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The Shakespearean Tragedy of/for Our Times. *Macbeth*?

Abstract: The article compares the diverse strategies employed by the three most recent adaptations of *Macbeth*, a play that appears to be the Shakespearean drama of our age judging from the number of recent adaptations. I argue that Justin Kurzel's 2015 historical epic, Kit Monkman's 2018 experimental production, and Joel Coen's 2021 film entitled *The Tragedy of Macbeth* reflect the current shifts in the world of the cinema, as they exemplify a number of changes taking place in front of our eyes, both in terms of cinematic production and popular and critical reception. All three films use the early modern text in their dialogue, but rely on different visual and technological tools, showing how nostalgia and innovation, traditional and experimental approaches exist side by side in the contemporary mediascape.

Keywords: Macbeth, *contemporary cinema*, *location shooting*, *Chroma key*, *black-and-white cinematography*, *theatricality*

1. Introduction

Macbeth seems to have become the Shakespearean drama of our age, judging from the number of recent theatre productions[1] and film adaptations, and it is easy to see how a story of a tyrant's climb to power and the toxic atmosphere he creates in and around himself resonates with our age of populist politics and general sense of social crisis. As Susan Snyder claims, "The play is an open system, offering some fixed markers with which to take one's basic bearings but also, in closer scrutiny, offering provocative questions and moral ambiguities".[2] The play's universal appeal is testified by the fact that it has been adapted to the most diverse contexts and a variety of cinematic genres, particularly variations of the gangster-crime-thriller-*film noir* family, among them *Joe MacBeth* (1955, dir. Ken Hughes), and its later reworking *Men of Respect* (1990, dir. William Reilly), while other films added elements of horror to the conventions of the gangster genre, for instance Geoffrey Wright's *Macbeth* (2006). Pierre Kapitaniak lists twenty different versions made in the first decade of the twenty-first century, though some of these are lesser-known variants that may not be known beyond a niche audience.[3]

Nevertheless, the trend does not seem to be abating, quite the contrary: the second decade of the century saw not only plenty of theatrical *Macbeth*s, but even mainstream filmmakers keep trying their hands at adapting the Scottish play in big-budget productions. Some of the most recent variations, ranging from the South African Broadcasting Corporation's 2008 "two re-versionings of *Macbeth* … as a power struggle for control"[4] within the context of South African history and mythology, through *House*

[1] The Royal Shakespeare Company has had four different versions since the year 2000; in 2021, the Almeida Theatre staged the play with James McArdle and Saoirse Ronan, directed by Yaël Farber; the Globe Theatre had the last production in 2023; and the English Touring Theatre have been touring with *Macbeth* since 2023, to mention just a few of the most acclaimed recent productions.
[2] Susan Snyder, "A Modern Perspective: *Macbeth*", *The Folger Shakespeare*, *www.folger.edu/explore/.*
[3] Pierre Kapitaniak, "Witches and Ghosts in Modern Times Lost? How to Negotiate the Supernatural in Modern Adaptations of *Macbeth*?", in Sarah Hatchuel et al., eds., *Shakespeare on Screen: "Macbeth"* (Mont-Saint-Aignan: P.U. de Rouen et du Havre, 2014), 55-69, 55, fn. 2.
[4] Adele Seeff, *South Africa's Shakespeare and the Drama of Language and Identity* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 182.

of Cards[5] or even *Breaking Bad*,[6] to a "social-enterprise"[7] film project, directed by Daryl Chase, set in contemporary Northampton, provide ample proof for the adaptability of the play's themes and conflicts to our current reality. Possibly the most recent version to reach movie theatres in the Anglophone world in 2024 is Simon Godwin's filmed theatrical production, starring Ralph Fiennes and Indira Varma. As one review points it out, "It is not modernised as such, but the war-like cast of the design suits a contemporary mindset in which world leaders like Putin conduct themselves like Macbeth, but without the guilt".[8] In fact, the army fatigues and a contemporary battlefield as stage design have been common to quite a few recent adaptations of several Shakespearean plays, among them Rupert Goold's 2010 *Macbeth* film based on his 2007 Chichester Theatre Festival production (even though the setting is claimed to invoke the Stalin era of the 1950s, the atmosphere is easy to associate with our own world and its atrocities). The setting of Ralph Fiennes' 2011 *Coriolanus* was eerily reminiscent of the Balkan wars, and Iqbal Khan's RSC production of *Othello* included scenes of torturing prisoners that brought to mind Abu Ghraib, and the human consequences of warfare. It is in itself a reflection on the sorry state of our societies that the constant military conflicts endemic in the world make it easy to update Shakespearean settings as identifiably contemporary warzones. Yet war is not the only possible way to connect the narrative to our day and age, as even a 2012 video production of *Macbeth*, directed by Daniel Coll, testifies. Although the film received rather mixed reviews, its topicality was evident, with critics pointing out how it could be seen as a reflection on "today's fame-driven world" in which the Macbeths "are the celebrities of their age; filthy rich, famous and passionately in love … [but] they are seduced into believing that they deserve even more and they jump at the chance to take it. With no regard for the consequences, their reckless impatience leads them to a spiral of violence ending in madness and death, and a final self-realisation".[9]

In this paper, however, I do not wish to look at the diverse forms of topicality that the narrative or generic elements of various *Macbeth* offshoots may bring to the fore, but intend to examine some of the seemingly more conservative adaptations that the drama has inspired over the past decade. I use the word 'conservative' with caution, because while these films rely on the early modern dialogue and do not change the setting or the plot in any obvious ways, they nonetheless display the signs of our times, similarly to the above-mentioned looser appropriations. Most importantly, I do not intend to return to an earlier era of adaptation studies and its insistence on fidelity criticism which persists even in relatively recent investigations, and which often circles around the notion of change in theoretical and practical analyses alike, examining what has changed from the (supposed) original and what has remained unchanged. These are the questions at the heart of Julie Sanders's distinction between adaptation and appropriation,[10] but even Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptation as "announced, extensive, specific transcoding"[11] is based on the idea that adaptations are always recognisable because they retain a considerable (extensive) proportion of the source work. In a more abstract sense, adaptation enquiries tend to return to the question of the changes in narrative, medium, genre, atmosphere or characterisation, asking where the limits of such changes are when one wishes to maintain a connection between source text and adapted product. It is true that an awareness of a literary source is generally unavoidable in

[5] See, *e.g.*, Katherine Rowe's discussion of the parallels between the tragedy and the series in an interview: "A Shakespeare Scholar Examines the Influence of Lady Macbeth in *House of Cards*", *The Week*, 4 April 2015, *theweek.com/audio.*

[6] Jeffrey Chisum, "The *Macbeth* of the American West: Tragedy, Genre and Landscape in *Breaking Bad*", *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies*, 14.4 (2019), 415-428.

[7] Daryl Chase, "Northampton-based Social Enterprise *Macbeth* Feature Film Launches Campaign For Completion Funding", *Northampton Chronicle & Echo* (2023), *www.northamptonchron.co.uk.*

[8] Penelope Debelle, "Ralph Fiennes Gives Shakespeare's *Macbeth* a Contemporary Edge", *The New Daily*, 4 May 2024, *www.thenewdaily.com.au*.

[9] Independent Artists Releasing, "Press Kit: *The Tragedy of Macbeth*", *Yumpu.com* (2012), *www.yumpu.com*.

[10] Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

[11] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 16.

adaptation analysis, and the recent post-fidelity debate has addressed this issue in particular.[12] At the same time, Michael D. Friedman points out in his examination of reviews of Justin Kurzel's 2015 *Macbeth* that in spite of the changes within the field, "outside of academia, general audiences continue to believe that the spirit of a Shakespeare play resides in its language, and therefore any Shakespeare film will be judged, at least in part, on the extent to which it remains faithful to familiar verbal aspects of the dramatic work".[13]

While I do not claim that examining the textual strategy of any adaptation does not reveal important aspects of the work as a whole, and by implication, the state of contemporary adaptations, a predominant focus on the source text tends to make us lose sight of the fact that despite their ties to early modern English literature, Shakespeare film adaptations have been produced by twenty-first century cinema, and create their meaning in the complex interplay of these radically different sign systems. This is why my interest lies predominantly in the non-verbal elements of *Macbeth* films; therefore, in what follows, I look at three of the most recent cinematic adaptations: Justin Kurzel's 2015 historical epic, Kit Monkman's 2018 experimental production, and Joel Coen's 2021 black-and-white *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, with a view to examining primarily their visual aspects. Without dismissing the fact that the three films' scripts are not identical, as a result of different editing, dramaturgical and directorial decisions, each of them uses the Jacobean text as the basis of their dialogues, and therefore their distinct, unique identities need to be located elsewhere. For all their respectful attitude to the Shakespearean language, I argue, these films provide ample proof of their rootedness in contemporary visual culture. As I intend to show, it is in their cinematography, their diverse formal and technical strategies and tools, rather than their content or themes, that we find the most tangible evidence for their contemporaneity. Moreover, the three films together offer a better representation of the current trends in the world of the cinema than any one of them on its own, as they exemplify a number of changes taking place in front of our eyes, both in terms of cinematic production, and in popular and critical reception. Some of these trends are inspired by technological advances, others try to fulfil audiences' demand for greater authenticity in an era of fake, superficial and imitative contents. The industry is also forced to invent more sustainable means of production, which can be one of the most powerful drives behind green screen technology and other digital experiments. It is only natural that each and every era displays somewhat contradictory tendencies, with different forms of innovation and nostalgia manifested side by side. At the same time, this range of answers to contemporary challenges, and the way they appear in the films' cinematographic features, not only reflect on changes in viewing habits and patterns characterising the twenty-first century, but also on our changing interpretation of the role of Shakespeare in our times.

2. Justin Kurzel's Scottish *Macbeth*

The first, and seemingly the most traditional film out of the three contemporary *Macbeth*s, Justin Kurzel's 2015 historical epic focuses on the power of the Scottish landscape and uses the widescreen format to authenticate its visual narrative. Surprisingly, this in itself counts as an innovative solution, as Kurzel's adaptation appears to be one of the very few *Macbeth*s in cinema history shot on location in Scotland. Roman Polanski's 1971 *Macbeth*, although often mistakenly described as filmed in the

[12] On the interpretation and role of fidelity in contemporary adaptation studies, see Douglas M. Lanier, "Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare: Afterword", in Christy Desmet et al., eds., *Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 293-306; and Douglas M. Lanier, "Text, Performance, Screen: Shakespeare and Critical Media Literacy", *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 105.1 (2021), 117-127.

[13] Michael D. Friedman, "The Persistence of Fidelity in Reviews of Kurzel's *Macbeth*", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 47.4 (2019), 3.

Highlands,[14] was in fact filmed in Wales and Northumbria.[15] Jeremy Freeston's 1997 television *Macbeth*, described by Alfredo Michel Modenessi as "a well-meaning low-budget effort"[16] was also shot in Scotland, but because of its limited accessibility, it never really gained public awareness. It comes as no surprise therefore that the Scottishness of Kurzel's film is presented as a key element in its marketing strategy and a key to its interpretation as well. However natural the Scottish setting may appear for what is commonly (and superstitiously) referred to as Shakespeare's Scottish play, and however much it feels like a long overdue coming home for the narrative,[17] in the drama's theatrical performance history, this localised interpretation has not always been an obvious or expected choice, but rather the result of a slow change with its origins in the long eighteenth century.

In the early modern era and during the Restoration period, traditional interpretations of the play tended to emphasise the moral element of the drama, viewing it as a universally applicable cautionary tale, and they focused less on the Scottishness of cast and conflict, or the local aspects of the setting. As a result, the type of authenticity demanded by audiences was also textual (using the Shakespearean language) and psychological (performing identifiable emotional and mental states), rather than historical or location-specific. As shown by Kristina Straub: "Macbeth embodied the changing image of military masculinity as he morphed, over the course of the century, from Restoration courtier, to British redcoat, and finally, to ancient Scot".[18] Even when the Scottish costume and scenic design became common on British stages, the Scottishness invoked in performance was more of an exotic and remote identity, and in this way "The raw violence of the character's action was comfortably removed from modern British military masculinity while retaining the aura of soldierly heroics".[19] Thus, until very recently, even the foregrounding of the Scottish element inherent in the play served the purpose of distancing the character from contemporary reality, rather than inviting an identification with them. In the twenty-first century, however, the representation of the traumatising impacts of the battlefield on the hero's psyche would not necessarily be off-putting for general audiences, and the psychological authenticity of such processes overrides concerns of identification with the troubled protagonist.

Yet what we can see in Kurzel's film, and what is a recognisable trend in contemporary cinema as well, is a constant striving for authenticity in representations of cultures that are seen as foreign or exotic,[20] either because of their geographical or temporal distance from the mainstream Anglo-American here and now. This is a very different use of identification from the above-described psychological relatability, and in this process even the more abstract elements of the film's visuality are employed to localise the conflict in the recognisable geographical setting of the Scottish landscape, and a medieval Scotland in particular. This Scotland is awe-inspiringly beautiful and brutally savage at once, a combination familiar to viewers of contemporary fantasy cinema and television series, especially HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), which was at the height of its popularity at the time Kurzel's *Macbeth* was released. Based on popular and critical responses to the film, viewers were indeed quick to make the connection between Michael Fassbender's "handsome and rugged" Macbeth who "looks like he's

[14] Lars Kaaber, *Murdering Ministers: A Close Look at Shakespeare's "Macbeth" in Text, Context and Performance* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), xix.
[15] "Macbeth: Filming & Production: Filming Locations", *Internet Movie Database*, www.imdb.com.
[16] Alfredo Michel Modenessi, "'Stands Scotland Where it Did?': Re-locating and Dis-locating the Scottish Play on Scottish Film. *Anuario de Letras Modernas*, 14 (2009), 33-49, 35, doi.org/10.22201/ffyl.01860526p.2008.14.671.
[17] Anne-Lise Marin-Lamellet, "Bringing 'the Scottish Play' Back to Where It Belongs: Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015)", *Études écossaises*, 22 (2023), journals.openedition.org/etudesecossaises.
[18] Kristina Straub, "The Soldier in the Theater: Military Masculinity and the Emergence of a Scottish Macbeth", *The Eighteenth Century*, 58.4 (Winter 2017), 429-447, 430.
[19] Ibid., 433.
[20] See, *e.g.*, Vilsoni Hereniko, "Authenticity in Cinema: Notes from the Pacific Islands", *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 148 (2019), 65-72.

walked straight off a *Game of Thrones* episode",[21] or the setting as "Scotland with a pinch of Westeros".[22] Yet what Kurzel emphasises in interviews is always the "raw authenticity" of the location, the Scottish Highlands in winter, rather than a fictional or alternative universe.[23] The intended meaning of the location is precisely its reality, its lack of artifice, making the viewer feel that the film's "gimmick is there is no gimmick: according to historical record, the setting is the Scotland of 1057, a place of cruel violence, where crowns are made from bone and dogs lap at the blood of kings".[24] Whether the latter part of the statement is on historical record is hard to say, yet the intention is clear, which in itself may point to a common trend within the filmmaking industry of the twenty-first century: a striving for realism. This realism not only appears in film theory[25] or in documentary filmmaking, but it is equally noticeable in independent world cinema[26] and even in mainstream film. As Bruce Isaacs argues, "Contemporary film culture, particularly mainstream film culture, esteems an essentialist notion of realism in which cinema is a mimetic art, or a 'reality myth,' to paraphrase André Bazin. Cinema promises the possibility of the perfection of representative art: the revelation of truth and a profoundly humanist capacity for the illumination of Nature, self and culture".[27]

Considering that the play's earlier cinematic renditions tended to aspire to a universal and allegorical, rather than local interpretation (Orson Welles's expressionist 1948 film is an obvious example, but even Polanski's film makes the viewer contemplate the nature of politics and power in general, rather than as a reference to any specific society), the decision to authenticate the narrative through location shooting is itself indicative of an industrial change noticeable in recent years in global film production. As Camille Johnson-Yale points out, "Hollywood built its reputation on reproducing exotic and faraway landscapes on its back lots",[28] yet recently this practice of "runaway film production"[29] (that is, using "stand-in locations", or outsourcing film production, originally an economic necessity for the post-war American industry)[30] has come under scrutiny. Acknowledging that the choice of shooting location has far-reaching consequences appears to be a sign of our times, since real – rather than realistic – landscapes have an impact not only on the film and the tourist industry, but also inspire discussions on what Deborah Jones and Karen Smith describe as "the tensions between two sometimes divergent strands of authenticity: creative authenticity and national authenticity".[31] Research into the types of authenticity tourists are looking for has found that there are even more differences between the ways locations can appear authentic (or indeed, how they can fail to do so), and how they may inspire loyalty in former viewers who will in turn become tourists.[32] Therefore it is important to acknowledge the difference between the authenticity of cultural heritage sites and those locations that acquire celebrity status through

[21] Jennifer McShane, "Watch: Michael Fassbender's Epic Turn in *MacBeth*", *Image* (2015), www.image.ie/editorial/.
[22] Agnieszka Piskorska, "Scotland with a Pinch of Westeros? The Case of Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth*", *Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies*, 29.3 (2020), 135-143.
[23] Danny Leigh, "*Macbeth* Director Justin Kurzel: 'You're Getting Close to Evil'", *The Guardian*, 24 September 2015, theguardian.com.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Christine Reeh-Peters et al., eds., *The Real of Reality: The Realist Turn in Contemporary Film Theory* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021).
[26] Fernando Canet, "The New Realistic Trend in Contemporary World Cinema: Ramin Bahrani's *Chop Shop* as a Case Study", *Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 7 (2013), 153–167.
[27] Bruce Isaacs, "The Cinematic Real: Aesthetics and Spectacle", *Sydney Studies of English*, 33 (2007), 96-124.
[28] Camille Johnson-Yale, "West by Northwest: The Politics of Place in Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*", *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 44.4 (2011), 890-891.
[29] Daniel Steinhart, *Runaway Hollywood: Internationalizing Postwar Production and Location Shooting* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2019).
[30] Paul Thomas, "Runaways", *Film Quarterly*, 63.2 (Winter 2009), 86-87, online.ucpress.edu/fq/.
[31] Deborah Jones and Karen Smith, "Middle-earth Meets New Zealand: Authenticity and Location in the Making of *The Lord of the Rings*", *Journal of Management Studies*, 42.5 (July 2005), 923.
[32] Minerva Aguilar-Rivero et al., "Authenticity and Motivations towards Film Destination", *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 28.5 (2023), www.tandfonline.com/.

the film industry, either as the 'original' or 'real' locations for historical narratives, or as the fictional locations created by the industry out of existing geographical spaces. The latter trend is evident in the increase of mass tourism to New Zealand following the success of Peter Jackson's cinematic renditions of J. R. R. Tolkien's works,[33] or *Game of Thrones* fans' flocking to Northern Ireland in search of the shooting locations of the series.[34]

Indeed, as in the case of the above films and series, Kurzel's *Macbeth* was promoted by VisitScotland[35] and the Scottish tourism industry, in the hopes that it would bring a much-needed boost to the country's economy. But what this move also signals is a recognition not only of a change in industrial patterns – the film industry catering to the tourist industry and the national economy, rather than the other way around – but also a change in viewing patterns, particularly in the sense of the type of authenticity viewers are looking for on the screen. As it becomes increasingly clear, the contemporary viewer is less concerned with the authenticity of language, or the originality of interpretation; what they demand is a visually immersive experience, often prompted by external factors, such as the landscape that can be further authenticated by the tourist gaze, in private visits inspired by fan-style engagement with visual culture. But this trend has also been fuelled by the desire to see "an antidote to the same vaguely anonymous, CGI-heavy blockbusters often demonized by analog purists, skeptical film theorists, and critics of Global Hollywood"[36] – an antidote Dudley Andrews finds in World Cinema, and its visual and cultural diversity.[37]

Beyond the attention to the Scottishness of the environment, Kurzel's *Macbeth* displays other creative decisions that are equally timely. The way the film places its protagonist within the environment shows a particular sensitivity to the cinematic medium and its evocative powers. In Edel Semple's discussion of Kurzel's *Macbeth*, it becomes evident that the film's "interest in the representation, construction, and destruction of masculine military identities"[38] can be observed in the film's visuality, and she points out how this impression is created already in the film's opening scene where Macbeth appears "pale, grimy, and bloodied. But the stripes of black war-paint on his face at once displays (*sic*) his military identity and suggests (*sic*) that his true self is masked, inaccessible to us and his opponents".[39] At the same time, this depiction also brings to mind the way the protagonist's body reflects the pale, grimy and bloody battlefield, and by association, the body of the kingdom, "marked signally by war"[40] and violent conflicts of all kinds. In Kurzel's film, this depiction of masculinity is thus tied in with a historically authentic visuality embedded in the "pale, grimy, and bloodied", but nonetheless awe-inspiring Scottish landscape.

As Peter Kirwan notes, the elaborate, not so much theatrical as painterly contrast between the realism of the backdrop and the artistic spectacle of the human body intends to offer a visual treat for the viewer. "The painterly composition of frames treats Fassbender's body – itself sometimes exposed – as still life framed within nature, the aura generated by the intersubjectivity of the two and subjected to the exposing

[33] ShiNa Li et al., "The Economic Impact of On-screen Tourism: The Case of *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Hobbit*", *Tourism Management*, 60 (2017), www.sciencedirect.com.
[34] Emily Mannheimer et al., "*Game of Thrones* Tourism and the (Re)imagination of the New Northern Ireland", *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25.5 (2022), journals.sagepub.com.
[35] Ozgur Tore, "VisitScotland to Promote Country with the *Macbeth* Movie", FTNNews, 8 September 2015, ftnnews.com; "Tourism Industry Hails Macbeth", *The Highland Council* (2015), www.highland.gov.uk.
[36] David Richler, "Cinema, Realism, and the World According to Jia Zhangke", *Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 25.2 (Fall 2016), 6-7.
[37] Quoted in Richler, 6-7.
[38] Edel Semple, "'Make You a Sword of Me': Military Masculinity in *Coriolanus* (2011) and *Macbeth* (2015)", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 46.2 (Spring 2018), 1.
[39] Ibid., 4.
[40] Ibid.

scrutiny of the camera".[41] Kurzel's film thus succeeds in creating an impression of a nostalgic film, which draws on its embeddedness in the past. This embeddedness is evident in its choice of the historical epic as a genre, and its reliance on the power of the still image as opposed to a hypermobile cinematography, and all of these technical features contribute to the taking of the narrative back to its roots, in pre-Shakespearean Scottish history. But this medieval landscape is filmed in a way that is a marked trend in twenty-first-century filmmaking: the use of subdued colour and lighting that can be used "to convey the nuanced emotional landscape of … characters",[42] and to emphasise a closed, oppressive, eerily haunting atmosphere – the orange mist transforming the landscape into an otherworldly, even hellish scene is one of the most obvious examples in Kurzel's *Macbeth*. In this way, the film provides ample evidence of its embeddedness in the time of its production: combining an evident desire to offer authenticity through its shooting locations and scenic design with the visual spectacle of its subdued colour palette and its painterly photography that draws attention to the (super)heroic male body of a star actor, it is indeed an epic work that is both historical and recognisably contemporary.

3. Kit Monkman's Chroma key *Macbeth*

While the proliferation of ultra-high-resolution screens places high demands on televisual and cinematic products alike, raising filmmakers' awareness to viewers' expectations of attention to detail and the authenticity of the visual spectacle even in historical narratives, this is not the only direction contemporary filmmaking is exploring. Kit Monkman's 2018 *Macbeth* chooses the opposite path to Kurzel's film, and turns the environment into the most artificial of spectacles: a spherical, floating world, "thus making a nod to Shakespeare's Globe, even as he marries aspects of theatricality with remarkable advances in cinema".[43] By shooting the film entirely on green screen (also known as bluescreen, or Chroma key technology),[44] in this *Macbeth* the human figure is placed in the centre of the fully digital globe, denying the viewer the visual authenticity of the setting that Kurzel's adaptation was evidently aiming for. While the limited popular or critical response to the film[45] may be seen as an implication of its failure to forge a viable path for itself, Tom Cartelli emphasises the potential that is never absent from the viewing experience, and that allows us to see the film "as an indicator of what digital filmmaking may do when it becomes more unmoored from the media – filmed theater, analog film – it is convergent with".[46] In fact, the film may be a perfect example of contemporary digital cinema's desire to emancipate Chroma key technology from its regular uses, either as special effects impossible to create otherwise, or an imitation of realistic images, where the use of live action or location shooting would be either more costly or less controllable. This in itself is a contemporary trend that is constantly gaining momentum: the drive for a more sustainable form of filmmaking, reducing the carbon footprint and the environmental impacts of the industry by substituting digital technology for human labour, eliminating the building of single-use sets, or the shipping of human and material resources all over the globe. Monkman's film, however, goes further than using digital technology for cost-effectiveness, and it flaunts its virtuality proudly: the result is a bold experiment in what the Chroma key technology is capable of. It is no wonder

[41] Peter Kirwan, "Consuming the Royal Body: Stillness, Scopophilia, and Aura in *Lear* and *Macbeth* on Screen", *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 39.1 (Spring 2021), 49.
[42] New York Film Academy, "The Best Cinematography Films: Exploring Contemporary Trends", *NYFA*, 1 January 2024, nyfa.edu.
[43] Tom Ue, "Review of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Motion Picture (Directed by Kit Monkman), Goldfinch Studios / Premiere Picture, 2018", *Shakespeare*, 15.1 (2019), 77.
[44] Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*, Third Revised Edition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam U.P., 2018), 380.
[45] After a single commercial theatrical screening, the film was made available for streaming on Amazon Video in Britain, and low viewing figures resulted in its inability to reach even the American Amazon site.
[46] Tom Cartelli, "Medium Specificity and/as Medium Convergence in Kit Monkman's Chromakey *Macbeth* (2018)", manuscript.

that both the trailer and the accompanying leaflet emphasise the film's technological achievements, and they quote Peter Holland's high praise, calling the film "the most innovative rethinking of what it means to put Shakespeare on film for decades"[47] – for all the shortcomings of the enterprise, the courage and the innovative vision of the filmmakers are undeniable.

When one allows the blatantly unrealistic backdrop to work its magic, it can foreground aspects of the drama that can hardly manifest in a naturalistic setting: particularly the creation of the environment that is just as much inside the mind of the protagonist as outside, closing in on him, and pulling him towards a virtual abyss. Alison Findlay and Ramona Wray describe the visual impact, emphasising its connections with contemporary popular culture's CGI-created visuality, but also the way this connects to the Shakespearean text/drama:

> [The camera] swings around a sumptuously designed set, a 'Scotland' visualized as a revolving 'other' world (a kind of Shakespearean 'Death Star' or globe-shaped castle/fort adrift in the void). This is very much not the 'Scotland' of the 'blasted heath' variety and inherited representations; instead, an audience is presented with a universe in which outside and inside are delightfully blurred (is the moon inside or outside Macbeth's room or both?) and in which 'nothing is but what is not'.[48]

Chroma key technology is of course not in itself a recent development in cinematography, as it has been characteristic of analogue television, and computer-generated imagery has been employed in mainstream feature films at least since the 1950s. What makes Monkman's film feel contemporary is, however, partly its exclusive reliance on the green screen for its set design, and perhaps, even more importantly, its unapologetic artificiality which does not even attempt to create an illusion of realism. The spectacle of the virtual globe invites the viewer to experience something akin to video-game-style visuality, and offers not only a contemporary, but almost a futuristic viewing experience in the way it experiments with the technology. As *The Guardian*'s reviewer summarises the effect, "the end result creates an edgy, visually innovative background which is lush to watch but constantly upstages the foreground action, especially since, to put it politely, not everyone in the cast has the chops to handle the material".[49] It is certainly true that we are never allowed to forget the artificiality of the fictional world wherein the action is set, particularly as the scenic design typically dissolves into architectural sketch-like lines, emphasising the createdness of the artifice, making the film as metacinematic as possible.

And yet, we are never quite allowed to enter into this otherworldly space, at least not in the sense that we would expect from a mobile camera and a fast-paced editing characteristic of contemporary cinema. As Neil Forsyth laments, "whereas most films, at least since the early days, have been spliced together from sequences and shots taken from multiple positions, in this case the viewer sees all the action from his one unchanging vantage point, as if he were stuck on his seat in the theatre".[50] The potential reasons for the film's commercial failure – though one with great educational potential – may be found precisely in the promise of this setting and what it fails to deliver in terms of a virtual spatial experience, opting for the invocation of a theatrical space instead. Since certain elements of the film remain not simply grounded in traditional cinematography, but feel even theatrical, what is more, they are theatrical in the sense that they feel out of place in the cinema – from the exaggerated enunciation of some characters to the stage-like design of some interior scenes, the freedom of the virtual space is contrasted by the unnaturally rigid movements of both actors and camera. While the meticulous planning and the two separate shoots, followed by painstaking labour by hand and software[51] resulted in a stunning

[47] "Macbeth Movie 2018 Official Trailer", *Daily Motion*, dailymotion.com.
[48] Alison Findlay and Ramona Wray, "A Review of *Macbeth* (dir. Kit Monkman, 2017)", *British Shakespeare Association* (2017), www.britishshakespeare.ws.
[49] Leslie Felperin, "*Macbeth* Review – Full of Sound and Fury", *The Guardian*, 8 March 2018, theguardian.com.
[50] Neil Forsyth, *Shakespeare the Illusionist. Magic, Dreams, and the Supernatural on Film* (Athens: Ohio U.P., 2019), 159.
[51] Ibid., 160.

and flawlessly composed visuality, and the acting is equally of very high, but very theatrical quality, the viewer still feels a discrepancy between the two, as they appear to come from (and remain in) two very different worlds. The film displays the creators' awareness of the role that digital technology can play in contemporary cinema, beyond its ability to add special effects, replicate real(istic) locations for easier access, or beyond a creation of an imaginary space for science fiction or fantasy narratives (films like James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* (2013), or even Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* (2013) come to mind). In other words, the film's promise of a uniquely innovative visuality suggests that there is a demand for a more consistently experimental form of filmmaking, together with a conscious effort to make film production more sustainable, even if in this case it falls short of the fully immersive interactive storytelling that the design promises.

4. Joel Coen's Blending of the Theatrical and the Cinematic

While in terms of technology, Monkman's enterprise appears the polar opposite of Kurzel's, the two films' limited colour palette (Kurzel's alternating "between cold blue and grey and saturated red and orange",[52] as Agnieszka Rasmus points out, while Monkman's dominant black and red are placed against a greenish-brown background, also serving as an architect's drawing board)[53] emphasises the artifice of their spectacle. As already mentioned above, the use of subdued lighting and unsaturated colours or a limited colour palette, especially the extreme of black and white, is yet another feature of contemporary indie productions. In less than half a decade, cinemas have seen *Roma* (2018, dir. Alfonso Cuarón), *Cold War* (2018, dir. Paweł Pawlikowski), *The Lighthouse* (2019, dir. Robert Eggers), *Passing* (2021, dir. Rebecca Hall), *Belfast* (2021, dir. Kenneth Branagh), just to mention a few of the best-known award-winning black-and-white productions of the past few years. One of the effects of monochrome films is naturally the evocation of nostalgia, and an expression of the desire to recreate the cinema of the early twentieth century that is often a vital inspiration for the new auteur films. Looking at some of the most spectacular productions of the past decade, several Oscar winners and nominees among them, we can find that black-and-white filming is never a compromise but an artistic choice, "one loaded with meaning, sometimes artistic, sometimes technological, and sometimes purely emotional", showing that it is not an absence of colour, but "an art of light, shadow, lines, and shapes".[54]

This consciously artistic and abstract scenic design is especially characteristic of the most recent of the three *Macbeth*s, Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2021), which represents yet another path in its attempt to bring the four-hundred-year-old text to the contemporary viewer. In many ways Coen's film appears to seek a similar fusion of the theatrical with the cinematic that Monkman's project pursued, but in Coen's work the marriage of the sister arts has been clearly more successful. The film's understated visuality, shot in black-and-white, together with the use of the Academy aspect ratio (1.37:1) that in itself implies a return to a pre-blockbuster era of filmmaking, draws attention to itself through its sparsity. The first impression of this minimalist visuality is highly theatrical, rather than cinematic – Edward Gordon Craig's set designs for *Hamlet* are a direct parallel,[55] with their symbolic monoliths among which the human figure is haunted by shadows and pierced by beams of light. Production designer Stefan Dechant has also acknowledged Craig as one of the influences on the design, together

[52] Agnieszka Rasmus, "What Bloody Film Is This? *Macbeth* for Our Time", *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*, 18.33 (2018), 117.
[53] For a more detailed discussion of the different strategies used by the two films, see Kinga Földváry, "Going Digital vs Going Mainstream", in Magdalena Cieślak and Michał Lachman, eds., *Literature and Media: Productive Intersections* (Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Warszawa, Wien: Peter Lang, 2021).
[54] Luci Marzola, "The History of Black-and-White Cinematography: From its Death to Latest Oscar Trend", *IndieWire*, 18 January 2022, *Indiwire.com*.
[55] I am indebted to Veronika Schandl for drawing my attention to this parallel.

with German Expressionism, the work of "Carl Dreyer and F. W. Murnau, Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs of architecture, and Casa Luis Barragán in Mexico".[56] Craig's description of the theatre of the future emphasised the power of the simplification of all visuals: stripping down the set design to the barest essentials would allow "a stronger and more immediate appeal to the imagination", and in its ideal theatrical form, where all the accidental elements would be eliminated, "movement and expressiveness would be limited to architectural shapes and the play of light".[57] These Craigian ideals are noticeably echoed in the way Coen's *Macbeth* plays with shadow and light, with the razor sharp edges of monolithic structures and fabric patterns alike,[58] each having its function in the creation of this nocturnal vision of a moral maze where man cannot but get lost.

Jean-Louis Coy refers to the film as an "aesthetic and faithful vision of tragedy",[59] and also argues that the sparse visuality underscores the film's theatricality, claiming that Coen's *Macbeth* "rather constitutes an aesthetic and faithful vision of tragedy, the technicality and filmic creativity put at the service of the theater in order to harmonize space and speech".[60] This effect is enhanced by the use of "theatre light, like you'd see at a Beyoncé concert, which has very, very hard shadows",[61] as cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel describes the way he achieved this spectacular combination of nostalgic contemporaneity and cinematic theatricality. At the same time, this theatrical space is employed in the service of a highly cinematic form of storytelling, where simplicity serves the purpose of abstraction, but never makes the viewer feel that they have left the cinema. Coy's analysis points out the ways the cinematography is embedded in a variety of visual traditions, from early cinema through theatrical modernism, showing how "The format … recalls that of the great 'mutes'; the geometric rigor of the shots, the discreet accessories, the austerity of the style, finally the magnificent black and white, allow the cinema to coexist with a refined theatricality".[62] At the same time, as cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel makes it clear, whatever theatrical or cinematic traditions were invoked, these were always in the service of a technologically highly advanced, consciously cinematic experience:

> But I didn't want to be 'nostalgic' about old black-and-white movies. Quite the opposite: I was looking for the intensity that a very sharp image gives to close-ups. We used large format because I wanted to get a very sharp 4K image. When you do a close-up in 1.37, you fill the screen. The set disappears, and you bring the face and the text to the forefront. Of course, close-ups don't exist in theater – they are pure cinema.[63]

While the film's cinematography deserves a more in-depth discussion than I have space for here,[64] it is useful to point out how Coen's film displays backward-looking features as well as highly advanced and thus very contemporary cinematographic precision as well. Acknowledging this complexity, Sarah Hatchuel analyses the film as a synthesis of all preceding versions.[65] As Chloé Giroud argues in her comparison of the *Macbeth*s of Orson Welles (1948) and Joel Coen, it is easy to find a similarity between the noiresque visuality of the two films, both of which feel like an internal exploration rather than a geographically rooted interpretation of the play (in contrast with Kurzel's Scottish *Macbeth*). As Giroud points out in her abstract, "In many a way, Coen and Welles move away – geographically – from

[56] Adam Woodward, "Joel Coen: How We Made *The Tragedy of Macbeth*", *Little White Lies* (2022), *lwlies.com/interviews*.
[57] Christopher Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig: A Vision of Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 179.
[58] Fosco Lucarelli, "To Transcend Reality and Function as Symbol: Stage Design of Edward Gordon Craig", *SOCKS*, 15 February 2014, *socks-studio.com*.
[59] Jean-Louis Coy, "*Macbeth* à l'écran: trois films", *Humanisme*, 335.2 (2022), 102 (my translation).
[60] Ibid.
[61] Kyle Buchanan, "This Movie Season, It's a Black-and-White Boom", *The New York Times*, 3 November 2021, *nytimes.com*.
[62] Coy, "*Macbeth* à l'Écran", 102 (my translation).
[63] Benjamin B, "*The Tragedy of Macbeth*: Palace Intrigue", *American Cinematographer*, 4 January 2022, *theasc.com*.
[64] For more details, see, *e.g.*, Dipankar Sarkar, "*The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2021) Cinematography", *Flickside*, 28 March 2022, *Flickside.com*.
[65] Sarah Hatchuel, *L'Écran shakespearien: Adaptation, citation, modèle* (Rouge Profond, 2023), esp. 290-295.

Scotland, but paradoxically seem to get closer to *Macbeth*. Both of them focus on the theatricality of the play…. And both of them place the story of *Macbeth* at the core of their adaptation, even if it means drifting away from historical realism, or even tending towards abstraction".[66] This abstraction is, however, different from Monkman's virtual Chroma key backdrop, although it displays a no less amazing sense of what contemporary digital cinematography is capable of. The blending of the virtual and the real, the theatrical and the cinematic, the simple and pared down monochrome world and the unimaginably expressive camerawork make this film a worthy representative of its age, particularly characteristic of films aspiring for a status of classics, with narratives and themes whose universal appeal fits the way the "stylization of black-and-white unmoors it from time and space".[67]

5. Conclusion

All in all, the three *Macbeth*s, released within less than a decade, can be seen as representatives of the parallel trends observable in contemporary filmmaking: Kurzel's authentication of the narrative through landscape, Monkman's interest in the fictionality of the virtual setting, and Coen's abstract combination of the theatrical and the digital are all significant approaches characteristic of twenty-first-century cinema. None of the films have been box office hits (which rarely happens to Shakespeare adaptations in any case),[68] but their existence in their diverse forms and appearance on various platforms (Kurzel's in traditional commercial theatres, Monkman's almost direct relegation to streaming, and Coen's parallel release in both theatres and on Apple TV+) all testify to Shakespeare's continued presence in the constantly changing mediascape. The future is always hard to predict, but the present of filmmaking – if these three contemporary productions are anything to go by – is full of experimentation with what technological advancements can offer to creative professionals, yet a respectful awareness of the earlier giants of cinema history is equally there, showing how innovation is never possible without nostalgia, how the cinema can keep learning from the theatre, and how the global is always rooted in the local in filmmaking. The three *Macbeth*s of the past decade thus serve as witnesses of past, present and future, and teach us how to appreciate our Shakespearean heritage while living in our own times.

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[66] Chloé Giroud, "*Macbeth* déracinée, ou comment transmettre l'Écosse sans l'Écosse, dans les adaptations d'Orson Welles (1948) et de Joel Coen (2021)", *Études écossaises*, 22 (2023), journals.openedition.org/etudesecossaises/.
[67] Marzola, "The History of Black-and-White Cinematography".
[68] Ronan Paterson, "Box Office Poison?", *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, 25 (2013).