

## *Throne of Blood* and the Metaphysics of Tragedy

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The question of the relationship of Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (*Kumonosu-jō*, Kurosawa, 1957) to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has often been raised. While some claim it to be the most successful adaptation of Shakespeare's work onto film, it has also been argued that the film succeeds precisely because it is *not* an adaptation of *Macbeth* itself, but a work which rests on fundamentally different principles. While the importance of Kurosawa's use of Noh drama has often been noted in discussions of *Throne of Blood*, as Yoshimoto argues, it is important to go beyond simply recognising the influence of Noh drama to showing exactly how this influence affects the nature of *Throne of Blood* (Yoshimoto 2000, 253). To gain a deeper understanding of this influence, I want to relate *Throne of Blood* to some of the metaphysical concerns which underlie both Japanese and Western drama. This will allow us to see how the imposition of the Japanese aesthetic on *Macbeth* allows for a fundamental transformation of its meaning. While there are several accounts of drama that one could use to bring out the metaphysical implications of various forms of drama, I will focus in this essay on the Hegelian theory of drama. There are several reasons for this. First, Hegel situates drama simultaneously within a metaphysical and a cultural perspective, which allows us to relate an analysis of particular moments within the film to deeper themes pervading the film. Second, there are some interesting parallels between Hegel's theory of the metaphysics of tragedy and the metaphysical work of the great theorist of Noh drama, Zeami, which provide a useful point of intersection and contrast between the two models of drama. Finally, Hegel emphasises the difference between Greek and modern tragedy. Using Hegel's formulation of the distinction allows us to consider a third possibility, that *Throne of Blood* has metaphysical affinities not with Shakespeare's work, but instead with the Greek model of tragedy.

### **Japanese Drama and the Two Accounts of Western Tragedy**

To begin with, I want to outline the key features of Hegel's theory of tragedy, before introducing a discussion of how the metaphysical basis Hegel ascribes to Western tragedy differs from that of Eastern drama. At this stage, it is worth noting, however, that Hegel claims that that 'the whole Eastern outlook inhibits *ab initio* an adequate development of dramatic art' (Hegel 1975, 1205). 'Orientals' only know that 'One is free' (Hegel 1998, 402), and so are unable to bring freedom down to the level of the human

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spirit. Instead, the One, as dehumanised, remains a ‘savage despot’ (Hegel 1998, 402). As we shall see, Hegel’s reasons for making this assertion are fundamentally bound up with the Buddhist ground underlying what he calls ‘the Eastern outlook’ (Hegel 1998, 402). We shall return to Hegel’s criticism, but for now it will be noted that tragedy for Hegel requires two elements: the divine or ethical substance which is shared by the characters, and ‘the subject, the individual himself in his unfettered self-determination and freedom’ (Hegel 1975, 1194). It is the second of these aspects which is lacking in Japanese drama. For Hegel, tragedy instead originally develops in Greece, where ‘some are free,’ and takes as its theme ‘what is in *substance* good and great, the Divine actualised in the world’ (Hegel 1975, 1194). The divine is for Hegel the universal ethical nature of the Greek *polis*; that which allows the *polis* to exist as a community. Tragedy emerges due to the fact that this universal nature needs to express itself in particular individuals and principles within the community. There are a variety of ‘substantive and independently justified powers which influence the human will’ (Hegel 1975, 1194), such as familial relations, political life, religious commitments, each of which form a part of the ethical structure of the *polis*. Tragedy emerges when the will of the characters become aligned with one of the powers that make up the ethical, to the exclusion of the others. The essence of tragedy is thus the relationship between the universal ethical values and the particular figures who instantiate them. As each of the characters embodies a fundamental ethical principle, each character is justified in their actions. Further, as their characters’ wills are entirely determined by the particular principle, their actions follow freely from their character. Their actions flow from their essence. Thus, they are justified in their actions, but also responsible. While there are a variety of different ethical principles available, the single-mindedness of the ethical hero leads inevitably to the conversion of this difference into opposition, through their failure to countenance alternative grounds for ethical action. The ethical is split between characters within the tragedy, each character thereby gaining justification for his actions, but at the same time, as his actions cut across those of the other characters, becoming guilty of the transgression of ethical values. The ethical, when called into the world, loses its inner harmony. Its difference becomes contradiction, a state which cannot be tolerated, thus leading to the necessary final conclusion through which the contradiction is annulled, usually through the deaths of the principle characters.<sup>2</sup>

The negation of the contradiction is thus a return to truth through the rejection of the anomaly, and what is true in each is maintained. Hegel cites

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<sup>2</sup> As Houlgate notes, Hegel also allows the contradiction to be annulled without the destruction of the central characters, such as in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* and Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, although in these cases, the resolution is brought about by a third party who accords honour and recognition to both parties (Houlgate 2007, 160-161).

*Antigone* as an archetype of this account of tragedy.<sup>3</sup> Here, the conflict occurs between the rights of the family, represented by Antigone's desire to bury her brother, Polyneices, and the rights of the state, represented by King Creon's desire to punish Polyneices as a traitor. While both characters are in fact also governed by the principle of the other (Antigone is the daughter of a king, and Creon is a father and husband), they choose to act solely according to one determining principle. Difference is thus turned into opposition, and the dissolution of this one-sidedness can only be achieved by the tragic death of Antigone and Creon's loss of his wife and son. In this respect, the use of masks is essential to the drama, as it emphasises the fixity of character of the *dramatis personae*. Hegel notes in relation to this that the masks transform the role of acting into something more akin to sculpture (Hegel 1975, 1187). We should note, however, that the resolution of Greek tragedy is not simply annihilation. In this regard, the role of the chorus is central. While the characters express the particularity of the ethical, the chorus maintains a universal perspective as a counterpoint. In this respect, the chorus' final lines signify that outside of the fixity of the will within the play itself, the tragedy leads to a positive reconciliation of the opposed values:

Grand words of arrogant  
Men, paid back with  
Great blows, in old age  
Teach good sense. (Sophocles 2003, 116)

It is therefore important to note that Greek tragedy deals with what is past, prior to the proper reconciliation of these values in the ethical. Greek tragedy is not directly comparable with that which is found in modern drama, where, as we shall see, the emphasis is on subjective will, but in order for the concepts of guilt and justification to become operative within the tragedy, the concept of responsibility is necessarily presupposed, and with it the notion of freedom. Freedom is required in order that we move from the sphere of the tragic to the sphere of tragedy. Without it, the nature of the ethical is lost, the play becoming merely a study of the events as accidents that can befall man within the world. Freedom is therefore a central concept of tragedy, which relies on the agent acting in accordance with their will, and taking responsibility for their actions.

I now want to look at the form of Japanese drama which influenced Kurosawa, Noh drama, and the role of freedom in its structure. Japan developed three principle (surviving) drama forms: Noh, Kabuki, and

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<sup>3</sup> Hegel discusses the case of Antigone in the *Aesthetics* (pp. 1217-8). Hegel also notes that many tragedies, such as *Oedipus*, rest on the collision between the right of a man to take responsibility for the actions that he is conscious of, and what he has been fated to do by the gods (1214).

Bunraku. Of these, Noh is the most important to us, principally due to Kurosawa's interest in this form. Indeed, we can see *Throne of Blood* as an experiment in the translation of one of Shakespeare's most important works into a Noh aesthetic. It is the fusion of these two horizons that I wish to explore in this essay, and the effect that such a fusion has on the notion of freedom, which is clearly present within Shakespeare's work, but more ambiguously present within the great works of Noh drama. In order to understand the concept of freedom that forms the foundation of Noh drama, we need to understand that it too has its basis in religious ceremony. Just as Greek tragedy evolves through the choral chant to Dionysus (Hegel 1975, 1211-2), so Noh drama evolves out of early shamanistic rituals, existing in the grey area between Shinto and Buddhism. It also uses a chorus, and relies heavily on the use of masks for the actors. Although Shinto as a religion is itself based on a polytheistic conception of particularised gods, these gods, under the Buddhist interpretation, have been seen primarily as Bodhisattvas, or enlightened ones, thus subsuming the religion of Shinto under that of Buddhism. Thus, even though the basis of Noh is not orthodox Buddhism, it is nevertheless still fundamentally Buddhist in its metaphysics. The actor and playwright Zeami, who produced the earliest theoretical grounding for Noh drama, himself later became a Buddhist monk, and the effects of his religious orientation can be seen clearly in his theoretical writings on Noh. In his *Notes on the Nine Levels*, for instance, which provides a taxonomy of the different levels of achievement in the performance of Noh drama, he chooses a Zen proverb to open his discussion of the highest level of achievement: 'In Silla, in the dead of night, the sun shines brightly' (Zeami 1984, 120). The point of the proverb is that it can only be understood without contradiction once one has attained enlightenment, and thus can think outside of the world of spatio-temporal appearance. In choosing this proverb, therefore, Zeami aligns the highest form of practice of the Noh actor with the state of enlightenment, and with it, the dissolution of individuality. The differences that are found between this metaphysics and the one that forms the basis of Greek tragedy can be found through an analysis of the Bunraku play, *Kagekiyo Victorious* (Sasayami 1998, 145). While not a Noh play, *Kagekiyo Victorious* was explicitly modelled on Zeami's teachings. Leaving aside the central plot, which deals with the warrior Kagekiyo's attempts to gain revenge on a rival clan, we can see that the subplot, which deals with the search for vengeance by Kagekiyo's concubine after she is rejected by Kagekiyo, mirrors that of *Medea*. The subplot revolves around the betrayal of Kagekiyo to his enemies by his concubine after he decides to make another his wife. Kagekiyo's concubine, immediately regretting her action, seeks to atone for her actions, begging Kagekiyo to take her back. Upon Kagekiyo's rejection of her, and the further rejection of their two sons, she kills them in front of him before stabbing herself. The first response to this may be to see it in Hegelian terms.

The two ethical attitudes at play could be seen as that of revenge, considered to be a duty in seventeenth century Japan (Sasayami 1998, 147), and the duty to the family. Thus the final tragic scene would be seen as the abolition of the conflict between the two characters-as-ethical-attitudes through the death of the concubine – a reversal of the structure of *Medea*. Such an analysis would, however, make the mistake of confusing the act of Medea with the gesture of the concubine. Whereas Medea is playing out her ethical attitude to the end, the concubine instead kills herself to show the correctness of the judgement of Kagekiyo. Her sons are not killed out of malice, but, due to their rejection by their father, are in fact in a sense already non-existent. We can see that the identity (and hence freedom) of the concubine and her sons is always outside of themselves, and so their deaths at the concubine's hands are not free actions, but instead the extension of an action which has already taken place. Thus the concubine's act takes place after she has stopped being human, it is a dissolution into the One. To understand this more fully, we need to turn to Buddhist metaphysics, as it is here that the reason why act is replaced by gesture will become clear. Let us take as an example the *Kōan* of Pai-chang's fox:

Whenever the Ch'an Master of Great Enlightenment Huai-hai of Mount Paichang delivered a sermon, an old man always accompanied the monks to listen to him. When the monks left, the old man also left. One day, as it happened, he did not leave. Pai-chang asked: 'Who are you, standing here before me?' The old man responded: 'I am not a human being. In the past, at the time of Kasyapa Buddha, I lived on this mountain. When a student asked me, "After someone masters great cultivation [i.e., attains enlightenment], will they again be subject to [the law of] cause and effect [i.e., karma]," I answered, "No, they will be not subject to [the law of] cause and effect." Since then I have been born five hundred times as a fox. Now, I beg you to give the transforming words to release me from being a fox.' The old man then asked: 'After someone masters great cultivation [i.e., attains enlightenment], will they again be subject to [the law of] cause and effect?' Pai-chang answered: 'The [the law of] cause and effect is obvious.'

As soon as the old man heard this he experienced a great awakening. (Shūdō 2000, 125)

The old man's belief in freedom necessarily separates him from the One, and for this belief he is punished. We must note here that what is at stake in the *Kōan* is not whether or not the enlightened man is free or not free, but the entire conception of man as being separated from the One. To say that the enlightened man is one with the law of causation is to say that the enlightened man is not as such a man, that he has already passed beyond a

western conception of man as agent.<sup>4</sup> For the Buddhist, to apply the category of freedom to man implies that one has misunderstood the true nature of the transience of the world. It is because of this that Noh theatre does not call for a moral response from the audience, since without the moment of freedom, there is no possibility of responsibility, or even of action. The ethical is not called into question, or even actualised on the stage. As Komparu notes, the structure of a programme of Noh plays parallels the structure of the Buddhist narrative of salvation, rather than the restoration of an ethical order (Komparu 1983, 42). Noh plays 'are simply there to be enjoyed for their own sake; no order or value, either cosmic or social, is called into question through them' (Sasayami 1998, 158).

### ***Throne of Blood and Macbeth***

Kurosawa claimed that Noh drama is 'the real heart – the core of all Japanese drama,'<sup>5</sup> and *Throne of Blood* provides an interesting intersection of it with Western tragedy. Whilst *Throne of Blood* is certainly inspired by Noh theatre, it is also a reworking of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The intermingling of these two influences at least raises the question of how we are to read *Throne of Blood*. As we have seen, the notion of freedom seems to be central to the working of Western tragedy, and as we shall see, it also occupies this place in *Macbeth* itself. In terms of narrative structure, *Throne of Blood* tracks *Macbeth* closely, but it is clear that many of the stylistic effects are taken from Noh drama, which operates without a Western notion of freedom. Anyone familiar with Kurosawa's work will know that the kinds of questions which we discussed in relation to Greek tragedy are also operative in many of Kurosawa's films. *Drunken Angel* (*Yoidore tenshi*, Kurosawa, 1948) for instance, 'a film in the Dostoevsky manner,'<sup>6</sup> deals (amongst other things) with an individual caught between two opposed ethical principles, the gangster code of honour and the recognition of the

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<sup>4</sup> Although this *Kōan* only deals with the nature of the enlightened man, we can see that the difference between the enlightened and unenlightened man is only one of difference in knowledge, rather than difference in kind, as is shown by the following *Kōan*: 'Ma-tsu sat in meditation for long periods every day outside his little hut. His Zen master, Hai-jang, watched him one day and thought, 'He will become a very worthy person. Still, right now he is stuck and needs some help.' 'Noble one,' he asked, 'what are you trying to get by sitting in meditation?' 'I am trying to become a Buddha,' Ma-tsu replied with conviction. Hearing this, Hai-jang picked up a rough clay tile that had fallen from the temple roof and began rubbing it against a rock.

'What are you doing, Master?' asked Ma-tsu. I am polishing this rough tile to make it a precious jewel,' the master replied. 'How can a roof tile ever become a jewel?' asked Ma-tsu. 'How can you ever become a Buddha through meditation,' Hai-jang replied, if you weren't already a Buddha to begin with? Walking, standing, lying down, sitting - who are you in all these activities? Real Zen is not confined to sitting. Live Buddhas are not just found in the lotus posture.' Hearing this, Ma-tsu felt as refreshed as if he has just drunk the most delicious drink' (Martin and Soares 1995, 45).

<sup>5</sup> Kurosawa quoted in Kishi and Bradshaw 2005, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Kurosawa quoted in Desser 1981, 5.

power of reason as a principle of life offered by Sanada. The film revolves around the gangster Matsunaga's recognition that he is free to follow either principle. While Matsunaga fails to reconcile these principles, reconciliation is ultimately achieved through the recovery of Sanada's other tubercular patient. *Ikiru* (Kurosawa, 1952) also centres on the question of subjectivity, with the existential recognition of Watanabe's impending death leading to a search for an authentic form of existence. Whilst the annihilation of the characters in a Buddhist drama would signify a recognition of the transience of life, and a reaffirmation of the primacy of the One, in *Drunken Angel* and *Ikiru*, death is instead that which leads to a recognition of the value of individual existence, and with it the question of how to take upon oneself one's freedom authentically. Both of these archetypes, operating under a concept of freedom that is both radical and ungrounded, fit well with Hegel's examination of modern drama in which conflict 'lies essentially in the character to which the individuals adhere in their passion, not because of any substantial justification but because they are what they are once and for all' (Hegel 1975, 1226). The notion of freedom is therefore demonstrably central to Kurosawa's work. Of course, these other works of Kurosawa, whilst obviously influenced by Noh drama, are not influenced either as explicitly or as radically as *Throne of Blood*. The question will therefore be whether it is possible to separate the form of Noh drama from the content of Shakespearean tragedy, with its focus on freedom. On the one hand, the possibility of the adaptation of a Western conception of freedom into Noh theatre was at least opened up by the work of Jesuit priests in seventeenth century Japan who, through their translation of mystery plays to the Noh stage, attempted to provide enough common ground between the two cultures to allow the Japanese an understanding of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity (Otolani 1995, 156). This implies that a distinction can be made between Noh itself and the Noh aesthetic. Against this, we have Kurosawa's own statement that 'in Noh, style and story are one' (Kurosawa quoted in Richie 1996, 117). In this section, I therefore want to discuss the degree to which Kurosawa can (or wishes to) separate Noh aesthetics from its underlying metaphysics in his reworking of *Macbeth*.

The staging of the Noh drama itself has effects, both on *Throne of Blood* and its relation to Hegel's theory of tragedy. The Noh stage (*Honbutai*) forms a simple set, made up simply of a bamboo edge with perhaps a painted pine backdrop. This greater simplicity allows for a focus on the characters themselves and adds a somewhat surreal atmosphere to the affair, which proves to be an advantage given the predominance of divine intervention within the plays. This feature is mirrored in the work of Kurosawa through the use of large, empty geometrical spaces, and the wooden construction of the forts. Kurosawa's background as a classical Japanese painter comes in to the construction of scenes where space is often more important than the actual objects that occupy it, a feature which

parallels the use of silence within Noh drama, hence the use of fog throughout the film to further abstract the characters from the realist world of Western cinema. Kurosawa took this use of space and contrast to the extreme of moving the sets of the castles to Mount Fuji in order to find the correct contrast between the soil and the pine-wood castles (Richie 1996, 123). This effect is further enhanced by Kurosawa's use of the telephoto lens, which helps to flatten the image on screen, adding to the effect that what we are watching is a moving painting, as opposed to a real world event. Hegel would obviously have approved of these moves. The analysis of painting shows that what allows painting to 'open the way to the principle of finite and inherently infinite subjectivity' (Hegel 1975, 795) is its movement away from being manifested in a spatio-temporal framework for Hegel. Whereas earlier forms such as sculpture and architecture rely on the three dimensions of space for their portrayal of the ideal subject matter, painting reduces this to two dimensions. In this sense, the move to a less realist portrayal allows the focus on the fundamental theme of the drama, which is subjectivity, to come more clearly to the fore. There is less possibility of it being hidden behind the actual form through which the ideal is manifested. Manifestation therefore takes place through the intermingling of colours on the planar surface which, although still not as effective as the form of manifestation found in more abstracted art forms such as music, or indeed poetry, is still an advance. This notion of a movement away from the spatio-temporal does not have to be interpreted in relation to an expression of subjectivity, however. Zeami, for instance, took up the poetic notion of *yūgen* to describe the central aesthetic concept of Noh drama (Komparu 1983, 12). The term can be loosely translated as profound sublimity, and carries with it the implication of the rejection of the appearance of beauty in favour of a mode of beauty which transcends presentation in space and time. Whilst Zeami originally used the concept of *yūgen* to imply a form of nobility which cannot be simply given in appearance, its meaning quickly became imbued with a stronger metaphysical sense of representing that which underlies the transience of appearance itself. In this sense, sublimity, rather than opening the way to the presentation of subjectivity, instead leads to the presentation of that which is beyond the world of subjects and appearances. Kurosawa's cinematography in *Throne of Blood* is therefore compatible with both a Hegelian and Noh reading.

In order to analyse the effect of the Noh aesthetic on *Macbeth*, we first need to look at what exactly makes *Macbeth* a tragedy. Hegel remarks that modern tragedy is differentiated from Greek tragedy by the fact that 'what presses for satisfaction [within the characters] is the *subjectivity* of their heart and mind and the privacy of their own character' (Hegel 1975, 1225). Modern tragedy does not take as its theme the opposition of different ethical principles, as they are instantiated by different subjects, but rather the notion of subjectivity itself, and the relation between the subjective will



and its objectification within the world. The coincidence of the ethical with the ambitions of the characters is a mere chance happening when it does occur, as is shown by the fact that in modern tragedy, we do not need the central figures to be justified in their relation to the ethical world as was the case for Greek tragedy. It is no longer the *essence* of the play. In this sense, Kurosawa is clearly far closer to Hegel's conception of modern drama particularly in relation to the films discussed earlier. The lessened emphasis on the ethical leads to two possibilities for Hegel: either the replacement of the ethical with another motivation, as Hegel claims is found within Spanish drama,<sup>7</sup> or else the study of very particular, concrete characters, as is found within English drama. The fact that Shakespeare is held up as an advocate of the second school must not obscure the fact that he is proficient in both. *Macbeth* shows both the characteristic of single-minded motivation, what is commonly considered to be motivation by ambition, combined with an extremely individual character. With these, we have the fixity of will which is essential for any tragedy. *Macbeth* does not vacillate between different courses of action, but remains true to his original choices. Similarly, he claims responsibility for his actions through his determination to fight the final battle, even when his defeat has been prophesied. It is true that with Bradley, we could view *Macbeth* along the lines of, if not a conflict of universal ends, at least a conflict of virtues, thereby bringing in the strengths of *Macbeth*, most notably, courage and fearlessness (Rosen 1960, 56), but the real interest of the story must be internal. Duncan 'hath been so great in office, that his virtues will plead like angels' (Shakespeare 2008, I.VII.18), which leads *Macbeth* to see his murder of Duncan not as something to be valorised, but rather as a 'duty.' What interests us is *Macbeth* himself, the juxtaposition of his courage that makes him 'dare do all that may become a man' (Shakespeare 2008, I.VII.50), and his poetic soul, which can already foresee the consequences of his actions. His inability to pray is symptomatic of his own ambivalence towards the act. *Macbeth* can therefore be seen as a study in a self-destructive character. Whilst it is external forces which destroy *Macbeth*, it is his fixity of will in the cause of ambition against everything, including his own conscience, which precipitates the situation of his downfall. The increase in determination exhibited by *Macbeth* throughout the play is mirrored by the general collapse of Lady *Macbeth*, who lacked the foresight to steel herself for the consequences of the act itself. Following Hegel, we may therefore state that *Macbeth* is a tragedy in which the characters' downfall is a 'logical consequence of [their] peculiarities' (Hegel 1975, 1229). The strength of the play is precisely this movement from the internal, subjective will to its external consequences.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hegel 1975, 1227, for instance. Hegel's claim is that Spanish drama tends to replace objective ethical principles with subjective principles such as honour. In this regard, it stays closer to Greek tragedy, in that the focus is only indirectly on subjectivity.

The development of the play is thus the explication of Macbeth's character within the world. In that the actions of the characters are their own choices, however, we still have a notion of responsibility within the play. Macbeth's call of 'Blow wind, come wrack, at least we'll die with harness on our back' (Shakespeare 2008, V.V.54) is not a call of resignation, but instead one of determination, a determination borne out of the knowledge that the path he is on is one that he has chosen of his own free will. The final defeat of Macbeth brings with it the restoration of order to the kingdom, thus an end to the turbulent times of Macbeth.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Throne of Blood and the Metaphysics of Tragedy***

From the background of the influences of Greek, modern, and Noh drama, we can now begin to discuss *Throne of Blood* itself. In terms of the plot, the structure of *Macbeth* is almost completely retained within *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa using his talents largely to prune (and possibly improve) the existing structure. If we take up Aristotle's idea of the unity of action, it is clear that the removal of the subplot relating to Macduff and the addition of Asaji's pregnancy allow Kurosawa to further tighten the web of consequences already present within *Macbeth*, as Macbeth now has reason not to name Banquo's son as his successor. As we have already seen, what is primarily at stake within the discussion is the extent to which Noh as a style necessitates a modification of the structure of the play, i.e. whether the presence of Noh elements sufficiently alter the plot and characterisation of a work to prevent the effective portrayal of subjectivity as freedom within it. It is therefore necessary to examine the effects of the Noh aesthetics on the play as a whole.

Paralleling Greek tragedy, Noh drama begins with the notion of the chorus, a chorus originally used within Shamanic ceremonies. After a time, the chorus leader, or *Waki*, disengaged himself from the chorus, and thus became in a sense the leading character of the Noh drama (Yokota-Murakami 1998, 167). It is the *Waki* who tends to frame the story, often playing characters such as a travelling priest, who thus allows an access point to the main plot. Whilst the *Waki* is not present within *Throne of Blood*, the chorus maintains a central role, who, as in Greek tragedy, appear as a 'higher consciousness, aware of the substantial issues' (Hegel 1975, 1210). Indeed, it is only the chorus and Miki (analogous to the role of Banquo) who seem to have any moral conscience within the play, as can be seen in the chorus's opening chant that 'the devil's path will always lead to doom', portending the conclusion of the narrative. The chanting is, however,

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<sup>8</sup> This view of reconciliation is not universal in interpretations of *Macbeth*. Polanski's interpretation, for instance, is far closer to *Throne of Blood* in indicating that the reign of *Macbeth* is simply one in a series, with Malcolm's younger brother, Donalbain seen visiting the witches in the final scene of the film.

accompanied by the image of a simple monument proclaiming the site of Cobweb Castle. The chorus is thus removed from the action of the play, thus becoming the antithesis of the Greek chorus; a chorus which instead seems to disclose the fact that the ethical is not at home in the time of Washizu (Macbeth). Indeed, against Macbeth's crime of the murder of Duncan, Washizu's crime is one that mirrors his own lord's climb to power over Cobweb Castle. While in Greek tragedy, the conclusion of the play sees the restoration of the universal, this notion of restoration is fundamentally different from that which is found in *Throne of Blood*. The universal that is restored in Greek tragedy is the universal ethical substance of the *polis*. The play ends with the reassertion of the values of the community in the face of the single-mindedness of the protagonists. The struggle in Greek tragedy is between the ethical and the individual, but the form of the universal that appears in *Throne of Blood* is rather that of nature. The emphasis is on the dissolution of consciousness into the One, rather than the reconciliation of one-sidedness in an ethical human community.

In this way, the movement of Cobweb forest on Cobweb Castle takes on a new significance in Kurosawa's production. Rather than simply representing a moment of pure impossibility that justifies Macbeth's confidence, it represents the idea of the reconciliation not involving a return to the ethical, but a return to nature itself. While in Greek tragedy, it is the one-sidedness of a particular will that is threatened with annihilation, in *Throne of Blood*, the true reconciliation is rather the renunciation of the *polis* as separated from nature itself. Thus, if the play is to be interpreted within the Hegelian framework, it must be seen along the lines of a study of subjectivity, rather than the substantive. As the spirit of the woods tells us, both 'saint and sinner ... fade to nothingness.' It does not accord with the conception of tragedy Hegel attributes to the Greeks.

The second major aspect of Noh aesthetics that is prominent in *Throne of Blood* is the use of masks. Whilst the use of masks is only explicit with the female characters within the play, i.e. the witch in Cobweb forest and Washizu's wife, Asaji, we must not fall into the error of discounting their influence on the other characters within the film.<sup>9</sup> Toshiro Mifune, who plays Washizu in the film, was, for example shown the mask, *heida*, or warrior, by Kurosawa prior to filming (Prince 1995, 145-6). The effects of this can be seen in the rather dry, formal style of acting displayed by Mifune throughout most of the film, a style which differs from the usual exuberant style found in his performances in *Rashomon*, *Seven Samurai* or *Yojimbo*. The mask within Noh theatre obviously has special meaning, and defines basic archetypes of attitudes towards the world. As such, it implies a stability of characterisation across different plays which adds to the formal

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<sup>9</sup> Richie for instance, makes this claim (Richie 1996, 118).

nature of Japanese theatre. The masks themselves are considered to have special powers to transform the actor into the role he is playing. The mask contains within it the *Kokoro*, or spirit of the character (Ortolani 1995, 148). Within *Throne of Blood*, the three principle character types that are used are *yaseona* for the spirit of Cobweb forest, a mask used to symbolise old women and demons, *shakumi* for Asaji, a mask which apparently and aptly symbolises a beautiful middle aged woman on the verge of madness, and, as already stated, *heida* for Washizu, a warrior mask (Yoshimoto 2000, 253). Of course, the nature of these masks within *Throne of Blood* necessarily creates a deviation from the characterisation found in *Macbeth*. Whilst Macbeth himself slowly loses his humanity throughout the play, the character of Washizu remains particularly constant. Macbeth must be persuaded to commit the deed, and in the final analysis, his treatment of the murder of Duncan is as a 'duty' that must be carried out. For Washizu, on the contrary, the only persuasion needed is the possibility that his lord might discover the words of the witch in the forest from Miki before the deed has been committed. This motivation, fear, is constant throughout the film. When all appears lost, he rouses his troops not through his own qualities, but rather by divulging the external circumstances of the prophecy, which seem to make failure impossible. His death is no longer one of resoluteness, but of terror. Whilst Kurosawa parallels the scene where 'all the great oceans of Neptune' (Shakespeare 2008, II.II.75) will not cleanse his hands, this is no longer a scene of godforsakenness, of a recognition of having transgressed the boundaries of human decency, but rather one of pure fear. Miki's jest, whilst he is lost with Washizu within Cobweb forest, that they are in the forest 'where the enemy gets lost and cannot find our castle' emphasises this point. Washizu may not already be an enemy, but he already carries the seeds within him, through his natural attitude towards the world.

Following the Noh tradition of the *Torimono* (Ortolani 1995, 93), or possessed object, we can draw some significance from the presence of the sword within the play. Within *Throne of Blood*, the bow is the constant tool for the suppression of traitors. Washizu's first scene shows him fresh from the battle against the traitor Fujimaki, carrying a bow. Similarly, his death, one of the most exquisite pieces of cinematography in the Kurosawa canon, is also by arrow. In contrast to this, all scenes of Washizu's treachery are filmed with him holding the sword which his lord gives to him. It is by this that his master's legacy of treachery is passed on to Washizu. The symbolism is further emphasised by the lord's approach to the Northern mansion, Washizu's reward for the crushing of the insurrection of Fujimaki, upon which Washizu first approaches the gates unarmed, but then returns to his chambers to pick up the sword. This return further shows us the moment when Washizu decides to kill his master. In Japanese dramatic circles, the *torimono* is seen as an object imbued with a spirit, therefore capable of

possessing its owner. In this way, Washizu embodies a fundamentally Buddhist conception of (non-)freedom.

All these facts point to a feature of *Throne of Blood* that clearly leads it away from being understood as tragedy. The beauty of *Throne of Blood*, its formal perfection, is also the element that divorces it from the concept of human freedom. This fact is brought out by the Japanese title of the film, *Castle of the Spider's Web*, symbolic of the complete lack of freedom to be found within, as is Washizu's clan symbol, the millipede, an insect to be caught within the spider's web. The fog that opens the play, not so much obscuring action as rendering all action ineffective, adds to this feeling, as does that of presentience running through the play. Action cuts through the normal biological repetition of life, inscribing a mark on history itself. In *Macbeth*, this is shown by the succession of Banquo's son, which leads ultimately to the enlightened rule of King James. *Throne of Blood* instead sees time as a repetition. The opening choral chant is a testament to the cyclical nature of the events. Washizu 'adds his tribute to the throne of blood,' a tribute that has presumably been paid by many before and after him. Similarly, the fact that it is a tale 'of a strong man weakened by a woman' once again puts the cause for the tragedy outside the control of Washizu himself. The position of women within *Throne of Blood* is particularly interesting in this regard. The three female characters featured within the play all control Washizu's actions. The spirit in the woods, who proclaims that life is just 'a leash, at which men strain and yelp,' controls the action throughout the narrative through her prophecies. Similarly, Asaji, Washizu's wife, also controls his actions through her persuasion as to the course he must take.<sup>10</sup> The third character, the midwife, also prevents Washizu from seeing his wife in her infirmity, thus sealing the association of women within the film with outside forces that control the destiny of Washizu. Miki's wife has also foreseen the events of the story, as she kills herself because 'she did not want to see the enemy take the castle.' Holes in the causal sequence of the plot are also covered over. Asaji falls pregnant, leading Washizu to reject his plan of declaring Miki's son his heir, only for their child to be stillborn. Furthermore, all introspective passages are cut from the script (Yoshimoto 2000, 253). Macbeth's twelve line soliloquy ('Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow....' [Shakespeare 2008, V.V.16]) is replaced by the single cry by Washizu of 'Fool!' We can also note that whereas Macbeth develops throughout the play, his actions becoming progressively more 'bloody, luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, sudden, malicious, smacking of every sin that has a name' (Shakespeare 2008, IV.III.57-60), the equivalent moment in *Throne of Blood* is expressed purely

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<sup>10</sup>Of course, such a statement could also be made of Macbeth, as is shown when Lady Macbeth says of her husband, 'Let my keen knife see not the wound it makes' (Shakespeare 2008, I.V.48).

passively, in terms of the rats leaving the castle. Likewise, there is no Macduff to provide a dramatic expression of Washizu's lawlessness. When this is combined with the emphasis on Noh archetypes, we can see that the aim of the play is clearly not to show us the subjectivity of the human spirit.

*Throne of Blood* therefore occupies a strange position in relation to the categories of Western tragedy. On the one hand, its reliance on a strong notion of causation seems to prevent a true expression of subjectivity. Whereas deception heightens the emphasis on subjectivity in *Macbeth* by marking the difference between the inner will and its manifestation (Duncan's ironic assertion that 'There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face' [Shakespeare 2008, I.IV.11-12]), the introduction of masks from Noh theatre seems to eliminate subjectivity altogether. Instead, the characters become archetypes. Likewise, the presence of the chorus gives the impression of the transience of existence, shifting the emphasis away from the human. The same geometry which governs the aesthetics of the film also ensures that there is no space for freedom within it. *Macbeth* shows us a scene in which morality is overcome by ambition, through the singular will of Macbeth himself. In this, Macbeth is completely transparent to himself, discarding the reasons given to him by his wife. The final *denouement* sees Macbeth accepting his fate, readying himself for a battle that he knows he will lose. The equivalent scene in *Throne of Blood* sees Washizu futilely attempting to escape his fate, as he moves from left to right across the walkway of his mansion, his path continually cut off by volleys of arrows. As David Desser points out, the symbolism of the film 'imbues nature with greater life than the human beings in the film' (Desser 1985, 73). The motifs of possession and of controlling forces external to the characters means that Kurosawa is moving away from Shakespeare's presentation, on the one hand, through the Noh imagery, destroying the study of subjectivity, and on the other hand, through the lack of morality within the play, preventing the representation of the substantive side of the ideal. Ironically, therefore, it is those features of Greek tragedy, the use of masks, the chorus, and the emphasis on archetype, that prevent it from being read in terms of modern tragedy. It is that key to modern tragedy, the removal of the ethical as the ground upon which the act takes place, that prevents it from being seen through the interpretive framework of Greek tragedy. We can therefore see that Kurosawa's study of Noh moves far beyond a mere borrowing of the aesthetics, the entire production being imbued with the Buddhist metaphysics which underlie it. This leads to a further dilemma, however. If we accept that '*Throne of Blood* may be an example of film functioning spectacularly on a purely formal plane, but [that] the human element is lacking' (Desser 1985, 71) and that 'the only important thing for a work of art is to present what corresponds with reason and spiritual truth' (Hegel 1975, 1197), we must still ask why *Throne of Blood* remains such an intriguing work.

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