

Throne of Blood / Cobweb Castle / Castle of the Spider's Web / Kumo no su-jo (1957) Akira Kurosawa

P Michell Sept 2016

A vivid, visceral *Macbeth* adaptation, *Throne of Blood*, directed by Akira Kurosawa, sets Shakespeare's definitive tale of ambition and duplicity in a ghostly, fog-enshrouded landscape in feudal Japan. As a hardened warrior who rises savagely to power, Toshiro Mifune gives a remarkable, animalistic performance, as does Isuzu Yamada as his ruthless wife. *Throne of Blood* fuses classical Western tragedy with formal elements taken from Noh theatre to create an unforgettable cinematic experience.

Considered to be even more superior than *Rashomon* (1950). Many consider this to be one of the best interpretations of Shakespeare on film. Once seen many scenes will be remembered for quite some time.

Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) and Toshiro Mifune (1920-1997) collaborated on 16 films together (1948-1965). (Mifune made 170 films including some in English including the TV series *Shogun*.) Then thirty years of separation. It has been argued that the director's best films were made during this time.

Mifune first encountered director [Akira Kurosawa](#) when [Toho Studios](#), the largest film production company in Japan, was conducting a massive talent search (1947), during which hundreds of aspiring actors auditioned before a team of judges. Kurosawa was originally going to skip the event, but showed up when an actress he knew told him of one actor who seemed especially promising. Kurosawa later wrote that he entered the audition to see "a young man reeling around the room in a violent frenzy ... it was as frightening as watching a wounded beast trying to break loose. I was transfixed." When an exhausted Mifune finished his scene, he sat down and gave the judges an ominous stare. He promptly lost the competition. Kurosawa, however, had found his muse. "I am a person rarely impressed by actors," he later said. "But in the case of Mifune I was completely overwhelmed."

*"Mifune had a kind of talent I had never encountered before in the Japanese film world. It was, above all, the speed with which he expressed himself that was astounding. The ordinary Japanese actor might need ten feet of film to get across an impression; Mifune needed only three. The speed of his movements was such that he said in a single action what took ordinary actors three separate movements to express. He put forth everything directly and boldly, and his sense of timing was the keenest I had ever seen in a Japanese actor. And yet with all his quickness, he also had surprisingly fine sensibilities. – Akira Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*.*

On the film:

Noh theatre's use of Lady Macbeth in white mask and slightly accelerated movements. Also final scene with arrows.

"I decided upon the techniques of the Noh because in Noh style and story are one. I wanted to use the way Noh actors have of walking and the general composition which the Noh stage provides. This is one of the reasons why there are so few close-ups in the picture. I tried to show everything using the full-shot."
Kurosawa quoted in Sadoul's Dictionary of Films.

Links:

Senses of Cinema

<http://sensesofcinema.com/?s=throne+of+blood>

Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akira_Kurosawa

Guardian's Top 10

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2010/mar/23/akira-kurosawa-100-google-doodle-anniversary>

Analysis

Every Samurai Longs To Be Master Of A Castle

Michael Coy.

5 August 2000

Washizu is a brave samurai who helps his lord to fight off a violent rebellion. Washizu and his friend Miki are riding through Cobweb Forest when a spirit appears to them and makes predictions which fire their ambitions. When Washizu explains this vision to his wife Asaji, she urges him to murder his lord and rule in his stead. Thus the tragedy begins.

Kurosawa's interpretation of Macbeth is visually fascinating. Swirling mist, colossal trees dripping with rain, rich black volcanic soil and bulky fortress architecture provide the imposing, dread-laden backdrop against which the humans move in superbly stylized patterns. The director chose to shoot the action on Mount Fuji precisely because of the volcanic soil - and even had truckloads brought to the studio for pickup shots.

Westerners unfamiliar with Noh are missing a huge part of the film's meaning. This thousand-year-old theatrical tradition corresponds broadly to our Elizabethan Tragedy, and Kurosawa shows how the two cultural strains, eastern and western,

interlock and interact. The one illumines the other.

The Noh stage must have on it three pine branches and a symbolic Shinto temple-arch. In the film, shots are carefully composed to include tangles of branches in the foreground, and the vast entrance gate of Washizu's fortress serves for the temple arch. And yet Kurosawa is not including these details redundantly, for mere form's sake - the ubiquitous branches, framing the human action, remind us all the time of the forest nemesis awaiting Washizu. The arch is Washizu's interface with the world - open in the early stages, but gradually less so as the protagonist retreats into his own diseased inner self.

A Noh play features a "doer" (Shite) and a "companion" (Waku) who plays a subordinate role. Washizu and Asaji are the Shite and Waku respectively. Elements in the Noh include a battle-drama (we get one here) and a so-called "wig drama", in which a female character dominates the action. This is the central portion of the film, in the quiet of the fortress quarters, when Asaji ruthlessly manipulates her husband's ambition. Every Noh play has a ghost which appears to the Shite, and the spirit in the forest fulfils that function. Noh plays are never original works, in that (by a venerable convention) they are re-workings of ancient legends. Kurosawa follows tradition by quarrying his tale from Shakespeare's play.

There is no western term to describe the stylized striking of poses so important in Noh. Our word "dance" is a crude word which approximates to, but does not convey, the grace of the Japanese art-form. Asaji, alone with the blood-stain, gives us a glimpse of this delightful ritual.

Finally, Noh contains an aural richness almost totally absent from western tragedy - the complex rhythms of stamping and percussion which accompany the spoken word. In the film, the rhythmic patterns of horses' hooves on soil, and Washizu's bare feet on the boards of the banquet hall, are meant to reinforce the mood as they creep into our emotions by subliminal insistence.

Isuzu Yamada is terrific as Asaji. Her stillness absolutely oozes determination, contrasting strongly with her husband's hollow bluster.

It seems that Kurosawa cherished the concept of a Noh Macbeth for some years before committing it to celluloid. Apparently the project had to be scrapped in 1952 because Welles' Macbeth was nearing completion, and Kurosawa did not want the two films to suffer by being endlessly compared. This version, then, had to wait until 1957 to be realised.

The director is not afraid to add his own flourishes to the well-known story. We hear of the notorious traitor Fujimaki who disembowelled himself in a room of the fortress. The exact spot is now known as the Forbidden Room, a place of evil omen with its indelible bloodstain on the floor. It is a symbol which encapsulates the spirit of the film, interweaving the related themes of treachery, blood and guilt. In a

brilliant transition, we are taken to a change of scene by the ripping down of a banner by galloping horsemen. Washizu at the pinnacle of his arrogance is filmed from below with severe foreshortening, conveying his vainglory more effectively than words ever could. The death scene, with its railing, hysterical protagonist and relentless volleys of arrows (their grouped shafts recalling the fateful forest) has enormous power and lives long in the viewer's memory.

Throne of Blood: Shakespeare Transposed.

Stephen Price

Critics commonly describe *Throne of Blood* (1957) as Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of *Macbeth*. While this description is certainly not untrue, the film is much more than a direct cinematic translation of a literary text. Kurosawa's movie is a brilliant synthesis of diverse cultural, aesthetic, and historical sources, only one skein of which derives from Shakespeare. The film's towering achievement lies in the way Kurosawa seamlessly integrates these and gives them superlative formal expression. Kurosawa often turned to foreign literary works for his films, but in all cases, the result was a transposition of the source rather than anything as straightforward as an adaptation. His appropriations of Shakespeare (here as well as in 1985's *Ran*), for example, were acts more of historiography than of analysis, and descriptions of the films as adaptations minimize the true nature of what Kurosawa accomplished. In *Throne of Blood*, with his keenly developed sense of Japanese history, he found a kind of mirror universe in the period of turmoil, treachery, and succession battles that Shakespeare wrote about in *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare's play derives from a regicide and other historical events in eleventh-century Scotland. Emerging ideas of national unity and kingship were then vying with civil disorder caused by battles for power among regional lords. Struggles over succession often resulted in bloodshed. Malcolm II, grandfather of Duncan, the king Macbeth killed, seized the crown by slaying a rival prince and eliminated other rivals to ensure Duncan's succession. Duncan, in turn, was killed when he unwisely ventured into Macbeth's province in the north of Scotland. Kurosawa was keenly impressed with the heritage of violence that he saw in the play and its history. He once remarked that, in depicting an age when the strong preyed on the weak, *Macbeth* had a focus in common with all of his films.

The parallel Kurosawa intuited and explored was with the century of civil war in medieval Japan. Following the Onin War, which lasted from 1467 to 1477 and laid waste to the imperial city of Kyoto, the nation entered this prolonged time of turmoil, the Sengoku Jidai (the Age of the Country at War), which was marked by internecine conflicts among rival clans, the absence of a central political power, and the kind of treachery, prevarication, and murder that Kurosawa dramatizes in *Throne of Blood*. Warlords violently seized domains, murdered trusted associates, and were killed in turn by their vassals. Washizu (Toshiro Mifune) may enact a story whose outlines are those of *Macbeth*, but he personifies elements of the historical

spirit of his own age.

Kurosawa's chronicle is a highly selective one, however. As with his literary sources, his treatment of history is faithful to elements of the factual record while transposing them into poetic terms. He made the sixteenth century his own period by being one of the few Japanese filmmakers of his time to explore it. In *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Throne of Blood*, *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), and *Ran*, Kurosawa concentrates on the epoch's military strife, and his presentations of those conflicts are so apocalyptic as to imply that widespread killing was taking place in Japan's medieval era. In fact, the rate of battlefield death in the samurai wars was not so extensive. Kurosawa gives us battles filtered through his perceptions as a twentieth-century artist well acquainted with the truly large-scale slaughters of his own time. The sense of apocalypse in the films is not of the sixteenth century but contemporary.

Kurosawa's transposition of *Macbeth* points to the transcultural materials in the play—the common human experience that underlies it—but also vitiates the Shakespearean elements. All that beautiful dialogue is gone. That surely makes it an odd adaptation, except that Kurosawa has transposed not only history but theater as well. There is plenty of theater in this film, but not the sort the King's Men would have staged.

Kurosawa's radical gesture here is to supplant Shakespeare with Noh theater. Emerging in the fourteenth century and patronized by samurai lords, Noh was contemporaneous with the age Kurosawa depicts, and therefore he felt that its aesthetic style would furnish the right kind of formal design for the film. (In *Ran*, when he again transposed Shakespeare to sixteenth-century Japan, he again incorporated Noh elements.) Besides, he loved Noh and found it inexpressibly beautiful in its own right.

Noh shows up everywhere in *Throne of Blood*, making the project a real fusion of cinema and theater and showing just how cinematic theater can be in the hands of a great filmmaker. Noh elements include the music (that assertive flute, for example), the bare sets, and especially the stylized performances by Mifune and Isuzu Yamada (as Asaji).

Noh performing style, with its blend of dance, song, poetry, and mime, is antithetical to the realism and naturalism that invests acting in the West. It counters the meaning of Shakespeare's famous lines in act 3, scene 2 of *Hamlet* about the actor holding the mirror up to nature.

Performance in Noh aims for a paradoxical conjunction of elements. When an actor moves in a powerful way, he must stamp his foot gently. Noh performance is a striking blend of stillness and agitation, a mixture of different gestures and tones that can be seen in the acting throughout the film, and that Kurosawa even carried over into the cinematic design of entire sequences, as when he cuts from a long,

static scene of ritual immobility and austere playing to a scene of furious action choreographed with flamboyant camera moves.

Actors in Noh use masks, and while Kurosawa doesn't do anything so blatantly artificial here, he does have Mifune and Yamada model facial expressions that resemble popular Noh masks (a strategy he extended in Yamada's makeup). The Noh masks point to a huge difference between this theatrical tradition and Shakespeare's, one that helps give the film many of its unusual qualities. Noh is not psychologically oriented; its characters are not individualized, they are types—the old man, the woman, the warrior, and so on. And the plays are quite didactic, aiming to impart a lesson. Kurosawa, therefore, strips all the psychology out of *Macbeth* and gives us a film whose characters are Noh types and where emotions—the province of character in the drama of the West—are formally embodied in landscape and weather. The bleached skies, the fog, the barren plains, and characters going adrift against and within these spaces—this is where the emotion of the film resides. It is objectified within and through the world of things.

As a result, the film has a definite coldness; it keeps the viewer outside the world it depicts. Kurosawa wants us to grasp the lesson, to see the folly of human behavior, rather than to identify or empathize with the characters.

This provides us with a different cultural way of seeing, which Kurosawa extends by incorporating another medieval art informed, like Noh, by a Buddhist orientation. The striking emptiness of the spaces in the film—the skies, the dense, roiling fog that obscures mountains and plains—is a cinematic rendition of *sumi-e* composition. This style of pen-and-ink drawing leaves large portions of the picture unfilled, making of emptiness a positive compositional (and spiritual) value. Kurosawa believed that this art form resonated deeply with the Japanese, and he was eager to infuse the film with its aesthetic. (Production designer Yoshiro Muraki's castle set was black, and was built on the dark, volcanic soil of Mount Fuji in order to heighten the *sumi-e* effect, the contrast between dark and light. Although based on historical sketches, the castle is not of any single period.)

As a positive value, this pictorial and spiritual emptiness is set against the human world of vanity, ambition, and violence, which Kurosawa suggests is all illusion. The Buddhist arts of Noh and *sumi-e* enabled him to visualize this disjunction between the hell of life as we poor creatures know it, subject to our strivings, our desires, and our will, and the cosmic order that negates them.

If Kurosawa strips the psychology from *Macbeth*, he also strips out Shakespeare's political conservatism, refusing to give us the play's reassuring conclusion (flattering to James I) in which a just political authority triumphs. In Kurosawa's film and worldview, the cycle of human violence never ends. Thus the film's many circular motifs describe the real tragedy at the heart of the history that *Throne of Blood* dramatizes. Why do people kill one another so often and through so many ages? Kurosawa had no answer to this question. But he showed us here, through the film's chorus, its circularity, and its Buddhist aesthetics, that there may not be an

answer within this world.

The aesthetics and philosophy of *Throne of Blood* take us well beyond Shakespeare, and that's why this is a great *film*. Its accomplishments are not beholden to another medium or artist. Kurosawa gives us his own vision, expressed with ruthless, chilling power, and it's the totality of that vision, its sweep and its uncompromising nature, that moves and terrifies us—and that we are so seldom privileged to see in cinema.

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Donald Ritchie:

Ritchie is an important in the understanding Japanese Cinema.

Director Akira Kurosawa had wanted to make *Throne of Blood* for some time. "After finishing *Rashomon* [in 1950] I wanted to do something with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, but just about that time Orson Welles's version was announced, so I postponed mine." Kurosawa had long been fond of the play, once called it "my favorite Shakespeare," and—beyond this—had another reason for making it. "I've always thought that the Japanese period film is historically uninformed. Also, it never uses modern filmmaking techniques. In *Seven Samurai* we tried to do something about this, and *Throne of Blood* had the same general feeling behind it."

In *Macbeth*, Kurosawa saw a contemporary issue—a parallel between medieval Scotland and medieval Japan which illuminated contemporary society; and further, a pattern which is valid in both historical and contemporary contexts. Once asked if he wanted to pose philosophical questions in his films or whether he was merely making entertainment, he answered: "I look at life as an ordinary man. I simply put my feelings onto film. When I look at Japanese history—or the history of the world for that matter—what I see is how man repeats himself over and over again." For Kurosawa the pattern of repetition is destructive and it is this pattern which free his heroes attempt to destroy—as in the director's *Ikiru*, for example.

The fable of *Macbeth* held a special attraction for Kurosawa. The hero tries to realize himself. His fault—not ambition or pride, as such—is his failure to realize himself completely. Instead, he wants merely to rise in the world, he wants something as conventional as power. Naturally, one murder leads to another, because this is the pattern of power.

Kurosawa did not intend this film for himself. “Originally, I wanted merely to produce the picture and let someone younger direct it. But when the script was finished and Toho saw how expensive it would be, they asked me to direct it. So I did. My contract expired after these next three films anyway.” Perhaps if he had written the script with himself in mind he might have written it differently. He has said that the scripts he does for others are usually much richer in visuals than those he does for himself—and *Throne of Blood* is extremely visually rich. But what occurred, he says, is that he often visualized scenes differently than the way he had written them. Not that he improvised, or invented on the set. “I never do that. I tried it once. Never again. I had to throw out all of the impromptu stuff.” What he did do, once he knew he was to direct the picture, was to begin a study of the traditional Japanese *musha-e*—those early picture scrolls of battle scenes. At the same time he asked Kohei Esaki—famous for continuing this genre—to be the art consultant.

The designer, Yoshiro Muraki, remembers: “We studied old castle layouts, the really old ones, not those white castles we still have around. And we decided to use black armored walls since they would go well with the *suiboku-ga* (ink painting) effect we planned with lots of mist and fog. That also is the reason we decided that the locations should be high on Mount Fuji, because the fog and the black volcanic soil. We created something that never came from any single historical period. To emphasize the psychology of the hero, driven by compulsion, we made the interiors wide with low ceilings and squat pillars to create the effect of oppression.”

Kurosawa remembers that, “First, we built an open set at the base of Fuji with a flat castle rather than a real three-dimensional one. When it was ready, it just didn’t look right. For one thing, the roof tiles were too thin and this would not do. I insisted and held out, saying I could not possibly work with such limitations, that I wanted to get the feeling of the real thing from wherever I chose to shoot.”

Consequently—Toho having learned from *Seven Samurai* onward that Kurosawa would somehow get his way—the entire open set was dismantled.

I was present during the location shooting for much of the film. Particularly fine were those rushes of the advancing hunting party, both the long silhouette shots and, later, the advance, taken with longdistance lenses which flattened the figures out and looked like a medieval tapestry. After they were taken Kurosawa said he was pleased. “I have about ten times more than I need.”

In the finished film this morning’s work takes ten seconds. Gone are the living tapestries (“they only held up the action”); the wonderful turning shots of the messenger (“I don’t know—they looked confused to me”); a splendid entrance of Mifune skidding to a stop (“you know, Washizu wasn’t that upset”); and a lovely framing shot of the procession seen through the gate (“too pretty”).

I still think of Kurosawa that morning, up on his platform, directing everything, always quiet, suggesting rather than commanding, looking through the view-finders, getting down to run through the mud to the other camera, making jokes, getting just what he wanted. And then—having the courage, the discipline to choose from that

morning's richness just those few frames which contained what would best benefit the film. And, all the time, making the definitive statement on man's solitude, his ambition, his self-betrayal.