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From 'Scottish' Play to Japanese Film: Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*

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Abstract: Shakespeare's plays have become the subject of filmic remakes, as well as the source for others' plot lines. This transfer of Shakespeare's plays to film presents a challenge to filmmakers' auterial ingenuity: Is a film director more challenged when producing a Shakespearean play than the stage director? Does having auterial ingenuity imply that the film-maker is somehow freer than the director of a play to change a Shakespearean text? Does this allow for the language of the plays to be changed—not just translated from English to Japanese, for example, but to be updated, edited, abridged, ignored for a large part? For some scholars, this last is more expropriation than pure Shakespeare on screen and under this category we might find Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu-jō* 1957), the subject of this essay. Here, I explore how this difficult tale was translated into a Japanese context, a society mistakenly assumed to be free of Christian notions of guilt, through the transcultural move of referring to Noh theatre, aligning the story with these Buddhist morality plays. In this manner Kurosawa found a point of commonality between Japan and the West when it came to stories of violence, guilt, and the problem of redemption.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Kurosawa; Macbeth; films; translation; transcultural; Noh; tragedy; fate; guilt

1. Introduction: 'The Instruments of Darkness Tell Us Truths' (Macbeth)

At the nineteenth century's end Shakespeare's plays became the subject of filmic remakes, as well as the source for others' plot lines.[1] Rothwell (1999) claims that this transfer of Shakespeare's plays to film presents a challenge to filmmakers' auterial ingenuity,[2] a process that began with the first attempts to capture a Shakespearean performance on film. Such a statement raises a variety of questions: Were the very first attempts to film plays—any plays, not just Shakespeare's—already a shift from faithful documentation on film to auterial ingenuity? Why should a film director be more challenged when producing a Shakespearean play than the stage director—does auterial ingenuity imply that the film-maker is somehow freer than the director of a play to change a Shakespearean text? Does it mean that the plays are somehow transformed, translated we might say, from a mode of representation in which a single stage must represent the world to one in which the process allows for all sorts of visual manipulation? Does it allow for the language of the plays to be changed; not just translated from English to Japanese, for example, but to be updated, edited, abridged, ignored for a

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1 According to the British Film Institute, the first such adaptation was Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's production of *King John* in 1899 (see: http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/444972/). *The Guinness Book of World Records* in 2014 named Shakespeare the most filmed author with 410 film adaptations of his works, while in the same year IMDB listed 1095 works that credited William Shakespeare (see: https://stephenfollows.com/movies-based-on-shakespeare-plays/).

2 The use of the term auterial here refers to Truffaut's (1954) argument that a film-maker can a film's author. Truffaut argued that in French cinema, but also in the work of some non-French directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, the vision and purpose of the director dominated the entire process of filming, making them the movie's auteur/author.

large part? If the language is so radically altered and the plays updated, are we looking at changes in genre, a shift in storytelling style as in the various versions of *Macbeth, Othello*, and *King Lear* which recast the narratives as gangster films? For Rothwell (1999), this last is more expropriation than pure Shakespeare on screen and under this category he puts Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu-jō* 1957). While this article cannot consider why and how Shakespeare has come to be so durable, cross-cultural, and global, we do need to consider what happens when a work of art transcends its local culture.

To begin with, the potential difference between a filmed version of a play and its live performance must be understood. I use the term 'potential' because the very first versions of Shakespeare on film were often seen as visual recordings (no sound), short clips, of an actor in his greatest role. This trend can still be discerned in television and cinema broadcasts of staged versions, sometimes live, with several cameras used to give the audience some visual variety. Such attempts to capture the power of a live performance were critiqued early on by Benjamin (1973). For Benjamin the charismatic power of a particular performance depended on the actor's aura, a quality he did not see as possible to capture on film. While Benjamin argues that the aura of an actor's performance can get lost in the age of mechanical reproduction, we should be wary of reading this work as a lament for the loss of authenticity, because Benjamin goes on to develop his analysis to note that perhaps something else is happening in a film, something of great importance. The reactions of the audience to the film may well vary,[3] thus the shift is from a ritualised relationship in which a single performance in a play might dominate, to one that is inherently personal and possibly political: Film allows all viewers to become critics and to have their own relationship with a narrative, including the desire to create one's own story.

Thus, the fact of mass production asks us to have a different relationship with art: Copying or remaking might well be about creating new and different meanings. This is the line pursued by the anthropologist Taussig (1993), and his argument was prefigured by Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) discussion of deterritorialisation and re-assemblage in their long essay on Franz Kafka. For these writers copying and re-assembling are not just about generating faithful reproductions, but also are about the relations of production and the politics of othering. When someone new enters the processes of assemblage and production, their re-assemblage may well result in creative innovation. In other words, Shakespearean screen adaptations not only strive to find new ways of telling an old story, but endeavour to imbue the play with new, contemporary, meanings. If films allow for a myriad of understandings, deeper incursions into the human psyche and the body politic, then achieving that end necessitates pushing film as a medium to its very boundaries. This is a point which Brode (2000) makes in relation to filmed versions of Shakespeare.

Every film version of a Shakespearean play, then, is much more than just another movie derived from a work by the world's greatest playwright. It is, whether or not the filmmakers are aware of the fact, a fighting document—a unique singular, debatable, and more often than not, temporary interpretation.

The notion of a unique and singular, fighting text (Brode 2000, p. 9) might also serve as an answer to the question: Why, given the availability of various copies of the original, do we get new versions? An answer I suggest here is that an original work's intention can be so meaningful to so many people that its message clamours for repetition and that repetition results in new interpretations. This, we might say, is the intellectual's version. The Hollywood version might well be: It made money the first time, why not do it again, but slightly differently? Hence film-making does not only seek to produce copies of an original print, it also attempts to re-use plots, characters, and even visual imagery, in the hope this will guarantee economic return. Not only do films do this within a genre, or a cultural context, but they are also capable of doing this across societies—requiring, perhaps, one more layer of

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3   Benjamin dismissed the possibility of defining the common characteristics of an audience 50 years before Ang (1991).

translation for and by audiences. A film's intertextuality then is not limited to an individual director's vision, or to a particular social history, but is endlessly translatable by audiences.

Moreover, the translation of a foreign film—one of the subjects of this essay—occurs in different ways. The simplest, and most frequent, is simply the act of dubbing or sub-titling, although even these techniques might well require re-editing for length and/or censorship. When we see a 'foreign' film with subtitles, we are already seeing another version of the film, not merely just another copy.[4] Again, Horton and McDougal (1998), among others, argue that there are two different ways of translating: The text that is a faithful, word-for-word translation, and the text which aims to accurately capture something of the original and render it comprehensible in another language. In film, subtitling is often assumed to be more or less close to the original dialogue, but anyone fluent in two languages is aware of how subtitles can get it very wrong, indeed.

Despite these problems, films are translated and appreciated across cultures. In this sense, the medium itself is transcultural, since despite cultural variations in both the narratives and visual styles that different societies favour, the technology is global and filmic techniques—while always evolving and changing—tend to be shared cross-culturally. To put it in another way, because film is a visual medium, it is possible sometimes to work out a plot without hearing the dialogue in film. We do this by deciphering the images; assuming that films are constructed according to a limited—and shared—grammar of sight. Therefore, another reason for films travelling cross-culturally is that they are seen to be fundamentally translatable as visual texts, and that human beings have come to share a way of seeing. This notion might well speak to translatability as being a quality that some texts have, pointing to a kinship of languages: Not an actual etymological kinship, but to a kinship of meaning, intent, and experience. As Lucien Taylor notes in his forward to MacDougall's (1998) *Transcultural Cinema*: '[T]he "shock" of film's transculturality, MacDougall suggests, is that *through* its particularity it evokes the *universality* of human experience—experience, in a word, that transcends cultural boundaries' (Taylor 1998, p. 19).

While it could be argued that what we understand by seeing is not easily shared cross-culturally, I agree with the notion that some texts are transcultural because they evoke the human condition and experience—both diachronically and synchronically. Additionally, some stories are so powerful that they become embedded in the folklore and/or high literature across many societies; thus becoming part of the knowledge that is taught to children, forming a template for understanding the world (Propp 1968). These are stories that get retold for they are seen to merit re-capitulating even in the same language. Such reiterations are both translations and re-assemblages, because they are attempting to work within new modalities of technology, or within historical moments, that allow for the original to be interpreted once again and, perhaps, in a different way. Hence Brode's use of the phrase 'temporary interpretation'. Moreover, because films are visual, they evoke another level of meaning and intent, a meta-level perhaps, which seduces us into thinking we completely understand others solely through the shared faculty of seeing, when actually it is similarities in the story that we recognise.[5]

Macbeth appears to be one of the narratives that is endlessly translatable. It is a gripping tale of a man tempted into hurrying up fate: Killing his King, in order to be king, after being told that this will happen in any event; followed by gory and supernatural consequences. It is a very 'visual' play as well, full of descriptive language about how the natural world reacts to this unnatural act. Many film-makers would think nothing of cutting such verbal description, making it visual and in a way tangible. However, few would get rid of all of Shakespeare's language—yet this is precisely what Kurosawa Akira did in *Throne of Blood*. Before analysing Kurosawa's version of Shakespeare's play, it is worth considering the 'original' tale itself.

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[4] For a discussion of the issues that Japanese subtitling raises, see (Nornes 1999).
[5] Kurosawa also questioned the possibility that seeing is the same as knowing or understanding in *Rashomon* (1950).

2. 'Let Every Man Be Master of His Time' (Macbeth)

Macbeth is often referred to as the Scottish play, due to the theatrical tradition that it is cursed and therefore must not be named by actors. Yet, it is an English play, written by an English writer in 1606, for a Scottish king, King James VI of Scotland, who became James I of England. Bradley (1991) tells us—as do other Shakespearean experts—that it is shorter than some of the author's other tragedies because the new King hated long plays. It is argued that the addition of witches to an actual historical event (the fall of Mac Bethad mac Findláich, c. 1005–1057, who became King of Scotland in 1040 and was dethroned in 1057), is because James I was interested in witchcraft, and had himself written a book on the subject. However, given the recent failure of the Gunpowder plot (1605), the topic of the play itself—the possible treachery of one's loyal vassals—seems rather close to the bone. A few scholars now question 1606 as the year in which the play was written, dating it back several decades, and see it as a commentary on the violence of the Tudor successions.[6] This is still in contention, but whether the play was written in the seventeenth or the late sixteenth century, it clearly alludes to periods in which the succession to the throne had been marked by rebellions and uprisings. It can be read as a celebration of a new age—the almost peaceful succession of James—by relegating violent successions to a dark, primitive time and place.

More anomalous is the figure of Lady Macbeth, a barren and scheming woman who does not stop at murder to achieve her ends—an interesting woman to represent in a play written for a king who was heir to the childless and iron-willed Elizabeth I, who herself was half-sister to the infertile Mary Tudor. James I was also son and heir to Mary, Queen of Scots, who had been accused of plotting to murder James' own father. The depiction of a woman as potentially more evil and strong-willed than the men of the story is often taken to be an example of Shakespeare's—or just the era's—misogyny. The feminist scholar, Dusinberre (1996), has a difficult time arguing her way through to a sympathetic reading of the character (see also Rutter 1988). However, the linking of Lady Macbeth to barrenness is symbolically important, and would have resonated for seventeenth century audiences in London. As noted above, the Tudors had been haunted by this issue, whereas James I came to the throne with a large family already in place.

The resulting play is one that has long interested scholars and critics, and the role of the witches has been much discussed: Are they meant to represent the Fates or are they there only because the King was very interested in demonology? What did witchcraft mean to Tudors and Stuarts? Tudor and Stuart apprehensions about prophecies had much to do with their political implications—prophets and their prognostications were seen to be capable of inciting rebellion.[7] The witches therefore signal a very real danger: The way in which some men were led to rebellion simply through the words and dreams of others.

The tension between whether the witches are meant to be Greek-like sibyls or political troublemakers is interesting in relation to the play's structure: Some scholars find it the most like a Greek tragedy of all Shakespeare's work,[8] and see the role of the witches as a clue to this. In this regard, then, Macbeth would be like all the Greek tragic heroes who follow a particular path because it is ordained by the Fates and cannot be escaped, no matter how much they may try to resist. In contrast, scholars who contextualise the witches' role within Tudor and Stuart politics argue that since they do not represent the Fates, there is still the element of free will in Macbeth's story—it is all about giving into temptation. The latter is, obviously, a much more Christian reading of the play and possibly this is a more historically accurate interpretation than the former. Alternatively, Macbeth's Greek-like features might be just as intentional as the witches being there to flatter a king interested

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[6] Whalen (2003, pp. 54–70) sums up the arguments for an earlier date for the play.
[7] See (Thomas 1971), see also MacFarlane (1970) for an anthropological analysis of witchcraft in this era.
[8] Showerman (2011, p. 70) provides a good discussion of the scholarship on Shakespeare and Greek tragedy.

in demonology: Shakespeare's works are full of intertextual references to other stories, plays, and theatrical traditions.

What makes this story so powerful? For Bradley (1991) it works precisely because it is short and pithy. The play's depiction of the path towards evil that is followed by a seemingly good man, a career soldier, a loyal vassal, is crucial—one that is often 'translated' into modern versions by setting the story amongst gangsters, leaving us with the modern implication that violent men come to violent ends. Yet Macbeth's mounting feelings of guilt over his crimes, and the growing insanity of his wife, seem modern also: Would the gritty warriors of old really have agonised so much over the killing they did on their way to power? No man in the play is free of the charge of killing others, yet there seems to be a fine line drawn between justified 'killing' and 'murder': The distinction between the two being, perhaps, new.[9] His soliloquies offer us insight into the mind of a man tortured by bloodshed, and yet he is the product of a warring and feuding society in which bloodshed is the norm. This contradiction did not exist for the historical Macbeth, of course: It may have been a problem for inhabitants of Tudor and Stuart England and, possibly Europe, where constant warfare over the right to rule had long taken its toll. Macbeth is a particularly English play, however, in that it addresses the issues raised by a new religious culture: What happens when Catholic confession and subsequent absolution are no longer options for sinners? One obvious answer is that guilt becomes even more internalised and a very personal burden. Thus, the story presents audiences with an interesting tension between an old-fashioned method of succession and a 'modern' possibility of externalised guilt.[10]

If we follow this line of argument, Macbeth becomes a text that is deeply rooted in the history of the development of modern European self-consciousness and culpability. How, then, to translate this difficult tale to Japan—a society long assumed to be free of Christian notions of guilt, in which the emphasis is supposed to be on contextual shame, and notions of Shinto pollution (*kegare*). Such a typical Orientalist view has been disputed by anthropologists, such as Lebra (1983), and are also as challenged by *Throne of Blood* itself, through its framing as a Buddhist morality tale.

3. 'Give Sorrow Words' (Macbeth)

While it has been argued that Kurosawa's oeuvre can be read as an expression of his humanism (see especially Richie 1996), the Japanese came to brand Kurosawa as western—not just in influence, but in style and preference for the sorts of stories he turned into screenplays. Several of his films were based on the works of western writers: Gorky, Dostoyevsky, Ed McBain, Dashiell Hammett, as well as Shakespeare.[11] Yet Kurosawa must be seen as a man of his era: Educated both within older Japanese values, and with a broad exposure to western arts, as were most educated Japanese from 1868 until the late 1920s. His stance was part of his early leftist political leanings, and coloured by his father's samurai values (Kurosawa 1982). His film-making style borrowed from the grammar of western films,[12] but created a new visual grammar as well, which was in turn borrowed by western film-makers—a clear example of film's transcultural nature. Moreover, Kurosawa's moral questioning, popular with 1950s Japanese audiences, remained the same even while Japanese film viewers began to prefer less didactic and more upbeat movies in the 1960s. That is, much of Kurosawa's work can be read as social commentary on the horrors that war and a culture of violence inflict on society and its individuals. His films explore what the cost of that violence is; they beg the question of who should

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9   See Martinez (2015) for a discussion of the 'modern' distinction between murder and justified killing.
10 This is an issue with which the comic novelist Pratchett (1989) wrestles in his version of Macbeth, *Wyrd Sisters*.
11 Galbraith's (2001) detailed filmography of the films Kurosawa produced, or for which he wrote screenplays, makes it clear that he dealt more often with Japanese themes and topics than he did with translations of western stories.
12 This covers a broad range, including Soviet (post-WWII) and European films. Kurosawa himself lists about 100 films that initially inspired him (Kurosawa 1982, pp. 773–74), which shows the diversity of his influences.

shoulder responsibility and how; and depict how his protagonists morally respond to human brutality and social corruption.[13]

After most Japanese had begun to be optimistic about their country's future and economic prosperity in the 1970s, and while the popular gangster (*yakuza*) films of that era tended to celebrate Japan's warrior past and values, Kurosawa continued to explore these weightier themes (see Oshima 1992, pp. 26–35). His loss of popularity at home also could be read as pure box office politics: When his films started being too expensive to produce, and did not make money because they dwelt on less popular topics, Kurosawa lost the backing of the Japanese studio system. *Throne of Blood*, however, was made at the height of both his Japanese and western popularity—and yet was not a hit in either place, although it has since been labelled a classic in most western overviews of great film-making.

Throne of Blood is, as Kurosawa himself described, a version of Macbeth, written without any reference to Japanese translations of the play—he sat down with three collaborators (Hashimoto Shinobu, Kikushima Ryūzō, Oguni Hideo) and wrote the script. As with his other Shakespeare adaptation as medieval film, *Ran* (1985), it is set firmly in a feudal Japan where warring clans vie for the mastery of forts rather than kingdoms. Thus, Kurosawa found a transcultural commonality: '[A] parallel between medieval Scotland and medieval Japan which illuminated contemporary society; and further, a pattern which is valid in both historical and contemporary contexts' (Richie 1991).

In *Throne of Blood* we find that the three witches have become one web-spinning prophet (Niniwa Chieko), a Japanese figure that mirrors Greek ideas about the Fates, and Mifune Toshiro plays Washizu, the Macbeth figure. Additionally, to heighten the shared moral issues between the original and his version, Kurosawa choose to stylistically refer to Noh theatre, by having the main actors made up and, in the interior scenes, move as if they were on the Noh stage.[14] Noh, a form of drama with origins in morality tales and largely shaped by Zen Buddhism, relies on the use of masks to depict characters' inner thoughts. Kurosawa's referencing of this theatrical form creates a connection to Shakespeare's very individual characters who invite us into their thoughts through soliloquies.

In Kurosawa's film, the closest we come to knowing Washizu's inner thoughts in spoken dialogue is during an early conversation with his wife, when *she* appears to know what he really wants, telling him that he is lying when he declares himself a loyal vassal.[15] The use of mask-like maquillage and the elaborate costumes, which subtly change throughout the film, are thus important—in Noh they are mean to express internal states of mind. Just as Kurosawa transposes Shakespeare's descriptions of both the growing darkness in the castle and of the fear displayed by animals into unspoken but powerful images on the screen, he also chose to articulate the growing ambition and madness of his characters visually, through the changes in their appearance.

Despite this work possessing such an unusual (even for Japan) mise-en-scène, *Throne of Blood* has been praised as the 'only work . . . that has ever completely succeeded in transforming a play of Shakespeare's into a film' (Blumenthal 1965, p. 190). In fact, it has also been called the most successful translation into a local set of conventions ever achieved with Shakespeare. Prince (1991, p. 143) argues: 'The images that he has created are not cinematic equivalents for the play. They go beyond the source to render the thematic and emotional world of Macbeth through indigenous aesthetic modes'.

Kurosawa himself, on the other hand, had a much more direct interpretation of his film. Donald Richie asked him what he hoped to achieve with his version of Macbeth, and Kurosawa said to him:

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[13] Desser (1992) discussion of narration as a moral act in Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (To Live, 1952), unravels these aspects of the director's work in a powerful manner.

[14] Mifune as Washizu is made up as a typical Hieta (warrior) mask (see: https://nohmask21.com/eu/heita.html), while Isuzu as his wife Asaji, looks like any number of Noh female masks. I would argue that she resembles a Magojirō mask (see: http://www.buddhamuseum.com/magojiro-noh-mask.html), a female character with a male name.

[15] Niki's (1984, pp. 166–67) translation of this discussion from the original screenplay is more accurate than the Criterion Collection DVD edition of *Throne of Blood*. The subtitles read 'I know otherwise' when her husband claims that there is no treachery in his heart. Niki translates the screenplay with: 'You tell a lie'. In the film Asaji clearly says: '*Sora wa uso desu* (that is a lie)'. We might accept all this as evidence that she knows her husband better than he himself does, and allow the varied subtitling.

'I keep saying the same thing over and over again. Why—I ask—is it that human beings cannot get along with each other, why can't they live with each other with more good will? . . . *Throne of Blood*, he added, was to show several of the reasons' (Richie 1996, p. 119). This broader intention requires us to consider the film as something more than a cultural re-interpretation. Rather than seeing the use of Noh as an attempt to translate the story into Japanese, we might ask if the use of Noh conventions signals Kurosawa's attempt to link the story firmly to a theatrical form that shared ethical concepts with the West.[16]

The Greek tragedies, which Macbeth is said to strongly resemble, were religious masked performances: Morality tales about the relationship between the gods, men, and fate. The earliest Noh performances were in Buddhist temples, a way of teaching basic Buddhist ideals to what was still, in early feudal Japan, a largely non-Buddhist population. Many descriptions of the film acknowledge the importance of Buddhist imagery in the story, seeing the sutra-like prologue and epilogue that frame the story as conveying this: '[T]he ruins show the fate of demonic men with treacherous desires. Life is the same now as in ancient times' (Niki 1984, pp. 109, 206). The song the witch Washizu encounters also could be described as Buddhist. She sings, ' . . . what men do in this world, burning ourselves with the flames of five desires, bathing ourselves in the waters of five impurities, piling up our sins more and more . . . ' (Niki 1984, p. 161).[17]

In Buddhism the five desires refer to the sensory experiences of the five senses; the five impurities are wilful desire, hateful anger, sloth, impatience, and obsessive doubt (see Hecker 2009, p. 122). Throughout the film, Washizu embodies all these impurities: He wants to succeed his leader and is impatient to be 'promoted' as the witch promises. He is angered by the thought that he might not be trusted, and increasingly doubts the men around him. Sloth might be seen to be one impurity he does not embody, but it could be argued that he is too indolent to battle against his wife's ill counsel.

Therefore, the impermanence of ambition, and the futility of violence, are endlessly cited as the moral of this tale.[18] While this is not an incorrect reading of what Kurosawa has done with the story, it ties his aim much too firmly to a western interpretation of Japanese tradition. This interpretation ignores the fact that while in Buddhism the self is seen to ephemeral, it has attachments in life that lead to suffering and sin, and thus the self must pay for its iniquities in order to achieve enlightenment. The cobweb castle of the Japanese title points to the illusory nature of desire, but the horrific battle scenes and Washizu's death remind us that such illusions engender powerful experiences. Most importantly, the film's end clearly depicts the punishment of sin—it cannot be shrugged off.

By employing a style of acting that has been described as resembling that of ancient Greek theatre, Kurosawa highlights *Macbeth*'s universality. It is a tale of ambition, murder, and subsequent guilt: Remorse, despair, madness, and nihilism are not just true within a European history, but also within a Japanese post-war setting. Without ever commenting on the western orientalist myth that described Japan as a 'shame not a guilt' culture, Kurosawa, in this film, makes a clear point: Individual Japanese, like individual westerners, struggle and have struggled with the morality of, responsibility, and guilt for their actions in all sorts of contexts from the medieval to the modern era. *Throne of Blood* shares with most of Kurosawa's work a strong main character who suffers and fights against the social expectations of others, although in this case he is not doing this in order to do the right thing. In this sense we can see how Kurosawa's film is a unique, and singular, version of the play, but I would also like to argue that it is a fighting document in another way: As an interpretation it adds a layer of understanding

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[16] Of course, Greek tragedy might well be described as a historically 'Oriental' form of theatre.

[17] Again, this is a more accurate, and in fact a less confusing translation than the current Criterion DVD subtitles for this section of the song: 'Humanity strives all its days to sear its own flesh in the flames of base desire, exposing itself to Fate's Five Calamities, heaping karma upon karma', leading to many an online discussion of what karma upon karma might mean. Other subtitled versions have entirely different words for this song, tending to convey the original Shakespearean sense rather than accurately translating the words and phrases.

[18] Yoshimoto (2000) is also critical of this sort of simplistic interpretation in his massive book on how western critics did not understand Kurosawa's work, but he offers us no alternative explanations for the use of Buddhism.

to the story that 'rings true', and this is through his changes to the Lady Macbeth character, Asaji (Yamada Isuzu).

It could be argued that Asaji is the character most like her counterpart in the Shakespearean play. There is a tradition of demonic and supernaturally powerful women in Japan (Barrett 1989), where, as in Christian society, both Shinto and Buddhism saw women as the weaker sex, who were therefore more prone to sin and pollution than men. By keeping the characters of a witch and an evil wife in the film, Kurosawa points not just to a cultural similarity, but also to the idea that the witches must be understood as representing something very different than the modern western witch, who embodies the possibility of Faustian pacts. Rather, if we see the witches as being sibyls, making predictions that tempt men to evil acts as Shakespeare perhaps did, then both versions of the story present us with the problem of fate. In a Buddhist context our fate cannot be avoided, but it is how we live our lives that matters: Endurance for bad karma, and generosity when life goes well are all matters left to the individual. Macbeth/Washizu might well have done nothing if not encouraged by the women in their lives to act when no action was needed: They were going to be ruler, they needed only wait.

Thus, Kurosawa follows Shakespeare in asking a different question than the sort we normally encounter in Greek drama—not if our fate can be avoided, but what happens when we try to rush fate and twist it to our own ends? As in many of his films, Kurosawa also asks: Can a man used to action and violence ever change? Can he ever have, find, and live in peace? For those unfamiliar with Kurosawa's films even a quick look at his body of work reveals such characters: Hard men, perhaps even broken men, still trying to do the right thing. Most famous, of course, is the leader in the *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no samurai*, 1954), but there is also the doctor in *Drunken Angel* (*Yoidori Tenshi*, 1948), as well as the eponymous hero of *Red Beard* (*Akahige*, 1965), or Lord Ichimonji trying to 'retire' in *Ran* (1985). Even the morally ambiguous hero of *Yōjimbō* (1961) ends by bringing justice to an amoral landscape. Such characters, as Yoshimoto (2000, p. 328) has noted, frequently have an opponent who could be their doppelgänger—the man who embraces violence. *Throne of Blood* is an exploration of the moral consequences of such a choice.

The film asks, then, what is the moral toll of having been taught to kill in the name of the king/clan/emperor? Moreover, what sort of women inhabit the dark world of war and ambition? Both might be seen as post-Second World War questions. When Washizu says to Asaji 'I'd rather live peacefully, content with my lot', she replies: 'You won't have that peace', and goes on to describe the violent nature of their society: 'In this world, struggling for fame and distinction, parents kill their children and children kill their parents. This is a corrupt age when we must kill others to avoid being killed'[19] (Niki 1984, p. 167). This is the society that has shaped Asaji: She looks and moves in accordance to Noh principles even more strictly than any other character save the witch and clearly symbolizing how she is a woman bound by strict social conventions (Richie 1996, p. 117).

Unlike Shakespeare who leaves us with the mystery[20] of a barren woman asking to be 'unsexed' so that she might kill like a man—a woman who has known what having a child is like, but seems to have none in the story, and would sacrifice her future unborn children to her husband's dark ambition—Kurosawa makes Asaji a complete woman. She is ambitious not just for her husband, but for their unborn child, and would do anything to ensure the child's future as a ruler—Asaji schemes not just for herself, but for others. She is evil in her choice of means to achieve her ends, but she is a mother prepared to do anything for her child, who appears to have no place in the prophecy: It is Miki/Banquo's (Kubo Akira) children who are supposed to rule after Washizu. While her husband is

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[19]　The filmed version compresses this speech.

[20]　Whether this would have been such a mystery to Shakespeare's contemporaries is another question: Stuart readers of Hollingshead's *Chronicles of Scotland* (Carroll 1999), upon which the play is also partially based, would have known that Lady Macbeth was older than the historical Macbeth and had a child by a previous marriage. After his death, there was an attempt to put Macbeth's stepson on the throne.

tempted into hurrying fate, Asaji is fighting to defy it (all for their child), and the knowledge of her pregnancy also hardens Washizu's resolve—what he does is no longer for his own ambitions alone.

This difference between Lady Macbeth and Lady Asaji seems to serve as an answer to the question: Why does Lady Macbeth go mad? She seems to have no conscience, so how can she be struck down by guilt? Kurosawa gives us a believable answer: Asaji stakes all on what Washizu will do for their unborn child; when the child is born prematurely and dies, she cannot bear life. The death of her child can be seen as a punishment for her actions. This is, understandable, within a Buddhist context: Asaji pays for her sins, not only with the baby's death but with her own. In a medieval society, where a woman could be only wife and mother, there is nothing left for her. Asaji is more understandable, then, than Lady Macbeth appears to be—her end makes clear sense without the need of tortured interpretations which struggle to come to terms with such evil in a woman. Asaji is in a sense every woman: Frightening in her ambitions for her child.

The existence of this baby gives Kurosawa's version of the story an added, and in this case also a Buddhist, dimension. With its death, the couple leave no heirs, no one to pray for them in their afterlife, no one to make merit for their sins, thus ensuring that they will be reincarnated or finally reach Nirvana. The death of the baby condemns them to hell (for Buddhism has hells upon hells), or a wandering afterlife as hungry ghosts. This is hinted at by the film's opening scene in which the mists part to reveal a stupa (used in Japan as grave-markers), marking not Washizu's grave, but just noting that Kumonosu castle once stood there—the couple are forgotten. Yet as Japanese as this interpretation is, it continues to resonate with something of the Protestantism of Shakespeare's age—where the burden of sin was inescapable.

4. Towards a Conclusion: 'Life Is . . . a Tale' (Macbeth)

To conclude that Shakespeare transcends time and culture would be to end with a cliché that tells us nothing new. Instead we should ask: What do we learn by looking at Kurosawa's deterritorialization and re-assemblage of Shakespeare's play? Kurosawa was not the first director to understand that some of Shakespeare's language, so descriptive, could work best as the visual element in a film. His version contrasts scenes of mist with sharply-focused, bloody battles, bright sunlight with dark interiors. While there is no discussion of 'in thunder, lightning, or in rain',[21] Wasaji and Miki ride through all three before meeting the witch; and night seems to dwell within the castle, turning Asaji, dressed in a luminous white kimono, into a ghost-like figure even before her suicide. In short, there is no need to set a camera up and have people describe their surroundings, when that can be done so much more easily on film than on stage.

As part of his auterial vision, Kurosawa might be said to have pushed his version beyond the bounds generally expected; by dropping the monologues, the expression of the characters' inner emotions, he pushed at the cultural and historical boundaries of what Shakespeare had tried to portray to comment not just on medieval Japan's culture of violence, but also on that of the Japanese Empire (1868–1947). The body of Kurosawa's post-war work speaks to his interest in the problems of corruption, violent action, and the question of how to act morally. This makes even more interesting his addition of Lady Macbeth's pregnancy—as for the Japanese, as with all Buddhists, descendants are important: Without them there is no one to pray for their dead souls to rest in peace, or have a good rebirth. Yet, for the Tudors and Stuarts, being barren was also an issue, and this was a topic that had haunted the English monarchy for decades.

Deleuze and Guattari (1986) argue that an author's re-assemblage allows for the possibility of a text to become both political and something new. The 'new' can result from recasting the story in a new context, as well as from the interpretative relationship that the audience has with the medium.

21　See Nishimura's (1990) book for an insightful and technically detailed discussion of Kurosawa's use of both sound and light in his films.

For the political message we need to consider the auteur's vision as part of this process. In *Throne of Blood*, almost perversely through the use of Noh conventions, Kurosawa wanted to invoke not just the power of theatre as ritual, but to make the audience think about limitations: The closed and artificial conventions of a constantly warring society. A man bred to war is shaped by his past, to try and break the mould, as Kurosawa also shows in *Ran*, is nearly impossible in the 'theatre of violence' that was both samurai society and the Japanese Empire. This is yet another example of his critical view of the modern Japanese reverence for the 'way of the samurai' (*bushido*), and the popular depictions of the yakuza as a contemporary embodiment of this 'way'. While seen as a great master of samurai, or period, drama (*jidai gekei*), serious analysis of his films in this genre reveal his stance. The husband in *Rashomon* is a coward; the bandits in *Seven Samurai* were once samurai; the yakuza in *Yojimbo* are all grotesque; *Sanjuro* (1962) is about a sustained effort at resolving problems peacefully; and *Kagemusha* is about the futility of war (1980).

Thus, Kurosawa's version of Macbeth is both true to Shakespeare, who was reflecting on the violence that had framed royal succession over centuries in England and Scotland and, yet, it is something else as well—unlike Shakespeare, as Richie (1996) notes, there is no possibility of a happy ending, there is no Macduff to come and set things right. As Goodwin (1994) points out, the shots of the destroyed castle, framing the film at the beginning and end, and the use of wide empty spaces tell us something about the insignificance and danger, in Buddhist terms, of ambition. In his version, Kurosawa seems to well illustrate what Michael Billington (2002, p. 4) noted of Calixto Bieito's staging of the play: 'Shakespeare in translation offers both loss and liberation: What you get is an analogue to the original that allows the director to search out the play's metaphorical meaning'.

Despite the fact that *Throne of Blood* gave raise to various critical reactions (from being called an 'awful' version of Shakespeare to 'the best'), and apparently offers opportunities for western over-interpretation, orientalising the significance of the film so that it would appear to be beyond western comprehension, essentially Kurosawa's version of Macbeth is about how Shakespeare should look and feel, not just about how he should 'sound'. Kurosawa understood that in a film version of Shakespeare, the language of the camera becomes another possible mode of interpretation—another mode of understanding, and another way of exploring the consequences of violent action. His use of Noh is a clear clue to the importance of the visual for understanding his meaning, but it is almost too personal an interpretation: It remains difficult for many viewers, including Japanese audiences. Yet, the film's powerful images never fail to impress and tend to remain embedded in viewers' minds: Washizu pierced by endless arrows is now a famous transcultural image, recreated in myriad ways in other movies. Kurosawa's version of Macbeth, then, is not just about sound and fury signifying nothing, but about sight and sound and fury, signifying something new.

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