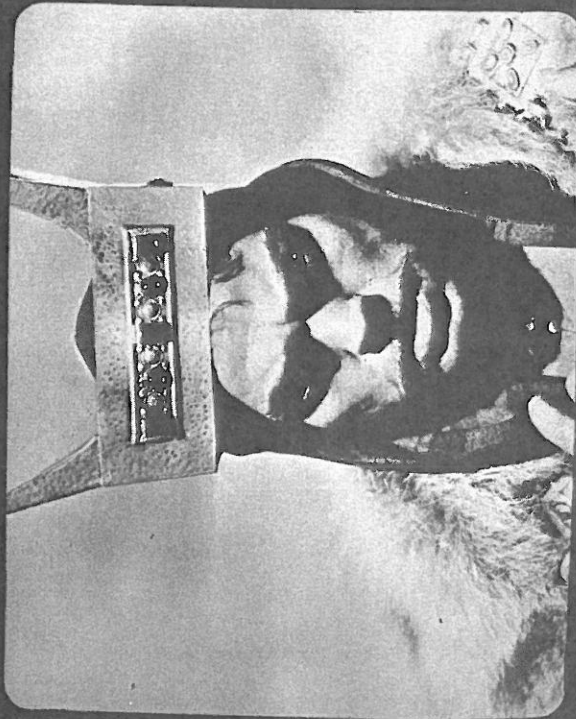


# LITERATURE

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## Time in Play and Film: *Macbeth* and *Throne of Blood*

The text of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*<sup>1</sup> as it has come down to us is approximately 2100 lines, five acts, long. When played on stage, *Macbeth* can take from one and a half to three hours to perform, depending on cuts, spectacle, mute action, scene changes and pace of delivery. *Throne of Blood*,<sup>2</sup> Akira Kurosawa's film adaptation of the same play, is one hour and forty-five minutes long. Barring commercial breaks on TV and movie buffs who steal film clips, performance of *Throne of Blood* will always take one hour and forty-five minutes: moreover, minute ninety-four will always show the exact same scene and speak the exact same words. The moviemaker has control of time that surpasses that of any other artist except the musician who has production control over his recordings. The moviemaker establishes the film's time relationships on the set and in the cutting room; these time relationships will stay the same for each performance and each viewer. The technical resources of film that allow precise control of time, furthermore, ultimately influence the basic nature of the drama presented. The possibilities of capturing performances, the controlled duration of shots, the creation of a rhythmic succession of images, and the setting of pace through cutting are so attractive and powerful as to encourage the filmmaker to choose one line of development of his story at the expense of another.

Certainly the playwright has some control over time. He knows whether he has written a short play or a long one; *Macbeth* is short by Shakespearean standards. So too he controls pace. The succession of long and short scenes sets up a rhythm, as the battle scenes of many Shakespearean plays, including *Macbeth*, illustrate. Pace can also be controlled by length of lines; for example, the nervous agitation of *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* immediately after the murder of Duncan is reflected in a staccato interchange (II, ii). The nature of the action can also determine pace; compare, for example, the retarded pace of the scene when Malcolm and Macduff wait in England (IV, iii) and the swift pace of the scenes when they pointedly direct the battle (V, ii and iv). Repetition of word, situation or scene can tie together diverse moments and establish underlying rhythms of plot or emotion; the repeated prophecies of the witches, for example, keep the puzzle of *Macbeth*'s fate constantly before the audience.

However strong these playwrights controls over time may be, they are only approximate, filtered through the interpretation of individual directors

and actors. Even if a playwright controls the production, he is limited by the vagaries of individual live performances, the lack of moment-by-moment control, and the technical restraints of what can appear onstage, how rapidly and with what precision.

In adapting *Macbeth* for the film, Kurosawa made full use of his freedom from these restraints. The precisely timed "permanent performance" of *Throne of Blood* creates a rhythmic interplay of events and images. The controlled motions, measured durations of shots, and the metrical pace of the succession of shots result in a movie almost dance-like in precision and most cinematic in form. As I will discuss later, visual choreography has consequences for the nature of the tragedy.

In comparing this cinematic adaptation to the Shakespearean script, however, we must recognize several important factors which stand in the way of a direct analysis of the changes wrought by film. First, *Macbeth* is a script, not a particular production; therefore, many of the new elements of Kurosawa's film may be discounted as the additions of spectacle and melody that any director of a stage or screen production must concern himself with. Further, script cuts and changes are common practice on both stage and screen, especially when the production is labelled an adaptation, so we cannot assume changes in plot, action or speech are the direct influence of film. Finally, with this particular Japanese adaptation we have additional changes wrought by translations of language, culture (particularly influential on this film is the *Noh* tradition), and historical setting (to fifteenth century civil war-torn Japan). The sorting out of these elements would be greatly aided if Kurosawa had, as Peter Brook had with *King Lear*, directed a stage production as well as a film version; unfortunately, the world does not always operate for the convenience of the critic.

Even as we recognize these complicating factors, we should not discount all but the most obvious and direct influences of film, for obvious influences may lead to less obvious ones. Consider, for example, the device of the series of messengers who follow on each other's heels with news of success or disaster. Shakespeare employs this device in many plays, but not in *Macbeth*, where the news of the hero's early heroism and of the opponent Malcolm's great power are brought by single messengers. In *Throne of Blood*, however, Kurosawa employs multiple messengers in both instances. Obviously this is the kind of script change available to any director, for stage as well as screen, but if we look more deeply into the matter, we can see how the resources of film encourage the addition. In *Throne of Blood* rapid cutting, precise timing, and the transitional "wipe"—where a new picture seems to wipe another off the screen—all emphasize the acceleration of events, heighten the effect of the device of repeated messengers and shorten the time necessary to complete the device. The messengers do not even have to enter and exit; they can be simply discovered in the center of the screen and wiped off by the image of the next messenger. The device of repeated messengers becomes more efficient, precise and effective on screen. The resources of film to control time enhance a stage technique relying on time control. In making the script changes Kurosawa was exploiting the potential of film to control time; as a result, the film makes the pace of events an important element in the experience of the scene. The measured duration of shots and cutting techniques have led to a script change which has led to a new affective element in the scene, a sense of urgency of time.

Kurosawa also exploits the film's potential for precise rhythmic control of motion and images in the scene where Washizu (the Macbeth character) sees the ghost of Miki (the Banquo character). As the banquet opens, a group of players is chanting a song and acting out the mime of a story that closely parallels Washizu's. Washizu listens with studied calm as he sips from a cup. He slowly lowers the cup to the saucer, then suddenly rises, stops the play and calls for light. The slow formal rhythm of the film, established by the mime and Washizu's deliberateness, is broken by the outburst. Washizu begins a dance of erratic motions; he notices Miki's ghost, charges around the banquet hall, calms into drunken passivity, sees the ghost again and tries to stab it with his sword. Rhythm and pattern emerge in the lack of symmetry of the sequence. The dance goes on. After his wife Asaji clears the hall, she mocks and berates her again passive husband. When the messenger arrives with Miki's head, however, Washizu again flares out in violence, for he finds that the son has escaped. There is no ease: Washizu kills the messenger. The precise sequence of motions, images and sounds become part of a cinematic choreography, a measured ordering of sense impressions through time.

Again the regicide sequence has the effect of a cinematic dance. Emotive rhythms are established by cutting, special shots, motions of characters with relation to the camera, and the intercutting of visual metaphors for the tense emotions. Silence punctuated by the sound of crows and spasmodic music accompanies as husband and wife alternate frantic action with almost catatonic stillness.

In both the haunted banquet and the regicide, Kurosawa externalizes emotional distress through movement, irregular rhythms and the sequence of images rather than through the verbal self-examination and self-doubts of Shakespeare's Macbeth. In fact, Washizu and Asaji have almost no soliloquies except for a terse version of the handwashing scene, which is more the portrayal of a deranged mind witnessed by others than a glimpse of internal conflicts by the audience. Whether to kill the Lord of Cobweb Castle takes the form of an argument between a simple, reticent Washizu and an ambitious, untrusting Asaji. Her transparent appeal is to Washizu's insecurity: rumor of the prophecy might get back to their lord, or the friend Miki may betray them. Mutely following his wife's goading, Washizu never verbally commits himself to the murderous course, unlike Macbeth, who expresses resolve and knowledge of his act.

The absence of psychological and moral self-examination in the film can with some justice be ascribed to a number of causes: the *Noh* tradition, the cultural transformation of the warrior hero into the plain *samurai*, the loss of Shakespeare's poetry in translation and Kurosawa's interpretation of character. But in light of the effectiveness of Kurosawa's use of cinematic technique to create the externalized characterizations of Washizu and Asaji, we must recognize some connection between cinematic form and the adaptation of Shakespeare's characterization. At the very least we must say that the film is admirably suited for Kurosawa's conception of the story and characters. Moreover, Kurosawa is a filmmaker and as such chooses and transforms his subjects with at least some concern for cinematic potential. Having freed himself from the necessity of faithfulness to Shakespeare's text by labelling the film an adaptation, Kurosawa has freed himself to recast the story in such a way as to do what he feels cinema does best.

Closely related to the externalization of character and the attendant elimination of speeches of psychological and moral self-concern is the simplification of the moral framework of the film. Part of this simplification may be attributed to cultural translation, the replacement of the Western concern for the individual soul by the rigid social ethic of feudal Japan, which encouraged obedience within a well-defined framework of social and political obligations. Yet part must also be attributed to Kurosawa's choice of evocative external images of emotional distress rather than an examination of the psychologically powerful Macbeth to weigh the consequences of his actions to his soul, the play's moral tensions become reduced to a simple opposition between Asaji's goad to her husband—"No man without ambition is a man"—and the moral judgment expressed in the chorus that opens and closes the movie that the story is of a once "proud warrior murdered by ambition, his spirit still walking." The old hag sings a similar song, "Men are vain and death is long. Pride dies in the grave. Hair and nails grow when fame is gone." This content, and not the ambiguous other-world of the three sisters, provides the moral foundation of the film.

Among the many techniques Kurosawa uses to lend aesthetic and emotional depth to this simple moral theme are a number that rely heavily on cinematic control of time. We have already seen how these cinematic resources encourage evocative portrayals of emotions at the expense of exploration of thought, but precisely controlled time in film can serve the simple moral theme even more directly. The sequence where Washizu and Miki lose their way in forest and fog is a particularly clear example of how the manipulation of time-related elements can give affective weight to the metaphor of having lost one's way. By a few techniques of shooting and cutting Kurosawa achieves an absolute sense of disorientation to serve as an analogue for Washizu's moral confusion after having won the battle and being swelled with pride. It is in this state of moral confusion that he hears the hag's prophecy and is swayed by his own ambition and his wife's goading. Kurosawa creates this sense of confusion using simple riding shots, in which the riders keep disappearing and emerging from behind brambles and mists. Not only are rhythms of visibility established, but the sequence is broken up into many shorter shots (at least nine in the fog part of the sequence) so that the ride becomes disjointed. The path and duration of each riding shot vary with brilliant irregularity: hard rides to fixed spots end in baffled halts; confused paths meander across the background, barely visible; one long tracking shot through the woods cuts to a close-up of the riders motionless. The shots are cut so that the riders seem to go off the screen at one point and in one direction and return from an entirely different one, often at an angle unusually oblique to the square of the screen. The rhythms within each shot, the contrasting pace of consecutive shots, the irregular duration of each shot, and the additive effect of the great number of varied shots all create a disturbed and disturbing visual rhythm of confusion. Thus the ability to control film time with duration and sequence of images makes the visual metaphor of disorientation evocative. When one loses one's way, time does not move forward in regular, predictable ways. Each new moment brings only greater disorientation.

All the cinematic techniques that control time, as we have observed in *Throne of Blood*, add up to a major difference in the overall sense of



time between the play that Shakespeare wrote and the film that Kurosawa made. Between Macbeth's precipitous rise in the early scenes and equally precipitous fall in the closing scene, he ponders the ravages of illegitimate political power and pays the spiritual price of bloody ambition. In the long, tense middle of *Macbeth* we see a hero facing his acts and fate. In *Throne of Blood* the long middle is an extended evocation of fate overwhelming a hero too shallow to do anything but fear. The final movement of that cinematic choreography is Washizu trying to avoid the volleys of arrows while frantically attempting to rally the deserting troops. His long death agony is the last spasm of disorder, and calm returns with the regular rhythms of the final chorus.

Macbeth struggles as he tumbles into an abyss; his struggle provides the forward motion of the play. Washizu, however, loses his way and is called to task by a world of absolutes; he can only play out disordered rhythms against the solid regularity of *samurai* ideals. From *Macbeth* we tend to remember the great speeches, the moments of torment and self-revelation—the agonizing thoughts; from *Throne of Blood* we remember the sequences of shots, the eccentric rhythms, the haunting movements—the motions of agony. Because the film can so well control what we see from moment to moment, cinematic techniques of time control add new dimensions to adapted material, but these new dimensions may be at the expense of the old.

Charles Bazerman  
Baruch College

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All citations to *Macbeth* are from the Folger Library edition, 1959.

<sup>2</sup>Japan, 1957. My memory of the film was aided by the synopsis on pages 108-112 of Roger Manvell's *Shakespeare and the Film* (New York, 1971). English subtitles quoted were translated by Donald Richie. I also wish to thank Audio Brandon Films of Mount Vernon, New York, for allowing me to see the film in private screening.

