

“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 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 filmmaking. You must refer to specific details from each film to support your answer.

As we all know ‘Macbeth’ is a tragedy by William Shakespeare. It is a play about deception, evil. Equivocations, truths. Fate, ambition. It can be taken by anyone in any part of the world and understood, because evil is everywhere, these things happen every day. People don’t initiate massacres to become kings of course, but people let their wild instincts take over, people are cruel and selfish, people do evil deeds. Shakespeare’s plays reflect aspects of life that are absolutely timeless. This is why I think a play such as Macbeth could be taken and made into three masterpieces: three films that are original, distinctive, like no other. They are completely different from one another but still inspired by the same message, the same great themes.

‘Throne of Blood’ by Akira Kurosawa is the version of the play that is the most alternative, being set in a different part of the world with a completely different culture and society. Feudal Japan is a dimension that is very singular: it is based on the principles of equilibrium, force and social position. In the film, the fact that the conditions of the kingdom deteriorate is not emphasised as much as it is in the original context. This is just why it is a striking contrast for the order to be broken so drastically in the end. While in medieval Scotland there might have been some symptoms of disorder even before anything happened, in the Japanese feudal scene there was no such thing. And the locations: Fort One, Fort Two, Cobweb Castle, are just something that the audience, the faithful readers of ‘Macbeth’, may not have recognised. Not to speak about the language: Shakespeare’s verse, the famous iambic pentameter, abandoned in favour of frantically incomprehensible dialogue. The changes in the story: Lady Asaji having a failed pregnancy and killing Banquo herself, Fleance being a strong and valiant young man, taking on the role of Macduff. It is outrageous how everything is different in this film, how it could even be taken from another story. Yet, ‘Throne of Blood’ is the purest version of ‘Macbeth’. It captures the most infinite essence of it, one that is so profound and intricate, many don’t even see it. The film changes everything that is superficial, and sticks with what is really important. Kurosawa gives us a parable of a man who doesn’t know his own limitations, who falls into the trap of ambition, and brings about his own ruin. It is a fable of the eternal fight between good and evil, and the original take on it is that for the first time, the protagonist is on the side of evil. And the audience is right there next to him, rooting for him, not even realizing that they are until the very end. Everything is kept objective, so we cannot get up close and analyze the situation, the characters’ real identities. Even the scenes are sharply distinguished by wipe shots, which force us to remain on the outside.

This is exactly when the Noh theatre factor comes in. Noh is an ancient classical form of Japanese musical drama, always slow and stylized, in which the characters wear masks to express their emotions and personalities. Kurosawa integrated this into his vision of Macbeth. He made his main characters, Washizu and Lady Asaji, take on rigid expressions as if they were wearing masks. However, he didn’t do this to have them convey their emotions, but to hide them, to not let the audience see inside them. Washizu is constantly trapped in that strained expression that is half way between a frown and a scowl, because he is caught up in his fate right from the beginning. In the film we do not get any close-ups, except of Asaji, whose face is so rock hard that it is impossible to observe her emotions, to read her mind. Kurosawa also integrates prolonged movements and camerawork typical of the style: soft and relaxed but still very sharp and stylized. Another important element taken from Noh is the sound, the particular instruments that reflect drama and

emotional tension. All this contributes to a composition that is pure and essential, yet rich in detail. It is 'Throne of Blood', and it is the projected vision of a parable which shoots us the strong message that brings it together with the other two films.

'Macbeth' by Orson Welles is another very original, eccentric even, version of Shakespeare's play. It was made as a film noir, dark and moody, fitting along the style of the 20th century emerging art movement that is expressionism. Everything that characterizes the film is greatly surreal; it transports us to a whole new dimension that doesn't even seem to know itself. The setting isn't real, the characters aren't real, the time that passes is not real. This film doesn't seem to have a logical structure, and Macbeth, as the main character, is made out to be a person that has nothing in his control. Right from the beginning he is a mud doll manipulated by the witches' will and desire. Everything that is even barely hinted at in the play is blown out of proportion. The darkness the castle plunges into, Lady Macbeth's insanity, Macbeth's alignment with evil. The projected shadows of Macbeth and Macduff in the final battle scene, Lady Macbeth's witch-like screaming and howling at the peak of her madness. This entire composition is greatly orchestrated, dramatic beyond belief, larger than life. This is Welles' vision of the story, which he projects into something completely alienating that is his 'Macbeth'.

This film was made in 1948, a date that would remind anybody of World War II. It had just ended, and the distraught people, while picking up the pieces of their broken homes and hearts, were still trying to give themselves an explanation. An explanation for all this cruelty, this insanity, this evil. And what Orson Welles did was give them one. Because 'Macbeth' is just about this: about how a man, a human like any other can get whipped up in the vortex of ambition, of desire for power. Macbeth was a valiant kinsman who gave all the good up in his life to follow evil, and brings his own ruin. Welles seems to be telling us that it could be Adolf Hitler. That evil is everywhere, it slithers right down in the bottom of some of us, and when even slightly stimulated, it erupts without any control. And this is a pessimistic view of life but it also shows us that there is truth in everything we believed in our childhood. The baddies do get punished. Macbeth got killed by his worst enemy in a shocking, brutal way, and Hitler had to bring about his own death when he realized that everything was crashing down onto him.

"I gin to be aweary of the sun, and wish the estate o' the world were now undone."

These tyrants did create enormous damage, they did undo the state of the world in their own way, but hope is never to be lost, because in the end good will find its way. The director takes us on a journey that is the story of Macbeth and all that is evil. And all of it takes place in that contorted mind of his. This is why it is so dark, this is why the setting is completely surreal. And it is why this film is such a work of art.

Roman Polanski's 'Macbeth' shows us a 'world that is concretely real'. It is the latest 'acclaimed' version of the play and it certainly is influenced by modern society. A lot of things that were considered wild, outrageous, even unacceptable to put on film some time ago are in here. There is violence, blood, nudity, Lady Macbeth as a stunningly attractive woman, luring Macbeth into doing evil as the absolute incarnation of,

'Look like th'innocent flower, but be the serpent under it'.

And the colour. The bright vivacious colour that transforms the vision of the story into something that is more aggressive, dynamic. This 'Macbeth' is a modern, psychological drama, and it is extremely powerful. Unforgettable. As I mentioned before, it does very much reflect upon today's world, but it is also a complete mirror image of the play. If Shakespeare had lived today and made a film of his play, in my opinion it would be this one. It incorporates every possible interpretation of it, every symbol, every analogy. The out of tune bagpipes signalling evil, and the nude child bathing, to represent vulnerability. Macbeth getting more grotesque, strained and desperate, throughout the story. Lady Macbeth dropping her mask to reveal all the evil and madness that is

inside her in the sleepwalking scene. These are all the things that give power and life to the picture. The analytical aspect of it, the camera panning into every single detail giving us the insight on all the secrets the story and the characters might have to hide.

This is a realistic film, it doesn't give us any existence we cannot recognize. And because of this it is even more intricate, because it is as if it had to show us the root of Macbeth's insanity, which is never really revealed. It does, though, add things that make the story slightly more tangible, less enigmatic. The opposite of what Welles does. And perhaps similar to Kurosawa's doing. For example, we have Macbeth killing Duncan because he wakes up from his sleep, which would have hidden the 'stars' fires, let not light see his black and deep desires'. This makes us see Macbeth in a different light: weaker than we thought, more of a human, and less of a mentally insane tyrant. Still, there is no version more faithful to the original like Polanski's Macbeth. It really does swoop us away to the real medieval Scotland. The castle of Inverness, monumental but filthy and rudimentary, exactly how it would have been. The great contradictions are presented to us: beautiful landscapes, and people living on those lands in misery and hunger, for example. We get no illusions, no ideas from the outside, just a full view on reality. And how something so extraordinary can happen in a world so real, so close to ours is what is haunting. Here we see what influence Polanski's family massacre had on the film. Behind that there is an incredibly sorrowful view on life: evil is among the natural elements we have on earth. Evil exists in reality. And not just the reality of a play, the reality of six hundred years ago, but also the reality of today. When the audience sees the explosion of colour, the exciting violence, the good-looking actors getting themselves in a great mess, often they don't realize what a profound message there is beneath all that. Once taken that in, this film might as well be dull, in black and white and with bad acting. Because that is what pushes through. And even though it's sad it's completely true.

These three versions of Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' are very different. They come from different cultures, different time periods, different directors' genius minds. Yet they are all about a man who lets ambition get the better of him and is trapped in the fate he himself creates. This is the strong message common to every interpretation. And these masterpieces all end in a way that, using different techniques, give the same significance. The story is over, and good forces are triumphant. 'The time is free.' However, evil is still out there and it won't be long before another man falls into the same intrigue. It is proven, history repeats itself. Men don't seem to learn anything from the mistakes their ancestors have made. Maybe there won't be another man who, lured by his wife, will kill his King, his best friend, and another man's wife and children. But there has been and will always be men who commit crime and who have evil inside them. In the closing of Welles' 'Macbeth', we see the witches getting together again to cast a new spell: "The charm's wound up", they say. In Kurosawa's 'Throne of Blood', the same chorus from the beginning chants at the end, making it a new start. In Polanski's 'Macbeth', the message is even more explicit, with Malcolm's brother Donaldbain being seduced by the witches' chanting, and going into their cave just like Macbeth had done long before. This is the final great theme every director sees in the play, it is the most profound and the most instinctive. 'Macbeth' such a powerful work of art, it conquered the hearts of many, and it will continue to, in any time or place. It is timeless, and just like the character of Macbeth himself, will never fade away.

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