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Media for Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Jack J. Jorgens

There are many media for Shakespeare: print, audio recordings, theatrical performance, aural readings, film, television, even still photographs, engravings, paintings, hand towels, and tea cups. Print is the medium with which we're most familiar. We feel that we're most sensitive when we read print. And the texts, as imperfectly preserved as they are, seem to offer the least distorted renderings of Shakespeare's vision. But reading Shakespeare is also a performing art. Shakespeare's plays—when they're viewed as experiences, processes, not static objects—are performances in several senses.

Within the fiction, characters perform for each other. In the case of Richard II, you have a feeling that he's also performing for himself. Shakespeare performs as a poet and a narrative artist, exhibiting and exploring his own talent. Most important, readers perform the text in their own thoughts, emotions, and sensations, and enact it in the theater of the mind. Our response to the printed word is not automatic. We can read well or badly. We've all had the experience of reading a passage and then asking, "What did I just read?"

In live theatre, the performances of the characters and Shakespeare are absorbed into the spoken words and gestures of actors. And these actors are shaped and controlled by the director and the designer who "perform" the text for us as well. The audience of a live performance may appear passive, but it is active: focussing attention, connecting, absorbing, comparing the play to stage and life experiences. The audience collaborates with the actors and with Shakespeare to create the work anew every time.

A film or T.V. performance carries things a step further. In addition to all the performances by the spectator, actors, director, and designer, we have a performance through the medium of the cinema. A poet of sounds and images, the film artist records, translates, or recreates Shakespeare in a new medium. The play speaks cinema to us.

Again the audience looks passive, but it's not. Though in an objective sense, film is a mechanical process which repeats itself perfectly as it passes through the projector, for the subjective viewer, a film is reborn each time we view it. The same sounds and images have different effects on us. It's a different work, because it is perceived and understood differently.

But in spite of the rewards of more students with more interest, many Shakespeareans are nervous about moving away from print toward stage and screen as media for Shakespeare. Anyone who has seen how eagerly teachers flock to actors, directors, films, and performances at scholarly conferences in recent years knows that a revolution is afoot.

Some of our colleagues suspect that this new emphasis on performance is a society for the promotion of illiteracy and ignorance of literary history, an attempt by lazy students to be stage-struck for credit, a digression from solid

criticism into a fool's paradise of visual gimmicks, bravura performances, and bizarre interpretations. In more personal terms, focus on performance threatens the teacher's monopoly. It's an acknowledgement that persons outside our profession have important things to say about Shakespeare. Deposed like Richard II, the teacher must relinquish the front of the classroom to filmmakers, theater directors, actors, or to the students themselves as they perform scenes.

Serious attention to performances strikes even deeper. Literary criticism is based on a traditional hierarchy of human faculties: the intellect at the top, the emotions second, and sensations at the bottom. Theatrical criticism places our discursive rational faculties on an equal plane with our feelings. In fact, it suggests that Shakespearian performance is (to adapt Rudolf Arnheim's phrase) a form of aural and visual thinking. When we watch a film or attend a performance, Shakespeare's lines are embedded in sensory experience. Most of his ideas are not stated baldly and abstractly in the neatly-honed paragraphs of an essay. They are rooted in shapes, sounds, movements, and colors, implied by icons, physical presence, eye contact.

In addition, few teachers who have been trained to approach Shakespeare with a wealth of knowledge about other playwrights of the period, the history of the English language, the workings of prose and poetry, and the complexities of narrative are also trained in the sophisticated workings of live performance. Even fewer have been formally trained in the cinema. Given an educational system weak in training us to deal critically with moving image arts, from kindergarten through graduate school, as well as the difficulty of obtaining and studying films, it is not surprising to see teachers hesitate to use Shakespeare films, and to note a certain literary lop-sidedness in the criticism written about them. Nor is it surprising that we are often urged to think of these films in deceptively simple ways. I am thinking of all those clichés about the incompatibility of poetic language and screen realism, filmmakers' affection for mediocre books and plays and avoidance of great literature, and the clash of theatrical styles and conventions with those of the cinema.

There is a cure for this mis-education, however, an antidote for easy assumptions about what film must do or cannot do and what is Shakespearian and what is not. That is simply to look at the films very carefully and look at them more than once. Shakespeare teachers have many of the skills necessary to deal with Shakespeare films in an interesting and sophisticated manner if they would only give themselves a chance. We need to give Shakespeare films the same kind of passionate and detailed attention that we pay to Shakespeare's imagery, characters, dramaturgy, and themes, to think for a while not on the problems of adaptation (from one medium to another, one culture to another, one artist's vision to another's) but the *possibilities*.

As an example, let us begin small—with two successive shots from Akira Kurosawa's Japanese version of *Macbeth* called *Throne of Blood*, the first of the Macbeth character (Washizu), and the second of the Witch (the Forest Spirit). [See Illustrations.] In *Shakespeare on Film*, I presented these two images without comment, implying that they lie at the heart of the film. Here I would

like to tease some of the meanings from these shots as a reminder that the filmmaker, like Shakespeare, thinks in terms of images, a reminder that the root of the word imagination is *image*, and that poets of the screen like other poets create not literal reflections of reality but metaphors.

Leading up to the first illustration, Washizu is lost in the forest. He and Miki (Banquo) encounter a Forest Spirit (an amalgamation of the witches) who kneels spinning thread in a stick hut and chanting about ambition. In yoking together these two images, Kurosawa makes use of montage—the juxtaposition of one image with another for expressive effect. In fact, if we ask ourselves, as I ask my film students, what are the ways in which one shot can harmonize or contrast with another, we will discover that Kurosawa has captured in these two shots the root conflict of the play and the film.

To begin with, there are predominantly darks in one image and whites in another, with all the elemental suggestions of ignorance and knowledge, good and evil, obscurity and clarity confused and at times reversed by the dramatic context. (Nature is not benign in this film.) One central figure is male and the other seems female, but we are not sure, for the sex is indeterminate, and in later surrealist appearances, the Forest Spirit is very definitely male. The result is a sexual ambivalence which carries over to the relationship of Washizu and his wife.

Washizu stares (with actor Toshiro Mifune's incredible intensity) directly at the Forest Spirit, desperately trying to control and understand. The Forest Spirit, on the other hand, refuses eye contact, gazes straight ahead, preoccupied not with the present like Washizu, but with past and future. In the first shot, Washizu's movements are quick, harsh, angular. He rides up on a nervous and powerful horse, reaches back for an arrow, pulls his large bow back, and prepares to fire point blank into the seemingly helpless seated figure. The feel of the moment is of impending bloody violence. The movement of the Forest Spirit—who, like the Fates, winds thread from one spool to another—is, by contrast, slow, smooth and steady, matching the even chant which contrasts so vividly with Washizu's guttural, abrupt shouts.

Washizu is seen close-up as we see the sweat and strain on his grimacing face. The Forest Spirit's chalky white mask of a face is seen in long shot. The shot of Washizu features broken arcs—the moon-like symbol on his helmet and the arc of his bow associating him with fragmentation, partial truncated patterns. The shot of the Forest Spirit contains two complete circles, one large and one small, suggesting harmony, completeness of vision, attention to large patterns and small. Washizu wears armor. The hard shiny surfaces of leather and metal contrast with the loose folds of cloth around the Forest Spirit, just as our recollections of Washizu's mighty fortress, refuge of mortals, contrast with the Forest Spirit's parodic hut of sticks.

Light and shadow, male and "female," eye-contact and distant gaze, violent movement and stasis, prosaic shouts and haunting poetic chant, parts and wholes, mortal bravado and immortal irony—these two shots are a microcosm of the film as a whole. The ferocious, single-minded samurai warrior is stopped in his tracks by an ambivalent, ironic immortal figure with whom he is ill-



equipped to deal. If we can make ourselves look long enough and carefully enough at the central metaphors of Shakespeare films, they will unfold themselves to us and our students.

Filmmakers share with Shakespeare his habit of thinking in images. They also share his habit of using the scene as a basic dramatic and narrative unit. Teachers and students can get much more out of Shakespeare films if they learn to deal with scenes and sequences before they try to deal with whole films. Let us look at five scenes from *Throne of Blood* leading up to Washizu's murder of his Lord.

Shakespeare leads up to the murder with four scenes:

- Act I, scene iv: Duncan learns that Cawdor has been executed, thanks Macbeth, announces that Malcolm is next in line for the throne.
- Act I, scene v: Lady Macbeth reads Macbeth's letter, calls upon the spirits to unsex her, greets Macbeth.
- Act I, scene vi: Duncan arrives at the castle with Banquo and the other lords; Lady Macbeth greets them.
- Act I, scene vii: Macbeth imagines the horror of the deed; Lady Macbeth persuades him to commit the murder.

Kurosawa's analogous scenes are:

Scene A, The feudal lord (Duncan) arrives at Washizu's fortress.

Scene B, The lord determines that Washizu will lead a surprise attack against



the rebel, Inui.

Scene C, Asaji (Lady Macbeth) suggests to Washizu that he's being led into a trap.

Scene D, Servants prepare a room for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to stay in.

Scene E, Asaji completes her persuasion of Washizu to kill his feudal lord.

[See Appendix for rough shot list.] Kurosawa is a master of scenic orchestration: transitions and climaxes, sound and movement, dialogue and body language. As we go through them, we will notice that each scene has its own quality and atmosphere.

Scene A. A private exchange between Washizu and Asaji is broken up by waves of servants reporting activity in the wood behind the fortress. Washizu moves laterally, barks orders, and races toward the gate and the camera. But as he runs the camera tracks before him, "contains" him. On the one hand Washizu expends tremendous effort to get somewhere, and on the other hand the frame recedes at exactly the same rate, so that the effort is neutralized. And ironic camera movement is followed by ironic editing. From the panic and swift motion of Washizu and his men, we cut to a horseman riding out, turning, and leading a very slow procession across the top of the screen and then on a diagonal path down and to the left, as gentle music, laughter, and an orderly row of kneeling peasants convey a sense of harmony, peace, social order.

Scene B. This fluid diagonal motion is interrupted by a wipe, an abrupt, harsh transition, foreshadowing the violence to come, and serving as an analogue to

Shakespeare's frequent use of verbal or physical interruptions on the stage. This scene is static, characterized by fixed camera positions, regular cutting rhythms, and rigid symmetry in the blocking. The lords sit in neat, balanced rows. In contrast to earlier scenes, the gestures are restrained, but our heightened attention picks up small movements such as Washizu's raising of his head as he hears that the hunt is for rebels, not deer. This scene of stasis and talk is punctuated by the only close-up of the five scenes—Asaji's immobile face. This contrasts vividly with Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* which is full of close-ups and seeks to involve us much more intimately with a murderously ambitious and pretty pair of young lovers.

Scene C. This scene consists of only one shot (vs. eleven shots in the first scene and fifteen in the second) lasting about one minute and fifty-six seconds. The composition is interesting, a kind of allegory of head and body: Asaji is shown from the waist up and fixed in the lower right hand part of the frame, while Washizu, laughing and strutting diagonally across the screen, is shown from the waist down. Toward the end of the shot/scene, he is drawn to her as if reeled in by invisible strings and kneels down, imitating her stasis and posture. The duration of shots is as important as their scale. When you hold something on stage or screen, it receives greater emphasis. There are two very lengthy shots in these five scenes, and they're both shots where Asaji is bearing down on Washizu. Asaji's pressure is intensified by close-ups, by rock-solid stasis, and by painfully prolonged shots where she tries to break him.

Scene D. The world of Washizu is filled with illusions and double meanings, and this is no less true of sounds than of images. When in this scene the two servants sent to prepare the ominous "traitor's room" for their master hear crows caw, they interpret it as an evil omen. In Scene E, Asaji interprets the caw differently: "Listen, even the crow is saying the throne is yours." These two caws may even imply, as Marsha Kinder has suggested ("*Throne of Blood: A Morality Dance*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 5 [1977], 339-45), that time has folded back on itself as we experience the same segment of time first from the point of view of the servants, and then from the point of view of Washizu and Asaji in a different room.

Even camera movement partakes of this ambivalence. In the eleventh shot of Scene D, the camera moves ahead of the servant's taper until it reveals to us the blood stains on the walls and floor—the ghastly memorial to a traitor who committed suicide in this room years before. But the camera does not stop. Rather it moves back slowly, with a double effect: the movement backward miming normal human response which is to retreat in horror, but also revealing more and more of the stain, miming our slow realization of how terrible the sight must have been.

Scene E. Asaji's assault on Washizu's loyalty and fear contains opposites. On the one hand, she seems passive; her voice from off-frame seems to permeate the room as Washizu paces by the mat/throne. Her thoughts seep into his mind and become his own thoughts. Then suddenly, after several scenes of stasis and verbal persuasion, Asaji resorts to direct physical action, seizing Washizu's hand and pulling him onto the throne where she challenges both his male pride

and his masculinity: "Without ambition, a man is not a man." This swift and sure move breaks his resistance, and he slowly sits on the throne, accepting his fate.

Kurosawa, like Shakespeare, is fond of foreshadowing. Just as Washizu kneels on the throne, his two servants' candles appear eerily through the opaque wall, giving him a start as they report that the traitor's room is ready. From the moment the samurai assumes the throne, he knows no rest. And again camera movement "contains" character motion, as the camera swings left in an arc to keep the royal pair and the candles shining through the wall in the frame. The camera is almost allied with the Forest Spirit: it is controlling, ironically distant, capable of seeing into the future.

There are many lessons to be learned from a film translation or re-creation like Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*. I will close with three. First, to move back and forth between a film with this kind of density and brilliance and a play by Shakespeare which is even more layered and complex, we must abandon any simple conception of the process of adaptation. It is comforting to line up films based on *Macbeth* on a linear scale according to their fidelity to the text, allegiance to Shakespearean conventions, and so on, but I am not sure it teaches us very much. Certainly such fidelity has little to do with quality, for *Throne of Blood* is by far the best film of the lot; some of the interesting films are in the middle range; while the more "faithful" renderings such as the T.V. films starring Maurice Evans in 1960 and Eric Porter more recently are disappointing in the extreme. Paradoxically, the realm of adaptation seems to be the realm of witches where at least to some degree the further away from a literal reading of the text you get, the closer to Shakespeare you come. Artists like Kurosawa circle round Shakespeare and arrive at him from the other side.

Second, no good Shakespeare adaptation is a mere collection of interesting effects and great moments, though just the memory of the slow movement of the wood toward the forest to low ominous music will serve to remind us that *Throne of Blood* has more than its share of those. Looking back over the five scenes we have just briefly surveyed, we can see a thematic spine running through them which can be summed up in the Shakespearean idea of equivocation. The Lord's sneak attack seems to be only an innocent hunting party, but in reality it is a ruse to set up an attack on a rebel. The honor of leading the troops is turned inside out as Asaji argues that Washizu will be shot down from behind while the favorite Miki (Banquo) remains safely behind. These servants seem innocent to his Lordship's guards, but they pave the way for his murder. The crows' caw bodes ill and well. By arguing that Washizu is not a man without ambition, and that his only path to safety is to kill his Lord, Asaji dooms her husband to inhumanity and a frenzied struggle for survival so terrible that the memory of his life outlives even the massive fortress, not for its heroism but for its horror. Like Kozintsev, Welles, and few others, Kurosawa has embedded Shakespearean themes throughout his film, not only in the dramatic action but in the very prosody of the cinema.

Finally, a film adaptation of Shakespeare will unfold itself to us only if we look at it carefully and often. And even then we are caught between the image

and the spoken word. As Macbeth put it, "Mine eyes are made the fools o' th' other senses, / Or else worth all the rest."

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Shot Chart: *Throne of Blood* (11 minute segment)

Abbreviations: ELS—extreme long shot;
LS—long shot;
MLS—medium long shot;
MS—medium shot;
MCU—medium close-up
CU—close-up

For a scene by scene outline of *Throne of Blood*, see Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (1977).

A. THE ARRIVAL OF HIS LORDSHIP (DUNCAN) AT WASHIZU'S (MACBETH'S) CASTLE (about 2 min.)

1. LS Pan with servant right to left to seated Washizu (Macbeth) and Asaji (Lady Macbeth). "Sir, men from the Forest Castle are coming from the hill at the rear."
2. MLS Washizu looks at immobile Asaji, rushes out on porch to hear servant who speaks from the back of a circling horse: "They were hiding among the hills and woods surrounding this castle. They are men from Forest Castle. Their spears and banners are lowered and they come this way." Pan Right to Left with Washizu as he moves back into room and looks at immobile Asaji, who stares straight ahead.
3. ELS Man riding down road to front to castle.
4. LS Washizu rushes past immobile Asaji, seizes his sword.
5. LS Horseman stops before the gate. "Lord Washizu of North Castle! His Lordship is on his way here."
6. LS Pan with Washizu right to left as he runs along porch, stops. Servant kneels: "Sir, his Lordship is coming." Washizu: "Men, come out!" Washizu leaps from porch.
7. LS Camera dollies backward rapidly before Washizu & his men as they run toward the gate. They stop. Man on horse: "Do not call your men."
8. LS Washizu and his men at the gate in the background. Rider in foreground: "And do not receive him in state. His Lordship is on a hunting trip."
9. MCU Washizu moving a few steps toward rider, looking from him to road.
10. LS Past Washizu and his men at the gate in the foreground to the horseman riding out to greet his Lordship's procession.
11. ELS Horseman rides out road. Presents move to kneel along road. *Gentle music*. Horseman reaches procession, turns, leads it toward castle slowly. Laughter from the hunting party which is carrying game.

B. LORD DETERMINES THAT WASHIZU SHALL LEAD A SURPRISE ATTACK AGAINST REBEL INUI (about 1 min.)

1. WIPE TO: LS past kneeling Washizu and Asaji to Lord seated on mat. Washizu: "Permit me to congratulate you on your excellent hunting sir."

2. MLS Lord: "The hunting is a pretense."
3. MLS Asaji kneels motionless, Washizu starts.
4. MLS Lord: "I wish to attack Inui and take him by surprise."
5. MLS Asaji kneels motionless, Washizu looks up suddenly.
6. MLS Line of lords starting in surprise.
7. MLS Lord: "He must be punished."
8. LS Past kneeling Washizu and Asaji of Lord: "I had wanted to attack after the rebellion, then decided to wait. Now I am ready. This castle shall be my headquarters. We will march our troops to the border and scatter the enemy. This must be kept a secret, however."
9. MLS Lord calls to Washizu.
10. MLS Asaji still, Washizu answers.
11. MLS Lord calls to Miki (Banquo).
12. MLS Miki moves into line with Washizu and Asaji. Lord's voice: "I will reward you with honorable posts."
13. MLS Lord: "Let Washizu lead the attack, and Miki hold my castle."
14. MLS Washizu and Miki bowing in assent, Asaji remaining still.
15. CU Asaji's still face.

C. ASAJI SUGGESTS TO WASHIZU THAT HE IS BEING LED INTO A TRAP
(about 2 min.)

1. MLS Washizu pacing and laughing, Asaji seated and staring. W.: "Asaji, you could not now be so suspicious...(laugh). Now that you see how he trusts me. (squats by her) In doubting Miki you have shown yourself bewitched by this evil spirit." A.: "Allow me to disagree." W.: "His Lordship trusts me more than anyone else. (paces) And that is why he has given me the honor of leading the attack." A.: "Where arrows will find you not only from the front but from the rear." *Ominous music.* W. stops, turns, comes to her, kneels. A.: "His Lordship has thought well. He has already taken this castle from you. Miki is keeper of the Forest Castle. Miki is his favorite. He must face no danger." W. turns to stare at Lord's empty mat. A.: "But you, my lord. You must not remain alive." W. sits. A.: "Miki will be watching from the tower. He will enjoy watching you die without realizing the truth."

D. SERVANTS PREPARE THE TRAITOR'S ROOM FOR WASHIZU AND ASAJI
(about 2 min. 45 sec.)

1. LS Three guards sit before Lord's chamber. *Eerie music.* Pan right to left as third guard rises, challenges two servants carrying tapers & mat with his spear. 1st Servant: "We work here sir."
2. MLS Second Guard: "No one may approach his Lordship's chamber. You may go no further."
3. MLS Past second guard to two servants. 1st Servant: "We do not go to His Lordship's chamber, sir, but to the forbidden room."
4. MLS Three guards listen.
5. MS Second Servant: "Where the traitorous rebel leader killed himself. We had washed the floor, yet the blood remained. So we closed the room."
6. MLS First guard: "Then why do you go there now?"
7. MS Second servant: "We must open it so our master may sleep there."

8. MLS Second guard: "I understand. You may go."
9. MLS Two servants bow. *Eerie music*. Pan left to right with them past fire, three guards to door.
10. MLS The two come through the door.
11. MLS Second servant: "I have fought in many battles and have seen blood, yet this stain horrifies me." Pan right to left following 1st servant's taper, moving ahead of it to blood stain on wall. "Because this is the blood of a dog, the blood of a despised traitor. He was a coward too." Camera pulls back. "Cried for mercy after his revolt was over." Second servant moves into shot, turns startled as *crow caws*. "The crow's caw—an ill omen."
12. LS Three guards sit before Lord's chamber.

E. *ASAJI PERSUADES WASHIZU TO KILL HIS LORD* (about 2 min. 30 sec.)

1. LS Washizu pacing, staring at the mat. A's voice: "You say that I am suspicious. Yet I believe firmly in that prophecy. But open your eyes and look. The stage is yours. There would be no difficulty in your making this prophecy come true. Have you no eyes? His Lordship has placed himself in your hands. Now is your chance. It will never come again." Pan L to R & pull back following W. as he approaches her: "But this be an act of highest treason. And afterwards, what then?" A.: "His Lordship trusts you you say, but the guards are Noriyasu's men, and this is all the better. I will give the guards drugged wine, and when they fall asleep, you will kill him." W. turns his back to her, faces mat. A.: "The blame will be placed on Noriyasu and his men." *Crow caws* and W starts. A. rises: Listen, even the crow is saying the throne is yours." Camera moves in to MS on two. A.: "This is what it says." *Japanese music: drum & pipe*. She seizes his hand. Pan R to L as she leads him to the mat. A.: "Without ambition, man is not a man. And after this, Forest Castle. Then you may well hope to rule the entire country." She kneels before him. He kneels on mat. Suddenly he starts.
 2. MLS Past W. to two lights beyond opaque screen. Camera pulls around behind W. & A. moving R to L to keep lights in frame as they move L to R. Servant: "The room is ready my lady." A. walks to screen: "Tell me, what are the guards doing now?" Serv.: "Keeping watch, my lady, with their spears ready." A.: "Admirable." She looks at W. "I will take them some wine." A. walks past W. toward Camera.
 3. LS A. walking past W. (on mat) toward inner room.
 4. MS A. disappearing into pitch black room. Pause. She reappears carrying container of wine.
- DISSOLVE TO: sleeping guards.