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Anne-Lise Marin-Lamellet

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# Bringing “the Scottish Play” Back to Where It Belongs: Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth* (2015)

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- 1 The innumerable cinematic variations of *Macbeth* that come out each year as well as the wide range of genres used account for the universal appeal of the themes developed in the play and their relevance to contemporary societies.<sup>1</sup> So much so that some scholars (Rogers, 2004; Thornton Burnett, 2004; Piskorska, 2020; Lehmann, 2012; Maley & Neely, 2004) regularly ponder over whether “the Scottish play” has anything to do with Scottishness at all since its supposed national anchoring seems superseded by its tragic nature or its Shakespearian origin. Yet, as recalled by Joel Coen, director of the latest adaptation to date, “Shakespeare belongs to the world but comes from Britain” (Sampson, 2021), which explains why, running along the dehistoricised or deterritorialised theatrical then cinematic versions of the legendary Thane of Cawdor, there has been an alternate thread of “caledonianising *Macbeth*” (McArthur, 2001, pp. 12–39). However, when Australian director Justin Kurzel released his adaptation in 2015, he did not resort to the usual signifiers of Scottishness—i.e. the use of Tartanry for costumes<sup>2</sup> and settings—to emphasise the Scottish connection, a device that has been used with various, more or less ironic, intents in very different types of adaptations from Orson Welles’s *Macbeth* (1948) to Billy Morrisette’s *Scotland, PA* (2001). Instead, he made the choice of relocating or even reterritorialising (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) *Macbeth*, repeatedly stressing the importance he attached to shoot on location in his interviews (FilmIsNow, 2015; HeyUGuys, 2015; Into Film Clubs, 2015; Lambie, 2015), a choice that singles this version out since many of the most iconic cinematic versions by the likes of Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa or Roman Polanski (and now Joel Coen) were shot outside Scotland, some of which integrally in Californian studios. In his own words: “I don’t think it could have worked if I hadn’t done it in

Scotland, and put that world up on the screen.” (Lambie, 2015) Scenery and landscapes do play a paramount role in the film, and actually make up for the cuts and trimmed-down verses of the play. Far from being a mere attempt at luring younger, *Game of Thrones*-addicted generations as lamented by some critics (Gignac, 2015), they are part and parcel of the director’s bold treatment of the Shakespearian canon in a truly cinematic style, a film whose visual poetry substitutes for verbal poetry.<sup>3</sup> But, interestingly, this wish to re-historicise/territorialise and thereby renationalise *Macbeth* also testifies to the film’s aesthetic ambivalence for it is a “Scotland from elsewhere” that is presented here. With its blend of graphic, gory battle scenes and visceral, intimate moments, the film expresses its post-*Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995) Highlandism. Owing to its use of space and characters, the film has been interpreted as both a product of its time, with a more humane and less misogynous tone (Piskorska, 2020; Gignac 2015; Bradshaw, 2015b; Kermode, 2015; Behera & Dutta, 2016, p. 32), and an echo of various genres such as war films, the director himself having stressed the influence of the western and indirectly gangster genres on his work. Even though this attempt at reterritorialising *Macbeth* may show the increasing intricacies of local and global contexts of production and reception in cinema, the national level is not eschewed. Despite some substantial alterations, the film still partakes of what Colin McArthur once called the “Scottish Discursive Unconscious”, this “ensemble of images and stories about Scotland as a highland landscape of lochs, mists and castles inhabited by fey maidens and kilted men who may be both warlike and sensitive—which serves internationally to signify ‘Scottishness’” (2003, p. 6). What is more, in terms of adaptation, the director’s choice proves fruitful if only because the atmospheric and chthonian quality of the film’s exteriors also builds up the cosmic element present in the original play, giving a new spin through global culture to the age-old common tropes of Scotland as “a ‘Caledonia stern and wild’, a chilly and thinly-populated land of mountains and shaggy woods rather than ploughed fields, of barren moors and battlefields and grim fortresses rather than towns, villages and farms [...] with thunder, rain and hail as accompaniments” (Clarke, 1981, p. 32).

## “Hell is murky” (Act V, sc. 1):<sup>4</sup> Scotland, a rugged land for rugged men

- 2 Going counter to the numerous “dislocated” versions of *Macbeth* (Lehmann, 2012, pp. 231–51), Justin Kurzel’s film is based on the premise of reterritorialising the story (both in a geographical and cultural way) and so reasserting its Scottish roots. The director has often alluded to how he must have fought for his idea against reluctant producers (FilmIsNow, 2015, 6’20”), joining other artists for whom Scotland is “a country in which history breathes from the landscapes” (Ben Okri quoted by Riach, 2012, p. 120) and proving wrong those who think Scotland is “not Scotch enough” to shoot on location (McArthur, 2003, pp. 110, 118)<sup>5</sup> because it has become too “travelogue” or “touristy” (Maley & Neely, 2004, pp. 100–1). Caledonianising *Macbeth* is mostly achieved through the use of space, the film exteriorising most of the play and thus doing away with its potential stageyness. Unlike the play that sets a scene in Macduff’s castle in Fife (Act IV, sc. 2) or before the English king’s palace (Act IV, sc. 3), the only castle seen in the film is that of Dunsinane—ironically shot in Bamburgh, Northumberland—of which the spectator only gets to see Macbeth’s bedroom and the

banquet room that are most of the time bathed in darkness<sup>6</sup> and barely more comfortable than Glamis. Macbeth does not live in Inverness Castle (Act I, sc. 5) that “hath a pleasant seat” (Act I, sc. 6) but in a small village made of coarsely decorated wooden shacks and, before his coronation, he and his men spend most of their time in campsite tents between battles. All the key political meetings take place on scenic ridges, weather-beaten moors or on the beach near Dunsinane whereas in the play they take place in castles or palaces. Banquo’s murder occurs in a forest and not a park near the palace (Act III, sc. 3) and the only other interior scenes are those set in the cathedral that is almost as dark as the castle’s bedroom. The use of exteriors—mostly shot on the isle of Skye—is a way for the director to show what is described or reported in the play, notably the battles (Act I, sc. 2) and the murders of Duncan (Act II, sc. 1), the guards (Act II, sc. 3), and Lady Macduff (Act IV, sc. 2). It allows for the trimmed monologues as well as establishing a connection between landscapes and characters in a sort of reversed pathetic fallacy since characters do not project their emotional states onto their surroundings as much as they appear to be the product of their environment. Justin Kurzel explains how, despite the challenges of sound recording, shooting outdoors brings “groundedness” and “gives an earthiness that is quite unique to the verse but also to the storytelling” (FilmIsNow, 2015, 6’30”; see also Into Film Clubs, 2015, 15”). “That’s a big part of depicting the characters as well. When I chose to film in Scotland, and to really bring that landscape into the film, to have it part of the psychological context of the characters, was really exciting.” (Lambie, 2015) The audacious 10 minute-long wordless opening scene exemplifies how the “camera probes the anguished geography of human faces as they ritualistically prepare for battle or burial” (Lodge, 2015).

- 3 Most of the film is shot on the “gorse yellow” moor (Lodge, 2015), shrouded in fog or soaked with rain, swept by “hurricane grey” (ibid.) gale-force wind whose howling starts from the production credits—the “blasted heath” it is (Act I, sc. 3). With the addition of the recurrent motif of fire (the initial funeral pyre, the Macduff stake, the final battle during which Birnam wood is set ablaze rather than cut down as in Act V, sc. 4), Scotland appears in all its elemental forces. The use of desaturated colours or blue/grey filters accentuates the unforgiving conditions endured. These are not bucolic or even sublime Highlands whose recurring presence could be deemed gratuitous.<sup>7</sup> Even the scene in which Macbeth washes himself in a loch and reveals the magnificently chiselled torso of its star persona after the camera has panned over waterfalls is endowed with a symbolic cleansing value since it occurs after Duncan’s murder. Contrary to the play’s allusions to the pleasant summery air of Inverness (Act I, sc. 6: “The air / Nimble and sweetly recommends itself / Unto our gentle senses. // This gentle guest of summer [...] The air is delicate”), the film’s time frame seems to be forever *driech* winter, and unlike the famous Mel Gibson / *Braveheart* shot, the opening fast-moving helicopter shots of bens, ridges and lochs that stress the vast and beautiful aspect of the land (Butt, 2012, p. 173; McArthur, 2003, pp. 140–2), the film is punctuated by a series of long, static shots on snowy tops and overcast skies that dwarf characters when they do not simply obliterate them thereby insisting on their insignificance or at least inherent weakness.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, the film departs from the traditional association of domineering masculinity and landscapes in films like *Braveheart* and *Rob Roy* (Butt, 2012, pp. 170–1) in which the viewpoint on the Highlands is revealed to be that of the hero. Here, these unusual establishing shots convey some form of omniscience if not immanence. The opening shot on a dead child’s funeral

echoes the Hobbesian nasty, brutish and short quality of these lives in such an environment. The brutal deeds committed to access and remain in power may be seen as a mirror effect of the harshness of the climate. Beheading a traitor to then casually throw his wrapped up head to the king’s suitor, burning an enemy’s relatives on the stake, piling up corpses of fellow soldiers after a battle in a mass grave that immediately get eaten by dogs are all in a day’s work. The way the soldiers are shot stresses their intrinsic bond with nature as if they emerged from the earth and went back into it when they die. Characters are sometimes presented in over-the-shoulder shots that open onto the surrounding landscape, or they are shot from the waist up for a similar effect. Their clothes and their war paint blend them into the environment but the intentional camouflage techniques used by soldiers is nevertheless also to be interpreted as a symbiosis. The track-shot over the line of soldiers who lie half-buried to try to protect themselves from the gale gives the impression they are eaten up alive. Significantly enough, when the treacherous Thane of Cawdor is executed, the editing cuts from the archers to a long shot of the untroubled landscape; Macbeth first emerges from the fog and when he is eventually slain by Macduff, he is not beheaded so that his head can be stuck to a pole (Act V, sc. 9) but he falls onto himself, crouching, kneeling, tilting his head forward as if he was about to coil into the earth. Dunsinane itself looks engulfed by the ashes and heavy black smoke caused by the burning Birnam woods. These scenes relate to the director’s intention:

But that was a big part of it—to make the characters feel exposed to those conditions and environments. At times, maybe it feels like the characters are trying to shelter themselves from that landscape and protect themselves, but then other times they’re giving into it. [...] I liked the idea of these characters living on the land, and [at] times almost being eaten by it. (Lambie, 2015)

- 4 The elemental visual aspect of the landscape is underlined by the soundscape. The howling of the wind is only disrupted by the sound and fury of the battles mingling war cry roaring, claymores clattering, flesh tearing apart, “faces meatily pummelled, bones crunchily broken and throats spurtingly sliced” (Kermode, 2015) although these scenes can also give way to silent slow-motion frames of mixed martial art fighters looking like a *danse macabre*. The music is kept to a minimum, which is unusual for a kind of action-film blockbuster. The main theme is a cello drone “set at a needlingly low, industrial hum throughout” (Lodge, 2015) that furthers the rawness and haunting quality of the place. “The score from the director’s brother, Jed Kurzel, adds to the pervasive feeling of unease; string-heavy and rather rustic, it enhances the eeriness of both the prophecies of the witches and the lingering of the dead.” (Lemire, 2015)
- 5 Together with the use of landscapes, the caledonianising of *Macbeth* is felt through the representation of early Christianity in a Celtic land and a decidedly thaneish, male Scotland. Colin McArthur (2001, pp. 15–6, 21, 25) explains that there have been Celtic and Teutonic versions of *Macbeth* that especially translate into the choice of clothes and props. Macbeth was once called “the last champion of Scotland’s Celtic identity” (Maley & Neely, 2004, p. 104) and Celticity, despite the conspicuous absence of tartan (except maybe one plaid blanket at 1h11’50” brought by Lennox and then worn by Macbeth like a sort of fly plaid at 1h12’13”), remains a bedrock of the early medieval society depicted in the film. Everyday clothes are simple, soft and plain, with Lion Rampant embroidery featuring on some of the thanes’ sashes. War clothes are layers of quilted fabric and leather, not chainmail or plated armours typical of the Norman-French and worn by some of the English soldiers in the final battle. Unlike later-set

period pieces, the Highlanders’ beards are shaggy but their hair is short (and reminiscent of a modern-day crew cut) to better reveal the war paint used by these soldiers, three vertical black stripes, that echoes the woad used by ancient Celts and Picts.<sup>9</sup> The soundtrack features no Celtic music or bagpipes but the village children sing a song in Gaelic in Duncan’s honour, as if the country was in a state of diglossia. The country is also presented like a syncretic combination of Christian and pagan rites and customs. Although many men are seen praying before the battle of Ellon that opens the film, Scotland still appears as a semi-heathen land. There are a few crosses (not Celtic) near the village of Glamis that look like a cemetery but they are wreathed with heather to link them to the moor, and funeral pyres remain the norm both for Macbeth’s child and his soldiers. The stones he places on their eyes before claspings their hands on their chests (sometimes holding a sword) are reminiscent of Greek mythology as well as Hebrew traditions (Lougheed, 2017).<sup>10</sup> Soldiers are seen praying or kissing a cross before fighting but they seem to have been forsaken and the most devout Christian, Macduff, is poorly rewarded for his staunch faith since his family is burnt alive by Macbeth, “the fiend of Scotland” in a country where witches are not considered a heresy.

- 6 The view of religion is quite iconoclastic. Besides the obvious corrupt nature of the bishops that unblinkingly crown kings in their golden gowns no matter how the latter raised themselves to that rank, the rustic wooden church in Glamis is where Lady Macbeth prepares the poison that will be used to drug Duncan, where she delivers her famous monologue calling on “spirits that tend on mortal thoughts [to] unsex [her] here” as the camera tracks on the decoration of the altarpiece featuring damned souls being thrown into hell by the devil, and where she taunts Macbeth over his male insecurities before the couple has sex on the altar. The scene is intercut with Duncan’s murder, linking Eros and Thanatos—the orgasm corresponding to Macbeth’s resolution to proceed further with the murder (“I am settled”)—, and with an arc shot showing her praying in church. The few scenes set in the cathedral offer the same ambiguity as when Macbeth and his suitors are seen sitting on the floor in a circle around a brazier and “when he has to address Seyton, he pronounces it ‘Satan’ to give his situation an even more diabolic ring” (Bradshaw, 2015a). Concurrently, the garment style of Lady Macbeth is very reminiscent of early Christian women and her look becomes increasingly Marian as her pain and anxiety grow, with a long gown and a veil covering her loosened hair in her final scene.
- 7 Scotland in *Macbeth* is a rugged land where men fight—the film is bookended by battles—and women weep.<sup>11</sup> In keeping with certain clichés, the country is presented as a male nation.<sup>12</sup> Macbeth’s army just as his village show fathers and children but very few mothers. The same symbolic effacement is perceptible at the court of Dunsinane since women appear almost unexpectedly during the banquet scene, relegated into the background on one side of the table. Lady Macduff’s lines are reduced to one sentence before she dies on the stake (in fact a line originally spoken by Malcolm in Act IV, sc. 3: “This tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues, / Was once thought honest”). The kidnapping scene in the wood substitutes for the dialogues set in Macduff’s Castle in the play (Act IV, sc. 2), possibly making it more poignant but depriving the only other important woman in the story of speech. Lady Macbeth, despite her initial lust for power, is from the onset presented like a *mater dolorosa* who definitely turns mad when she is forced to watch Lady Macduff and her children burn alive, a traumatic repetition of her own pain in the opening scene (she also witnessed Duncan’s guards’ throat

slitting). Although the play only reports her suicide (Act V, sc. 9) without being specific about the *modus operandi*, she is not seen jumping to her death at any point unlike numerous film versions. Her last ride on the moor shows her like another Ophelia going to meet the Weird Sisters (and the young girl and infant that are with them), establishing a sorority which is nonetheless only possible in death—of which the witches are a harbinger—thus emphasising that the country is not fit for women.<sup>13</sup> The cult of Scottish virility versus the more mitigated “English epicures” (originally in Act V, sc. 3 but delivered during the stake scene in the film) is omnipresent. It pervades ambivalent battle scenes that combine graphic realistic details about the horrific aspects of warfare and hyperbolic and hyper-stylised hand-to-hand combats or rather “beard to beard” as Macbeth says in Act V, sc. 5. Whether it takes the form of a symbolic (Macbeth and the boy soldier) or real (Banquo and Fleance) father/son relationship, army comradeship or overlord/vassal friendship, the male bond underlies Scottishness in Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth*. The homosocial nature of Scottish feudalism comes with homoerotic overtones as symbolised by the gentle strokes on the face these men give one another regularly.

## Macbeth, *The High Plains Drifter*?

- 8 The caledonianising of *Macbeth* certainly accounts for the film’s critical success, the location shooting enhancing its supposed authenticity. However, reterritorialising the Scottish play does not necessarily mean an international audience will pick up on its national character. The wide range of films *Macbeth* has been compared with indicates that the image of Scotland it presents fits within both a global representative framework and the personal experience of the spectator that may be more or less cognisant of Scottish culture. Part of the film’s success is probably based on its overall aesthetic quality and the number of interpretation/reading levels it lends itself to, notably psychology and trauma studies owing to the focus on children and war (Miller, 2017, pp. 62–4; Behera & Dutta, 2016, pp. 27–32; Rasmus, 2018, pp. 115–28). Part of it is due to the Scottish chronotope it presents, i.e. a Scotland from elsewhere.
- 9 Justin Kurzel has insisted that, besides his will to riff off the legend in order to find the reality behind or beneath it as implied by the intertitle in the opening scene<sup>14</sup> and the odd reference to the gangster film (in keeping with his debut *Snowtown*, 2011),<sup>15</sup> his main source of inspiration was the western genre (FilmsNow, 2015, 3’30”; HeyUGuys, 2015, 37”; Into Film Clubs, 2015, 45”):
- We looked at a lot of pioneer photographs. I was inspired by a lot of westerns. I was reading a lot of Cormac McCarthy at the time, too. I was really inspired by those pioneering towns. Inverness became like one of those, like a town camped on the edge. (Lambie, 2015)
- 10 This is indeed the most striking feature of his *Macbeth* that can visually be read as a western, on the spaghetti end of the spectrum judging by the number of static shots on lines of stately horsemen/cowboys or footsoldiers/gunslingers,<sup>16</sup> and extreme close ups on grimy, scarred, unkempt and (sometimes toothless) stern faces. Glamis looks like a Frontier town, with its freshly built wooden cabins—12 carpenters are credited at the end of the film—and animal skins tanning outdoors, before it turns into a ghost-town when Lady Macbeth rides back there after Duncan’s death. Besides the few hunting trophies spotted on the walls that connect the Scottish/British upper class and American trappers, some of its decorations are reminiscent of Native American art (the

chimes and flowers blowing in the wind) or sky burials. The final sequence with its orange/red filter evidently symbolises the violence of war as blood and fire invade the screen again. But it is also reminiscent of the ending sequence of *High Plains Drifter* (Clint Eastwood, 1973) when the nameless character played by Eastwood has the town painted blood red and writes “hell” on the town sign before going away and most of the buildings are set on fire by the attackers (a scene used for the original poster of the film that also echoes some of Kurzel’s film posters, see Figures 1a and 1b). The echo is all the more meaningful as *Macbeth* has been seen riding on the highlands, on trails and through narrow passageways, especially once in a simple tunic as if straight out of an (anachronistic) mental asylum, and, on a psychological level, his mind is increasingly drifting due to madness. His death that looks more like a suicide by proxy as he grabs onto Macduff so that the latter can stab him in the stomach is choreographed like a Samurai committing hara-kiri. The connection once again makes sense knowing that Kurosawa often adapted western films into a feudal Japan setting (in his version of *Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood* (1957), the attack on the fort looks like the siege of the Alamo)<sup>17</sup> while, at the same time, it can refer to a line by *Macbeth* (Act V, sc. 8) when he first brushes aside the idea of playing “the Roman fool, and die / On my own sword”.

Figures 1a–b. – *High Plains Drifter* and *Macbeth*.

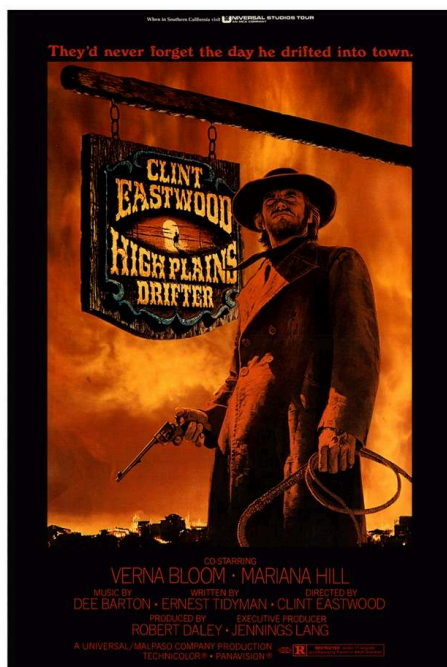


Figure 1a. – *High Plains Drifter*.

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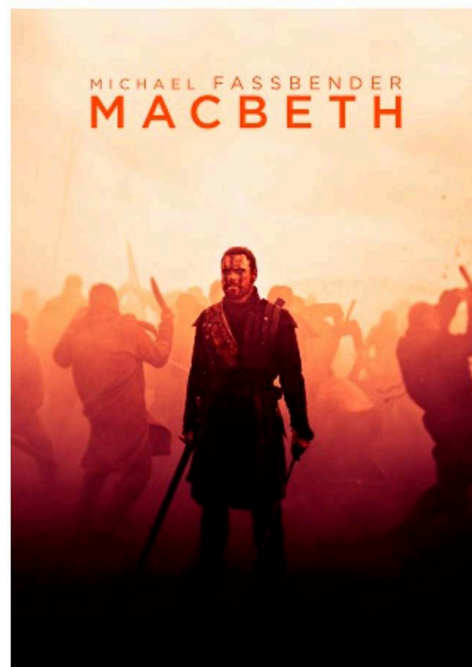


Figure 1b. – *Macbeth*.

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- 11 The violence enacted in slow motion or frame freezes and the ambiguous representation of childhood also bring out *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969). In *Macbeth*, young children die but not all of them are innocent. They play with a crown made of twigs and heather just as the gang of children play with ants and scorpions in the opening scene of the western film. The level of cruelty is not the same (the former are just bickering whereas the latter intentionally stir the ants to watch them eat the scorpions alive before setting the lot of them on fire) but the message is clear in both cases. Human nature’s lust for power and capacity for gratuitous evil does not await the



passing of years. The fatal flaw of Shakespearian tragedy is looming whatever the genre. The end of *Macbeth* confirms that ethos by establishing a parallel between Malcolm and Fleance both picking up their swords used in a match cut<sup>18</sup> and walking determinedly towards their destiny (i.e. the completion of the witches’ prophecy about Banquo’s sons inheriting the throne).

- 12 Notably because of its landscapes, Scotland has regularly been used by foreign directors as a backdrop for western-type of stories.<sup>19</sup> *Braveheart* and *Rob Roy* (Michael Caton-Jones, 1995) have been interpreted as such by Colin McArthur (2003, pp. 142, 146, 148–50, 155), Duncan Petrie (2000, p. 211; 2004, pp. 200–1) and Courtney Lehmann (2012, pp. 233–6). *Macbeth* leans on the spaghetti subgenre because of its aesthetics as noted but also because the story is set among Scots, the English being occasional allies, so that, contrary to the other more “classic” types of western, they do not appear like the Indians and therefore their Celtic roots are not specifically associated with the usual vision of primitive or semi-barbaric creatures. If westerns can be shot in Scotland, that might explain why Scottish historical films can be partly shot in Montana, such as *Robert the Bruce* (Richard Gray, 2019), because there is a geographical and symbolic connection between the two genres. This generic confluence may explain the wilding of Scotland in the choice of exteriors mentioned earlier compared to the play. As noticed by Mark Kermode (2015), “this is very much Shakespeare in the wild” and other Scottish places could have been used. By choosing a beach rather than the palace front, the woods rather than a park, the moor rather than castles, the last great European wilderness crosses over to the Wild West (and thus may appeal more to an international—read American—audience).

## Before Westeros and *Game of Thrones*, there were Scotland and *Macbeth*

- 13 Contrary to what some may think (Maley & Neely, 2004), the hybrid nature of reterritorialisation (being a mix between local and foreign/global culture) is not antithetical with presenting less clichéd versions of Scottishness on screen while simultaneously toying with myths that perpetuate age-old tropes about Scotland.<sup>20</sup> In fact, from an adaptation perspective, this rather enables Justin Kurzel’s film to go back to some of the original features and earlier interpretations of the play.<sup>21</sup> Despite the now compulsory comparison with *Braveheart* that has become a yardstick for any attempt at cinematic Scottish history, the director’s will to remain pared-down and simple—a recurrent word in his interviews (Into Film Clubs, 2015; Lambie, 2015)—his option “for high-impact sparseness in the film’s visual and sonic design” (Lodge, 2015), have led to mitigating some of the usual tropes associated with Scotland in a global cultural context. The supernatural element is thus downplayed in favour of a more modern psychologising of the characters’ neuroses. What comes out of the mist or rather thick fog are not so much witches as projections from a warrior’s mind suffering from PTSD (both mentioned by lead actor and director and analysed as such in Bradshaw, 2015b; Kermode, 2015; Lambie, 2015; Rasmus, 2018, pp. 124–5). Significantly, the scenes in which the Weird Sisters appear are shot using a yellow filter or overexposed, giving them a migraine aura-like quality as if *Macbeth*’s head was reeling. The meetings take place on the battlefield each time, not on the heath—the major and only change in the original verse (Act I, sc. 1) duly noticed by all critics—or in a cavern

(Act IV, sc. 1). There is no cauldron to be seen and no disgusting recipe to be heard despite a drop of blood being poured into the mix.<sup>22</sup> The witches look like ordinary women of various ages except for their silver nails and the mark they bear on their foreheads and chins for some of them—three horizontal stripes that evidently connect with Macbeth’s war paint and can be interpreted as “demonic” (Lodge, 2015).<sup>23</sup> However, his surprise at seeing them (“Speak if you can: what are you?”, Act I, sc. 3) stems more from the fact that their female presence on the battlefield is unexpected rather than their undefined nature as in the play. In a similar way, the film may be playing with the usual folklore and Celtic culture of Scotland on a meta level. Macbeth has a peculiar way of breaking the surface of the loch in which he is bathing. The shot starts on his rounded lower back barely surfacing before he stands back up, making him look like a Nessie-type of saurian as well as echoing the snake motif present in the play just as in Celtic artwork.

- 14 Despite some concessions probably explained by commercial reasons—the fact that, unlike the supporting cast, the leads do not have genuine Scottish accents (being bankable Irish, French and English actors) and that the historical accuracy of 11th century Scotland is at times mangled (see, for example, the juxtaposition of very rustic shacks even for thanes and a much later Gothic-style cathedral)<sup>24</sup>—the film is not merely trying to jump on the *Game of Thrones* bandwagon as implied by some critics or scholars. Even if it was, this would be eminently ironic for Westeros was inspired by Scotland and George R. R. Martin by Shakespeare—amongst other sources—, not the reverse (The Newsroom, 2016; Waugh, 2019; MacDonald, 2014). Unlike other versions such as Polanski’s that comes full with dysmorphic old men and horrendous witches, there is little to no Dark Ageism<sup>25</sup> in Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth* and the wilding of Scotland is not meant to present it as regressive or backward or, alternatively as in more conventional Jacobite versions of Highlandism, celebrate its noble savages living close to nature (McArthur, 2003, p. 18).<sup>26</sup> Some lines have been reallocated, some passages trimmed down and some minor characters conflated into more important protagonists such as Siward and Ross into Macduff who *de facto* becomes *the* film antagonist and, for example, conspicuously leaves the banquet whereas he does not attend it in the play. But these changes, keeping the original verses intact,<sup>27</sup> are not just a way to make Shakespeare more intelligible to a modern audience as mentioned by the film producer (Behera & Dutta, 2016, p. 25). They are rather a way to bring back the essence of the play in a cinematic way. The colour code for the clothes possibly echoes the world turned upside/down of the play (Act I, sc. 1, the witches’ “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” of course but also Malcolm’s lines in Act IV, sc. 3, “It is myself I mean: in whom I know / All the particulars of vice so grafted / That, when they shall be open’d, black Macbeth / Will seem as pure as snow”). Macbeth wears black while he is still a valiant warrior before donning a white robe when he usurps the throne to look like Duncan. The emphasis on the Highlands referring to the mineral and chthonian nature of the place actually resonates with the cosmic element present in the play through all the metaphorical network involving nature and Scotland as a sick country. That may be why the main sound effect, a pounding thump that regularly punctuates the film, could be symbolising a deep earthquake in line with the violation of the natural order that is the regicide in the original play (Act II, sc. 3: “The night has been unruly [...] Some say, the earth / Was feverous and did shake”). This culminates in the scene of Duncan’s murder with a crescendo that matches the skittishness of his horse while the moon gets obscured as the night is decidedly unruly (Act II, sc. 4: “Thou seest the heavens, as

troubled with man’s act [...] And Duncan’s horses [...] Turn’d wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out / Contending ’gainst obedience, as they would make war with mankind”).

## Conclusion

- 15 Justin Kurzel’s reterritorialised *Macbeth* enables it to be more than an early twenty-first century, multi-generic Hollywood film to paraphrase and contradict Colin McArthur about *Braveheart* (2003, p. 3). It is even a case in point to show how “Scotland from elsewhere” functions as a form of cultural translation (Hagemann, 2012, p. 158) in cinema. This process consisting in “making (representations of) aspects of one culture accessible to another” can be productive and work as a basis for broader reflection and aesthetic intertextuality while still keeping a national anchoring. With the version of Scottishness it presents, the film adds another layer to the great “Scottish Discursive Unconscious” understood as

[...] the successively emerging narratives of Scotland [that] did not simply displace each other but rather became interpenetrated to produce a kind of Scottish discursive palimpsest the diverse tropes of which might be mobilised by anyone seeking to create images, tell stories or, indeed, make any kind of utterance about Scotland and the Scots. (McArthur, 2001, p. 27)

- 16 Provided its “limited” (Brown, 220, p. 227) conceptual boundaries (i.e. restricting it to cinematic Tartanry and Kailyardism) are extended to include the increasing variations on a theme that is “Scotland from elsewhere”, “that deep-seated, historical *bricolage* of images, sounds and stories that immediately comes into the heads of people throughout the world at the word ‘Scotland’” (MacArthur, 2003, pp. 103–4) should not necessarily be seen as something distorting but rather embraced for all its potentiality (Martin-Jones, 2009, pp. 15–19). Because geopolitically speaking, Scotland remains a stateless nation but, geopoetically (i.e. in global film terms), it has long become a state of mind.

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## NOTES

1. See, for example, Hatchuel, Bladen & Vienne-Guerrin (2014), for a comprehensive view of the various adaptations *Macbeth* has generated over the years throughout the world.
2. That may be justified by a comment of Macduff in the play (Act IV, sc. 3) when he recognises “my countryman; but yet I know him not”, which implies a specifically Scottish dressing style.
3. As noticed by certain critics, “*le cinéaste [...] a eu la clairvoyance de [...] laisser ses images poétiques et oniriques parler, elles qui finissent par triompher du texte*” (Gignac, 2015; see also Kermode, 2015).
4. All the quotes from the play are taken from the Aubier edition.
5. The author refers on several occasions to the well-known anecdote about why *Brigadoon* was eventually shot in a studio because the makers of the film were disappointed with their location scouting.
6. *Macbeth* could be interpreted as an example of “baronialism” defined by Colin McArthur as “offering the pictorialism of Scottish scenery [...] a site, the dark Scottish castle, within which certain kinds of specifically ‘Scottish’ stories—principally hinging on treachery and the betrayal of hospitality—can be played out” (1982, p. 42). In the film, Dunsinane turns into a bunker for Macbeth once he becomes king. He only gets out to cynically bid Banquo farewell and to meet the witches a second time.
7. Colin McArthur notices that some films or series such as *Monarch of the Glen* tend to carry “landscape and castle shots disproportionate—in their number and length—to their function in the narrative” (2003, p. 132).
8. The ending credits reprise all these landscape shots in a black and red filter. They are the equivalent of the bird’s eye view/overhead shots regularly used for interiors that crush characters, living or dead.
9. Colin McArthur notes about *Braveheart*: “There being no historical evidence that the Scots painted their faces for battle in the medieval period (unlike the probability that they did so 1,000 years previously), this might be read as yet another intertextual reference to the western. In fact, Gibson has indicated that he got the idea from witnessing modern Scottish battle re-enactment groups; intertextuality still, but with a different text.” (2003, p. 151) War painted faces may then be a case of (re)invention of tradition.
10. More prosaically, some may see here an allusion to *Game of Thrones* in which some characters have painted-eye stones placed on their lids to symbolise the passage to the afterlife.
11. Even though it is said that Malcolm’s “eye in Scotland/Would create soldiers, make our women fight, / To doff their dire distresses” (Act IV, sc. 3), the fact is that “the cry of women” (Act V, sc. 5) is not even heard when Dunsinane is finally besieged since it seems the only living woman left in the castle is Lady Macbeth’s servant.
12. For more on Scottishness-as-maleness, see Brown (2020, pp. 16, 218–9) and Colin McArthur (2003, pp. 59–60, 105, 107, 150).

13. Peter Bradshaw (2015a) notices how the director “interestingly connects her [Lady Macbeth, editor’s note] emotional torment with the Weird Sisters themselves, the three witches: a radioactive feminine agony in the firmament, playing on a soldier’s macho aggression”.
14. That is how he justifies the screen wipe from black to red, reminiscent of Rothko’s painting, at the beginning of the film. “I was interested in the legend of Macbeth. The idea that the story had been buried under the land. It’s like we’re coming out from underground. You see at the beginning, the warrior Macbeth. There’s something about setting up this tale, and then instantly bringing you into the real people and the intimacy of it. There’s the sense of a legend at the beginning that I’m riffing off and trying to contradict a little bit.” (Lambie, 2015) This is a significant departure from the usual openings of films Colin McArthur calls cinematic Tartanry: “[...] many representations of Scotland begin with swirling mist, often lifting to reveal a highland landscape. This was reprised in the opening of *Braveheart* (1997) which begins with clouds parting to reveal a rugged Highland landscape.” (2001, p. 32)
15. He explains that some of the lines and unspoken conniving subtext made him think of *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990) (FilmIsNow, 2015, 4’40”).
16. The way Macbeth and his men play with their claymores also recalls the way cowboys play with their guns. Throughout the film, numerous shots and frames evoke typical western *mise-en-scène* such as when Macduff sends his family away to try and escape Macbeth, which looks like a chase along the river and an ambush.
17. Kermode (2015) sees some “Kurosawa-style heroic bloodshed” in the film, like Bradshaw (2015a).
18. In fact, Fleance picks up Macbeth’s sword that the latter planted in the ground before dying. The film might be alluding to *Braveheart*’s epilogue when Wallace’s claymore is hurled by his friend at Bannockburn before it embeds itself in the field. This recurrent motif could then liken the claymore to a sort of Scottish Excalibur since it symbolises sovereignty and fate/destiny being linked to prophecies about the rightful heir to the throne regardless of human lust for power and glory.
19. There may be an Australian connection as well since Mel Gibson, albeit American, was brought up in Australia while Justin Kurzel is Australian, the country’s geography and history having provided several western-types of films (for example, John Hillcoat’s *The Proposition*, 2005). Significantly, Peter Bradshaw (2015a) says that, in Kurzel’s film, “the Highlands are recast as a glowing outback”.
20. Although he is usually scathing with many films set in Scotland directed by foreigners, Colin McArthur admits that “where powerful existing traditions of representation, or discourses, exist (as is the case with Scotland) even talented artists will find it extremely difficult to create representations outside the frameworks of these traditions” (1982, p. 65).
21. For example, Beyad & Javanian (2018, pp. 9–13) assert the film adopts a carnivalesque approach to underline the inversion of various codes and values already present in the play: “Kurzel’s movie takes up the carnivalesque approach not only in its internal mechanism, but also in its relation with its source play. The film ranks high among the cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare’s bloody tragedy because it redefines its dialogic tie with the play by not adhering to its established structure.”
22. Similarly, Lady Macbeth is not seen sleepwalking but talking in Glamis church to what turns out to be her dead child.
23. The director nonetheless sees them as part of the rest of the characters, a product of their environment: “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.” (Lambie, 2015)

24. This clash in eras or conflation of time and space signals a chronotope, “a narrative time and place that has particular features, characters and in which certain events take place” (Brunsdon, 2007, p. 116) and as such contributes to establish or perpetuate certain tropes associated with the cinematic representation of Scotland mediating “between the historical and the artistic, providing fictional environments where historically specific constellations of power are made visible” (Stam, 2000, pp. 204–5).

25. Colin McArthur defines the concept throughout his work as “the Dark Ages as site of squalor, religio-mysticism, cruelty and physical deformity [...] Ring dancing, tumblers, jugglers, wrestlers, ‘medieval’ music. The brighter, reverse side of the Dark Ageism coin, medieval folk as bucolic simpletons” (2003, pp. 143, 145). He lists other tropes: “cauterising of the wound [...] eating noisily from a collective pot [...] boiling oil, burning bodies, the head of [your enemy] sent in a basket [...] disfiguring disease [...] physical grotesquerie” (ibid., pp. 148, 150, 153, 189–90); “[a] discourse in which the key tropes are religiosity and/or supernaturalism; grinding poverty and filth; physical deformity and disfiguring disease; and, above all, unrestrained and unspeakable cruelty” (2001, p. 22). Some of these tropes may have transferred through the spaghetti generic confluence in the film.

26. Because of its temporal setting, the vision of Scotland as rough and uncivilised is, in any case, not as problematic as for some other period pieces set in a later era such as *Braveheart* or *Mary Queen of Scots* (Josie Rourke, 2018) whose misrepresentation of Scottish cities “produces wonderful howlers” (Brown, 2020, p. 220).

27. Showing the opening battle is not an opportunity for yet another bombastic speech in the manner of other pseudo-historical films but rather to silently demonstrate the brutality of the “shadow of war” as explained by Justin Kurzel (FilmIsNow, 2015, 3’30”), despite the fact that showing battles may have become compulsory in a post-*Braveheart* era (Maley & Neely, 2004, pp. 103–4).

## ABSTRACTS

Amongst the innumerable deterritorialised film variations of *Macbeth* that come out each year, Justin Kurzel’s 2015 adaptation singles itself out by the fact that it was mostly shot on Scottish location. As such, it belongs to an alternate tradition of “caledonianising *Macbeth*” (McArthur) that nonetheless does not resort to Tartanry for costumes and settings but to scenery and landscapes. These play a paramount role in the film testifying to the director’s bold treatment of the Shakespearian canon in a truly cinematic style, substituting visual for verbal poetry. This wish to reterritorialise *Macbeth* also testifies to the film’s aesthetic ambivalence for it is a “Scotland from elsewhere” that is presented here, expressing its post-*Braveheart* Highlandism through its intertextuality with the western genre. Yet, doing so, the film, while partaking of the “Scottish Discursive Unconscious” (McArthur) also offers a great “chthonian” adaptation reinforcing the cosmic element present in the original play.

Parmi les innombrables variations cinématographiques déterritorialisées de *Macbeth* qui sortent chaque année, l’adaptation de Justin Kurzel en 2015 se distingue par le fait qu’elle a été principalement tournée en Écosse. En tant que telle, elle s’inscrit dans une autre tradition de « calédonisation de *Macbeth* » (McArthur) qui ne recourt toutefois pas à la *tartanry* pour les costumes et les décors, mais aux sites naturels et aux paysages. Ceux-ci jouent un rôle primordial



dans le film, témoignant de l'audace du réalisateur à traiter le canon shakespearien dans un style véritablement cinématographique, substituant la poésie visuelle à la poésie verbale. Cette volonté de reterritorialiser *Macbeth* témoigne également de l'ambivalence esthétique du film, car c'est une « Écosse vue d'ailleurs » qui est présentée ici, exprimant son Highlandisme post-*Braveheart* par son intertextualité avec le genre du western. Pourtant, le film, tout en prenant sa place dans le palimpseste qu'est « l'inconscient discursif écossais » (McArthur), offre également une grande adaptation « chthonienne » de la pièce originale en renforçant son élément cosmique.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, territorialisation, western, cinéma

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## AUTHOR

### ANNE-LISE MARIN-LAMELLET

Université Jean Monnet

anne.lise.marin.lamellet@univ-st-etienne.fr

Anne-Lise Marin-Lamellet est agrégée d'anglais et maître de conférences à l'Université Jean Monnet de Saint-Étienne. Elle travaille sur la civilisation et le cinéma britanniques contemporains, principalement sur les questions de classes sociales, de genre et de minorités, toutes formes d'identités qui peuvent s'exprimer par le prisme de l'espace, et donc de l'urbain et des territoires. Elle est l'auteur de l'ouvrage *Working Class Hero : la figure ouvrière dans le cinéma britannique depuis 1956*, co-directrice de *La ville industrielle à l'écran : objet cinématographique à identifier* et a publié divers articles en lien avec ces thématiques auxquelles s'ajoutent les enjeux de genres cinématographiques (notamment dans la représentation des jeunes et de l'Écosse).

Anne-Lise Marin-Lamellet is a senior lecturer of English at the University of Saint-Étienne, France. She works on contemporary British studies and cinema, mainly on issues of class, race, gender, and their relation to space and urban areas. She has recently published a book entitled *Working Class Hero : la figure ouvrière dans le cinéma britannique depuis 1956*, co-edited *La ville industrielle à l'écran : objet cinématographique à identifier* and wrote several articles related to these topics as well as on the impact of genre on the representation of youths and Scotland.