

Silence and Sound in Kurosawa's Throne of Blood

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**Abstract:** Lei Jin argues in her paper, "Silence and Sound in Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*," that silence and sound are employed as vehicles to explore the major themes of Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, fate, ambition, and destruction. By examining closely a few dramatic moments of the film, Lei demonstrates that silence and the interaction between silence, natural sound, and Noh music enhance the effect of Kurosawa's visual images, enforce their symbolic messages, and intensify the characters' psychological conflicts. Although Asaji's introspective speech and most of the dialogue between Washizu and Asaji are eliminated, silence bespeaks Asaji's unfathomable evil. In turn, Washizu's silence conveys his inner struggle between ambition, moral consciousness, and the social code of the samurai. The harmonious and disharmonious relationship between the performance, music, and silence of the film is traced back to the Japanese tradition of Noh theater.

Lei JIN

### Silence and Sound in Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*

Silence and sound produce a compelling power in Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957): the mysterious and pregnant silence carried on the harsh wind, the impatient silence that is intensified by the galloping hoof beats, the violent silence that is broken by the cry of the crow, and the ambiguous and suspenseful silence that is prolonged by the beating drum. These patterns intensify the characters' emotional turmoil, articulate their psychological struggle, and reinforce the narrative effect that is carried out through visual images in order to produce an aesthetically satisfying work of art. In the most critical moments of the movie, such as the murder scene, it is through the manipulation of silence and the interaction between silence, natural sound, and Noh music that Kurosawa recreates the dramatic power of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that was originally conveyed by dialogue. A close examination of a few selected moments of *Throne of Blood* shows that Kurosawa uses dramatic silence, natural sounds, and Noh music as symbolic vehicles by which to explore the major themes of the movie -- fate, ambition, and destruction.

The fact that *Throne of Blood* dispenses with Shakespeare's poetic dialogue has remained a contentious issue. Viewing it as "a great masterpiece," Geoffrey Reeves and Peter Brook refuse to recognize the movie as a Shakespeare film "because it doesn't use the text" (Reeves 316). However, more recent scholarship shows a more positive attitude. In Anthony Davies's view, the film "has made Western scholarship more aware of the universal appeal of Shakespeare's dramatic material" (154). Moreover, Davies's exploration of spatial relationships, particularly the conflict between horizontal and vertical, shows Kurosawa's craft and originality. And as Stephen Prince argues, Kurosawa "recognizes that the process of adapting literature to the screen is one not of translation but transformation.... The verbal texture of the play is transformed into a dense, elaborate patterning of image and sound" (142). Following this line of reasoning, I discuss in this paper how natural sounds, such as the cry of the owl and the hoof beats of horses, embody symbolic meanings that not only enforce the film's visual images but also the major themes of the movie.

In the early part of his cinematic career, Kurosawa showed a great sensibility toward the effect and power of silent movies: "I like silent pictures and always have. They are often so much more beautiful than sound pictures. Perhaps they have to be. At any rate, I wanted to restore some of this beauty" (qtd. in Richie "Kurosawa," 112). In *Throne of Blood* Kurosawa invites his audience repeatedly to ponder brief or minutes-long moments of silence. Through these moments, he restores the great concentration of the silent movie. He recognizes that "depending on how the sound is put in, the visual image may strike the viewer in many different ways" (Kurasawa 108). The way Kurosawa breaks the silence adds new meanings to visual images, and eventually he develops a symbolic sound and visual pattern that forms an aesthetic unity.



Silence that infuses and is broken by natural sound forms one of the most significant patterns in the film. At the beginning of *Throne of Blood*, the camera slowly moves from a vast bleak landscape to the site of a deserted castle, where only the stone foundation remains. The chorus chants the warrior's doomed fate: "Behold within this place / Now desolate, stood / Once a mighty fortress / Lived a proud warrior / Murdered by ambition / His spirit walking still." After the chant fades away, there is a moment of silence. The fog rises and flows more and more densely, eventually shrouding the landscape.

For a transcendental moment, the audience beholds nothing but void and hears nothing but

silence. The sound of harsh wind counterpoints the silence, and the silence deepens the mysterious and ambiguous feeling evoked by the heavy fog. Silence compels the audience to penetrate the inscrutable fog. The image of the creeping metamorphic fog emphasizes that all earthy things are illusory. Silence not only enforces but also transcends the particular historical moment to a timeless frame. Gradually the Forest Castle emerges on the screen, and the silence is broken by hoof beats. A wounded soldier knocks at the castle's heavy wooden gate and delivers a message: the North Fort has rebelled. Besides being a conventional characteristic of the war movie, the hoof beats here declare the major themes of the film -- ambition, perfidy, treachery, and war. This pattern is further developed and illustrated in two other important scenes: the forest scene in which Washizu (Macbeth) and Miki (Banquo) gallop aimlessly in the foggy forest and the scene in which the murder is being planned in Washizu's castle.

After hearing the Forest Spirit's prophecy, Washizu and Miki try to find their way anxiously out of the forest. A dozen times the two samurai gallop through the dense fog, then rush back again. After hours of vain struggle, the two warriors discover that they have ridden in a circle. The ringing hoof beats break the forest's silence, and in return, a crack of thunder and hollow laughter threatens and mocks the two warriors' aimless struggle. This eloquent shot is held for more than four minutes. Eventually the impatient and vigorous hoof beats articulate the two samurais' suddenly kindled ambition. Their ambition, however, is doomed to fail, a failure represented by the metaphorical circle which the two warriors exit and enter. The audience finds that the forest, whose silence is violated, not only threatens and mocks the two intruders, but also asks for revenge. The psychological implication of the metaphorical visual pattern -- labyrinth forest and circled movement -- and the particular sound pattern -- silence and the intrusion of hoof beats -- set up the symbolic texture of the film. At the end of the movie, the forest advances to the castle in a slow-motion shot, ending Washizu's ambition and his life.

In addition to the forest scene and the end of the film, the circling gallop is seen in another crucial scene--the plotting of the murder. The only bright yet ironically serene scene is depicted right after Washizu becomes the lord of the North Castle. In his courtyard, Washizu's samurais are relaxing in the sunshine -- walking a horse in lazy steps, sitting on the porch, and enjoying the shade, and chatting as one of the samurai proclaims: "how peaceful!" This contented mood and atmosphere, however, are subverted by a sudden whinny. The camera shifts to the porch where Washizu appears: Silently and



restlessly he stands there for a brief moment, then returns to his chamber. Inside the chamber, the warrior paces back and forth, trying to suppress his ambition and resist the attempts of Lady Asaji (Lady Macbeth) to persuade him to rebel. The warrior exclaims: "I want to live in peace!" His claim is immediately mocked by another loud whinny. In the rest of the scene, the conversation between Washizu and Asaji concerning the treacherous plot is coupled with and disrupted by the sound of the horse's whinny and hoof beats, and one can see through the open door of the room the horse circling in the courtyard. Washizu's moral struggle, suppressed ambition, and deepened suspicions are vividly illustrated through the image of the circling horse, and intensified by the sharp whinny and the restless hoof beats. Prince suggests that the repeated metaphorical circling movement of the film embodies "ideas of temporal circularity and the fatedness of violence and evil" (Prince 144). "Kurosawa seems closely allied to the Spirit," Jack Jorgens notes, as "he too enmeshes his characters in a format pattern so rigid that it becomes an aesthetic equivalent of Fate" (172). Suppressed silence, hoof beats, and the circled movement are interwoven, and the

repetition of this sound and visual pattern emphasizes the world of *Throne of Blood*, a world in which humans are caught in the cycle of ambition, treachery, and war.

Although the symbolic sound and visual images convey the complicated psychological conflict of the characters and fathom the depth of human fate, their elements are surprisingly simple. "Visually," Richie observes, "the film is a marvel because it is made of so little: fog, wind, trees, mist -- the forest and castle" (Richie 1965, 120). The same simplicity is applied to the sound pattern and technique. Silence, natural sound, and Noh-music -- mainly the sound of flute and drum -- are the main aural components in the movie. Moreover, both sound and visual images are shaped in a restricted pattern. The solitary flute and the contrast between its high pitch and a deep drum function as soliloquy and dialogue, conveying the characters' wide range of emotional stress, as well as the conflicts among different characters. The harmony of stylized performance and restricted music ironically amplifies the disharmonious relationships and the emotional and mental crises that follow.

A glance at the Japanese theatrical tradition, Noh, helps us to better understand the significant relationship between silence and the music. Both the visual and sound patterns of *Throne of Blood* are heavily influenced by Noh tradition, which flourished in the later fourteenth century. The ideal Noh performance offers the audience a profound theatric experience of ritual dance, song, chant, and poetry. Comparisons of *Throne of Blood* and Noh have stressed the affinity between this theatrical tradition and the performance of the characters in the movie, particularly the "stylized performance" and the "masklike presentation of characters" (Prince 146). The stylization of the two female figures -- Asaji and the Forest Spirit -- and "the formal, closed, ritual, limited quality of the Noh" has also been noticed (Richie 1965, 118). The relationship between the convention of Noh performance and the auditory perception of the film, however, has received little attention. Yet the connection is very strong, since the interval and silence between two physical actions has a fascinating and important effect. At the moment when the dance has stopped, or the chant has ceased, or indeed in any of those intervals that can occur during the performance of a role, or, indeed, during any pause or interval, the actor must never abandon his concentration but must keep his consciousness of inner tension. It is the sense of inner concentration that manifests itself to the audience and makes that moment enjoyable (Zeami 97).

The concentration and intensity of silence, a legacy of the pauses between chants and songs in the Noh tradition, creates the compelling force of the pivotal scene in *Throne of Blood*, the equivalent of Duncan's murder in Shakespeare's play. Lasting six minutes and broken only briefly by non-verbal sound and music, silence dominates the action. It deepens the dark mood of the movie, enhances the narrative effect of the visual images, and conveys the broad range of the characters' emotional struggles from hesitation to determination, fear, and eventually terror. Having been persuaded and now determined to murder the Lord, Washizu sits still on the floor of his chamber, his face contorting as he breathes heavily. In contrast to her husband's still position, Asaji glides around the room. Against the deep silence, the swishing sound of her silk kimono is sharp, clear, and forceful. Soon the gentle and feminine sound of silk is transformed into the creeping and threatening glide of a vicious snake. Sliding into a side chamber, Asaji disappears into the deep darkness. Reappearing a few seconds later, she has a jar of tempered wine in her hands. One shot of the particular jar sufficiently tells the lady's success. The drugged guards sleep soundly, and a profound silence pervades the entire castle.

The apparent silence, however, is deceiving, for soon the sharp swish is heard again. In concert with Asaji's appearance on the porch, a thin pitched flute melody rises. On one hand, the elegant music forms an aesthetic harmony with Asaji's body movement. On the other hand, it infuses a creeping, haunting sensation into the tense atmosphere. The camera quietly moves into the chamber in which the couple plans to stay for the night. It was once occupied by a traitor who killed himself after his treachery failed, and now hideous bloodstains cover the wall. The audience beholds Washizu, again sitting intensely on the floor. As Kurosawa explains, the low ceiling and the mattress lying in front of the warrior create "the effect of oppression" and emphasize the hero's



psychological struggle (Richie 1965, 123). The haunting sound of the flute persists, and the eerie sensation is made visual by the grotesque bloodstained walls, within which Washizu is physically and psychologically trapped. Asaji enters the room and places a spear in his hand, and all is silent. The silence and the swish associated with Washizu and Asaji indicate respectively their roles in the conspiracy. The forceful sounds of her garment symbolize the lady's aggression, which breaks the silence. Thus the ongoing psychological battle between the warrior and his wife is not only revealed by the spatial arrangement of the two characters -- stillness vs. movement, low position versus high -- but is also illustrated by the auditory contrast between silence and her forceful swish. This implication is made clearer by a significant moment in which the two characters appear frozen, face to face, both with their hands on a spear. Unable to speak, Washizu glares at his wife violently, as if trying to gather all his strength to resist her evil force, his face twisting like the Noh mask of an ancient warrior as his shoulders shake. In contrast, his wife remains emotionless, yet her eyes project a compelling force. Although Lady Macbeth's introspective speech and most of the dialogue between the couple are eliminated, silence bespeaks Asaji's unfathomable evil. Asaji's silence proclaims her determination, ambition, and thirst for blood and power, as well as a pure evil force.

Although the virtues of Shakespeare's King Duncan have been subverted by the treachery of Kurosawa's Lord, still the social code of the samurai emphasizes loyalty, duty, and trust. Facing the dreadful idea of violating the samurai code, Washizu wages a psychological battle both within and without himself. On one level, he desperately struggles between ambition, moral consciousness, and the social code of the samurai. On another level, he wrestles with Asaji's arguments. Her words from an earlier scene, "there cannot be any peace if Miki tells what happened in the forest," root suspicions in his mind, and the Lord's disguised military movements further muddies the unclear water. Washizu is confused. The warrior's inner struggle is so furious that ultimately he reaches its limitation. As if his nerve has been extended to the utmost limit and snapped, a sudden screech of an owl breaks the unbearable silence. The screech simultaneously conveys an ominous cry of murder, the mocking of the Forest Spirit, and a lamentation on the fate of a doomed human. It is also a cry of Washizu's defeated moral consciousness and destroyed samurai's confidence. Finally, the warrior takes the fatal spear and makes his way to the treacherous murder.

The power of silence is further manifested through the dynamic interfusion with Noh music. Although marked as "a good deal more evil than Lady Macbeth" (Richie 1965, 119), and "lacking of the human dimension of Shakespeare's character" (Prince 143), Asaji also reveals her inner fear and realizes her doomed fate. Sitting on the floor, she waits noiselessly. The silence that symbolizes Washizu's fear and resistance in the earlier scene accompanies her, until the haunting solitary flute recurs. As if listening to the flute, Asaji slowly turns her face to the bloodstained wall and rests her eyes on the grotesque scene. Although only partially visible, Asaji's mask-like face alters and betrays her fear. As the haunting flute begins to play, fear apparently creeps out from beneath

her mask-like face. The music persists, and the lady's fear increases. A sudden shrill note and a driving drum beat intensify Asaji's emotion. She abruptly rises and quickly walks toward the blood-stained wall. Staring at the hideous image, terrified, she circles frenziedly in front of the graphic wall. Her circular movement emphasizes the metaphoric cycles of the movie -- ambition, treachery, and hideous death. Ironically, she is one who draws the circle and sets the trap. The sharp contrast between silence and the driving Noh music, which frame the transition from Asaji's stillness to her sudden frenzied movement, prove that "the whole energy system of the film derives from the pattern of extreme containment followed by explosive release that characterizes the rhythm of Noh" (Hapgood 239).

The silence of the murder scene finally reaches its full power as Kurosawa reveals the destruction of the great warrior. Washizu returns with the bloody spear and drops himself on the floor without realizing that the deadly weapon is still in his hands. The spear remains locked in his lethal posture even after Asaji takes it away by force. The warrior appears to sink to a moment of "frozen immobility," to borrow Noel Burch's phrase (310). Where in the early scene silence conveys Washizu's wavering mental state, at the end of the scene it bespeaks his destruction. Commenting upon this breath taking scene, John Gerlach argues that "Kurosawa eliminates the contrast between act and reflection and gives only acts performed in mitigating circumstances" (357). From my point of view, however, the psychological complexity and conflict in the murder scene are extended and intensified to the extreme. This scene demonstrates the most distinctive characteristics of Kurosawa's general approach to Shakespeare's play: simple, dense, intense, and compelling.



Having examined the mysterious silence of the beginning of the movie and the violent silence of the murder scene, I now take a look at the most ambiguous and suspenseful silent moment of the movie, the funeral scene. Here Miki's silence contains a paradox of perfidy and loyalty. First, it can be understood as a denunciation of his loyalty to the murdered Lord. Chased by Washizu and his soldiers, Master Kunimaru (Malcolm) and General Noriyasu (Macduff) narrowly make their way back to the Forest Castle, and in a life and death moment, they demand that Miki open the gate. Instead of fulfilling his duty and demonstrating loyalty, Miki sends down a shower of arrows, wounding and driving his young master away. His rejection of Kunimaru, the legitimate heir, indeed is treachery. Therefore, it would not be surprising to see Miki take a chance and strike for power.



But Miki's ambiguous silence remains when Washizu first arrives at the gate. In contrast to the presentation of Washizu's psychological struggle, which is conveyed by the warrior's contorted face and glaring eyes, Miki is absent from the screen and only appears at the end of the scene. Rather than giving his audience the privilege of witnessing the character's mental stress from a distance as in the cases of Asaji and Washizu, Kurosawa involves the audience in the process of interpreting Miki's ambiguous silence. A long-

shot first reveals the slow funeral procession as Washizu approaches the castle for a second time. In addition to suspenseful music, a suddenly rising mist heightens the uncertainty of the situation. A few close-shots show the alert and tense facial expressions of Washizu and his soldiers, while a pounding drum dramatically resonates the beating of the warriors' hearts. The funeral procession is viewed for a long time and shot from different angles and distances, compelling the audience to perceive Miki's silence through the mist. The sense of danger heightens as the procession gets closer and closer to the castle and the drum pounds even more heavily. Eventually, at an effective moment, the distance between the observer and the observed -- the audience and Washizu -- is erased. In a low-angle shot the viewer finds himself placed in Washizu's position: looked down upon by those hidden behind the castle walls, and exposed to potential attack. A ringing gong heightens the threatening sensation. A low-shot of numerous arrow-holes of the high castle gate implicates the potential danger and viciousness of Miki's silence and projects Washizu's fear. Finally, the long suspenseful silence contrasts with the movie's intense rhythm. Kurosawa's portrait of Miki's ambiguous silence manifests his masterful skill and demonstrates the power of silence in the movie from a different aspect. The gate finally opens, Washizu encounters Miki, but one finds no certain answer to Miki's ambiguous silence over the murder that Washizu committed. Although Miki casts a condemning glance at Washizu, Miki's voluntary suggestion that the murderer is the Lord of the Forest Castle betrays his complicity, while his comment that "the Forest Spirit sees the future very clearly" reveals his own ambition. Miki's ambiguity enforces the observation that "the world of *Throne and Blood* is morally ambiguous" (Clifton 56) -- a theme that Kurosawa illustrates through the repeating symbolic circular motif.

The above brief examination of a few dramatic moments of the *Throne of Blood* invites us to appreciate Kurosawa's manipulation of silence and sound within the movie. Silence and the interactions between silence, natural sound -- wind, hoof beats, the horse's whinny, the owl's cry, and Noh music -- mainly flute and drum -- enhance the effect of Kurosawa's dramatic visual images, enforcing their symbolic messages, and proclaiming the major themes of the movie. The hoof beats symbolize suppressed ambition, war, violence, and the chaos. Parallel to the repeated circular movement of the galloping horse is the sound pattern of silence broken by hoof beats. Together they emphasize the cycle of doomed fate. The forest, whose silence is interrupted and broken by the violent hoof beats, sends the cracking thunder as a message of anger and revenge, foretelling the destructive result, that no voice will remain, only silence.

Silence conveys the characters' inner stress and conflict. While silence conveys Washizu's hesitation and fear, the swishing sound of Asaji's silk kimono proclaims her determination and force. The couple's psychological battle of desire and resistance, of treachery and moral and social consciousness are expressed through stylized performance and constricted music, both of which derive from the Noh tradition that offers a visual and auditory harmony. At the same time, an elegant flute creates a disharmony that reflects the characters' inner world, intensifying the characters' psychological conflicts. The owl's cry over Washizu's defeated moral consciousness and the lost confidence of the samurai mocks the couple's doomed fate and echoes the Forest Spirit's hollow laughter. While Asaji's fear is betrayed by the driving drumbeats and the sound of the shrill flute, silence and immobility accentuate Washizu's destruction. Finally, by employing different strategies to construct silence, Kurosawa not only reveals the psychological depth and conflict of this great story, but also forces his audience to participate in and interpret his film. Miki's inner tension is portrayed through an ambiguous silence, which reveals a moral ambiguity -- the lasting truth of *Throne of Blood*. Shakespeare's introspective speeches have been transformed into a contrast between silence and sounds.

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