

AA306 Shakespeare: text and performance
AA306/VCR 4 Shakespeare on Screen

Producer: Jenny Bardwell

Contributor(s) in clip:

Kiernan Ryan

Sue Wiseman

Stephen Regan

Clip transcript: AA306 MacBeth 3

Kiernan Ryan:

... I think there's something rather interesting about the development of Macbeth's characterisation by Orson Welles, at the start he's youthful and charismatic and athletic looking, every inch the warlord the successful glamorous warlord,

[Extract: Macbeth, 1948, directed by Orson Welles – Macbeth drinking and striding about]

and once he attains to the crown after the murder he becomes very citizen a very Citizen Kane-like way rather bloated, heavy drinking, slightly comical sinister monster a point that's underlined very dramatically this is a good example I think of the subtle use of sound in movies, by a kind of pumping tuba.

And so in that regard at least, you can see potentially tragic contrasts between the kind of man he started out being, and the sort of bloated buffoon in a way or rather sinister and lethal bloated buffoon that he winds up being.

Sue Wiseman:

Interestingly actually after that rather wonderful banquet scene there is a moment where the question of what Lady Macbeth has become and the question of what Macbeth himself now is this kind of rather bloated figure who is also I think in the banquet scene been a tragic figure,

[Extract: Macbeth, 1948, directed by Orson Welles – Macbeth slumped on seat, Lady Macbeth]

they're sitting alone together and when he's saying he's gonna do in all the McDuffs, and he sits there and he's this very solid kind of, the whole of his body sort of one pendulous thing sitting on this kind of the end of the bed posture isn't it, (slumped) like we're locked in this terrible relationship I was gonna tell you about my death, and she is increasingly she says "oh, you'll see to it will you", and then she moves right off and in a way that's the last time we see them together, and that's the point at which they both become those things that they're going to be to the end.

Keirnan Ryan:

That's right yes they're strange and isolated and on a one way track collision course with their own private obscure tragedies yes.

Stephen Regan:

We do see some very striking uses of cinematic technique in the Orson Welles Macbeth particularly the dissolves, the way in which certain images just turn into a very fluid state.

Sue Wiseman:

Yes that's the area in which the film organises ambiguity as opposed to the black and white imagery which creates contrast it seems to me that the hallucinatory quality of Macbeth's own life and the way his life is turning into a phantasmagoria, is really beautifully conveyed by the dissolves, and there's a wonderful moment when he's thinking about the murder of Banquo and Fleance, and there's a tree branch and that dissolves into the murderer sitting on the tree branch, and it creates a lovely kind of set of questions about what he is acting out, and how far fantasy is motivating that in that point.

Kiernan Ryan.

Yeah I think that's a wonderful example of the way cinematic technique in this case the use of montage and dissolves, can really capture the use of that the pre-figurative use of that same technique in Shakespeare's own poetry which is notorious for the way it can slip and slide and slither from one idea one connotation or association or image to another within the space of a single line, I think that's really marvellously caught that's a terrific example I think of finding a cinematic equivalent for the poetic resonances of Shakespeare's language.

[Extract: Macbeth, 1948, directed by Orson Welles]

Stephen Regan:

It's fascinating as well how through cinematic techniques we see a comment not just on Shakespeare's age, but on our own, the way in which cinema seems to pre-figure so much of what is happening in our own time. Not surprisingly the Orson Welles Macbeth drew on fears of fascism prevalent in the 1940's, as much as on issues of kingship in Shakespeare's own time. Roman Polanski was just a child when the Welles' Macbeth was being made, but his version of Macbeth also seems to show us specifically 20th century power struggles.