

“Whereas Welles transforms Shakespeare’s ‘Macbeth’ into an Expressionistic morality play and Kurosawa transmutes it into a Japanese parable, 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”

What is each director’s vision of the tragedy of Macbeth? Explain some of the ways in which each director projects this vision in his film making. You must first refer to specific details from each film to support your answer.

Welles, Kurosawa and Polanski all come from three different nations and very distinct cultures and experiences of life. Welles was American, Kurosawa was Japanese and Polanski is French/Polish. They all have a different culture which means that each of them perceived the Macbeth play in their own particular cultural way, as we can see this clearly from their films. Kurosawa treats the play as a fable but interprets it in a rigid way using many Japanese theatrical ways of acting or style of acting. Welles presents the play as a dark and secret story filled with thrilling events, while Polanski portrays the play as a bloody and violent story that will repeat itself many times in history.

Kurosawa, in his version, created a typical tale with all of its special characteristics. He uses supernatural elements and a moral theme, just like we find in a fable or a fairytale. The supernatural force that he uses is the evil spirit that magically fades away and can make thunder happen. The moral sentiment or lesson is the following: “ambition and power lead to self destruction”, just like the chorus chants at the beginning of his film. Kurosawa made the actors study, for a few days, various masks from the Noh theatre, (the Japanese ancient theatre tradition that used masks), masks that represented the look of the face that he wanted that character to resemble. As we can see in the film, Asaji ‘uses’ a mask that gives her the appearance of a serious person whose unnaturally calm attitude makes her seem like a supernatural person, but who is about to go mad, on all occasions except in the sleepwalking scene where she ‘wears’ a mask that conveys that she is terrified. Kurosawa also uses ‘Black and White’ instead of colours in his film to emphasize his interpretation of the play as a fable because black and white more effectively represents evil and good. Kurosawa conveys this understanding of the Shakespeare’s play in the film, “Throne of Blood”.

Welles’s version of the original play is transmuted into a historical story with real life references and with German Expressionism characteristics. He made his film in 1948 (three years after the end of the war) and he wanted to show the world the effects of power and the problems that emerge when a tyrant rises to power. He also wanted to show his viewers, indirectly, the terrors of the Nazi period in Germany through the story of Macbeth, since the play itself is about power and dominance. There are many historical references to the real life of the 1940’s, and there are two main elements that manifest this. The first is that Welles wanted to represent Macbeth as Hitler: an unstoppable dictator who would do anything for power, and then dies because of this. The second is that he shows Lady Macbeth as the wife of a tyrant (that is like Hitler) and she commits suicide just like Hitler’s wife Eva Braun. Even though he could have used

colours for his movie, Welles also chose to use black and white. This gives a greater sense of atmosphere to the movie and highlights even more his desire that everyone should notice his “German Expressionist Movie”. Indeed almost all of his films were in Black and White. Another factor that helps his movie be a German Expressionism type of film is that he expresses the enigma of the play by using symbolism and secret messages (just like German Expressionist films do). Welles didn’t really want a film that remained totally faithful to the play, as I have shown above, but there is one factor that makes it pretty realistic in relation to the play: the language spoken. The language used in Welles’ film is one with a very strong Scottish accent, and since both Macbeth and the play’s setting are Scottish, the voices of the actors with Scottish accents make the scenes very realistic and attractive.

Polanski’s version of the play is more of a personal story that reflects his own childhood memories and the horrible events of the murder of his wife by Charles Manson. In his version of Macbeth the protagonist is represented more as a killer than as a dictator. This is because Polanski wanted to make his personal story public and wished to express his feelings about his pregnant wife’s murder. He expresses his feelings throughout the film, which is, in fact, very bloody, especially the murder scenes of Lady Macduff and Duncan, which are extremely violent and full of blood. In an interview, Polanski, said that the scene in which Lady Macduff is being murdered was rooted in one of his childhood memories, when some SS soldiers went into his house and one of them started to play with his teddy bear. His version of the play has also a thrilling conclusion which was a scene not scene before: Donalbain meeting the witches after Malcolm was named King. With this scene Polanski wanted to tell us that he believes history repeats itself. He is telling us that all the things that happened to himself and to ‘his Macbeth’ could happen to anyone.

My overall conclusion about each director’s vision of the play is the following. I would say that Welles’s version is more implicit than the others as he wanted to make public the horrors of Hitler’s regime; Kurosawa treats the play as a fable that goes beyond this world, into another almost divine one, and each man must take a lesson from this; whilst Polanski’s version of Macbeth is a transformation of the play from a story about a tyrant and power to a story about murderers and murder which reveals us a bit of his own life and the moral he wants to communicate is this: there are many horrible and unimaginable events in life and they can happen to anyone. These three directors show us that there are many, different ways of understanding or interpreting the Macbeth play, and I think that maybe Shakespeare intended this when he wrote the play.

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