

## ***Macbeth* (2015). Directed by Justin Kurzel**

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Kurzel's first film *Snowtown* (2011) tells the story of the serial killer John Bunting. There, James Vlassakis is led to participate in four of Bunting's murders. For Patterson (2011), the emotional truth in the film shows that "James's mental and moral drift towards murder feels utterly logical and explicable." Bestwick says *Snowtown* shines "a cold light on people [...] we normally don't like to think about." Yet, lately fiction has privileged serial killers and psychopaths due to their fascination (Gadhia-Smith, qtd. from Kane 2014). In Kurzel's *Macbeth*, the eponymous hero, Barnes says, is driven by post-traumatic stress disorder. Jones (2013) establishes how classic literature has accounted for stress combat. For him, Macbeth "suffered hallucinations and nightmares as he became overwhelmed with guilt after, with the aid of his wife, he devised and executed a plot to kill King Duncan." Fassbender has war scars. He is an emotionally damaged king scratching the castle floor with his knife. The film's end brings to the screen the traumatic realities of exclusion for soldiers who suffer PTSD. Macduff's taunting of Macbeth as a rare monster achieves new meaning here.

The film's cinematography, by Adam Arkapaw, features landscapes reminiscent of the bravura of *Braveheart*, Turner's landscapes or Scott's novels. The soundtrack and bleak atmosphere reveal an ominous determinism, hardship and pain. Fassbender's Macbeth is a chieftain who leads a small clan, very likely in charge of protecting the Scottish borders. The settlement inhabited by Macbeth's clan recalls a Western town, with improvised houses, a graveyard, small wooden cabins, and a small community church filled with relics, images of the Virgin Mary as well as iconographic

representations of Hell to which Lady Macbeth addresses the invocation speech.

The Macbeths pray even before killing Duncan. And he keeps vigil as he waits for the arrival of the English army. As a Christian warrior, Macbeth – together with Banquo, his right-hand man – takes care of the children and the young soldiers. They apply antiseptic war paint to the soldiers and work as deputy priests before the battle. Also, they heal the wounded after the victory. Before the battle begins, Macbeth demonstrates fondness for a young boy soldier, who will be killed. In fact, the boy soldier later reappears holding the dagger for Macbeth in the “dagger” speech. This invented character binds Macbeth’s journey to his war trauma and the effects of pervading violence. He materializes Macbeth’s hallucinations.

In order to convey this effectively, Kurzel spends a long section of the film shooting the battle of Ellon. Kurzel combines slow motion and normal speed in the clash with Macdonwald’s army. The scene may well be aimed at the so-called “X-box generation,” as Try-Hane (2015) says, who are used to 300 or *Gladiator*. Apart from Macbeth’s fighting skills, this section shows his experience of delirium in battle. The Witches appear like sympathetic entities who pity Macbeth because they know he is going to be tormented. A girl – perhaps a representation of Macbeth’s dead child – accompanies the Witches and gives an amulet to Macbeth. The eldest witch, a surprisingly attractive one, strokes Macbeth’s face and laments the disasters to come.

What I perceive, contrarily to Try-Hane (2015), is that the film does not justify Macbeth’s actions but explores how a “mind diseased” brings about its own destruction. Kurzel emphasizes Macbeth’s essential goodness and inability to handle his condition. Macbeth’s sickness is thematized through his strange behaviour and feverish voice. He rides in his night-gown barefoot, howls in triumph under the rain, jogs inside the castle, and so on. Lady Macbeth is clearly affected by the same sickness. For Lady Macbeth, her dead child is an essential source of pain, as we can perceive at the child’s burial at the beginning. She experiences visions as well as her husband. The sleepwalking scene turns into a soliloquy which takes place in the chapel. Her sleepwalking monologue is re-edited

and directly addressed close-up, a powerfully difficult, and brilliantly handled, exercise for a film actress.

Lady Macbeth's invocation speech is filled with inserts showing the handsome figure of Fassbender riding a horse. Following Polanski, Kurzel shows the regicide while the King's horses turn wild, as Ross's speech is delivered (2.4.14-18). Fassbender's muscular figure fits the portrayal of a man of action, capable of looking truly menacing with a little grin or just his mere presence. It is clear that the camera favours Fassbender's figure, specifically in the beautiful scene where, after murdering Duncan, the naked figure of Macbeth emerges out of the lake in search of cleansing and forgiveness, and he appeals to the audience for forgiveness with the frailty of his character when acting as sovereign.

The film deviates consistently from Shakespeare's play as it cuts, rearranges lines and invents new scenes. But *Macbeth* itself is a post-text of Holinshed's *Chronicles* and it tackles a range of issues prevalent in Shakespeare's period. Returning to eleventh-century Scotland, Kurzel engages in a dynamic relationship between Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Shakespeare's play and contemporary issues, such as the prevalence of PTSD which has caused concern after the Iraq and the Afghanistan wars (Nolan 2013; Howard 2016; etc.).

Kurzel uses Western and epic film conventions which often seem to turn the film into an extension of Ridley Scott or Gibson's cinematic repertoire rather than a piece of Jacobean drama. Particularly interesting in this sense are the persecutions of Banquo and Macduff's family in the woods and, also how Macbeth cuts off Macdonwald's head while we listen to the captain's speech voice-over. One of the greatest features of Fassbender and Cotillard's performances is their incapacity to truly hide their crimes. Malcom discovers Macbeth after having murdered Duncan. The hero gently poses his knife on Malcom's cheek. Holinshed also accounts for Macbeth's direct involvement in the murder of Macduff's family. So in the film this execution is carried out publicly due to Macduff's public challenge to the King's authority by leaving the banquet. In this scene, Fassbender delivers the "Bring me no more reports [...]" speech (5.3.1) to the crowds who watch the execution. Lady Macbeth, who has actually tried to persuade Macbeth not to take action against Macduff's family – she warns him: "Hell is murky. What's done cannot be undone" (5.1.36, 67-68) as he is giving the

orders to “seize upon Fife” (4.2.150) – shows genuine pity for Macduff’s wife and children and fights against her tears at that moment. Macbeth addresses her: “Why are you silent?,” which is truly part of the text, but it is originally used by Malcom after his confession to Macduff (4.3.137). Responding to Macbeth’s tyranny, Lady Macduff cries: “This tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues / Was once thought honest” (4.3.12-13). In this scene and the “Full of scorpions is my mind [...]” dialogue, Lady Macbeth truly discovers that she needs to take care of a sick man who is overwhelmed by impotence, sickness and remorse. Birnam Wood does not literally move by way of Malcom’s stratagem but by Macduff’s blunt instruction to burn the forest.

Appropriations of sections of the text, which at drama or film school would be common practice, may be regarded by purists as an attack on the text in this particular film. Yet it also demonstrates the immense flexibility of a text that can be employed in different contexts. The text is fragmented, transposed, rearranged, and even expanded at certain points. Many scenes are reorganized into micro-sequences, a fact that, following Orson Welles’ example, turns the play into a much more cinematographic visual narrative than the mere playtext would. Through exploration of intimate detail and brief captions it is possible to understand much more about Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s social world.

What I regard as the most interesting aspect of Fassbender’s performance is how, despite his obvious stature as a credible warrior, he seriously engages with Macbeth’s frail qualities. Fassbender truly explores Macbeth’s weakness as a failed leader, a failed monarch and a failed human being. Thus, pity for the hero is constantly built up. After Cotillard rejects her husband’s approach, she passionately kisses him and shows that she is not going to abandon him, despite her momentary rejection. The “Tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow [...]” speech (5.5.17-27) is followed by “I have forgotten the taste of fear [...]” (5.5.9-15). In contrast to many other productions, there is never a true separation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. By far the most moving section is Macbeth’s death. The athletic display expected in this final fight does not spare any visual excitement, including fist-fight, sword and shield clashing, a bit of martial arts, stabbing and some arm-breaking

Fassbender is agile and watchable in his handling of violence. In a final display, he thrusts his sword into the earth and is about to finish Macduff off by stabbing his face. Yet, the final discovery of Macduff's "untimely" birth weakens Fassbender completely. What is more interesting is how he is surrounded by everyone and how his enemies, his visions, his own people – the ones who used to be loyal to him – suddenly circle him, who, with tears in his eyes, makes a final attempt not to yield. Curiously, his resistance does not result in more fighting, but instead he invites Macduff to stab him in the stomach. This suicide grants Macbeth a more heroic status than other productions do, and his corpse is left kneeling on the battlefield. Malcom appropriates the line: "He's worth more sorrow" (5.9.17). Ross denies this by borrowing Seywards's line "He's worth no more" (5.9.17). Even if this may not sound very credible for the viewer, it helps establish sympathy for the hero.

Tears are purposely and constantly present within the frame. Children are deliberately employed to emphasize how the couple is damaged. The first scene shows the burial of Macbeth's child. Children are very often portrayed playing and fighting each other in order to test their strengths. One of their games consists of fighting for a garland, which – perhaps a bit too obviously – symbolizes how many warring men contest for the crown. Lady Macbeth's tears enkindle her performance in her sleepwalking monologue. Macbeth's regret is consciously shown through a single tear he weeps once he is King, a shattered King. All in all, the film appeals to the viewer's compassion for the heroes. Children, compassion and sickness definitely bring new light to the text, which is often left unexplored for the sake of larger geopolitical and socially pervasive issues.

As Collin states, textually speaking "the play itself has been stripped down to its carcass" (2015). It is mostly concerned with making a point about war sequels and the effects of violence and the environment on a man potentially driven to do good and care for others. The film is at fault in the fact that the vocal performances are not particularly interesting. Mostly, the speeches are said in the most realistic way possible, without much attention to stress, nuance or ambiguity. However, I would not even suggest that the RSC's house style is recommendable for this kind of film, where, considering the emphasis on atmosphere, environment and crudeness, it might seem

completely out of place. The predominant action-based and narrative style in the film can attract a wide audience, including teenagers and people unfamiliar with Shakespeare, and they may wish, following Weiss (2000, 17), to read the play afterwards. The film's deviation from the playtext is what makes it important. Firstly, it selects a very specific feature of the text – Macbeth's insanity – and explores it to the fullest, although this is done at the expense of a plethora of other elements in the play. Being part of the text, the PTSD motif does not just consist of jazzing Shakespeare up. Not many filmic *Macbeths* have actually shown much of Macbeth as one who was once thought honest. So I suggest it is high time to experience the refreshing view of a pious Macbeth who is affected by the effects of war. The film, undoubtedly, talks about war today as much as about the eleventh century.

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