

‘Whereas Welles transforms Shakespeare’s ‘Macbeth’ into an expressionistic morality play and Kurosawa transmutes it into a Japanese parable, Roman Polanski’s Macbeth presents us with a world which is concretely real. From the outset we are privy to the secret thoughts and desires of the young couple and to the cruel and absurd nightmare that drives them to madness and self destruction.’ Since the very earliest years in the development of the motion picture, film-makers have found the plays of William Shakespeare continually tempting as subject matter for films. In the case of the play Macbeth there were at least nine different versions of it in the silent era, and there have been nine sound versions including adaptations. Three revolutionary directors have put onto film the classic play of Macbeth, seeing it in various personal ways: Akira Kurosawa’s ‘Throne of Blood’; Orson Welles’ ‘Macbeth- Restored Version’; Roman Polanski’s ‘Macbeth’. As Roman Polanski said, “People only see what they are prepared to see”, and “The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight, but has no vision.” These directors definitely had sight, but also had a vision of the tragedy of Macbeth and this is what I will explore in this essay.

Orson Welles’s adaption of Macbeth moves the action of the play into a world which is filmed and photographed poetically and symbolically. He felt that this approach was the only way to film plays because, he said, “For Shakespeare you mustn’t make a museum. You must find a new period, you must invent your own England, your own epoch, on the basis of what you have learned through research. The drama itself dictates the kind of world in which it is going to happen.” He likened the character of Macbeth to Adolf Hitler. His film served to show how the Nazi Regime of 1948 could have occurred. Welles’s vision of Macbeth had the texture and feel of a nightmare. Scotland is an eerie, nightmarish landscape that is constantly misty and partially unformed. This is “vintage” Welles, who loved to make the tone and texture of every part of the movie relate to the story he was filming. Welles referred to his Macbeth, filmed in twenty-three days, as "a kind of violently sketched charcoal drawing of a great play." Welles removes political elements bringing together the union of Scotland and England and makes the play one of religious conflict: the major symbolism is the Celtic cross against the forked staffs of the Witches. Welles creates a character called the Holy Father. Basically, this film is an expressionistic version of Macbeth which rejects naturalism. An example of this is when Macbeth is standing on a rock in his castle and suddenly throws his spear at the Holy Father, the symbol of law, order and morality. His destruction marks the end of goodness and the triumph of evil. Another symbol is the crown of Macbeth characterized by long, metal spikes. Welles used this symbol because Adolf Hitler, in 1951, was described as “a man with spikes on his head, and a spear in his hand”. This clearly shows that Welles saw the tragedy of Macbeth as a parallel story to the Nazi Regime and in particular to Hitler’s rise. Welles underlines the fact that one man can lead to the destruction of a whole nation. He also used old b-grade sets from westerns and artificial lighting. In this way he created the ominous atmosphere of a kind of ‘horror’ film and a more symbolic rather than realistic adaption.

Akira Kurosawa envisions Macbeth as a story with a parable: “fortune is man’s ruin and/or man’s fortune”. He wanted the spectators to view the film in a rather philosophical manner and not get too involved with the characters and the plot. Kurosawa, treating the film as a moralistic story, showed how a man with total authority could crumble into insanity and self-destruction. He intended to show how the moral transcends through generations, thereby demonstrating how history has a way of repeating itself. The director's vision of Macbeth as a samurai is a stunning reading of history and power. ‘Throne of Blood’ has been regarded as an adaptation rather than an imitation of

Shakespeare. For example Kurosawa makes the forest image central to the play: if Washizu could control the forest he would be king indeed. Kurosawa's visuals and battle scenes, such as having Washizu die by a flock of arrows, shot by his own men, are spectacular. Kurosawa tries to make the corruption of Washizu understandable by emphasizing the prophecies and the influence of his wife. Lady Asaji (Lady Macbeth) announces her pregnancy, thus giving Washizu a familial excuse for what in Shakespeare is less certainly realized and he eliminates the role of Macduff and the prophecy related to his caesarean birth. Kurosawa's Macbeth touches the tragic idea of "a world that ridicules human longing with sad knowledge of human limitations"-Jahman Paloa.

Kurosawa bases his style of filming on the Noh Theatre, which is characterized by the stylized movements of the individuals and vehement action. He uses natural lighting since much of the film is shot around nature and he uses authentic Japanese medieval costumes for each character. But Kurosawa interestingly does not see the Tragedy of Macbeth only as a story with a moral, but also a representation of Japan's own past: the 16th century Shogunate Japan; the period in Japan where a shogun (a warrior), who in this case is Washizu, became the practical ruler of Japan after murdering an emperor, and received the title of sei-i taishōgun. An example of this is seen at the beginning of the film when we are first taken into Cobweb Castle and we see the king receiving messages from survivors that were at war. The position and setting they were in called a "bakufu" was typical of the Shogunate period.

In Roman Polanski's Macbeth, the film is clearly as realistic as possible. Polanski tried to make every scene, every event and every action real. We know that Polanski made Macbeth soon after the killing of his own family was murdered by Charles Manson, and after his wife, Sharon Tate, had made the classic horror film, "Rosemary's Baby". Polanski emphasizes bloodshed more than Welles or Kurosawa do, and even more than Shakespeare does: for example, in his film the camera focuses on the bloody murder of Duncan, whereas this act in Shakespeare's play takes place offstage. One gathers that for Polanski the crown itself is tainted because at the end Donaldbain, is shown riding off to consult the Witches. Polanski sensationalizes Shakespeare's play by, among other things, having Macbeth drink the Witches' brew; by presenting the Witches nude; by having Lady Macbeth appear nude in the sleepwalking scene; and by focusing the camera on the decapitation of Macbeth. The result is a rather melodramatic and distracting film.

Roman Polanski, in order to keep realism in his film, opted to change the traditional delivery of Shakespeare's soliloquies. Rather than having Macbeth speak the lines directly on film, the actor reads the speeches as a voiceover, while the audience views shots of Macbeth's head. In stage versions of the play, soliloquies are spoken by the actor directly to the audience, while other characters on stage either remain still or go about 'background' activities like eating or talking. This allows the stage actor playing Macbeth to portray a wide range of emotion.

Polanski used many cinematographic techniques to enhance the themes of Macbeth. He created a rich medieval world of castles and fields, woods and plains. He used many extras, uncommon in Shakespeare's plays but adding to the setting and making the events far more believable. Polanski also used high quality lighting: the film begins in a foggy, dark setting, and gets progressively darker to reflect Macbeth's worsening character.

The many scenes of violence help to establish the movie's theme, "those who live by treachery and violence will meet an end in kind". Indeed, the excessive amounts of blood and gore enhance the film in this respect. These scenes and especially Duncan's murder and the final battle scene, are most effective at conveying the theme of both the original play and Polanski's adaptation. Polanski's vision of Macbeth owes its existence to Charles Manson. As the chapter's structure suggests, the violent images of the family murder and the film intertwine until we can't tell them apart. When actor Terence Bayler as Macduff had to describe the death of his wife (Lady Macduff) and child in the film, Polanski instructs him by saying: "You'll do it this way. I know."

The themes which emerge in Macbeth work in almost any genre, and as we have seen, in any decade of any generation, and will continue to find their home on stage, in movies, literature, and beyond. I would conclude, with what Paul Dehn said; "there can no more be a set of rules or principles for filming Shakespeare than there can be a set of rules or principles for staging him. Great plays are great because they will always mean different things to the different people who stage and film them." In this essay I've shown how all the directors had different visions of Macbeth, and also different reasons for filming such a story. What Dehn's quote may say is that the criticism of Shakespearean films according to what is acceptable on stage, or in terms of being 'faithful' to Shakespeare, is meaningless. Each director must discover what works well for him and for the play he is filming, and so each film should be judged by what it does. The three directors saw the Tragedy of Macbeth in different ways: Orson Welles' saw it as a painting of the world's past, that is, the Nazi Regime (1948) and the moments when Hitler rose to power; Kurosawa saw it as a story with a parable and an event which mirrors Japan's past: "16th century Shogunate Japan"; and Polanski who saw it as a concretely real story which in some ways was similar to the extermination of his family.

"When most I wink, then do my eyes best see." William Shakespeare.