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FILM STUDY EXTRACT
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THE THRONE OF BLOOD

FIRST MEETING WITH THE SPIRIT

NOTES AND ANALYSIS

THE THRONE OF BLOOD
(Japan, 1961)

FIRST MEETING WITH THE SPIRIT
13 min.

NOTES AND ANALYSIS
by Marilyn Fabe

CREDITS

Director Akira Kurosawa
Screenplay Shinobu Hashimoto, Ryuzo Kikushima,
Hideo Oguni and Akira Kurosawa,
based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*
Photography Asakazu Nakai
Music Masaru Sato

CAST

Washizu Toshiro Mifune
Miki Minoru Chiaki
Spirit Chieko Naniwa

Project Director: Willard W. Morrison
Editorial Consultant: Marilyn Fabe

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THE THRONE OF BLOOD

Plot Synopsis

On a barren, fog-enshrouded landscape lie the ruins of a once great castle. A chorus chants the moral of the tale: "ambition destroys." Through a transitional dissolve, the castle of the past emerges out of the mist and the story proper begins — a loose adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* set in medieval Japan.

The Lord of Forest Castle is informed that two of his generals, Washizu (Toshiro Mifune) and Miki (Minoru Chiaki), have successfully repulsed a rebellion led by Innui, the Lord's enemy. Overjoyed, the great feudal lord summons his loyal vassals to the castle so that he may reward them for their valor.

As Washizu and Miki attempt to reach the castle through the labyrinthine woods surrounding it, they encounter an unearthly being. This mysterious spirit prophesies that Washizu will advance from his present command of Fort One to become master of North Castle, and that one day he will be Lord of Forest Castle itself. Miki, in turn, will succeed his friend to the command of Fort One, while Miki's son will eventually succeed Washizu as ruler of Forest Castle. The comrades joke about the prophecy, but later that day the first part comes true — the Lord of Forest Castle rewards each of them with the very titles promised by the spirit.

Washizu's wife (Isuzu Yamada) does not allow her husband to rest content with his promotion. She convinces him that his life is in danger — that Miki will confide the spirit's strange prophecy to the Lord, who will then have Washizu killed as a potential traitor. His only recourse, she insists, is to kill the Lord before the Lord kills him. When the Lord selects North Castle as his command post from which to launch a counterattack against Innui, Washizu's wife persuades her husband to act. She drugs the Lord's guards, and Washizu murders his sovereign.

With Miki's support, Washizu becomes Lord of Forest Castle, fulfilling the second part of the prophecy. When his wife becomes pregnant, however, he determines to forestall the com-

pletion of the prophecy — that Miki's son (rather than his own issue) shall reign after him. He hires assassins to murder Miki and his son, but the boy escapes. As time passes, Washizu's rule becomes more and more oppressive. Obsessed by fears that his generals are conspiring against him, he forces many to commit suicide, leaving himself increasingly isolated and insecure. Alarmed by the news that Miki's son has joined forces with Innui to take Forest Castle, Washizu returns to the forest to question the spirit. The spirit assures him that he cannot lose a battle until the forest moves.

His warriors are rallied by the good news, but Washizu's misfortunes multiply. His wife goes mad when her child is born dead, and, at the same time, Miki's son lays siege to the castle. When the forest begins to move toward the castle, Washizu's terrified supporters turn against him and kill him with their arrows. Miki's son, who has ordered his men to use trees as camouflage in their attack, victoriously approaches the castle.

The film ends as it began; the chorus chants its fateful theme over the barren landscape where Forest Castle once stood.

THE EXTRACT

Plot Synopsis of the Extract

On their way to the castle of their feudal lord, in the midst of a raging storm, Washizu and Miki become lost in the labyrinthine forest that surrounds the ruler's castle. Deep in the forest they encounter a mysterious hut occupied by a forest spirit (Chieko Naniwa). The spirit prophesies that Washizu will become Lord of Forest Castle and that Miki's son will reign after him. The strange figure and the hut disappear, leaving Miki and Washizu to contemplate huge mounds of skeleton warriors. The two ride off into the fog.

ANALYSIS OF FILM ELEMENTS IN THE EXTRACT

IMAGERY

Although Kurosawa uses not one word of Shakespeare's text, many film critics rate *THE THRONE OF BLOOD* as the finest interpretation of a Shakespeare play ever attempted on film. It can be argued that the adaptation is successful precisely because Kurosawa does not try to approximate the beauty and complexity of Shakespeare's language. Most adaptations of Shakespeare for film are disappointing because they merely provide interesting pictures as an accompaniment to the poetry, or devise visual equivalents of Shakespeare's verbal descriptions. Hence, the images are in service of the words with no independent life of their own. Although Kurosawa occasionally provides brilliant visualizations of Shakespeare's verbal images, he does much more than this: he invents visual images sufficiently rich in symbolic meaning to give independent expression to the themes and motifs communicated through Shakespeare's poetry.

The Forest

The forest in the extract is such an image — a symbolic landscape that embodies the complex network of themes and motifs of Shakespeare's play.¹ The forest is Kurosawa's invention; it has no equivalent in the play. Macbeth and Banquo encounter three witches on a heath, a barren expanse of uncultivated land. Birnam Wood appears at the end of the play and is then only vaguely described.

What purpose does the forest serve in *THE THRONE OF BLOOD*? The mysterious forest with its twisted trees and labyrinthine paths makes a striking visual symbol for Washizu's mind. In myth and legend, a journey into a dark wood is often a journey into the hitherto unexplored regions of the inner self. In this dark wood, Washizu meets a spirit that tells him he will be ruler of Forest Castle, bringing him, as we shall see, face to

face with his unconscious desire. Here Kurosawa is following Shakespeare, who indicates that the prophecy brings to the surface an idea already lodged in Macbeth's mind. Macbeth's reaction to the prophecy is suspiciously violent, as evidenced by Banquo's question: "Why do you start and seem to fear/ Things that do sound fair?" Here and later in his soliloquies, Macbeth seems to assume that to become king he must murder Duncan, an assumption that would not occur to an untainted mind.

In the extract Washizu reacts to the spirit's prophecy that he will become Lord of Forest Castle with a furious denial: "Enough! That is his Lordship's!" The spirit knowingly replies: "Are you angered by this prophecy? Would you not want to be the ruler of the forest? . . . You humans, never will I comprehend you. You are afraid of your desires. You try to hide them." Later in the film, when Washizu tells Miki that the encounter with the spirit and the strange prophecy were like a dream, Miki replies, "We dream of what we wish."

That the forest is a symbol of Washizu's mind is suggested when Washizu, striving to break the "evil spell" that he believes holds him prisoner, furiously shoots an arrow into the trees. The echoing laughter that greets his gesture mocks his self-ignorance. He does not know that the martial means by which he vanquishes his external human foes cannot help him against the power of the forest, because the spell that holds him captive is not external but internal — he is threatened by his own unconscious desires.

Washizu's entrapment in the forest takes on further symbolic meaning if we consider the Japanese title of the film, *THE CASTLE OF THE SPIDER WEB* (Kumonosu-Djo). The title refers to the castle's situation at the center of a labyrinthine forest, a web of wood intended to ensnare enemies of the feudal lord. That Washizu, ostensibly a loyal vassal of the Lord, is trapped in the wood associatively defines him as an enemy, which he will later prove to be. The forest is often photographed in such a way to emphasize visually the entrapment of the two men in a web of wood (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The Storm

Like *Macbeth* and Banquo, Washizu and Miki are first seen in the context of aberrant occurrences in nature. Amidst the thunder and lightning of the storm, rays of sun stream down through dense fog and rain — Kurosawa's visual realization of Shakespeare's "fair and foul" (Fig. 2). Here we see Washizu's conflict externalized: the fairness that still survives in his nature struggles to penetrate the foulness that threatens to engulf him. The fury of the storm suggests that Washizu is leaning toward the evil impulses in his nature. In *THE THRONE OF BLOOD*, as in *Macbeth*, nature is sensitive to moral transgressions in man. Hence the natural chaos of the storm portends the moral chaos that will soon follow.

The Fog

In *Macbeth* fog is a minor image associated briefly with the witches who "hover through the fog and filthy air" in the first scene. In *THE THRONE OF BLOOD* fog is a major motif, especially prominent at the beginning and at the end of the film. In the extract, after the spirit disappears, fog gradually rises until it almost totally obscures the image. Next Washizu and Miki are seen on horseback, first emerging from the fog, and then disappearing back into it. In the portion of the film that immediately follows the extract, the two warriors are seen galloping in and out of the fog twelve times, increasingly confounded by their failure to reach Forest Castle.

In his study of *THE THRONE OF BLOOD*, Roger Manvell writes that in Japanese and Chinese painting, fog typically symbolizes what is hidden and mysterious.² Washizu's engulfment by the fog suggests visually that, as a result of the spirit's prophecy, he is succumbing to his hidden desires. The physical murkiness of the fog enshrouded landscape is another fitting visual image for the moral murkiness of Washizu's soul.



Fig. 3

The Forest Spirit

Kurosawa extends the metaphor of the forest as a spiderweb by depicting the forest spirit as a spiderlike creature working at a spinning wheel; the prophecies she spins ensnare Washizu into a web of thought and action that lead to his destruction. The delicate, airy construction of the hut visually suggests a spiderweb (Fig. 3), and Miki and Washizu knock it down as if it were in fact made of cobwebs.

The material insubstantiality of the spirit's hut visually emphasizes that Washizu is entrapped mentally, not physically, by the spirit. Just as the fog symbolizes the *hidden* nature of his ambitions, i.e., they are obscured even from him, so the spirit symbolizes his illicit desires as they suddenly, though briefly and frighteningly, become visible and audible. So incensed and frightened is Washizu by the prophecy that he pulls back his bow, threatening to kill the spirit. Once more he vainly seeks to overcome by physical violence powers over which he has no external control, his repressed or unconscious wishes.

Images from the Noh

Kurosawa incorporates into his vision of the *Macbeth* drama certain images that derive from the Noh tradition. The Noh, a highly stylized form of Japanese theater dating back to the 14th century, is played in mask and accompanied by song and dance.

The forest spirit who foretells the future at a spinning wheel is from the Noh tradition; its makeup is inspired by the ghost mask of the Noh, and its low unintonated voice closely resembles the disembodied voice of the Noh actor. The spirit's reed hut would be recognizable to the Japanese theater-going audience as a Noh property.³

The other character in the film who derives from the Noh (she does not appear in the extract) is Asaji, Washizu's wife. Her face is made up to suggest the Noh mask of a beauty no longer young, and her heel-to-toe movement is in the manner of the Noh actor. When she goes mad, her handwashing ritual is performed in the classic Noh style.

We might ask why Kurosawa associated the two most evil forces in the film (or the characters who voice the evil in Washizu's heart) with characters from the Noh. According to Donald Richie, Kurosawa understands the lust for power, encouraged in Washizu by the strange forest being and by his wife, as a compulsion that ultimately limits and constricts the human spirit.⁴ It is fitting, then, that characters who support this urge should be borrowed from the completely enclosed and ritualized world of the Noh. Richie writes: "It is the limitations of character that interested Kurosawa in this picture; the Noh offered the clearest visual indication of these limitations."⁵

PHOTOGRAPHY

Kurosawa creates meaning and mood in *THE THRONE OF BLOOD* not only through images that carry symbolic weight but also through the purely graphic means of composition and lighting.

Composition as Expression of Theme

In *THE THRONE OF BLOOD* we are given a rigidly determined world where man is doomed to relive his mistakes. The film begins with a chorus mournfully intoning the fateful moral of the tale: "For what once was is now yet true/ Murderous ambition will pursue." The end of the film is identical with the beginning. As the chorus reiterates the same moral we almost expect the story to begin again and the characters to reenact the same destinies. Richie has described *THE THRONE OF BLOOD* as "a finished film with no loose ends. The characters have no future. Cause and effect is the only law. Freedom does not exist."⁶

Kurosawa conveys the feeling of a determined universe through the tight composition of the film's images. Every shot in the extract gives evidence of Kurosawa's efforts to maintain a balance and symmetry within the frame. In an interview, Kurosawa relates that he gave "strict directions about the poses of the characters . . . if the actors moved into an incorrect position, the balance of the picture was broken. If a single shoulder went out of frame, everything was ruined."⁷ The effect of this tight framing is opposite to that of a Renoir film, in which the images are composed with a deliberate casualness, life continually spilling over the edges of the frame. (See the discussion of photography in the *Notes and Analysis* on *THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE*). Just as Kurosawa's characters are imprisoned in destructive patterns of behavior, so they are fixed into formal elements of composition within the frame.

Balance and symmetry of image are especially evident in the scenes involving the forest spirit. Washizu and Miki first see the spirit's hut bisected by a massive tree; they stand in the foreground, one on each side of it (Fig. 4). Thereafter, the spirit appears either alone in the center of the frame or formally framed by Washizu and Miki (Fig. 5). Here the extreme tightness of composition is a graphic metaphor for the control that Washizu's ambition, aroused by the spirit's words, will impose on his moral freedom.

Composition of the Image to Distance the Viewer from Washizu

In *THE THRONE OF BLOOD* Kurosawa seldom uses close-ups. In an interview he relates that he “tried to do everything using full-shots. Japanese almost never make films this way and I remember I confused my staff thoroughly with my instructions. They were so used to moving up for moments of emotion and I kept telling them to move back.”⁸ The close-up usually increases our empathy with a character; the longer shot tends to distance us from the subject emotionally as well as spatially. Most of the time Kurosawa keeps his camera back from Washizu, encouraging the viewer to watch the character’s rise and fall dispassionately.

But there is one close-up in the extract; it records Washizu’s reaction to his first sight of the forest spirit. He lunges toward the spirit (toward the camera), his face contorted with fear and fury (Fig. 6). This magnified view of the ugliness of Washizu’s nature encourages us to feel revulsion rather than pity for him.

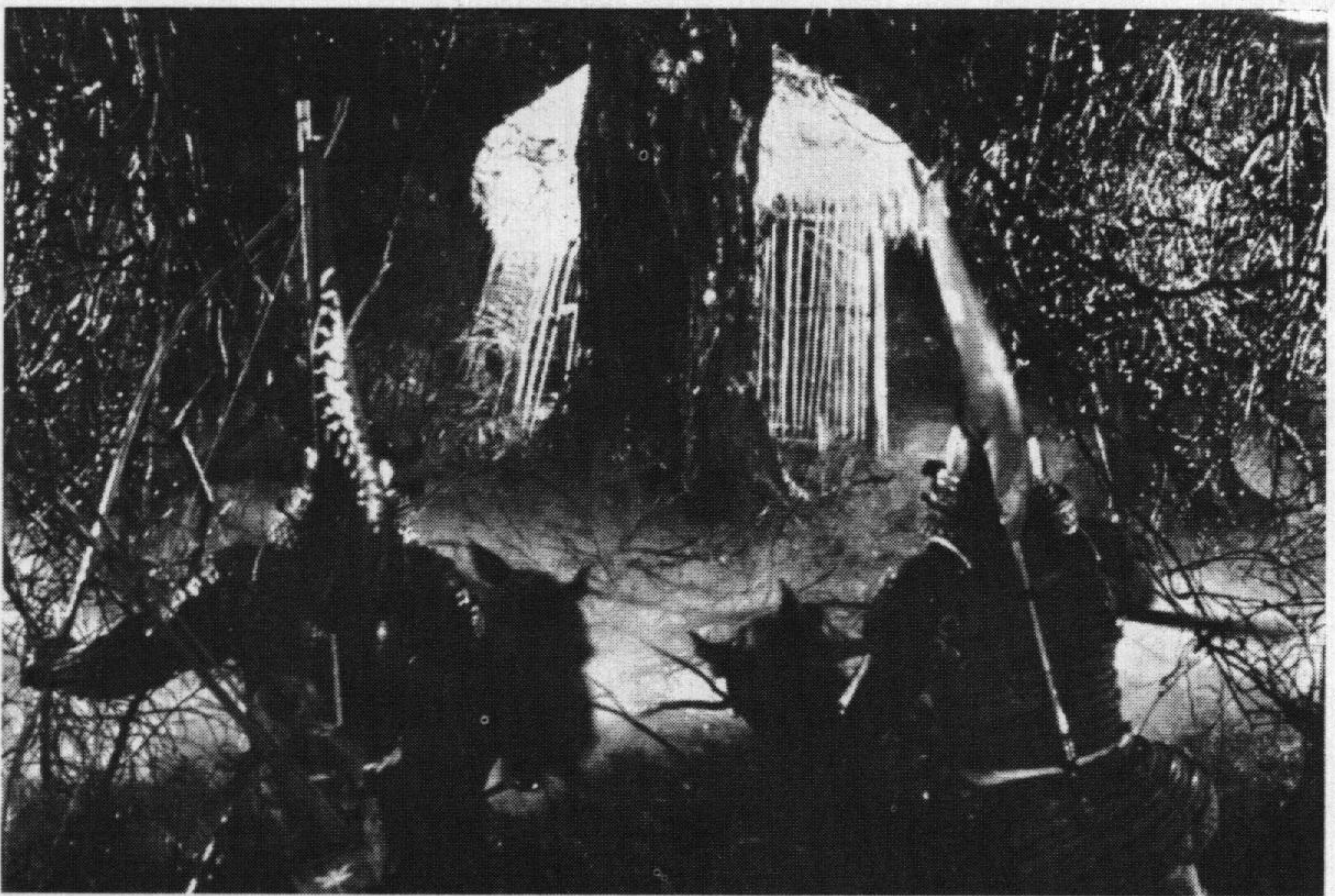


Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Composition of the Image to Suggest Washizu's Dominance

Although Washizu and Miki share the same experiences — they are lost in the woods together and they hear the same potentially corrupting prophecies — **THE THRONE OF BLOOD** is Washizu's film, the horror and bloodshed to follow, his responsibility. We know this because Washizu dominates the screen — not only by virtue of Mifune's (the actor's) emotionally expressive face, but also by virtue of his position within the frame. Washizu is almost always on the right or "heavier" side of the frame. Moreover, in most shots Washizu dominates the frame by physically blocking Miki from view or by appearing in the foreground of the shot, with Miki, diminished in size, in the background. Washizu also compels our attention by his movements; it is he who initiates every action — galloping into the forest, or approaching the forest spirit.

Lighting: The High Contrast Between Light and Dark Images

Richie has said of **THE THRONE OF BLOOD**: "There has rarely been a blacker and a whiter black and white film."⁹ The rigid composition of the images is underscored by the high contrasts between light and dark. Especially notable is the strange white haze or glow that surrounds the spirit and its hut in contrast to the darkness of the forest (Figs. 4 and 5). Whiteness in this film is associated not with benign forces, but with threatening elements — the fearsome white lightning that punctuates the darkness of the forest; the evil spirit bathed in a pool of light; the treacherous fog; the bleached bones of the skeleton warriors; and, later in the film, with Asaji, Washizu's evil wife, with her chalk white face and white garments. An uncanny aura of evil emanates from the heightened whiteness of these images.

Camera Movement to Involve the Audience in the Action

As Washizu and Miki plunge through the forest, the camera tracks and pans with them to compel our participation in the action. We experience their exhilaration in headlong movement, as well as their frustration when they stop short to find themselves back where they began.

Camera Movement to Create a Mysterious Atmosphere

When Washizu and Miki first peer around the massive tree to observe the spirit, the camera approaches the strange being while the men dare not. Their hanging back as the camera moves forward emphasizes the warriors' fear of the apparition.

Immediately after the spirit's disappearance, the camera follows the two men as they boldly enter the hut, knock down its far wall, and continue into the forest. At this point they turn around, astonished. The camera pulls back to reveal that all traces of the hut have vanished. By accomplishing the disappearance of the hut in one shot, maintaining the spatial and temporal unity of the incident, Kurosawa heightens the uncanny effect of the hut's disappearance.

Washizu and Miki then find themselves surrounded by mounds of skeletons. As the camera angles down and tracks past the strange assemblage of bones, we see that the skeletons were once warriors; many are helmeted still and holding spears. The slow tracking shot across the bones in combination with the eerie music on the soundtrack adds an aura of mystery and weirdness to the scene.

SOUND

Kurosawa's blend of actual and commentative sound invests the visuals with a strange and frightening preternatural quality. Actual sound can be defined as sound whose source is visible on the screen or implied to be present by the action of the film. The actual sounds in the extract include the dialogue between Miki and Washizu, the noises of the storm, and the hoofbeats of the horses. The echoing laughter of the forest may also be considered actual sound if we believe that the forest is literally bewitched. If, however, we believe that the laughter exists only in Washizu's imagination, the sound is commentative. Commentative sound is sound whose source is neither visible on the screen nor implicit in the action: it is artificially added for dramatic effect. The occasional background music in the extract is commentative.¹⁰

Actual Sound

The actual sound in the extract is emotionally evocative as well as realistic. Thunder, for example, can be expected to occur during a storm, but Kurosawa's thunderclaps punctuate the action in a particularly malevolent and frightening manner. The terrified neighing of the horses openly expresses the hysteria hidden beneath Washizu's and Miki's nervous laughter. The clatter of the horses' hooves, too, is made to serve for emotional effect. Even when Washizu and Miki are seen riding through the forest in long shot, the beat of their galloping remains loud on the soundtrack. This combination of long shot and sound close-up intensifies our sense of their confusion and desperation. The image of the two warriors plunging through the forest shooting arrows into the void, in combination with the disturbing noises on the soundtrack — the claps of thunder, the invisible demonic laughter, the amplified hoofbeats — create the impression that man and nature both are running out of control.

The spirit's unearthly hermaphroditic appearance is enhanced by its low-pitched electronically distorted chant. Other strange voices occasionally blend harmonically with the spirit's voice, understandably unsettling Miki and Washizu who see before them only a single figure. The silence also functions expressively in this sequence. In contrast to the tumult of the first part of the extract, the second part seems unnaturally quiet. Yet the oasis of silence in which the spirit resides is uncannily more frightening than the loud commotion of the storm.

Commentative Sound

Kurosawa uses background music in a manner so subtle that one is hardly aware of its presence. This is partly because Kurosawa uses musical instruments to imitate actual sounds; hence the music seems to emerge naturally from the images on the screen. The high-pitched flute notes at the beginning of the extract, for example, might easily be the cry of a strange bird; the driving music that accompanies the desperate gallops through the forest seems to arise from the horses' beating hooves; the violin and harp music played during the spirit's prophecies seems to emanate from the spinning wheel as it turns; and the strange music in the background as Washizu and Miki wander past the mounds of bones seems to issue from the bones themselves.

EDITING

The power of *THE THRONE OF BLOOD* lies primarily in the beauty and suggestiveness of Kurosawa's images rather than in his arrangement or juxtaposition of the images through editing. The editing mainly serves to present the narrative in a clear, straightforward manner. (Compare the extract from *MOTHER* or *THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN* in which many of the effects derive from the juxtaposition of images). Occasionally, however, Kurosawa uses an unusual editing technique for particular dramatic emphasis. For example, several shots of rather long duration of the men galloping off into the forest are followed by a series of brief tracking shots in which the warriors, in medium shot, alternately appear in the center of the frame. Almost imperceptibly, Miki seems to replace Washizu, and Washizu, Miki. The rapid cutting on movement makes it appear as if the two men were magically merged into one, emphasizing their single-minded determination to escape the forest.

Near the end of the extract the camera lingers on a mound of bones embedded with skulls. As the fog begins to obscure the image, the shot dissolves into a fog-obscured landscape. Gradually, we perceive Washizu and Miki emerge on horseback from the far background. Here Kurosawa creates the illusion that the skulls have dissolved into the image of Washizu and Miki, ominously suggesting that the imprint of death has been indelibly stamped on the destiny of the two warriors.

Finally, as the result of an editing technique and a laboratory process (that bleaches out the image), the spirit does not suddenly disappear from the sight of the warriors, but appears to merge with the fog and blow away.

APPENDIX

Footnotes

1. I am indebted to J. Blumenthal's article, " 'Macbeth' into 'Throne of Blood,' " *Sight and Sound*, British Film Institute, Spring 1965, for some of the remarks that follow.
2. Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film* (Praeger: New York, 1971), p. 105.
3. Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1970), pp. 117-118.
4. Richie, p. 117.
5. Richie, p. 117.
6. Richie, p. 115.
7. Manvell, p. 104.
8. Richie, p. 121.
9. Richie, p. 120.
10. These definitions appear in Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar's *The Technique of Film Editing* (New York: Hastings House, 1972), pp. 397, 398.

Suggested Extracts for Comparison

The extracts from THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI, THE LAST LAUGH, M, ECLIPSE and 8½ (especially *The Saraghina Sequence*) provide additional (and diverse) examples of the use of symbolic imagery to externalize a state of mind. The extracts from THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN and MOTHER offer examples of an editing style that contrasts significantly with Kurosawa's. Finally, the composition of image in the extract from THE CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE contrasts diametrically with Kurosawa's style as exemplified in the extract from THE THRONE OF BLOOD.

Recommended Readings

Donald Richie's *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1970) contains in-depth studies of Kurosawa's films through RED BEARD (1965) and includes a selective bibliography. The chapter on THE THRONE OF BLOOD discusses Kurosawa's interpretation of the film, compares and contrasts the film with *Macbeth*, and offers detailed information on the film's set designs and production. Richie also discusses Kurosawa's use of the Noh.

The chapter on THE THRONE OF BLOOD in Roger Manvell's *Shakespeare and the Film* (Praeger: New York, 1971) focuses primarily on the use of elements from the Noh in the film. It includes a commentary by Michizo Toida, an authority on the Noh, and an interview with Kurosawa. The chapter ends with a detailed outline of the film.

An outstanding article which discusses THE THRONE OF BLOOD as a cinematically independent adaptation of *Macbeth* is J. Blumenthal's " 'Macbeth' into 'Throne of Blood' " in *Sight and Sound*, Spring, 1965. The article has been anthologized in *Film and the Liberal Arts* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York, 1970), pp. 122-135.

The chapter entitled "On the Structural Use of Sound" in Noël Burch's *Theory of Film Practice* (Praeger: New York, 1973) discusses the interaction between sound effects and music in Japanese films. Burch does not specifically discuss THE THRONE OF BLOOD, but his comments on other Japanese films are pertinent to it.

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