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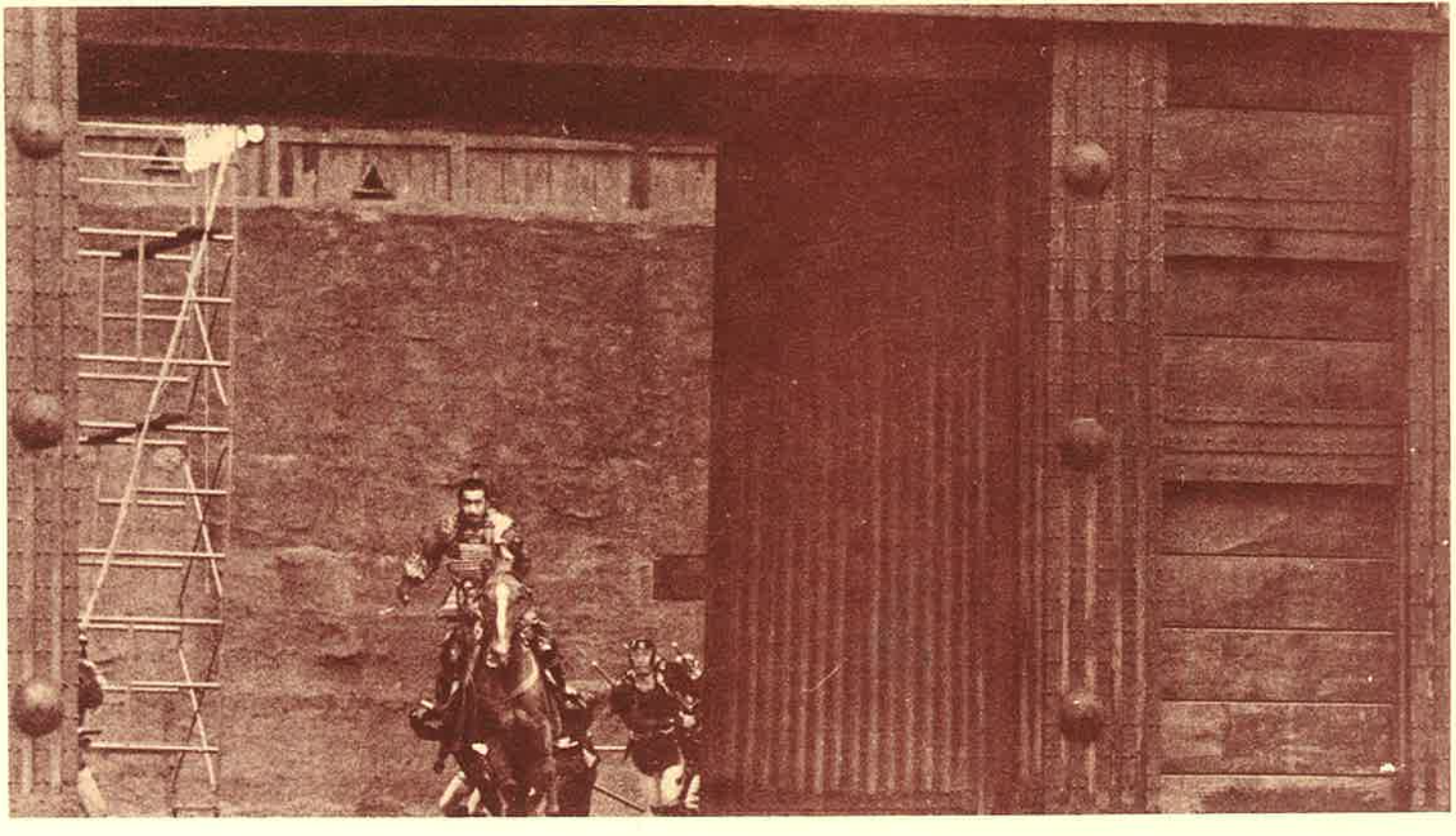

Throne of Blood: A Morality Dance

In the dialogue concerning the adaptation of Shakespeare to the screen, Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) is a pivotal film for it polarizes the critics—usually according to which medium they feel the greatest allegiance. Literary critics frequently dismiss it since Kurosawa dares to sacrifice Shakespeare's language. For example, Frank Kermode wants to rule it out as "an allusion to rather than a version of Macbeth."[1] As a director of both stage and screen, Peter Brook takes a middle position. While he calls *Throne of Blood* "a great masterpiece, perhaps the only true masterpiece inspired by Shakespeare," he concludes "it cannot properly be considered Shakespeare because it doesn't use the text."[2] As one might expect, film critics are more enthusiastic about Kurosawa's adaptation. In a highly influential and widely anthologized essay, J. Blumenthal persuasively defends Kurosawa's right to deviate from the original ("truly gifted film-makers will always try to liberate themselves from the dreaded literary media"), yet his defensive stance leads him to the rather dubious claim that Kurosawa surpasses Shakespeare in expressing essentially the same ideas.[3] While film scholars frequently hail this essay as a critical landmark (e.g., Roger Manvell has called it "the best essay yet written on the subject,"[4]), professors of literature tend to find it distasteful or sacrilegious. For example, John Gerlach charges Blumenthal with obscuring "the extent to which Kurosawa has *betrayed* the power of the play and accuses Manvell of "canonizing" Blumenthal's commentary.[5] Yet Gerlach's essay is unconvincing because it treats the visuals so sketchily and reveals so little understanding of the power of the film. Blumenthal still must be answered for he fails to acknowledge that successful adaptation inevitably results in a transformation of the original content as well as the form. This applies to Shakespeare as well as to Kurosawa, who are both masters at adaptation.

In Shakespeare's version, the conflict between Macbeth's perception and behavior lies at the center of the tragedy. With full awareness of the futility and immorality of his own ambitious deeds, Macbeth nevertheless makes a total commitment to evil. It is a strong act of will, and it establishes him as an existential hero. The fullness of his consciousness and the power of his imagination are revealed primarily through his language, which Kurosawa sacrifices.

In place of the language, Kurosawa uses a number of visual polarities to develop the moral conflicts. Simultaneously, these polarities emphasize important features of the cinematic medium and transform the drama into a kind of morality dance. First, Kurosawa creates a self-reflexive tension between performance and observation—a pattern that he uses again in *Yojimbo* (1961). In *Throne of Blood,* characters repeatedly perform actions or relate narratives in front of an audience. Most particularly, Washizu (Macbeth) is developed as a character who moves between two roles—forceful actor and foolish observer. Throughout the film the boundary between action and judgment, performer and audience frequently breaks down. We in the audience are also drawn into the tension; the film trains us how to observe the moves, interpret what we see, and make it the basis of our own performance.

The second polarity is between the concreteness of art and the elusiveness of reality: the palpable physicality of the cinematic image is based on insubstantial light and shadow. To accentuate this paradox, Kurosawa sets his drama in a highly physical world. Men, horses, and birds move dynamically through tangled forests, heavy gates, and wooden forts. Yet, the recurring image of white mist that permeates the film dissolves the solidity of these environments and makes all physical action seem insubstantial.

The third contrast is between motion and stasis—the moving image within a static frame. The paradox of motion is implicit in the demon's prophecy that Washizu will not lose a battle until the forest moves to the fort; Kurosawa fully exploits this incident in visual terms and gives it new meaning in the cinematic context. Making a forest move is no more miraculous than creating the appearance of motion out of still photographs—the illusion that lies at the center of cinema.

The contrast between motion and stasis is developed most fully in the visual characterizations of Washizu and his wife Asaji, whose movements are drawn from different artistic traditions. Asaji is usually static. When she does move, she glides across the screen as a unified presence, totally committed to ambition. As Donald Richie observes, her movements are constrained by the choreographic conventions of Noh drama.[6]

> The Noh elements are mostly associated with Asaji—the Lady Macbeth role—for she is the most limited, the most confined, the most driven, the most evil. She moves, heel to toe, as does the Noh actor; the shape of Isuzu Yamada's face is used to suggest the Noh mask; her scenes with her husband have a very Noh-like composition, and her handwashing is pure Noh drama.[7]

In contrast, Washizu (brilliantly played by Toshiro Mifune) embodies restless energy, constantly pacing back and forth, heaving like an animal, grimacing in pain, flashing his eyes, twitching his facial muscles, and gritting his teeth. He seems to move simultaneously in several directions as he considers various courses of action. In battle and in the forest, he wears out one horse after another. Ana Laura Zambrano suggests that his movements are patterned after the later form of *Yamato-e* picture scrolls from the Kakamura period.

> Kurosawa's samurai horsemen are often set against a neutral background of fog or sloping hills, creating the same dynamic contrasts of dark figures against an opaque setting as the scroll paintings of warrior scenes. The horses charge at full gallop, mouths agape with tension while their riders hold their weapons defiantly, moving in clusters along the landscape as had the samurai of the Kakamura era.[8]

Their movements are transformed by the murder, in which both characters alternate as performer and observer. While Washizu's flow of energy is intensified, his pace accelerated, and his direction focused, her stability is permanently disrupted.

Kurosawa choreographs the movements of his camera, characters, and polar forces, creating a highly patterned dance that fully articulates the moral issues of the drama. The dance is performed in a world that is dominated primarily by three movements, which recur throughout the film. The *horizontal* line represents the moral poles of good and evil, the stable parameters. The *diagonal* lines of conflict and disruption give men the illusion that they decide their own fate and pursue their own ends. The *circle* is the cyclical movement that interweaves the other two; in a relativistic universe, a horizontal line ultimately becomes a curve or circumference, and a diagonal is reduced to a radius or diameter. Zambrano traces these three movements to the early and later form of *Yamato-e* scrolls.

> *Throne of Blood* uses both styles of Yamato-e, the former with its concern for curved forms and straight lines of the dialogues between Washizu and his wife Asaji, and the latter style in the battle episodes . . . After Tsuzuki's (Duncan) murder Kurosawa depicts the ensuing struggle for power by cutting sharply to a close up of a warlord's banner being torn to one side in a sharp angle as a group of horsemen move in the same direction toward soldiers already engaged in hand to hand combat. The scene could be taken directly from the scrolls of the *Heiji Monogatari* recreating the conflict between linear and angular rhythms of movement.[9]

Kurosawa bases his choreography on the horizontal, the diagonal, and the circle—the three moves that define his moral universe.

Most sequences visually parallel movements in preceding scenes or anticipate future developments, implying that the entire film is locked into a single synchronic pattern—the inevitable circle of fate. This pattern becomes explicit in the prologue and epilogue which serve to encircle the film, making the point structurally as well.

In the prologue (or overture), the motifs are introduced verbally while the visuals simultaneously establish the codes of movement. As a chanting chorus tells us that human will and ambition are illusions, the sequence demonstrates the various cinematic sources of illusory motion in different combinations. A static camera watches a static landscape; mist slowly begins to drift across the screen revealing ruins of a castle. Then the camera pans along the stable horizontal lines of the hills; when it stops, the motion is resumed by the mist. Cuts and dissolves mark reversals in motion, direction, and time. The camera moves vertically along an immobile wooden funeral post; the castle rematerializes. At the first glimpse of a man on horseback, both camera and subject move together and the dance begins.

Kurosawa draws on dance and mime and their potentiality for expressing moral qualities within the Noh tradition, but he develops them in cinematic terms. The opening sequence provides the dramatic exposition for the story and the visual exposition of the dance. The authorized Lord of Forest Castle and his retainers sit in a horizontal line on a dais in a formal static arrangement; the only motion is provided by wind flapping the banners behind them. The first dancers on the scene are the messengers bringing news about past action—a betrayal by one lord and the heroic deeds of Washizu and Miki that reverse the outcome of the battle. The dynamism

of these intrusive performers is emphasized by the horizontal wipes connecting their appearances before the court audience, which hardly moves. The sequence concludes with a horizontal wipe in the reverse direction, wiping out the established Lord, who is soon to be murdered and moving to a travelling shot of his successors Washizu and Miki, riding at great speed through the labyrinthine forest.[10] The twisted branches in the foreground, the rolling mist, the stroboscopic lightning, and the distorted sound of laughter intensify the sudden rush of motion in this sequence, which is so disorienting after the stability of the previous scene.

The riders' encounter with the forest demon is rich in visual irony; it subverts several elements from the opening sequence with the Lord and introduces the lines and images that lead to his overthrow. The demon's hut, though set in the insubstantial white mist, is barred and cagelike; it suggests a parallel with the wooden beam construction of the Forest Castle that earlier emerged from the mist—the prize that lures the humans into their petty struggles. The first time Washizu and Miki see the hut, the trunk of a large tree stands in front of it, linking it more literally to the Forest Castle and cutting it in two (as if foreshadowing that each man will have his turn as Lord of the Castle). The demon sits in formal repose, like the Lord, while the men move into the frame. But this time the intruders are the audience, while the demon, who foretells future actions, is the performer spinning her tale. As the two friends listen to the prophecy, they stand in a horizontal line with the evil spirit between them; the visual composition is also prophetic for the demon will eventually alienate Washizu and Miki. This shot establishes a pattern that recurs throughout the film where the rivals are in the same horizontal plane, separated by the prize for which they compete—the castle, the Lord, and the crown. After Miki and Washizu leave the forest, they lose their direction in the mist, which is as white and as disorienting as the demon. Just as the spirit had earlier materialized in and out of white nothingness before their eyes, we now watch the two riders fade in and out of the mysterious fog.

The visual and structural interweaving continues in the scene where Washizu tells the prophecy to his wife. She sits in the same static pose assumed by the demon, drawing him further into evil. The barred panel in the background evokes the caged hut in the forest. As Washizu restlessly paces back and forth within the room, unable to decide what course to take, the two empty spaces surrounding the barred panel visually represent his options. In deep focus through the space on the right we see a horseman riding in a circle—an image which, like the spinning wheel, mocks Washizu's decision-making process by evoking the inevitability of fate.

When the Lord comes to visit Washizu at North Castle, we see the first disruptive diagonal, which foreshadows his murder. At first the Lord and his retainers move in a straight horizontal plane; then they make a sharp angular turn and the treacherous action begins.

The choreography of the murder scene is masterful. As Lady Asaji goes to drug the guards, she steps back and is swallowed by the darkness, just as the demon had earlier been enveloped in whiteness. The three guards sit in an orderly horizontal line; after being drugged, their formation collapses into disarray. As he waits in the blood-stained room (an extension of Shakespeare's "Blood will have blood, they say"), Washizu is enclosed by a cradle of arrows, a visual echo of the demon's cage which foreshadows

his death in waves of arrows. He sits quietly, assuming the posture both of his wife and of the demon in one of his few moments of stillness; it is almost as if Asaji has taken over his character, temporarily suspending his identity. A spear enters the frame in a diagonal line as she arms her husband for the murder. When he goes out into the darkness, it is her turn to wait in the room. A strange alternation takes place between the couple as they collaborate in the killing; while one performs the action, the other assumes the role of passive observer, and then the process is reversed. While the murder is being committed, the camera remains focused on Lady Asaji. Suddenly she breaks into a frenzied dance to discordant music, as if she is acting out the violence; the camera joins in the movement, as if all observers are implicated in the evil. This time *her* identity is suspended; her husband's restless movement takes over her character and disrupts her stillness. Suddenly, sound and motion cease. Slowly Washizu backs into the frame carrying the bloody spear in a diagonal plane. He sits down wearily, breathing heavily like an animal. The murder has permanently disrupted the silence and peace. Now Asaji springs into action, wrenching the spear from his hands and bloodying her own; moving in zig zags, she plants the weapon on the guards and runs to the courtyard to yell, "Murder!" This call rouses Washizu into action, allowing her to recede into the crowd of observers in the background. Once their foul deed has been brought to light, nightmare grows yet stronger. Washizu runs to kill the guards and the entire fort erupts into chaos. Suddenly the film cuts to the outer courtyard where horses, men, and banners all move in conflicting directions within a single frame. The Lord's loyal followers first move in a circle as they get their bearings and apprehend their fate; then they flee in a straight line with Washizu, representing the forces of evil, pursuing them in a diagonal.

In the funeral sequence, Washizu cleverly forces Miki to open Forest Castle and reveal whether he supports him or the fallen Lord. Although the funeral procession with its line of men and horses led by Washizu appears orderly, it moves diagonally across the screen; the men keep shifting their eyes from side to side, as if expecting an ambush. The Lord's coffin is decorated with the crescent moon crown, the open circle suggesting the struggle for possession of power is still unresolved. When the gates of the castle finally open to admit the coffin, Miki stands with his followers in a horizontal line, as if supporting the authorized order of his deposed ruler. Washizu faces him, imitating the orderly line but with a slightly perverted slant. After a few moments of suspense, Miki moves forward, turns, and rides into the castle by Washizu's side. By restoring the horizontal plane and making this truce with his rival, he re-establishes a temporary stability.

Washizu's false stability totally breaks down in the banquet scene, where he awaits the news of Miki's murder. The decor contributes to the illusion—one wall is decorated with a series of broken horizontal lines while another contains the crescent crown. Washizu sits in the center of his guests, who are arranged in orderly rows; the scene imitates his predecessor's court audience in the opening sequence. A Kyogen dancer entertains the guests. Unable to accept the passive role of audience, Washizu rashly dismisses the dancer and breaks into his crazed, antic dance. Provoked by the vision of Miki's ghost, he unwittingly foreshadows his final dance of death. Zambrano traces this use of dance for moral exposition to the Noh tradition.

> One of the guests at the banquet begins to perform a dance of a man who, ambitious and insolent, was unable to escape punishment . . . . Washizu disrupts his guest's dance and song and then proceeds into dance-like movements of his own as he moves frantically about the room, slashing with his sword at the ghost as he reveals his guilt to all. In this scene Noh is used to force Washizu to recognize his own guilt, and the dance itself adds another strand to the film's theme of ambition and transitory glory.[11]

While the guest follows traditional choreography, Washizu's desperate moves are improvised. His performance also forces Lady Asaji to impromptu action —pretending her husband is drunk, she finally dismisses the audience for fear they will accurately interpret Washizu's movements. When the murderer arrives with Miki's head, Washizu reverts to the role of audience. As in the opening sequence, the messenger brings both good and bad news of past deeds—Miki's murder and his son's escape. Horrified by the bad news, Washizu once again becomes the rash performer as he murders the assassin. Both the dancer and the assassin double for Washizu, exposing his past guilt and foreshadowing his doom.

The second appearance of the demon reaffirms the parallel with Lady Asaji for it has many similarities with the mad scene. In these two sequences Washizu actively seeks out these women who originally drew him into the web of evil and accelerates the pace of his own destruction. His encounter with the demon is marked by disorienting movement and spatial distortion; lightning flashes and the demon reappears in various forms and from different directions, forcing Washizu to keep turning around. Later, when he discovers Lady Asaji behind the screen, she is constantly trembling; she has lost her physical and mental stability. Immediately following the mad scene, the screen erupts into the same kind of multi-directional chaos that followed the killing of the Lord and that now further undermines Washizu's confidence. The voices of both Lady Asaji and the demon have been transformed, suggesting that their words should not be accepted at face value, but interpreted with great caution. In both dramatic contexts, Washizu had anticipated reassuring news—a prophecy that would reaffirm his power and the birth of a child that would have guaranteed his future. The baby is stillborn, which drives his wife mad; similarly, the demon's promise that he will not lose until the forest moves, insures not his succesSion but his defeat.

The war council before the final battle focuses our attention entirely on interpretation, which has always been Washizu's weakness. As he and his advisors form their strategy, the room is suddenly invaded by a flock of shrieking birds; the men disagree on whether they are an omen of victory or defeat. This highly dense image tests our powers of vision and judgment as well as Washizu's. As his advisors point out, birds are traditionally a supernatural omen of both good and bad fortune. But, if we have carefully observed the patterns of movement within the context of this particular film, then we suspect the worst. After the murder of the Lord, disruptive elements entering the frame have consistently brought bad news. This pattern is confirmed again in the mad scene when the waiting women skitter around the room in similar paths as if pursued by the invading birds. On a naturalistic level, the birds have appeared because the trees have been cut down, thus literally foreshadowing the movement of the forest and Washizu's defeat. On all levels—the supernatural, the aesthetic, and the narrative—this event confirms Washizu's doom.

In the final sequence, Washizu moves between his dual roles as performer and observer. As he energetically struts on a platform above his men, he ob-

serves the movements of his approaching enemies and commands the attention of his followers, making a final attempt to unify his forces. In his first speech, he moves smoothly from observation to performance; he is the confident leader, who successfully draws approving laughter and raised banners from his admiring audience. But later when he is informed that the forest is moving and watches his men panic, he is forced into the weaker role of foolish observer. Although he tries to regain control, his men seize the power and become the performers; they unleash their arrows like a jeering audience stopping a bad performance. The men decide the outcome of the battle before the enemies reach the gates. Washizu's final *danse macabre* is the last powerful demonstration of his superhuman energy, which defines his character; it takes hundreds of arrows to make him halt. When his twitching body falls from the platform, his men gather around him to watch his last move in the dance.

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NOTES

1 Frank Kermode, "Shakespeare in the Movies," in Mast and Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 328.

2 Geoffrey Reeves, "An Interview with Peter Brook," *Tulane Drama Review*, 2 (Fall, 1966).

3 J. Blumenthal, "*Macbeth* into *Throne of Blood*," *Sight and Sound* (Spring, 1965).

4 Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film* (New York: Praeger, 1971).

5 John Gerlach, "Shakespeare, Kurosawa, and Macbeth: A response to J. Blumenthal," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1(Fall, 1973), p. 352.

6 For a discussion of the influence of Noh drama on *Throne of Blood*, see Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film* (New York: Praeger, 1971), and Ana Laura Zambrano, "*Throne of Blood*: Kurosawa's *Macbeth*," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 2(1974).

7 Richie, p. 117.

8 Zambrano, p. 265.

9 Zambrano, p. 265.

10 This use of the horizontal wipes was described by Warren Bass in a paper delivered at the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Bridgeport, August 5, 1976.

11 Zambrano, p. 273.