzel’s version more with the focus on the theme of children in the context of their parents’ desperate attempt to provide them with security and a shelter from war. Significantly, during the uprising, Duncan and his son Malcolm are shown safe in their tent. They do not fight but wait for the news from the battlefield. Seeing how precarious life is if you are not in the possession of the crown motivates the Macbeths to seek protection for their future offspring even at the price of other lives.

In contrast to the play and Polanski’s version, Lady Macbeth knows of Macbeth’s plans to murder Macduff’s wife and children and even tries to stop him, saying “What’s done cannot be undone”—a line lifted from her “sleepwalking scene.” She is then forced to watch Macduff’s wife and children burned at the stake in a gruesome public spectacle of death. Macbeth himself sets Macduff’s wife and children on fire. This becomes a turning point for Cotillard’s Lady Macbeth, who seeing the deaths of other children begins to regard all lives as “grievable” and hence “valuable” (Butler, *Frames*, 25). She acknowledges “precariousness as a shared condition” (28). In Polanski’s adaptation, the murder is secret and performed in Macduff’s castle away from public view and scrutiny.

Unless they are related to the king, older children in the film are not protected from war but are forced to participate in combat as shown in the scenes following the funeral. Straight from the burial Macbeth and Banquo are on the battlefield tying swords to the forearms of young teenage soldiers who are too small and weak to even hold weapons. Macbeth coaches a boy soldier who in the film represents his son’s alter-ego. During the brutal battle sequence, the

boy's throat is slit, which is shown in slow motion to ensure that this image becomes imprinted in the viewer's memory. The dead boy then haunts Macbeth, who appears to suffer from PTSD and sees him in every crucial moment from the scene with the dagger, which in this version is passed on to Macbeth by the teenager, to the final moments of Macbeth's life. The recurrent image of the dead boy highlights Macbeth's fragile state of mind—he is a product of war as Kurzel and Fassbender claim in numerous interviews.⁵ More importantly, however, the boy soldier's numerous appearances serve to emphasise the cruelty of war with children as its unwilling participants and victims.

Macbeth opens with the shot of a dead child and closes with the shot of Banquo's son, Fleance, who grabs Macbeth's sword and is shown running away from the camera into a blood-shot red landscape. This movement is cross-cut with Malcolm's identical run towards the red light at the end of the hall in his castle, thus implying that they are two adversaries who will eventually meet and clash. Banquo's issue has been promised the crown. Yet it is difficult to read if Fleance's actions are motivated by that prophecy or simply because he is aware that Malcolm is after him just as Macbeth was and so he is preparing his defence. The film comes full circle as the death at the beginning is matched by the anticipation of yet more deaths to come. Polanski also shows a circular nature of violence by offering a surprising twist at the end of his adaptation with Donalbain seeking the witches in the hope of getting the crown from his brother, Malcolm. As pessimistic as that finale is, it is surpassed by Kurzel's depiction of children fighters.

Again, it seems fitting to draw parallels between the ubiquitous presence of children in the film whose life is at constant risk and the current situation in the Middle East. The film was released in 2015 which saw an unprecedented until then number of 14 million children impacted by conflict in Syria and Iraq then entering its fifth year. Since then many vulnerable children have regularly fallen prey to ISIS recruitment strategies becoming the youngest army of children fighters, serving as couriers, spies, soldiers or even suicide bombers. As UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake claims: "For the youngest children, this crisis is all they have ever known. For adolescents entering their formative years, violence and suffering have not only scarred their past; they are shaping their futures. [...] As the crisis enters its fifth year, this generation of young people is still in danger of being lost to a cycle of violence—replicating in the next generation what they suffered in their own." Reading these words, it is hard

⁵ For example, Fassbender compares him to soldiers coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD during a press conference in Cannes 2015 while Kurzel mentions interviewing soldiers coming back "from recent wars" in preparation for the film (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2IyD0LGtnk>). Kurzel talks about Macbeth being the product of war in numerous interviews, for example in "*Macbeth* (2015) Behind the Scenes Movie Interview" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuIbKxpLXSA>).

not to see Kurzel's *Macbeth* as a timely reflection on and a response to this overwhelming crisis. Asked why he wanted to play Macbeth, Fassbender answered, "I did it for the kids. I wanted 15-year-olds to be excited about Shakespeare" (DVD commentary). It is unlikely that many 15-year-olds will be allowed to watch this version of the play on their own as it is 'R' rated. Still, Fassbender may have done something "for the kids" by taking part in the film that is a strong oppositional voice against violence against children.

If there is any safe zone present in Kurzel's dark universe, it is strangely associated with the secluded world of the weird sisters. Instead of three witches, we have three adult women, one girl and one infant. They are clearly on the outskirts of society, self-proclaimed outcasts, who find safety in their exclusion. Kurzel's witches are depicted observing events from a safe distance, serving more as the film's moral compass than its source of evil. Kurzel explains his approach to adapting Shakespeare's witches:

I wanted to ground them, so that they feel as though they could possibly be real travellers. That they had a kind of dignity, they felt more human. My inspiration came from a lot of travellers, and the idea that they were from the land rather than mystic beings. Just underplaying them, really. Also, I'm allowing them to traverse through the possibility that they're a figment of Macbeth's imagination—created from the shadows of war. Which is why we were interested in having them appear on the battlefield, perhaps as observers and watchers of his tragedy. (qtd. in Lambie)

They only get involved in the action directly once when the girl witch brings Fleance to safety, protecting him from the murderers. The women's wisdom is shown to be paying dividends as their offspring is spared in the otherwise male-dominated brutal world. With the image of the women constantly wondering around the barren Scottish landscape comes yet another association with war refugees without any permanent lodgings or stability. Even though the film shows an impressive castle (Bamburgh Castle shot on location in Northumberland), the film's landscape predominantly features humble dwellings and a little wooden church that looks more like a hut. According to Anthony Lane, what we see are "merely a gaggle of tents, pitched like nomads' dwellings in a bare land," which creates further associations with the current refugee crisis.

Conclusion

With hindsight, Polanski's *Macbeth* can be analysed not solely in the context of his personal life but also in the light of the Vietnam War, which as Sontag points out, was the first one "to be witnessed day after day by television cameras, introduced the home front to new tele-intimacy with death and destruction" (21).

One of the most powerful images that may have finally put an end to that conflict by causing an unprecedented public outcry was, as she calls it, “The signature Vietnam War horror-photograph from 1972, taken by Huynh Cong Ut, of children from a village that has just been doused with American napalm, running down the highway, shrieking with pain” (57). Kurzel’s Scotland is fluid and evocative of any barren and sterile landscape that we have come to associate with war. However, seen against a larger backdrop of the current political climate with its growing nationalism and radicalism spanning from the Middle East, through Europe to the US, this adaptation with its numerous bold textual interventions and powerful mise-en-scène also seems to be a valid response to the current political crisis. Its ultra-brutal imagery and the portrayal of children echo Polanski’s final assertion of perpetuating violence, only this time, tragically and more pessimistically, with children as not only the victims of war but also its active players.

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