BRITFILMS #10 – Accompanying material for media education

MACBETH

USA/Great Britain/France 2015, 113 min

FSK rating: 12
age recommendation: 16+

Language: English/English with subtitles in German or English

Director	Justin Kurzel
Script	Todd Louiso, Jacob Koskoff, Michael Lesslie, adapted from William Shakespeare's play
Cinematography	Adam Arkapaw
Editing	Chris Dickens
Music	Jed Kurzel
Cast	Michael Fassbender, Marion Cotillard, Passy Considine, Sean Harris, Jack Reynor and others

About MACBETH

The Scottish general Macbeth is loyal to his king. Yet when he tells his wife about a visit from three witches who prophesy that he will someday be King of Scotland, he decides to act. Macbeth becomes consumed by the promise of the throne and kills King Duncan. However, this isn't enough. To protect his claim to power, the family of a friend also has to be killed, whose progeny the witches predict would be the future successors to the throne. Soon the tyrant Macbeth cracks under the weight of his own lack of scruples. Plagued by guilt, he descends into madness and violence escalates.

This new adaptation of William Shakespeare's theatre piece retains the original text and despite necessary cuts remains faithful to the original. Added scenes like a short prologue and epilogue seamlessly blend into this narrative about a power hungry tyrant. The cinematography of Justin Kurzel's film is particularly impressive. The film's battle scenes are highly stylized by using slow-motion effects, almost like a painting (and are reminiscent of the film adaptation of the comic book "300"). The beautiful landscape shots not only convey a feeling for the setting but also function as a mirror of the soul for the film's characters. The conspicuous use of Christian symbolism visually places a struggle with guilt at the centre.

The following worksheets will address
- the adaptation's new prologue and epilogue and how this effects the history
- how the film locates the characters in the impressive scenery and what this says about them
- the aestheticized representation of violence and its effect
- the use of Christian symbolism as a major theme of the film

A new prologue and epilogue

Justin Kurzel's adaptation of MACBETH begins and ends with the following images, both deviating from the original. Explain briefly what you see here.
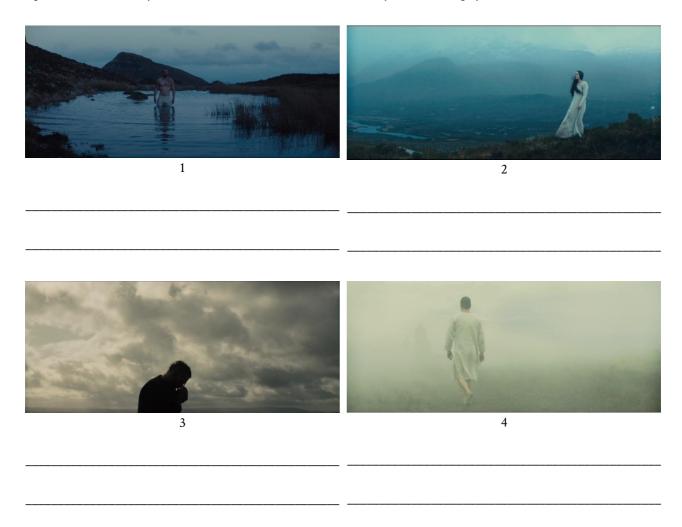

1

2

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Picture 1: How does this scene explain the motives of Macbeth and his wife?

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_____

How do these scenes contribute to a new narrative arc?

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Compare the colours in the stills. In what way do they reflect the film's plot?

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Divergences and cuts

In small groups, list important passages from the play that were cut from the film. Then make a list of scenes that were added to this cinematic version. Consider in what ways these cuts and additions change the plot. Also think about what requirements scenes need to fulfil in a feature film.

The scenery and the characters

MACBETH is dependent on its imposing shots of the Scottish countryside. Using the following stills from the film, explain how the scenery characterizes the characters and what it says about their physical and mental state.

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2

_____   _____

_____   _____

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4

_____   _____

_____   _____

Aesthetics of violence

Image 1 is a still from the battle at the beginning of the film, and image 2 from the battle at the end of the film.

1

2

What design elements connect these two images? What effect is created?

_____

Discuss together in the class: Does the aesthetic trivialise violence in MACBETH?

Faith

The symbol of the cross has an important part in MACBETH. Using the following stills from the film, explain the context (and with whom) in which they most frequently appear. Also address how this is cinematically presented.

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In addition to the Christian symbolism in MACBETH, there is also a belief in the existence of "witches" who can predict the future. What does this tell you about the attitudes towards faith in the early seventeenth century, the time when Shakespeare's play was written?

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