

**MACBETH FROM MADAGASCAR TO JAPAN
THE INTERLOCKED ISSUES OF FILM ADAPTATION
AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

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Abstract: *Any of Shakespeare's most renowned works is a case study in its own right on the matter of cinematic adaptations of theatrical texts, as all have spawned numerous transpositions which vary from the strictly faithful to the original to the widely imaginative reworking. But the Bard's historical plays, and Macbeth in particular, are inseparable from a set of socio-political circumstances that places physical violence at the core of its power dynamics. Alexander Abela's Makibefo and Akira Kurosawa's Throne of Blood both relocate the intrigue of the Scottish play in a distinct and strongly typified spatio-temporal context, in an attempt at once to formulate an ethical commentary and address the issue of cultural appropriation.*

Keywords: *stage to screen adaptation, cultural appropriation, Macbeth, Shakespeare, transposition*

Literary adaptations have always raised challenging structural, formal and even philosophical issues for filmmakers, leading to a vast specialized literature on the subject (Cartmell, Corrigan, Stam, to cite only a few authors who have recently edited generic collections of such essays), to the apparition of a specific field of studies - adaptation studies - as well as to a multiplicity of handbooks that supposedly detain the best formula to turn a literary work into a screenplay (Cotte, Seger, Williams). Theatrical adaptations in particular seem to revive an old feud between the two

media - a feud almost as old as cinema itself. Undoubtedly, out of all classical art forms, film has the greatest number of common denominators with theatre, in its quality of performing and (predominantly) narrative art; moreover, the founding principles of blocking, acting and establishing time-space correlations of the first origin from the long-lasting practice of the second. This similitude has also meant that, once cinema had evolved from its early status of fairground attraction or supplement to magic shows or semi-scientific lectures, it became the main competitor of theater. Initially, the two forms of entertainment did not pursue the same audience: while theatre targeted the middle and upper classes, going to the cinema was the escapist moment of the lower stratas. Only the revue could have tried to lay claim to the preference of the urban proletariat, but the novelty of film, and afterwards the speed with which it adapted to the demands of the public (that were artificially produced by the same form of entertainment that was supposed to solve them) tipped the balance. Soon enough, the cinema of attractions, as Gunning called the exhibitionist, immediate, loosely-narrative logic of primitive film, converted into a stabler system which needed in turn a less volatile and more economically-robust audience: the bourgeoisie. The first 'art' films employed stage celebrities and reenacted resounding theatrical successes, making them accessible to people who rarely or never crossed the threshold of dramatic art institutions. Thus, film won its *lettres de noblesse*, borrowing from theatre not only its content, but also the rituals which surrounded the activity of theatre-going: the so-called picture palaces had opulent ornamentations and, to perfect the illusion, the screen was hidden behind a curtain. The exceptionality and refinement of a night at the theatre was reproduced, while the price of the cinema ticket stayed significantly lower than its competitor's. But the counter-reaction was also quick to emerge: the French *cinéma pur* movement appeared in order to counter the perceived tendency of the new medium to parasite other art forms instead of cultivating its

specificities. From that point on, the filmmaker's dilemma when deciding to adapt a theatre play became clearer, at least in its formulation if not in its solution: one of the two means of expression had to be betrayed, but in what way and to what extent?

Unsurprisingly, Shakespeare's writings are among the most frequently adapted to the screen, not only because they have shaped the collective imaginary of the West - artistically mediating our understanding of love and power struggles - but also because many of them are conventionally 'cinematic': behind the complex rhetorical dimension, the stories are simple, the usual trigger of the action being a rudimentary feeling that is complicated by bouts of remorse, hesitation, metaphysical musing, by socio-political context or even by supernatural forces; landscape also plays a significant role, especially in the historical plays. If titles such as "Romeo and Juliet" and "Othello" (or at least their narrative frame) have been the object of both highly faithful adaptations and widely imaginative transpositions, the historical plays are not so easily displaceable. Despite the fact that they too depict the confrontation of generic human passions, they are also tied up with a certain political conjuncture and, most importantly, with a precise hierarchical system. "Macbeth", for example, entails the existence of a pre-modern political structure, unevolved in its organization and disconnected from a regulating body that could step in the power vacuum created by Duncan's murder - situation that enables the protagonist's fulgurant ascent. The play does not contain too many details that could anchor it in a recognizable time and space, but the outlines of the action are enough to ensure that its transposition in a society based on diametrically different organizational principles would simultaneously alter its essence beyond recognition. Due to the fact that it deals with atemporal notions such as thirst for power, limits of immorality and liberty of conscience (which Macbeth exercises under the guise of predestination), "Macbeth" is an ideal material for abstract transpositions that use the feudal society

background as a metaphor for the violence and the egotism of human nature which are lurking behind even the most progressive form of organization. But it resonates particularly strongly in cultures which either have retained a similar repartition of power or maintain strong links with their feudal past. The two films we intend to analyse in the present article, “Makibefo” (dir. Alexander Abela, 2001), and “Kumo no sujō” (“Throne of Blood”, dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1957), emanate from such socio-political contexts.

First and foremost, Abela’s “Makibefo” is a cinematic experiment that opposes the traditional colonial anthropology situation which involves the methodical observation of the reaction of members of an archaic civilization to the display of moving images, reaction which usually mirrors the naiveté of the audience of the Lumière brothers’ first films, fleeing from the train on screen. Whether scientific study or colonial mobile cinema screening, the principle is the same: the “civilized” observes, puts labels and draws conclusions, while the “savage” unwillingly confirms the theories formulated at his expense. “Makibefo” virulently rejects this power division. The filmmaker Alexander Abela decided to enroll the Antandroy people - an ethnic group who dwells in the deserts of the southern region of Madagascar - in his unorthodox adaptation of the Scottish play. A title placed before the closing credits proclaims that “[The majority of] the Antandroy people of Madagascar who played the characters and helped in the making of this film [...] have never seen a television let alone a film, and have never acted before in their lives.”⁷⁸ But Abela’s film is much more than an example of participative anthropology: not only do the indigenes reenact their daily tasks and their rituals in front of the camera, but they do it in the larger context of a narrative that comments indirectly upon the issue of cultural appropriation - which was traditionally unilateral, imposed by the West upon the rest of the world. Therefore, the

⁷⁸ *Makibefo* (dir. Alexander Abela, 2001)

choice of Shakespeare's play serves a double purpose: first of all, the violence of social interactions and the interplay of domination and submission which characterize "Macbeth"'s diegesis are fittingly perpetuated in the indigenes' primitive organizational structure (or, more accurately, in the canonical - and Westocentric - representation of the savage's way of life). Moreover, the British playwright's oeuvre is considered to be the pinnacle of high art, one of the most revered cultural heritage of the Old Continent; consequently, its takeover and its processing at the hands of a marginal culture is undoubtedly a revenge - albeit a minor one. The intrigue of the play is reduced to the bare minimum, and in some occasions modified to fit local specificities: Makibefo (Macbeth's counterpart in the film) does not return from battle, but from a chase after a fugitive; making his way back to the village, he encounters a sorcerer who predicts that Makibefo will become the ruler of his tribe. After the succession of murders he commits to gain and conserve power, he is killed by Makidofy (Macduff), the only one who is not "of woman born"⁷⁹. The action is repeatedly interrupted by a commentator, a solemn figure draped in white, seated by a totem pole and looking straight into the camera. At one point, the character takes up a book and starts quoting the verses of Shakespeare's play, building a bridge between the oral tradition of archaic civilizations and the print culture of developed societies. The obvious poverty in which the tribe lives becomes a quality in the cinematographic adaptation, as it reveals the essentially symbolic nature of Makibefo's lust for power. The protagonist does not desire material goods, but psychological domination over the villagers, who respect with religious zeal the tribe ruler's orders - with little consideration for his actual identity. In the absence of material products, statuses are objectified and become empty shells that significantly outlive their ephemeral occupants. Parallely, the coarseness of the cinematographic

⁷⁹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Act V, Scene VII

language also proves to be an advantage, as it concretizes with remarkable expressiveness and simplicity the otherwise convoluted relationship between the real and the fantastic realms. For example, the same editing method is used to depict the sorcerer's transformation into a snake and Makibefo's murders: in both cases, the action and its result are presented in separate shots, which are linked by a match cut - a basic technique (as many others featured in the film, including a parallel montage that juxtaposes Bakoua (Banquo)'s execution with the sacrifice of a cow in typical Eisensteinian manner) that dissipates rather than maintains the illusion. Instead of suggesting that the protagonist is possessed by black magic, their similitude has the opposite effect: it indicates that people manufacture their idols and suppersitions in order to feel supported in their initiatives. Despite the famous verses "Nothing is / But what is not"⁸⁰ which are solemnly uttered by the narrator (at the end of the film, while they were in the beginning of the original text), both the content and the form of Abela's film are rooted in a simple, concrete, scarce world where violence, without being excusable, becomes at least understandable amidst the aridity of the landscape and the hardships of subsisting in such conditions.

Unlike "Makibefo", "Throne of Blood" is not a pioneering work, as it inscribes itself in an ample cultural tradition that Akira Kurosawa himself helped establish. When analysing the post-World War Two Japanese cinematographic landscape, one notices that national history, and especially the pre-modern times, with its legendary samurais - comparable in terms of aura with the European knights - quickly became an inextinguishable source of subjects that could easily be exported. The exotic sonorities of the language, the eccentricity of the clothes, the ritualization of the everyday, the grace of gestures that resisted assimilation to European aesthetic categories exercised and continue to exercise a fascination on Western

⁸⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Act I, Scene III

audiences. Japan, which acutely needed to replace its image of ally of Nazi Germany, willingly commodified its past. Assuredly, not all *jidaigeki*⁸¹ filmmakers were motivated by commercial considerations: the genre was also a smokescreen for formulating a critique about the contemporary political situation - discourse which was strongly discouraged by the occupying American forces immediately after World War Two. The *jidaigeki* enacted a realm where the frontiers between reality and fantasy were porous, the characters' psychology belonged to magical rather than to logical thinking, and where minor history could be freely rewritten as long as the framework of canonical history remained intact. In many aspects, feudal Japan superficially resembled medieval Scotland: both spatio-temporal contexts shared the instability of power units, the continuous warfare between clans, the indifference to human life and the reliance on the supernatural to explain hazard and natural phenomena. Kurosawa's adaptation of *Macbeth* is generally perceived by international film criticism as a major instance of transcultural dialogue, as it "rests so comfortably - and so brilliantly - between two great world traditions, [offering] the best opportunity for a balanced cross-cultural experience"⁸². It blends vastly different influences (such as Elizabethan and Noh theatre traditions), and yet manages to create a stylistically and thematically coherent ensemble, which operates both as a bold but loyal adaptation of Shakespeare's intentions, and as an autonomous work of art that reflects its *auteur's* artistic searchings and philosophical credo (and which demonstrates, contrary to the early stance of *auteur* theory, that adapting a literary work does not disqualify a film-maker from fulfilling the necessary

⁸¹ Period dramas

⁸² Keiko I. McDonald, "Noh into Film: Kurosawa's Throne of Blood", *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 39, nr. 1, 1987, p. 36. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20687756, accessed on 15.11.2020

criteria to be considered an *auteur*⁸³). The entire organization of the Japanese feudal system, whose instability was matched only by the rigidity of its pyramidal structure, crushes individualities and reduces human beings to cogs in a machine gone berserk - the socio-political context thus adding another critical reading grid of Macbeth's actions to the two usual interpretations, based on the ideas of predestination or, conversely, of free will for which the notion of destiny is nothing but a trigger. As Erin Suzuki astutely remarks: “[u]nlike Macbeth, Washizu is not a scapegoat who must be killed in order to restore the balance of society; rather, there is the sense that through his willful act of treachery he is actually conforming to fill a prescribed role in a society that ultimately does not change for either better or worse. In the film, [...] Washizu is only participating in a naturalized chain of events, rather than transgressing in any spectacular or singular sense. While Macbeth's most fateful decision is his choice to murder Duncan, in “Throne of Blood” Washizu is robbed of even that form of agency, and the furious impotence that he exhibits as he falls into the role of a mere functionary character in the drama highlights the overdetermined theatricality that is inherent in both Kurosawa's film and Shakespeare's tragedy”⁸⁴ If the power for which Makibefo was willing to kill was mostly symbolic and psychological, the one obtained by Washizu has a distinct materiality epitomized by the Castle of the Spider's Web - the place where the protagonist rises and falls from grace.

Both Abela's and Kurosawa's films strike a balance between the attributes of the two media they weave together. In “Makibefo”,

⁸³ An important criterion was the creative control over all stages of production, including the writing of the screenplay; the division of labour that relegated directors of the so-called Tradition of Quality to the rank of “white-collar workers of the camera”, as François Truffaut used to call established film-makers of the older generation such as Claude Atan-Lara or René Clément, was vehemently contested by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* collective.

⁸⁴ Erin Suzuki, “Lost in Translation: Reconsidering Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*”, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2006, p. 96

cinematic specificity resides in the distinctive editing techniques, the carefully processed sound and the documentary aspect; in “Throne of Blood”, it dwells in the elaborate camera work, the use of exteriors and the framing, which is sometimes self-reflexive (according to Neil Forsyth, who correlates the two-level in-depth composition of the shot in which Washizu and his comrade glimpse the forest spirit with the competing Lumière and Mèlies traditions which tailored early cinema). The theatrical specificity lingers in the ritualized and stagnant quality of the cultures where the Sakespearian intrigue is transposed - cultures that are in the habit of staging themselves with the occasion of various celebrations and military deployments (such as the songs and dances in “Makibefo” or the whole ceremonial of the delivery of official messages in Kurosawa’s film). But above all, the two films prove that the free circulation of cultures does not automatically involve their demise or the absorption of the minor one⁸⁵ by the major one; instead, it often leads to symbolic reconciliations and fertile dialogues between civilizations.

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⁸⁵ In the sense defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986)

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