



Northern Illinois University

NIU Art Museum

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

Film Screening and Discussion of Akira Kurosawa's 1957 classic *Throne of Blood*, hosted by Northern Illinois University Art Museum's educational series

DeKalb, IL – The NIU Art Museum will sponsor a screening and discussion of Japanese cinematographer Akira Kurosawa's 1957 classic ***Throne of Blood*** with NIU History and Language Professors E. Taylor Atkins and John R. Bentley moderating this re-interpretation of *Macbeth*, at **7:00 p.m., Thursday, April 30 at the Egyptian Theatre, 135 N. Second Street, DeKalb. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. and admission is \$7 for adults, \$5 students, seniors, and NIU Art Museum Members.**

Stuart Henn, Coordinator of Marketing and Education at the NIU Art Museum took a moment to talk about the film with the moderators of the discussion and screening, E. Taylor Atkins and John R. Bentley.

Henn: What first drew you to this particular film by Kurosawa for the screening?

Atkins: I first saw this film when I was an exchange student in Japan in the fall of 1988. One of the faculty at our school, Kansai Gaidai, would show classic Japanese films on Friday afternoons. I think I attended every one. *Throne of Blood* was one of the most memorable and mesmerizing. When Museum Director Jo Burke asked if I knew a movie that "blended East and West," this film was my first thought. It is a retelling of *Macbeth*, using the stylized acting techniques, music, and expressions of *nō* theater.

Bentley: I was intrigued by the imagery of war-torn Japan overlaid with *Macbeth*.

Henn: Why has this film endured as one of Kurosawa's classics?

Atkins: With the exception of his wartime films, Kurosawa's films are always of interest to film buffs. People who take an interest in his work—including me—crave to see all of them. But although Kurosawa is a household name in Japan, he was not in his lifetime, nor is he now the most popular or well regarded director among Japanese audiences. There was a time when people criticized him as Japan's most "Western" director, who made films for the international festival circuit. He always insisted he made his films for Japanese audiences, but his later work often depended on investors like George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, or even the Soviet Union (!) for financing. *Throne of Blood* stands out among his oeuvre for its signature blend of *nō* aesthetics and its critique of individual ambition as a self-destructive force.

Bentley: I think it is because both cultures (British and Japan) appreciate the common theme. I think human nature is portrayed effectively here.

Henn: What is most striking in Kurosawa's melding of Western tragedy and Japanese Noh Theatre?

Atkins: For me, it's Washizu's wife Asaji and her unnerving lack of expression, which replicates the unmoving visage of a *nō* mask. When she does smile—exactly once, I think—you wish she hadn't. It's so sinister. The scene in which she tells Washizu that she is "with child" uses *nō* music to powerful effect, as well.

Bentley: The almost rhythmic movements, and the melodic imagery, to me, is the most striking.

- More -

Henn: What can viewers learn from this film about feudal period Japan or Japanese Noh Theatre?

Atkins: I use this film whenever I teach about the Warring States period in Japanese history, roughly 1467-1590, which is the historical setting of the movie. *Ran* and *Kagemusha* are also set in that time, and I've used those as well, but I keep coming back to *Throne*. It's an example of film as a "responsible" interpreter of history, whether or not it's based on factual events or real people. It shows the cutthroat milieu of the Warring States, in which warlords (*daimyō*) came to power by ruthlessly murdering their lords, then spend most of their time worrying that someone among their retainers will do the same to them, rather than governing or enjoying their new status. It was later—in the seventeenth century—when loyalty became the cardinal virtue of the samurai; but at that time the country was at peace, warriors were bureaucrats and administrators, and some of them wrote about the ideals to which samurai should aspire. The writers of *bushidō* texts explicitly remembered the Warring States period as one in which treachery was far more common than loyalty, and constructed a value system encouraging nobler conduct.

Bentley: I think when people see the commonalities between Western and Japanese culture, they stop seeing Japanese culture as strange or exotic, and this then allows them to appreciate the things that are interesting or distinctive within Japan.

Henn: Thanks for taking this time to discuss the film with me. Be sure to join E. Taylor Atkins and John Bentley Thursday, April 30 at 7:00 p.m. at the Egyptian Theatre for the screening and discussion of Kurosawa's film *Throne of Blood*. Special thanks to both of you for your help in presenting this discussion in the Art Museum's educational series. This program is offered in conjunction with the exhibition *Traditions Transfigured: The Noh Masks of Bidou Yamaguchi*, a national traveling exhibition organized by the University Art Museum at California State University Long Beach in conjunction with Dr. Kendall H. Brown on display now at the NIU Art Museum.

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* serves as the source of the film's plot, which has been transformed into the feudal period of Japan by stylistic elements from Japanese Noh theatre. General Taketoki Washizu, a Samurai warrior played by actor Toshiro Mifune, plays the lead role of Macbeth, spurred on by his wife, Lady Asaji Washizu, played by Isuzu Yamada, who seeks power and control of Spider's Web Castle. Kurosawa directed 30 films during his 57 year career which was critical in opening Western film markets to Japanese films and other Japanese filmmakers. Kurosawa received a Lifetime Achievement Academy Award in 1990 for his contributions to cinema. Among his highly acclaimed films are *Ikiru* (1952), *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Kagemusha* (1980) and *Ran* (1985).

This film is not rated. Viewer discretion advised; film contains images of blood and violence.

Individuals who wish to learn more about this and other upcoming events may visit www.niu.edu/artmuseum or phone 815-753-1936.

About Dr. E. Taylor Atkins

Dr. Atkins is a Presidential Teaching Professor in the Department of History in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at NIU. Atkins teaches modern world and Asian history courses as well as Japanese history including popular culture in Japan as well as special topics in Knights and Samurai with Professor Valerie Garver.

About Dr. John R. Bentley

Dr. John R. Bentley is a professor of Japanese language in the Department of Foreign Language and Literature in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at NIU. Bentley's research interest includes the history, phonology, and etymology of Old Japanese from the Asuka (592 – 710) and Nara (710 – 794) eras as well as the literature from the Asuka and Nara eras.

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About the NIU Art Museum

The NIU Art Museum contributes to the University's educational curriculum and provides opportunities for art education and cultural enrichment throughout the community. The Museum serves to educate, preserve, exhibit, and enlighten by balancing the challenges of contemporary art with the riches of traditional media for a comprehensive examination of visual culture.

The exhibitions and programs of the NIU Art Museum are sponsored in part by the Illinois Arts Council Agency; the Dean's Circle of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, NIU Foundation; and the Friends of the NIU Art Museum.

Gallery Hours

Tuesday through Friday 10 am – 5 p.m. and Saturday 12 – 4 p.m.; or by appointment for group tours which can be arranged by visiting www.niu.edu/artmuseum or calling 815-753-1936.

Exhibitions are open to the public and admission is **FREE**.

The NIU Art Museum is located on the first floor, west end of Altgeld Hall, located on the corner of College Avenue and Castle Drives on the campus of Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL. Parking is available in the Carroll Avenue Visitor's Pay Lot; handicapped and metered spots in front of Altgeld Hall; and during public receptions and programs in Lot 3 northeast of Gilbert Drive and College Avenue. Campus parking is free on weekends and after 7 p.m. weeknights.

More information about the exhibitions, events, and educational programming at the NIU Art Museum may be found by visiting www.niu.edu/artmuseum or calling 815-753-1936.

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NIU Art Museum

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