

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Throne of Blood, 1957

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

Film *Throne of Blood* is a military thriller, accompanied by dramatic music and large swathes of moving armies; light and sound effects abound and make the senses work hard from beginning to end. The film is set in the Middle Ages, feudal Japan, and the story is borrowed from Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*, which was set in mediaeval Scotland. It is worth noting that elements of Noh drama--acting styles and costumes--are scattered throughout the play--as are sensational sound effects. The film concerns the simple crisis around which Shakespeare's play of *Macbeth* (1606) turns. The character of MacBeth is represented by a powerful military commander, the samurai general Washizu, who is at the beginning of the play returning home together with his fellow general, Miki, from an expedition to slay the enemies of Tzusuki, a local lord who lives in the Castle of the Spider's Web Forest. Miki is traveling along with Washizu, a fellow samurai commander.

Historical Background Kurosawa had for some time valued the idea of an historical drama based on this fascinating, and often reinterpreted, play of Shakespeare. The appearance of Orson Welles' *Macbeth* in 1948 had postponed Kurosawa's plans for bringing out a new version of his own. Among the dramatic changes he undertook was a sensational finale in which Mifune--as always his chief actor-- is shot with a cascade of arrows. The film was shot in territory carefully chosen by Kurosawa--foggy and rough, like *Macbeth's* Scotland--it was in fact filmed on the slopes of Mount Fuji and Izu peninsula, which just suited the demands of the action. It might be added, when assessing some of the innovations of Kurosawa's film, that it was at time of release the most expensive Japanese film ever produced.

SYNOPSIS

As Miki and Washizu make their ways home they meet an evil spirit in a thick and mysterious grove; this spirit, who bobbles like a ghost in the trees, is to the last degree uncanny, and makes an accordingly improbable prediction; that Washizu is to become commander in the north, while Miki will become commander of the southern fortress. The prophecy goes on to say that Washizu will become Lord of Spider's Web Castle, and the son of Miki will become its lord. When the two men return to Lord Tzusuki's estate, he rewards them with just what the spirit's prophecy had indicated. Washizu explains the prophecy to his wife, who is brutally ambitious for her husband, and proceeds to murder Tzusuki on his next visit. This crucial act will dominate and deepen the remainder of the play, introducing, as it does, profound issues of guilt, revenge, and cowardice.

On the down to earth level this murder will have been the most formidably prosaic violence imaginable; the Lord of the Castle visits Washizu; Asaji drugs Tzusuki's guards, allowing Washizu to slip into Tzusuki's bedroom and kill him. When he realizes what he has done, Washizu staggers back to the scene of the crime, Asaji grabs a bloody spear and puts it in the hand of a sleeping guard, while proclaiming that thugs have stormed the castle. Washizu immediately kills the guard. Miki's son, Kunimaru suspects Washizu but Miki, despite the prophecy, cannot believe in the fact of his brother's treachery.

Washizu accepts--with the prophecy--Miki's son will be lord of the castle, but in the midst of this awareness Washizu is told that Asaji is pregnant, and that not Miki's--but his own child--will be the lord of the manor. Miki and his son, it appears, will have to be killed.

Washizu has already planned a great state dinner, in which Miki's son will be crowned lord. But that banquet is no longer relevant, and by the time it takes place, Miki is dead and all is over. Or almost over,

for In the midst of the banquet Washizu realizes how obvious it is that he, Washizu, is nervous; not much later the ghost of Miki appears in the room. This is too much for Washizu, who fears what's next, and has drunk too much sake. The banquet guests, surmising the truth, vanish from the banquet hall. During the night a messenger arrives at Washizu's door, bearing the head of Miki, but informing Washizu that Miki's son has escaped.

Washizu now passes into a condition of high anxiety, prey to rumors that his own heir has been stillborn. and that a substantial enemy is rising against him. Seeking clarification he returns to the forest in which he first met the prophetic ghost. He is told, by the ghost, that he will not be defeated until the trees of the 'Spider's Web Forest rise against the castle,' the presumably impregnable residence of Washizu and Asaji. (Shakespeare's lines echo through the translation, 'til Burnham wood to Dunsinane shall come.') Washizu shares this prophecy with his soldiers, who like him laugh it off, but only until he goes to his wife's bedroom, and finds her hysterical. She is washing her hands frenetically, trying to wash the guilty bloodstains off of them. When she goes to her window she sees the camouflaged army of trees advancing on the castle. She understands the words of the evil spirit. A passing soldier tells her that the game is up. In the final frames Washizu is smothered by arrows fired by the advancing enemy troops.

CHARACTERS

Taketoki Washizu. One of two Samurai commanders we encounter at the beginning of the film

Lady Asaji Washizu. Wife of the samurai Washizu.

Noriasu Odagura. Right hand man of Washizu.

Yoshiteru Miki. Washizu's comrade, then deadly enemy,

Kumimaro Tzusuki. Lord of the castle of the Spider's Web Forest. Killed by Washizu.

Witch. The evil prophetess encountered by the two samurai, as they return home from battle.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Throne of Blood is a film of action and of the subsequent transitory character of human existence. It is also a drama which reinforces its points with special effects, thus eschewing the three dimensional character.

Taketoki Washizu

When we first see him Taketoki Washizu is a four star military man, returning successfully from a liquidation campaign against the enemies of his regional Lord. Innocence itself as he and his retinue enter the Spider's Web Forest, he meets a ghostly evil spirit, who declares that Washizu will become Lord of Spider's Web Castle, and finally that Miki's son, his comrade at the moment, will become Lord of the castle. This is a lot for Washizu to absorb, and we see that his inner unpackaging of the prophecy is the unwrapping of his personal dimensionality. The process exemplifies Kurosawa's profundity at the art of characterization.

Lady Asaji

Lady Asaji, wife of Washizu, is arguably the most stunning character in the play, although we hear little from her mouth. Her actions, and particularly her poses and gestures--note the mastery of Kurosawa in control of these special effects, especially in those deriving from the Noh tradition--are eloquent testimony to her feelings and her testimony--which in the end is sufficient to compel the future consequential actions of her far less complex husband.

The characters of Washizu and Lady Asaji fit hand in glove to one another. One's weakness fits into the other one's strength.

THEMES

Ambition. Washizu is above all military, concerned about victory more than power. Yet under his wife's prodding he pursues the ambitious goal of putting his own son on the throne. The misleading assurance of his wife, that she is pregnant, leads him to reject the witch's prediction that Miki's son will become lord of the castle, and to count on the eventual success of his own son. Mistaken about his son, Washizu pays the price for bad judgment, and loses everything.

Credulity. Poor judgment is the source of Washizu's downfall. He is credulous, believing that his own son is the sure fire candidate to succeed him. Does that mean he should have anticipated that his son would be dead on birth? No, it means that he should have pondered longer over the witch's assurance, that Miki's son would be the next lord of the castle. Is credulity then a theme? Yes, it comes into play whenever hasty judgments are on the table.

Susceptibility. Washizu is highly susceptible to the pressures and histrionics his wife brings upon him. Her reaction to the news that the lord of the castle will visit them--and, as she is planning, get himself murdered---is seductive and cunning; she subsequently talks her husband into murdering Kunimaru, the lord of the castle. Her larger plan is to drug the lord's soldiers, so that her husband can take over the palace, and we see no evidence that her husband demurs at this plan.

Cunning. All the above is made possible by the cunning of Lady Asaji. She it is who is truly ambitious for her husband; even that cunning involves lying to him, assuring him of her pregnancy, which the film leaves us believing was a pure invention of hers.

SCENES

1 Generals Miki and Washizu return from the battlefield, where they have defeated the foes of Lord Tzusuki. Their mood is ambling and leisurely. On every side of them their horse backed retainers laugh and joke.

2. As they emerge out of the rough forest they are confronted by the figure of an evil witch. They approach in terrified fascination, making out her words: she is telling them, they realize, what they will find when they get home. The prophecy is that they will overthrow the lord of the castle, will dispose of Lord Tzusuki, and that Miki's son will become their new ruler.

3. As with all good prophecies, this one leaves a lot out, in particular how Miki's son is to acquire power. That story, as we will later learn, is long and winding and compresses within itself the most convoluted events of the film.

4. The Lady Asaji devises a plot to catapult her own husband to the summit of power, a plot which involves the murder of Miki, and the producing, from within herself, of the lineage of Washizu. She invents her own pregnancy and convinces her husband to convoke a victory banquet in honor of his son, the new king to be.

5. Miki, when informed that an act of treachery was underway, refuses to believe it, and is reluctant to take action. He loses his neck to the cunning plots of Lady Asaji.

6, In the midst of his celebratory banquet, Washizu is informed that the beheaded torso of Miki has been delivered to his quarters. He suddenly grows aware of the ghost of Miki besieging the drama.

7. Washizu flails at the besieging ghost, alerting the whole assembly to his own designs for conquest. He is to everyone's horror setting out to stage a revolution.

8. At this point Washizu's men start to grumble, no longer confident of their master's purposes. The Lady Asaji hears the rumor that the forest itself is moving against the Spider's web Castle. She is bewildered and doubtful.

9. Washizu learns that he will not be overthrown until the very woods attack him. Not clear of the meaning of this statement, he goes to Lady Asaji, and finds her in hysterics, manically struggling to wash from her hands the bloodstains from her hands--'out out damned spot!--and watching in amazement as the forest moves toward her castle.

10. The forest, camouflage for Miki's men, marches toward their revenge, while Washizu goes down, smothered by the arrows of his own mutinying men. The now mad Lady Asaji is left trying to scrub her hands free of the blood of Lord Tzusuki and his men.