



In Nature We Trust: Reading the Atmospheric of *Throne of Blood*

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Abstract— Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* has firmly established its place as one of the finest adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Enthralling cinema enthusiasts since its release in 1957, this cinematic adaptation has been extensively analyzed and reviewed. The paper titled "In Nature We Trust: Reading the Atmospheric of *Throne of Blood*" attempts to read the ways in which Nature warns man of unchecked and reckless ambition. Artistic originality notwithstanding, *Throne of Blood* is a testament to aesthetic cinematography. The paper traces the symbolic and stark appearances of birds, beasts and bois. Nature in *Throne of Blood* is dark, eerie and mysterious. Yet, it never fails to warn man of his flaws. The paper will attempt to read the many chances Nature offers Washizu for reflection and redemption in his all-consuming desire for power that ultimately destroys him. The paper seeks to highlight that Nature in this cinematic adaptation is not just a backdrop or a symbolic force but it tries and falls short of being the guardian spirit of man.



Keywords— Nature, Symbolism, Adaptation, Shakespeare, Kurosawa

Widely recognized as one of the most compelling adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Akira Kurosawa's cinematic tour-de-force *Throne of Blood* (1957) has been extensively analyzed and critiqued over the years. This paper attempts to read the ways in which Nature warns man of unchecked and reckless ambition. It attempts to delineate the many chances Nature offers the protagonist Washizu for reflection and redemption in his destructive desire for power. The paper argues that Nature not only functions as a backdrop or a symbolic force in the adaptation but also acts as an elemental spirit which tries, albeit in vain, to preserve humanity. Employing a theoretical framework of eco-criticism and adaptation studies, the paper tries to trace the symbolic and stark appearances of birds, beasts and bois interspersed in the narrative that warn man of his recklessness and descent towards doom.

Kurosawa does not make a straightforward adaptation of *Macbeth*, but rather relocates the story to feudal Japan, jettisoning the language and major plot points entirely. The broad strokes and themes are still there and so are many of

the major characters (Macbeth has become Washizu, Lady Macbeth has become Lady Asaji, and Banquo has become Miki, for example), but there are significant deviations from the source material outside of the linguistics or temporal changes like the presence of the chorus, replacing the three witches by a single forest spirit, the absence of MacDuff, etc. The atmospheric use of natural elements in *Throne of Blood* is a marked departure from *Macbeth*. The forest and the weather are the twin forces that put the film's themes of fate, human ambition, and the impermanence of existence into perspective. The most important natural setting in the film is the Spider's Web Forest, the site where Washizu and Miki meet the Forest Spirit. The fog and wind are a recurrent trope throughout the film underscoring existential uncertainty and raw elemental power.

The film opens with a barren landscape with dense fog covering the entire screen; a visually blinding landscape that is prophetic of the moral blindness of the characters. A ritualistic chant on the dangers of "all-consuming desire...never changing, now and until eternity" wafts

through the foggy nothingness even as a memorial column with “Here Stood Spider’s Web Castle” etched on it slowly appears *mise-en-scene*. Then, the fog momentarily lifts and Spider’s Web Castle comes in to full view. This technique of foreshadowing that the film employs is simultaneously dream-like and clinically precise. The film’s ending with exactly the same frame contributes to emphasizing the cyclicity of Nature and unchanging cosmic order.

Washizu Taketoki and Miki Yoshiaki, the garrison commanders of the Lord of Spider’s Web Castle, have just defeated the enemy forces of the treacherous commander Fujiyaki who had joined hands with the Lord Tsuzuki’s sworn enemy Inui. With war messengers hailing Washizu’s bravery on the battlefield, the Lord and other attendants breathe a sigh of relief. The victorious commanders, however, have lost their bearings trying to navigate through the infamous Spider’s Web Forest. The forest exudes an eeriness that accentuates its labyrinthine structure. Washizu and Miki seem to be going in circles for hours together as if entangled in a web. The forest, a symbol of their entrapment, along with inclement weather creates a veil of mystery and unease around the characters. Washizu senses the presence of the witch in the forest, “There’s evil afoot”. They stumble upon a ‘hovel’ in the forest where an ancient forest spirit with a spinning wheel, talks of how men’s lives are “destined to sear its flesh in the fire of desire”. The spinning wheel is symbolic of the vicious circle of suffering and meaninglessness of life. The prophecies of the forest spirit *in lieu* of the three witches of Macbeth are also significantly altered in the adaptation. For example, the prophesy does not mention anything about “one borne of a woman”. This is necessary because there is no character that plays McDuff in the adaptation. Donald Richie writes, “[T]he idea of a trio of malevolent witches is far from the Japanese imagination. The witch, the warlock, are really priests, embodiments of a nature which is neither good nor evil. They are diviners and fortune-tellers who attempt to pierce the future but the gratuitous evil of Shakespeare’s witches is impossible” (117).

The spirit’s prophecy that Washizu, presently commander of the First Fortress, would become the Lord of the North Garrison from this day and the Sovereign of the Spider’s Web Castle soon is closely linked to her environment, suggesting that the character’s destiny is woven into the fabric of the natural world. The relentless power of evil in shaping man’s fate is revealed by the piles of human bones near the witch’s hovel. Kurosawa frames these heaps of decomposing people even after the horrified Washizu and Miki walk away, as a resonating reminder that humans are unidentifiable in death, and regardless of accomplishments

in life, they will only be able to rot away after death. The Spirit vanishing into thin air after delivering the prophecy is indicative of the illusory nature of the supernatural. Also, his/her unnerving song is a stark reminder of man’s flawed desire for power and glory. Despite leaving the forest behind, Washizu and Miki continue to be lost for hours in the barren landscape before they finally manage to reach the Castle. Their chaotic thoughts are mirrored by the harsh winds and the heavy fog that forewarn the characters of their actions. As Graham Austin in ‘Macbeth: Three Distinctive Adaptations of Shakespeare’s Scottish Play’ observes:

After Washizu and Miki encounter the forest spirit and receive their prophecies, they get lost in a thick bank of fog on their way back to the castle. The scene seems to last for an eternity, or at least well past the point in which most directors would have figured it served its purpose; there is no dialogue, and the scene is comprised purely of Washizu and Miki riding back and forth through nearly identical shots of impenetrable fog. But the maddening tedium of the sequence is key to its brilliance, in that it is a wholly visual way to depict the mental fog that Washizu and Miki are experiencing following their encounter with the spirit, and it forces the audience to spend time with the characters to wonder if they will ever be able to find their way out, both literally and figuratively.

Furthermore, as Olivia Rutigliano notes, “The padded armor worn by Washizu and Miki appears crunchy, iridescent, and darkly reminiscent of beetle skin. When men in *Throne of Blood* are riding horses—controlling another life form, let’s say—they are superior, and can be seen as men. But on the ground, awkwardly moving in their thick, shell-like armor, they are debased, and they become bugs”. The spidery appearances of soldiers, the crouching assassin begging for Washizu’s forgiveness, the androgynous forest-spirit, the ghost-like Lady Asaji all navigate the liminal spaces between nature and culture with their fluid movements.

As the scene shifts to the house of the newly appointed Lord of North Garrison, the viewers perhaps for the first time see bright sunshine and scenes of domesticity: workers in the expansive rice fields, servants bustling about the household, etc. Cut to the image of Asaji, Washizu’s wife and the viewers are back to witnessing

pure evil incarnate. After Lady Asaji has convinced Washizu of killing Lord Tsuzuki, she quietly and slowly shuffles into a pitch-black doorway before returning, facing the camera now, moments later holding a bowl of drugged sake. It is a chilling image, both because of her unnatural movements and because the doorway has been transformed into a void where she returns full with the intent to murder. This shot visually encapsulates her essence and the depths to which the narrative will go. Her ghost like appearance, heavily influenced by the Noh masks, along with her gliding movements is maleficent at best. With her outwardly calm demeanor and steady tone of articulation, devoid of any emotion whatsoever, Asaji reasons with Washizu as to why he must pursue the Witches prophecy to its logical conclusion. They seize the opportunity to commit regicide when Lord Tsuzuki unexpectedly pays them a visit. The household also has a sealed chamber with visible bloodstains on the wall where the treacherous former Lord of North Garrison had committed suicide. The stains on the wall are a forced reminder of the destructive forces of treachery. It represents both the inevitability of Washizu's fate, and the cyclical nature with which violence begets violence, or as Macbeth himself states in Act 3 Scene 4: "blood will have blood". Washizu betrays his Lord, and when he becomes Lord, he too is betrayed. This never-ending cycle of violence is furthered by another adaptive choice of Kurosawa: it is noted that Washizu's predecessor, Lord Tsuzuki, also rose to his post by slaying his former lord. However, Asaji and Washizu completely ignore the signs and carry out their discussions of murdering the Lord in the very same ill-fated chamber. Also, the day they chose to commit the regicide happens to be a new moon day. The Lord's crown carries a new moon insignia on it. They do not heed to the ominous cawing of the birds around the household. The warnings that the forces of Nature give are completely ignored by Asaji and Washizu making them culpable of the destruction that follows the regicide.

With Washizu becoming the Lord of Spider's Web castle, Miki believes that in due course his son would be declared the successor. However, Washizu had other plans and hires an assassin to murder both Miki and his son. On the day of the banquet when the assassination is to take place, Miki's loyal horse runs away from the stables. It is as if the beast has a premonition of what was in store for Miki if he decides to attend the banquet. The warnings are loud; but not loud enough before self-serving ambition.

The workers in the Spider's Web Castle talk about rats fleeing the house. They remark that rats leave a house before it burns. This is indicative of the chaos that is going to consume Washizu's household. When the enemy forces are closing in on to the Castle, flocks of birds rush wildly

into the chambers. Even when the other officials see it as a warning, Washizu interprets it as a good omen from the heavens signally his victory over the enemies. Lady Asaji, on the other hand, has become a nervous wreck obsessed with washing her supposedly bloody hands. It is highly ironic that she dies following the complications of having a still-born child.

When Washizu engages in combat with the enemy, who have hidden themselves behind twigs from Spiders Web Forest, he is fatally struck by a volley of arrows of his soldiers. In fact, he is trapped inside his own castle with his own soldiers betraying his trust. With arrows jutting out of his body, Washizu looks like a trapped spider entangled in its own web. Having Washizu's own men kill him rather than an enemy invader completes the film's circular structure.

The film ends with the barren landscape again; the loop structure reinforcing how nature reclaims the site of blood and violence. The forest avenges itself-it moves towards the castle; a testimony to Nature's role as a force of justice. The final judgement of Washizu is carried out by a natural force - an end that was his own making.

The elemental forces in *Throne of Blood* evoke unease and fatalism but they also offer scope for contemplative engagement within a larger cosmic game. Nature, the only constant in the fleeting and illusory world of impermanence, always calls. Whether man heeds or not is a matter of his free will, not necessarily his fate.

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