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Citation

Korovsky Moura, F. (2024). “When shall we three meet again?”: Medievalism and perceptions of time in Justin Kurzel's "Macbeth". In B. Kopschitz Bastos & J. Mirian Rosa (Eds.), *Advanced research in English series* (pp. 47-55). Florianópolis: Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4281033>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

“When shall we three meet again?”¹: medievalism and perceptions of time in Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth*

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1 “If you can look into the seeds of time [...] Speak then to me”²: introduction

Umberto Eco (1932-2016) (1986, p. 61) wrote in his seminal essay “Dreaming of the Middle Ages” in 1986 that “Indeed, it seems that people like the Middle Ages”. Eco’s examples of medievalist books filling the shelves in the 1980’s bookshops illustrate the validity of his statement: Arthur Landis’ *A World Called Camelot* (1976), Evangeline Walton’s *The Sword is Forged* (1983), Lawrence Watt-Evans’ *The Lure of the Basilisk* (1980), Paul Williams’ *The Dome in the Forest* (1980), amongst other fantasy tales set in a mostly mythical medieval past. Over forty years later, it seems that people still like the Middle Ages. Medieval settings abound not only in historical fiction and best-seller books, but also in other media, such as the cinema. Just a glimpse at the catalogue of popular films and TV series can demonstrate the fact: George R. R. Martin’s pseudo-medieval saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-) was adapted to a highly profitable series broadcasted by the American television network HBO, *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019); William Shakespeare’s historical plays hit the television in an adaptation of the playwright’s two tetralogies produced by Rupert Ryle-Hodges for BBC Two in *The Hollow Crown* (2012-2016); *Macbeth*, one of Shakespeare’s great tragedies set in medieval Scotland, was adapted to the big screen in 2015. This production, directed by the Australian Justin Kurzel (1974-), will be the focus of analysis of the present article. However, before turning to Kurzel’s film, it is important to investigate how the Middle Ages have been represented on screen.

¹ Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 1, 1.

² Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 3, 58-60. Banquo, Macbeth’s friend, talks to the witches after their first prophecy regarding Macbeth’s future.

In the first chapter of *Cinematic Illuminations*, Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman (2010, p. 3) refer to Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and his recognition "that film would become the quintessential art form of our time and that it would bring about profound changes in how we view the work of art and, by extension, our own past". Indeed, the way we perceive the Middle Ages has been much affected by the way it has been represented in film and television. The different responses to the medieval past are inserted in the area of studies called *medievalism*. According to David Matthews, this field of research has gained prominence in the past three decades – since Eco's reflections on the different ways we dream and "return" to the Middle Ages. Importantly, Medievalist Studies differ from the area of Medieval Studies, since this is dedicated to the study of the medieval period itself, while the first investigates reactions and responses to the Middle Ages in other periods. Leslie J. Workman (1927-2001) (apud MATTHEWS, 2017, p. 7), considered the founder of the discipline and creator of the journal *Studies in Medievalism*, describes it as the "process of creating the Middle Ages" and "the study not of the Middle Ages themselves but of the scholars, artists, and writers [...] who constructed the idea of the Middle Ages that we inherited". Among these constructors of the medieval past, there are the film directors and actors, who recreate and embody the Middle Ages in film.

Reconstructing the medieval past is a process. As Eco (1986, p. 67-68) explains, "the Middle Ages have never been reconstructed from scratch: We have always mended or patched them up, as something in which we still live". In this sense, the Middle Ages we dream about and reconstruct in literature or film is connected to our present. Eco numbers ten ways we reconstruct the medieval past: the Middle Ages as a pretext, as the site of an ironic revisitation, as a barbaric age, the Middle Ages of Romanticism, of the *philosophia perennis*, of national identities, of Decadentism, of philosophical reconstruction, of the so-called Tradition, and as the expectation of the Millennium (ECO, 1986, p. 68-72). With this categorization in mind, I argue that the different perceptions of time in Kurzel's *Macbeth* evoke two different types of Middle Ages: the perspective of the medieval past as a barbaric age is achieved through the regular moving image, whereas a sense of a Romantic Middle Ages is constructed by means of time in slow motion, editing and the feeling of the power of the false.

2 "To beguile the time, Look like the time"³: perceptions of time in *Macbeth*

An interesting aspect regarding historical films is time: how the narrative is inscribed within a historical timeline and how the plot unravels during the length of the film. Also interesting, but not that well explored, however, is the perception of time itself within the film, and how this perception shapes the spectator's reconstruction of the Middle

³ Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 5, 63-64. Lady Macbeth incites her husband to kill the king.

Ages. In Kurzel's *Macbeth*, time mostly follows an organic chronology, but editing and instances of slow-motion destabilise the notion of time for the viewer. In this article, I explore two moments in Kurzel's *Macbeth* which challenge the organic chronological perception of time: the first appearance of the three witches, and the battle between Macbeth's and the rebellious army. I will draw on Gilles Deleuze's notions of time, the time-image and the power of the false. In addition, I will relate how these different perceptions of time affect the way the medieval past is reconstructed in *Macbeth* and experienced by the spectator.

In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze writes about different regimes of the image developed in post-war cinema, which have a major impact on how time is perceived: the organic or kinetic image, and the crystalline or chronic image. The first regime refers to moving images, which are interdependent, depicting the real through continuity and through the development of sensory-motor schemata. According to Deleuze (1989, p. 126-7), "it is a regime of localizable relations, actual linkages, legal, causal and logical connections. It is clear that this system includes the unreal, the recollection, the dream and the imaginary but as contrast". In this sense, the organic regime refers to the traditional cinematographic narrative, in which one event causally follows the other, resulting in a continuous whole. If instances of disruption exist, they function chiefly to oppose the reality of the main narrative. By contrast, the crystalline regime's focus is not on movement and interdependence of events, but on no-action. It is "a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent" (DELEUZE, 1989, p. 126), which "implies a collapse of sensory-motor schemata. Sensory-motor situations have given way to pure optical and sound situations to which characters, who have become seers, cannot or will not react" (DELEUZE, 1989, p. 128). The organic and crystalline regimes are presentations of time in film. They consist of the two poles of a spectrum, therefore it is possible to go from one regime to the other in the same film. On the side of the organic regime, there are the indirect images of time based on sensory-motor situations. On the side of the crystalline regime, we find the direct time-image. In fact, it is extremely hard to create films composed of time-images only.

Kurzel's *Macbeth* is a film rich with different layers of time. In certain scenes, time itself seems to move in a different rhythm for different characters, as I will argue. Certainly, *Macbeth* is composed of indirect images of time that follow an order of cause and effect, in which one scene has a palpable effect on the next. There are no time-images in the Deleuzian terms, since the sensory-motor schemata still rules the flow of the narrative: events happen for a certain reason in order to achieve a certain result. Nonetheless, there are instances of time disruption that challenge the organic regime of the image, resulting in a level of the power of the false. The power of the false is an idea systematised by Deleuze in *Cinema 2*. It is a power the cinema has to "replace[s] and supersede[s] the form of the true, because it poses the simultaneity of impossible presents, or the

coexistence of not-necessarily true pasts" (DELEUZE, 1989, p. 131). I will return to the notion of the power of the false when analysing the corpus of this article.

Kurzel's film starts with reference to time. The first scene opens with the image of a dead baby: a paradox of new life and death in one small body, which has lived too little but has now entered the realm of eternity. While the infant's body is inert, his clothes move gently due to the wind. Similarly, the people who stand at the funeral in mourning black clothes stand still while their robes are agitated by the breeze. The growling of the wind can be heard alongside a soundtrack of almost dissonant string arrangements: an intense sound effect in contrast with the almost immobility of the people in the scene. The opposition between stillness and movement is constant throughout the film.

After a close-up of the faces of Macbeth and his wife facing one another in silence and immobile, the frame opens up to an aerial shot of the remote mountains, covered by a grey mist that gives the place a mythical atmosphere. The smoke of the funeral pyre can be seen in the valley. Subsequently, the scene shows four figures in a medium shot: three women stand erect next to each other in black clothes; the one on the left puts her arms on the shoulders of a young girl, also in black, and the one in the middle holds what seems to be a baby wrapped in rags. There is a distance of approximately two meters between each of the three women, which conveys an unnatural atmosphere to the scene. The place seems to be the same as in the scene of the funeral. However, it becomes unclear for the spectator if one event follows the other in time, since the women were not present in the previous aerial shot, and the funeral pyre or the smoke emanating from it can no longer be seen when the dark figures are on screen. Moreover, it remains uncertain if the four figures are real or imaginary, if they belong to the same "presentness", to the past or the future, or even if they belong to the same universe. As Deleuze (1989, p. 130) points out, "time has always put the notion of truth into crisis". His argument is illustrated by the naval battle paradox:

If it is *true* that a naval battle *may* take place tomorrow, how are we to avoid one of the true following consequences: either the impossible proceeds from the possible (since, if the battle takes place, it is no longer possible that it may not take place), or the past is not necessarily true (since the battle could not have taken place). (DELEUZE, 1989, p. 130)

The two events cannot be true *at the same time*. In order to solve this paradox, Gottfried Leibniz proposes the idea of *impossibility*. The events are *possible* to happen, but in different worlds, which in turn cannot happen simultaneously: they are not *compossible*. Analysing the opening scenes in *Macbeth* through this lens suggests that the baby's funeral and the four figures in black are not *compossible* events. In this case, the narration is no longer truthful, since it does not unfold events in a chronological sequence. This is what Deleuze (1989, p. 131) calls "the power of the false".

Furthermore, as the camera captures the women in closer shots, what had seemed to be a wrapped baby in the hands of the woman in the middle disappears. Instead, she now seems to be holding an amulet made of small human bones. If the wrapped baby turned into bones refers to the death of Macbeth's son, does that mean that the child died while the speech of the women took place? In this case, did the scene of the women in black happen before the baby's funeral? Or did the change from wrapped baby to bones in the woman's hands signify the burning of the baby's corpse, in which case the scenes would have happened simultaneously? Surely, the power of the false in *Macbeth* is not as evident as in Robbe-Grillet's films, which Deleuze mentions in his book to illustrate his argument, but the awareness of such instances of "falsity" in Kurzel's film contributes to the understanding of how the film as a whole affects the spectator's response to the medieval past constructed in it.

The three women in black obviously refer to the witches in Shakespeare's play text. Their grotesque looks and scarred faces give them a supernatural appearance, emphasised by the mysterious and remote misty mountains that surround them. The witches' speech, in fact, composes the first scene in Shakespeare's play. The baby's funeral was an addition to Kurzel's cinematographic adaptation. Curiously, the first scene in Shakespeare also refers to time. The first line of the play is uttered by one of the witches: "When shall we three meet again?" (1.1.1). Indeed, the very first word of the play alludes to time: *when*. Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (2015, p. 62), editors of the Arden Shakespeare edition of *Macbeth*, call attention to the relationship between *Macbeth* and time: "From at least Coleridge onwards, critics have drawn attention to the ways in which time is a major aspect, not to say a governing principle, of the play". They consider time and the passage of time as central to the understanding of the dramatic text. They go on:

From its opening with the First Witch's question, 'When shall we three meet again?', to its closing with Malcolm's reassurance that 'What's more to do, / Which would be planted newly with the time... We will perform in measure, time and place', it is permeated with time references. (CLARK; MASON, 2015, p. 62)

The obsession of the play with time may have induced Kurzel to work with different time perceptions in his film, as the examples in this article aim to illustrate. The final lines of the Witches in Shakespeare's scene are spoken by the oldest of the women in black in Kurzel's film: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.9-10), followed by an abrupt cut to a black screen, which could indicate that the witches indeed "hovered", or disappeared.

If we consider Eco's definitions of how the Middle Ages can be reconstructed either as a *barbaric* age or as a *Romantic* site, it is possible to analyse the first scene of the baby's funeral as an illustration of the first. As Eco (1986, p. 69) puts it, the medieval past is seen

as “a land of elementary and outlaw feelings”, which would account for the rudimentary of the baby’s funeral pyre and rites. In opposition, when the three women and the girl are put on screen, involved by the mysteriousness afforded by the power of the false, it consists of a different type of medievalism. The medieval past is still perceived as rudimentary, but in a more Romantic light. According to Eco (1989, p. 69), the Middle Ages of the Romanticism are characterised by “their stormy castles and their ghosts”. The grotesque women in black allude to the witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, uttering their prophecies from the top of a misty mountain. This Romantic perspective of the Middle Ages is linked to the Gothic movement in English literature at the end of the eighteenth century, when writers such as Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823) and Horace Walpole (1717-1797) set their fantastic tales in medieval castles and ruins.

Another interesting instance of time perception in Kurzel’s adaptation is the first battle scene between Macbeth and his group against the army of rebels led by Macdonwald (as it is spelled in the film’s opening lettering). The first scene of the battle consists of a red-filtered moving-upwards shot of Macbeth alone. We see his back only, surrounded by the mystic foggy atmosphere. Despite the fog, the sun shines bright in the sky. The upward movement of the shot reminds the rising of the sun itself, which could indicate the passing of time, the start of a new day. The red filter undoubtedly functions as a foreshadowing of the bloody battle to come. The red tonality also denaturalises the scene, giving it a dream-like atmosphere. Afterwards, there is a dry cut to the medium shot of a mountain covered with snow: an intense contradiction with the warm colours predominating in the previous scene. It is not possible to see the mountain in its entirety, only the top and part of its body. It seems to be the same place as in the red-filtered scene before, but the difference in the colour palette results in a feeling of disruption. A closer shot at the mountain and an aerial shot follow, in which the fog moves quickly. In the next scene, the dark silhouettes of soldiers contrast with a dense white fog that envelops them. The presence of the fog in all scenes link them, giving the sequence a logical connection. Nevertheless, in the red-filtered scene the spectator finds Macbeth alone, and the next time we see him, he is walking amongst the dark silhouettes of Scottish soldiers. It becomes clear for the spectator that time has elapsed while the fog slithered down the mountains, although how much time it is impossible to say.

After Macbeth and his group are joined by the last reserves sent by the king, they await the battle in silence. When they are ready to march, they lift their swords and yell. As they run towards the enemy, the scene is seen through an aerial shot, and time loses organic presentation: the fog becomes still, the soldiers are seen marching in slow motion, and the sounds of battle are muffled, only the wind is heard. Moments of regular time motion are interweaved with moments in slow motion as the armies get closer. The intersection of different time presentations causes in the viewer a sense of bewilderment, for such

durations of time simultaneously are “impossible”. The bloody battle continues until three men are seen standing still in the midst of the moving soldiers in action. The contrast between stillness and movement calls attention to the different layers of time passing. It feels the time passes at a different rhythm for the men fighting and for the three men who stand there and watch. The camera rotates to the men in battle and when it returns to the three still figures, they are no longer men, but the three women from the beginning of the film: the three witches. As Macbeth sees them, he too becomes still. Time starts to move at a different speed for him as well, the same rhythm as the magical time of the witches. The next time the witches are captured by the camera, they are not only three, but four – the little girl from the beginning of the film has joined them. Macbeth remains immobile as the camera approaches him, while the battle goes on in his surroundings. In the next shot, time is restored to its regular speed and Macbeth is in the act of killing a man on the ground. The dry cut from Macbeth’s immobile reverie to Macbeth’s murderous action causes a feeling of discontinuity.

As Louis D’Arcens (2016, p. 1) points out in her article about mood and transhistorical empathy in Kurzel’s *Macbeth*, “its early alternating of kinetic battle scenes with static human tableaux establishes a paradoxical world of turbulence and stasis, where volatile dynastic politics churn within a world of unchanging tribal custom”. The constant opposition between stillness and movement throughout the film results in a contradictory perception of the Middle Ages: at times mythical, characterised by the slow motion of time, and at other times extremely violent, characterised by the rapid motion of time. As Macbeth is back in action, he looks at the place where the four mystical figures had been, but he sees only the three men he had seen before. The spectator again faces blurred boundaries between the real and the imaginary. Were the witches only in Macbeth’s mind, which ran in a different speed than the real action in the actual world? Or were the witches in fact there? If they were, they could not share the same physical space as the three men. Moreover, they could not stand still in the midst of a violent battle and remain unscathed. In this sense, the different layers of time could not occur simultaneously.

As the scene goes on, we hear in voice-over a man retelling the events of the battle. Later we find out it is a messenger who comes to King Duncan to bring the news of Macdonwald’s treason and Macbeth’s victory. The retelling of the results of the battle could only happen *after* the battle itself. However, the juxtaposition of the soldiers fighting and the messenger talking with the king inside a tent blur the division between present and future – if the current event is the battle; or past and present – if the current event is the retelling of the battle. The viewer remains uncertain as to when in time the narrative stands. This disruption of the organic flow of time gives the spectator another instance of the power of the false.

The analysed scene of the battle illustrates how the Middle Ages were recreated in different ways but within the same scene in the film. The mythical, magical, slow-motion Middle Ages in which the witches and Macbeth (temporarily) are inserted refer to a Romantic reconstruction of the medieval past, whereas the bloody battle between Macbeth's and Macdonwald's armies, which is in motion at a different layer of time than the mythical medieval past of the witches, illustrates the dreaming of the Middle Ages as a barbaric age, as the real Dark Ages.

3 *"Thy letters have transported me beyond this ignorant present, and I feel now the future in the instant"*⁴: final considerations

Kurzel's film is extremely rich in offering the spectator different perspectives of time. I have focused on two moments in the film that illustrate how editing and interweaving of different rhythms of time blur the distinctions of past, present and future, causing a power of the false in the viewer. In a film that reconstructs the medieval past such as *Macbeth*, the juxtaposed layers of time contribute to offering distinct reactions to the Middle Ages on screen. As D'Arcens (2016, p. 1) points out, the film is not set in a specific time in the past. As she puts it, Kurzel's film "is emphatically not a historicist venture". There are no references to specific moments in Scottish history, but only an overall medieval setting. "The expository intertitle at the beginning of the film, moreover, makes no specific allusion to the action's eleventh-century historical context. Indeed, the only 'grounding' historical event mentioned in the opening text, the 'Battle of Ellon,' is historically unattested" (D'ARCENS, 2016, p. 1). Such uncertainty adds to the power of the false elicited by the film. Where does the story take place? Is it a real or imaginary venue? When does it occur?

The instances of "falsity" in Kurzel's film affects the way the spectator perceives the medieval past through the film. As illustrated by the examples above, editing and time in slow motion can work as forgers of a power of the false, which elicits the reconstruction of a Romantic medieval past. Conversely, the rudimentary funeral rites and a bloody battle run in a different layer and speed of time reconstruct the Middle Ages as Dark and barbaric. Interestingly, the creeping fog is present throughout the film, linking the moments of "falsity" and reality, giving the narrative an overall cohesive unity based on sensory-motor schemata. Deleuze's definition of time-image, therefore, does not apply to Kurzel's film. However, there are instances in the film that challenge the organic flow of time and blur the boundaries between past, present and future, such as the two moments analysed in this article. These moments are capable of forging a power of the false, offering the viewer a double-voiced experience of the Middle Ages: perceived as both barbaric and Romantic.

⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 5, 56-59. Lady Macbeth welcomes her husband, who arrives after his letters about the witches' prophecy.

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