“The Witches Assume Control”

Never has a Shakespearean film adaptation been so surreal. Director Justin Kurzel illustrates a cinematic fever dream in his adaptation *Macbeth* (2015). He does so by using extended film techniques to create the world of *Macbeth* as unsettling, unreal, and grotesque at times, displaying a gratuitous level of violence and terror. One scene that represents the film as a whole is Act 2 Scene 1. Macbeth (Michael Fassbender) murders King Duncan (David Thewlis) while Lady Macbeth (Marion Cotillard) prays peacefully. By manipulating of color and time with creative cinematography, Kurzel portrays the witches as wholly responsible for the evil that ensues, while Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are helpless victims to their power.

The cinematography in *Macbeth* make the film seem surreal and apocalyptic. It feels less like a film and more like an artistic purgatory that distorts time and reality. In his adaptation, Kurzel takes quite a bit of artistic freedom in deviating from the original *Macbeth*. Though the dialogue is directly based off of Shakespeare’s play, Kurzel makes conscious decisions to cut out entire scenes, place later scenes before earlier ones, or have one scene visually playing out while a monologue from another scene is simultaneously dubbed over. This manipulation of the passage of time makes the film feel loose and unnerving. Kurzel also uses variation in color to create this effect, displaying shades from the palest of greys to the most vibrant scarlets, presenting a hyper-saturated look. Many of the scenes take place slowly and methodically, emphasizing space and suspense. There is also a multitude of wide landscape shots often employing an unlikely color, a slower appearance of time, and a liberal application of mist and fog, to give an even more unearthly feeling. One noticeable difference in the film is the gruesome display of violence among the many bloody onscreen deaths. Almost all of these deaths include shots of the witches. In some of these scenes, they do not speak, but rather watch their hurly-burly from a distance. As the film progresses, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth completely lose their sanity, and Kurzel is successful in showing their manic outbreaks. These two themes coupled together give the witches a much more powerful role in the film and liken them to reapers as they create and watch death, and destroy the Macbeths’ minds. Duncan’s murder scene implements many of the discussed tactics, and involves heavy manipulation of time and color against odd cinematography.

The distortion of time in Kurzel’s *Macbeth* is quite unorthodox and gives the film an uncanny progression. The scene opens with an ominous view of the moon and objects swaying in unsettling wind, while a pensive Macbeth nervously fiddles with chimes (0:33:35). Out of nowhere, the film displays a scene of an intense battle sped up to an overwhelming speed. At the center of the shot, Macbeth is standing still, staring at the camera, while the chaos ensues around him, signifying that Macbeth is lost in his head with the murder plot weighing heavy. The battle then slows way down as it shows the witches staring back at Macbeth, followed by another shot of Macbeth, but closer and in slow motion. The intensity of this stare off implies the witches’ grasp on Macbeth’s sanity as time itself becomes altered. The fact that Macbeth is simply thinking and reliving this so vividly emphasizes the diminishing of his mental state. At 0:37:14, when the actual murder takes place, Kurzel includes a montage of unrelated scenes that switch from Macbeth repeatedly stabbing Duncan, to Macbeth blankly staring off, to Lady Macbeth praying, to random shots of horses being pulled by a rope and exhibiting great struggle. The juxtaposition of Macbeth stabbing and then staring signifies the time manipulation as it goes back and forth between the two, and this turbulence provides insight into the instability of Macbeth’s mind as he murders Duncan under the witches’ guidance. Similarly, Lady Macbeth is praying silently while this all happens, indicating her coldness and absence from all sense. Later in the film, she becomes extremely distraught with everything that has happened, indicating that the witches’ spell has overtaken her. The seemingly random shots of the horses actually confirm that the witches are in control, because the horses are being pulled by a rope and thrashing, similar to Macbeth’s excited movements as he murders Duncan. The rope is pulled off-screen, and this implies that the witches are pulling them, because they are always standing off the sides of a major death or event, so the pulling of the rope symbolizes the witches’ control of Macbeth. Thus, the manipulation of time and montage establishes the witches as dominant over Macbeth.

As well as time, color is crucial in this film. Most of *Macbeth* exploits a pale, lifeless color scheme, but some scenes utilize vibrant shades of color. The scene starts with the typical morose greys, but becomes lighter when we see Macbeth and Lady Macbeth illuminated by warm candlelight (in separate settings).While it seems comfortable, the mood soon shifts as the montages progress. The battle scene in Macbeth’s head is a pale and somber blue, which works with the distorted time to give an imbalanced mood. The somber blue invades the warmth of the candlelight, pulling Macbeth from his reality and from his safety. The instability furthers as the film presents the shot of the witches from a distance, who are silhouetted against a dampened chartreuse green, a color that does not occur in natural atmospheres. This alien green increases the surrealism of the scene, and points to the fact that the witches are controlling this montage. Only supernatural forces can alter time and color in this fashion, and the fact that this intrudes Macbeth’s serene candlelight setting symbolizes the extent at which the witches are affecting Macbeth. We see another complete contradiction in color in the second montage, where the familiar candlelight turns into the darkness of the horses, which becomes more sinister in the pouring rain. In other scenes of the film, the witches stood in rain of this exact dark nature, and even reference it when one questions if they shall meet in “thunder, lightning, or in rain“ (1.1.2). This establishes rain as a motif of the witches, so a rope pulling the horses in pouring rain from offscreen, combined with the contortion of time and invasive colors, confirms the witches’ control over Macbeth. The scene concludes with a bizarre shot of Macbeth, who after killing Duncan, lays down next to his corpse. The camera is placed at the head of the bed and points down on Macbeth and Duncan’s faces, who strongly resemble each other at this particular moment. This scene’s final shot not only symbolizes the death of Macbeth’s individuality as he is now under supernatural control, but also foreshadows his own tragic demise, as he resembles the dead king he will become.

The scene demonstrates the catalyst for the continual deterioration of Macbeth’s sanity due to the witches’ invasion, which is a focal point of the entire film. In Shakespeare’s original play, Macbeth, and especially Lady Macbeth, exhibit some responsibility over their actions, as the witches only foretold Macbeth’s fate, as opposed to overtaking him completely. Kurzel’s adaptation is successful in portraying the witches as the masterminds behind the plan, using the Macbeths as pawns in their scheme. This is visible due to the distortion of time, the contradiction of bland colors with super saturated ones, and an almost avant-garde approach to shot composition. The murder of Duncan is a great example that touches on all of these aspects, and it is a superb representation of the nature of the film, which delves into the deteriorating sanity of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Kurzel’s *Macbeth* becomes somewhat independent as it ventures off from the strict structure of the play, and changes the nature behind Macbeth’s actions. Visually, it is a fresh and creative adaptation to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and it succeeds in taking the original play and introducing a distinct twist to it.

Works cited

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