

“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.

It has been very interesting to watch three different movies made by three different directors from three different countries inspired by the same play, ‘Macbeth’ by William Shakespeare. Each had his own way of interpreting the story, using his abilities at full blast. Orson Welles treated the story as an expressionistic tale, that takes place in Scotland during the period of the Nancy Regime. Akira Kurosawa treats it as a Japanese parable, which is a story where there is a good and a bad side. The message he wants to transmit is that ambition can lead us to success or to ruin and there is absolutely no way out. Finally, Roman Polanski treats the story as a realistic morality play, as a matter of fact it is the most realistic and modern of all three films.

Roman Polanski’s film presents a world which is concretely real, and he manages to show us for example the changes that Macbeth has during the time. At the beginning he is a very young, clean, healthy man, looking almost like a boy, but after becoming king he looks like an old man, bearded, dirty and brutal. Also Lady Macbeth at the beginning is very happy, for example when she sees Macbeth the first time, but after the murder we start seeing the changes taking place, for example when she sleepwalks, or even when she dies. One of the most realistic scenes is the final battle because the two actors Jon Finch (Macbeth) and Terence Bayler (Macduff) are actually wearing the armour. There is no music in that specific scene, and the only sound we can hear is the clanging of the metal.

In this movie, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are played by actors younger than has been tradition. Lady Macbeth is a softer, tamer woman than is usual. Although wilful and seductive, she is a capricious and childish woman who controls her husband by prodding his frustrated masculine pride. Macbeth is the central character; he is portrayed as a brave and honourable thane of Scotland. Polanski also adds a new scene not in the play, where Lady Macbeth reads overwhelmed by guilt the letter that was sent to her by Macbeth before Duncan’s murder, and we can actually see how frustrated she is and tearful. Polanski also treats the character of Ross in a different way in comparison to the other movies and the play, ‘Macbeth’. In this movie, Ross is a truly political character that is always present, and stays with the side that is winning. At the end, it is in fact he who gives the crown to Malcolm. Polanski uses very little music, and distorted real sounds with lack of harmony. He also uses natural light, and the colour at its maximum effect, even though the blood seems in black-and-white.

Akira Kurosawa treats the play as a Japanese parable, which is a story with a moral, exposing a bad side and a good side that repeats itself in history. It gives us, in fact, the general idea that it’s going to happen again. Kurosawa sets his movie in medieval Japan during the “Age of the country at war”, where feudal Japan was undergoing civil war. Nature is dominant and everything is presented with minimal stark economy. The message that Kurosawa wants to transmit is that ambition can bring man to ruin or success and there is no way out. In this case, ambition brought Washizu to total ruin. In fact it was Washizu’s own men who destroyed him.

Kurosawa follows the events of Macbeth fairly closely, although Kurosawa’s Washizu Taketori is arguably less evil than Macbeth, while his wife Asaji is even nastier than Lady Macbeth. In fact in this movie, Asaji drives Washizu to kill. It seems as if she’s the one killing Duncan mentally, but physically it’s Washizu. Kurosawa was an admirer of Noh drama, and acknowledged the stylistic

influence it had on *Throne of Blood*. This influence can be seen in many aspects of the film, from the staging, to the characterizations, to the editing and direction. Actually the actors in Kurosawa's film are all characters of the Noh theatre, who seem to be wearing a mask which fixes their facial expression for the duration of the film. Even the main character, Washizu, has always the same facial expression therefore it seems as if he is wearing a mask. In this movie, there aren't any witches because the Japanese culture doesn't believe in witches, so the evil is represented by a white spirit, that is a pure character of the Noh theatre.

Kurosawa chose a very interesting instrument used in Noh theatre, the Taji, a type of flute that makes a piercing sound that seems actually out-of-tune. Regarding the light and colour, 'Throne of blood' is in black and white, but has a very natural light, for example the light that passes through the trees in the scenes in the forest. Something very interesting about this film is that in Washizu's famous death scene, in which his own archers turn upon him and pierce his body with arrows, the scene is performed with real arrows, a choice made to help Mifune produce realistic facial expressions of fear. The arrows meant to strike the wooden walls were not superimposed or faked by special effects, yet, they were shot by choreographed archers. During filming, Mifune waved his arms wildly at times because his character was trying to brush away the arrows embedded in the planks; this indicated to the archers the direction in which Mifune wanted to move.

Orson Welles treats 'Macbeth' as an expressionistic tale set during the period of the Nancy Regime. Welles had witnessed the horrors of Nazism, and in this movie he tries to express his feelings towards this dictatorship in a very abstract way. This movie is full of symbols; for example the "V" shape represents evil because it is the witches' symbol. The celtic cross represents good, and sometimes the "V" symbol is placed next to it and this represents the bonding between the good and bad. The castle is like a maze. In a maze you lose yourself, just like what happened to Macbeth who lost his mind and self. The clothes seem very heavy on the characters, and this symbolizes that the Nancy Regime was very oppressive. The movie is in black and white, which is the best way to express Macbeth's character. The light is artificial as most of the film was shot in studio sets. Welles uses epic music, loud sounds and orchestral symphonies that highlight the most dramatic scenes, suggesting tension and suspense.

Throughout the whole film the character of Macbeth dominates with his ambition, which will allow him to obtain absolute power over everyone. Lady Macbeth starts dominating at the beginning, but before too long she starts losing control of the situation, and ends up committing suicide. Orson Welles creates a new character for his film, the Holy Father. This character represents Christianity and works a counter point to the witches. The killing of the Holy Father by Macbeth is the final demonstration that Macbeth reached the highest level of evil.

Of all three films I enjoyed Polanski's the most because it was very modern and realistic. Being an adolescent, I appreciated the time in which it was set because it is closer to the world I come from compared to the other two films. Even though I liked the Polanski film the most however, I feel that the time in which the other two films are set and the perspectives they take are very appropriate for telling the story of Shakespeare's Macbeth.

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