

A Japanese Macbeth

Essayist's general position, and implicit thesis, is clear from the start.

A Japanese movie-version of Macbeth sounds like a bad idea--until one sees Akira Kurosawa's film Throne of Blood, in which Toshiro Mifune plays Washizu, the equivalent of Macbeth. It is a much more satisfying film than, say, Olivier's Othello, largely because it is not merely a filmed version of a play as it might be performed on a stage but a freely re-created version that is designed for the camera. The very fact that it is in Japanese is probably a great help to Westerners. If it were in English, we would be upset at the way some speeches are cut, but because it is in Japanese, we do not compare the words to Shakespeare's, and we concentrate on the visual aspects of the film.

As the paragraph proceeds, it zooms in on the topic.

There are several differences in the plots of the two works. Among the alterations are such things as these:

Shakespeare's three witches are reduced to one; Lady Washizu has a miscarriage; Washizu is killed by his own

Essayist tells us exactly what will be covered in the rest of the essay.

troops and not by Macduff. But this paper will discuss another sort of change, the introduction of visual symbols, which the camera is adept at rendering, and which play an important part in the film. The four chief visual symbols are the fog, the castle, the forest, and the horses.

***Transition
(through
repetition of part
of previous
sentence) and
helpful forecast.***

***Analysis, not
mere plot telling.***

***Thoughtful
interpretation.***

***Further
interpretation.***

The fog, the castle, and the forest, though highly effective, can be dealt with rather briefly. When the film begins we get a slow panoramic view of the ruined castle seen through the fog. The film ends with a similar panoramic view. These two scenes end with a dissolve, though almost all of the other scenes end abruptly with sharp cuts, and so the effect is that of lingering sorrow at the transience of human creations, and awe at the permanence of the mysterious natural world, whose mist slowly drifts across what once was a mighty castle built by a great chief. The castle itself, when we come to see it in its original condition, is not a particularly graceful Japanese building. Rather, it is a low, strong building, appropriate for an energetic warrior. The interior scenes show low, oppressive ceilings, with great exposed beams that almost seem to crush the people within the rooms. It represents one man's achievement in the center of the misty tangled forest of the mysterious world, but it also suggests, despite its strength, how stifling that achievement is, in comparison with the floating mists and endless woods. The woods, rainy and misty, consist of curiously gnarled trees and vines and suggest a labyrinth that has entrapped the man, even though for a while he thinks he is secure in his castle. Early in the film we see Washizu riding through the woods, in and out of mists, and behind a maze of twisted trees that periodically hide him from our sight. Maybe it is not too fanciful to suggest that the branches through which we glimpse him blindly riding in the fog are a sort of net that entangles him. The trees and the mist are the vast

unfathomable universe; this man can build his castle, can make his plans, but he cannot subdue nature for long. He cannot have his way forever; death will ultimately catch him, despite his strength. One later scene of the forest must be mentioned. Near the end of the film, when the forest moves (the soldiers are holding up leafy boughs to camouflage themselves), we get a spectacular shot; Shakespeare talks of the forest moving, but in the film we see it. Suddenly the forest seems to give a shudder and to be alive, crawling as though it is a vast horde of ants. Nature is seen to rise up against Washizu's crimes.

Essayist moves chronologically.

Summary leads, at the end of the paragraph, to interpretation.

The first half of this paragraph is a well-handled comparison.

Shakespeare's stage could do very little about such an effect as the fog, though his poetry can call it to mind, and it could do even less about the forest. Kurosawa did not feel bound to the text of the play: He made a movie, and he took advantage of the camera's ability to present impressive and significant scenic effects. Similarly, he made much use of horses, which, though mentioned in Shakespeare's play, could not be shown on the Elizabethan stage. In fact, in Macbeth Shakespeare more-or-less apologizes for the absence of horses when one murderer explains to the other that when horsemen approach the palace it is customary for them to leave their horses and to walk the rest of the way.

A reminder of a point made earlier, but now developed at length.

But the film gives us plenty of horses, not only at the start, when Washizu is galloping in the terrifying forest, but throughout the film, and they are used to suggest the terror of existence and the evil passions in Washizu's heart. Shakespeare provided a hint. After King Duncan is murdered, Shakespeare tells us that Duncan's horses

"Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls," and even that they ate each other (II.iv.16-18). In the film, when Washizu and his wife plot the murder of their lord, we see the panic-struck horses running around the courtyard of the castle--a sort of parallel to the scene of Washizu chaotically riding in and out of the fog near the beginning of the movie. The horses in the courtyard apparently have sensed the villainous plots, or perhaps they are visual equivalents of the fierce emotions in the minds of Washizu and his wife. Later, when Washizu is planning to murder Miki (the equivalent of Banquo), we see Miki's white horse kicking at his attendants. Miki saddles the horse, preparing to ride into the hands of his assassins. Then Kurosawa cuts to a long shot of the courtyard at night, where Miki's attendants are nervously waiting for him to return. Then we hear the sound of a galloping horse, and suddenly the white horse comes running in, riderless. Yet another use of this motif is when we cut to a wild horse, after Washizu's wife has said that she is pregnant. In the film the wife has a miscarriage, and here again the horse is a visual symbol of the disorder engendered within her (the child would be the heir to the usurped throne), as the other horses were symbols for the disorder in her mind and in Macbeth's. All of these cuts to the horses are abrupt, contributing to the sense of violence that the unrestrained horses themselves embody. Moreover, almost the only close-ups in the film are some shots of horses, seen from a low angle, emphasizing their powerful, oppressive brutality.

***Thoughtful
generalization.***

Conclusion is chiefly a restatement, but the last sentence gives it an interesting twist.

Throne of Blood is not Shakespeare's Macbeth--but even a filmed version of a staged version of the play would not be Shakespeare's Macbeth either, for the effect of a film is simply not identical with the effect of a play with live actors on the stage. But Throne of Blood is a fine translation of Macbeth into an approximate equivalent. Despite its lack of faithfulness to the literal text, it is in a higher way faithful. It is a work of art, like its original.