

“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.”

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 refer to specific details from each film to support your answer.”

Welles, Kurosawa, and Polanski each treat the tragedy of ‘Macbeth’ differently, whether it be in the setting, the treatment, the film technique, or the characters. Each different movie depicts how each director personally interpreted one of Shakespeare’s most famous tragedies, Macbeth. While Welles uses the “expressionist” film technique to communicate and manifest power, weakness and emotions, Kurosawa uses the traditional Japanese Noh Theater keeping the viewer unemotionally involved in the story, and Polanski creates an immediate, realistic and modern setting for a story that contemporary society can relate to.

German Expressionism is a post-war cinematic movement that developed in Berlin during the 1920’s. As Europe was recovering from the destruction of the First World War, the German film industry was thriving. Typical characteristics of Expressionist films are: use of darkness, light and shadows, distorted angles and perspectives, supernatural presences, irrationality, and emotion. Many of these fundamentals can be observed in Orson Welles’ adaptation of Shakespeare’s Macbeth. However, a comparison of a portion of the original play and the script reveals how the screen writer (Welles) has made the film effective by retaining the Shakespearean style and taste, and by using modern sound effects and distinctive camera techniques. Welles treats the play of Macbeth as a fable, using symbolism to make a simple setting and characters, have more depth and importance. Macbeth, played by Orson Welles himself, is dominant throughout the film, appearing in almost all the scenes. Set in a dark, foggy, mysterious and sometimes macabre setting, the film has a nearly gothic look to it. It was filmed in less than a month, on old b-grade western sets, which were effectively hidden by the dramatic and artificial lighting used.

Noh is a major form of classic Japanese drama that has been performed since the 14th century. Throne of Blood, directed by Kurosawa, is an example of Noh Theater, where Kurosawa transposes the plot of Macbeth to medieval Japan. Set in a mystic and deserted small kingdom, with overgrown forests and castle ruins, Throne of Blood is regarded as one of Kurosawa’s best films, and by many critics as one of the best film adaptations of Macbeth, despite the fact that it does not including any of Shakespeare’s original lines in the dialogue. Lady Macbeth (Asaji) is even more malicious and cruel than the original Lady Macbeth: her cold, unemotional white face seems to make her into a ghost long before she is driven to madness by the terrible deed that she and Washizu (Macbeth) commit. Unlike Welles, Kurosawa does not express emotion, nor does he keep the audience emotionally involved in the play. He uses very few close ups, and tends to keep

the camera at a distance from the characters. Washizu and Asaji always have a fixed expression on their faces that never changes. They are hiding behind a mask, and only at the end, when everything is falling apart, do we see real terror and emotion revealed on their faces.

In the sleepwalking scene, where Asaji has clearly been driven to madness by the terrible crime they committed, her mask has disappeared. This is the only scene where she has any sort of emotion in her face. Since there is no Macduff in *Throne of Blood*, the final battle scene consists of a small army of men, representing the good forces, that shoot arrows at Washizu, who is now defenseless. In this scene, there is clearly a sense of terror and defeat in his eyes. The scene is especially realistic and effective seeing that Kurosawa shot real arrows at Washizu (Toshiro Mifune), to make the acting even more genuine and authentic. Kurosawa treats *Macbeth* as a parable, so at the end there is a moral: it's clear from the opening and the ending scene. Both start and finish with the ruins of Cobweb Castle, so the beginning of the movie is really the end. The opening scene has a chorus chanting in the background:

“A proud castle stood in this desolate place
Its destiny wedded to a mortal's lust for power
Here lived a warrior, strong yet weakened by a woman
Driven to add his tribute to the throne of blood
The devil's path will always lead to doom.”

The morals are that history does and will repeat itself, and that ambition is man's ruin.

Polanski's *Macbeth* is certainly the most real and immediate filmed version of the play. The sets, costumes, and casting all work to create an accurate depiction of nasty, brutal, and short 11th century life. Polanski uses the original Shakespearean script, making it even more realistic and similar to the actual play. In Polanski's adaptation, *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* are played by actors, younger than has been tradition, and for this reason they appear more modern and relatable to our contemporary society. The film's bleak ending is one of the most significant scenes of the play. Although Malcolm is crowned as Scotland's rightful king, his concluding speech is absent in favor of a quick, wordless scene showing his brother, Donalbain, disabled and considered inferior to his brother, Malcolm, riding his horse and entering the witches' lair, implying that he will use their counsel in betraying King Malcolm (his brother) just like *Macbeth* did with King Duncan, thus repeating the destruction and chaos caused by *Macbeth*. Throughout the story, Donalbain is shown as envious of Malcolm, perhaps even more than was *Macbeth*. The ending recasts the story as a closed circuit of action suggesting that the tragedy will be repeated again in history.

Each of the versions of Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*, are different and unique in their own way. From German Expressionism, to Japanese Noh Theater, and authentic 11th century life, the play can without a doubt be interpreted and portrayed in numerous ways. No matter what the setting, characters or technique used, the story has one fundamental element to it. *Macbeth* shows us that lust and desire for power can lead to disastrous consequences.