

Marty's Notes On "Roshomon"

Summary of, and comments on the 1951 film by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa about the subjectivity of truth.

by MARTIN SPELLERBERG

REVIEW: According to Noel Burch Kurosawa was "superior" to his Japanese contemporaries for his assimilation of Western cinema practice as a starting point from which he proceeded to grow. While Roshomon was considered to have little importance by Japanese critics at the time of its release, and has been declining in western eyes since its speedy acceptance, it remains an original yet accessible film. Roshomon is the story of two men as they sit and relate the events of an "interior narrative" to a third. They are debating the state of the world and how people are so easily driven to lie and cheat for their own ends. The interior narrative is of a trial wherein participants in a murder tell events as they saw them. The events they tell of involve a bandit tying up a samurai, having sex with his wife, and the samurai's death by his own sword. The telling of these events varies from person to person, each of whom takes credit for the samurai's death (including him). When this evidence for humanity's damnation has been presented, the three at the gate are presented with a challenge - there is an abandoned baby behind the gate and each must react to it. The "commoner" steals the baby's clothes, the woodcutter is forced to reveal his part in the crime - that he witnessed the entire thing and stole the valuable sword. It is now that we get a definitive, "true" telling and Kurosawa shows that morality does exist separate from actions as the woodcutter is guilty for his part in the crime. The woodcutter wants to make amends and offers to care for the child, which reaffirms the Priest's faith in humanity and is the case for the film. It was his first use of the geometry that would become his trademark style, though in a rudimentary and simplified way. It serves to challenge film structure in a way that had not been done since filmmakers grappled with the introduction of sound years earlier. He rejected smoothness in editing, not hiding the frame line and the truth to materials that was popularly avoided in the west. He used his camera in the "interior narratives" to reflect the characters as they wanted themselves portrayed after-the-fact. We are aware that we are being exposed to different versions of the same story because the visual style reflects the personalities and the egos telling the story. The bandit's eccentricity finds its way into the camera as a quickly changing jerkiness, while the efforts of the wife and the samurai to sound heroic tend to their posing alone in the frame. The "truth" of the woodcutter's story comes out in an all-encompassing, objective moving camera. In his piece, "The Film Idea," Stanley Solomon argues that the subjective truths of the different tellings are not the motivation for telling the story, that humanity's preservation of ego is the real driving force. In composing the story, Kurosawa took two separate stories and intertwines them, using the gate of Roshomon and the subjective versions of "In A Grove" to symbolize a civilization in decline. Personally, I was very excited by this film. It seemed to me very much more contemporary, owing, I assume to, its western influence. I found that this stylistic feature led me to a greater involvement in the film and consequently I was better able to understand what the filmmaker meant by it. Rather than having to decode every element, I could draw from what I already knew about visual storytelling.

The most curious, yet utterly intriguing portion of that masterful work Rashomon was the version of the deceased husband's tale conveyed through the "medium". This was the most strange and confounding part of the movie for me. I must admit, upon first sight of this shaman of sorts, I was utterly confused as to what in the hell was taking place on screen. After realizing her purpose--that of communicating the dead man's version of the events--I was continually more perplexed with respect to the nature of her validity. I was stupefied at the fact that the magistrate could even logically consider this version of the story remotely credulous in making a decision. It seems to me wholly irrational and ridiculous that the authorities would summon a 'mystic' to assist in an investigation through the conjuring of a spirit; such a 'witness' seems to me beyond the realm of credibility in the investigation of a murder. On the other hand, the idea of using the medium for a witness is probably completely understandable in the eyes of those for whom the movie was explicitly intended, the Japanese. Perhaps such a practice was not that uncommon in Japan, especially during the Middle Ages. Indeed, the priest perhaps lends credit to the mystic's credibility, thus debunking my argument: "Dead men tell no lies."

The aspect of the film that effected the most lasting and memorable impression upon me was the director's altogether novel and groundbreaking approach to creating a film: concerning any situation or event, the various participants will subsequently reveal differing and often opposing versions of reality. Many reasons for this lack of unity exist. Naturally, people will remember facets of an experience in different ways, emphasizing disparate portions of the incident with variability. In addition, each one relating the events of an incident will perhaps want to portray their actions as better than they were in reality, either for the sake of covering up their own cowardice or guilt, or simply to add in a noble quality to their actions. The reports are bound to be inconsistent among the participants--it is an inescapable part of human nature. The idea of portraying this phenomenon through film is ingenious and unparalleled. The effect on the viewer is one of awe and appreciation; and yet there is at the same time a sense of uncertainty as to the true nature of the events in the story--and therein lies the true brilliance of the work. They say that the goal of art, especially that of theatre, is to imitate real life. In my eyes, Rashomon is as real and true to life as art becomes.

The idea that the authorities commandeered the services of the supernatural to provide yet another take upon the events surrounding a murder is wholly un-American (not to say that un-American ness denotes badness, just difference). Indeed, the fact that the supernatural invoked was the murdered man himself seems absurd to American judicial practices--although the scene is primitive, medieval Japan, a fact that definitely adds another element altogether. In addition, in the version of the woman's tale, she killed her husband from shame incurred as a result of giving herself to the bandit. Likewise, the dead man said that he stabbed himself from shame after having seen his wife give herself to the bandit. It seems that shame and dishonor hold more egregious and earth-shattering consequences in Japanese culture rather than in America.

RASHOMON

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BY ROGER EBERT

Shortly before filming was to begin on "Rashomon," Akira Kurosawa's three assistant directors came to see him. They were unhappy. They didn't understand the story. "If you read it diligently," he told them, "you should be able to understand it, because it was written with the intention of being comprehensible." They would not leave: "We believe we have read it carefully, and we still don't understand it at all."

Recalling this day in *Something Like an Autobiography*, Kurosawa explains the movie to them. The explanation is reprinted in the booklet that comes with the new Criterion DVD of "Rashomon." Two of the assistants are satisfied with his explanation, but the third leaves looking puzzled. What he doesn't understand is that while there is an *explanation* of the film's four eyewitness accounts of a murder, there is not a *solution*.

Kurosawa is correct that the screenplay is comprehensible as exactly what it is: Four testimonies that do not match. It is human nature to listen to witnesses and decide who is telling the truth, but the first words of the screenplay, spoken by the woodcutter, are "I just don't understand." His problem is that he has heard the same events described by all three participants in three different ways--and all three claim to be the killer.

"Rashomon" (1950) struck the world of film like a thunderbolt. Directed by Kurosawa in the early years of his career, before he was hailed as a grandmaster, it was made reluctantly by a minor Japanese studio, and the studio head so disliked it that he removed his name from the credits. Then it won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, effectively opening the world of Japanese cinema to the West. It won the Academy Award as best foreign film. It set box office records for a subtitled film. Its very title has entered the English language, because, like "Catch-22," it expresses something for which there is no better substitute.

In a sense, "Rashomon" is a victim of its success, as Stuart Galbraith IV writes in *The Emperor and the Wolf*, his comprehensive new study of the lives and films of Kurosawa and his favorite actor, Toshiro Mifune. When it was released, he observes, nobody had ever seen anything like it. It was the first use of flashbacks that disagreed about the action they were flashing back to. It supplied first-person eyewitness accounts that differed radically--one of them coming from beyond the grave. It ended with three self-confessed killers and no solution.

Since 1950 the story device of "Rashomon" has been borrowed repeatedly; Galbraith cites "Courage Under Fire," and certainly "The Usual Suspects" was also influenced, in the way it shows us flashbacks that do not agree with any objective reality. Because we see the events in flashbacks, we assume they reflect truth. But all they reflect is a point of view, sometimes lied about. Smart films know this, less ambitious films do not. Many films that use a flashback only to fill in information are lazy.

The genius of "Rashomon" is that all of the flashbacks are both true and false. True, in that they present an accurate portrait of what each witness thinks happened. False, because as Kurosawa observes in his autobiography, "Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing."

The wonder of "Rashomon" is that while the shadowplay of truth and memory is going on, we are absorbed by what we trust is an unfolding story. The film's engine is our faith that we'll get to the bottom of things--even though the woodcutter tells us at the outset he doesn't understand, and if an eyewitness who has heard the testimony of the other three participants doesn't understand, why should we expect to?

The film opens in torrential rain, and five shots move from long shot to closeup to reveal two men sitting in the shelter of Kyoto's Rashomon Gate. The rain will be a useful device, unmistakably setting apart the present from the past. The two men are a priest and a woodcutter, and when a commoner runs in out of the rain and engages them in conversation, he learns that a samurai has been murdered and his wife raped and a local bandit is suspected. In the course of telling the commoner what they know, the woodcutter and the priest will introduce flashbacks in which the bandit, the wife and the woodcutter say what they saw, or think they saw--and then a medium turns up to channel the ghost of the dead samurai. Although the stories are in radical

disagreement, it is unlike any of the original participants are lying for their own advantage, since each claims to be the murderer.

Kurosawa's screenplay is only the ground which the film travels, however. The real gift of "Rashomon" is in its emotions and visuals. The cinematographer Kazuo Miyagawa evokes the heat, light and shade of a semi-tropical forest. (Slugs dropped from trees onto the cast and crew, Kurosawa recalled, and they slathered themselves with salt to repel them.)

The woodcutter's opening journey into the woods is famous as a silent sequence which suggests he is traveling into another realm of reality. Miyagawa shoots directly into the sun (then a taboo) and there are shots where the sharply-contrasted shadows of overhead leaves cast a web upon the characters, making them half-disappear into the ground beneath.

In one long sustained struggle between the bandit (Mifune) and the samurai (Masayuki Mori), their exhaustion, fear and shortness of breath becomes palpable. In a sequence where the woman (Machiko Kyo) taunts both men, there is a silence in which thoughts form that will decide life or death. Perhaps the emotions evolved in that forest clearing are so strong and fearful that they *cannot* be translated into rational explanation.

The first time I saw the film, I knew hardly a thing about Japanese cinema, and what struck me was the elevated emotional level of the actors. Do all Japanese shout and posture so? Having now seen a great many Japanese films, I know that in most of them the Japanese talk in more or less the same way we do (Ozu's films are a model of conversational realism). But Kurosawa was not looking for realism. From his autobiography, we learn he was struck by the honesty of emotion in silent films, where dialog could not carry the weight and actors used their faces, eyes and gestures to express emotion. That heightened acting style, also to be seen in Kurosawa's "Seven Samurai" and several other period pictures, plays well here because many of the sequences are, essentially, silent.

Film cameras are admirably literal, and faithfully record everything they are pointed at. Because they are usually pointed at real things, we usually think we can believe what we see. The message of "Rashomon" is that we should suspect even what we think we have seen. This insight is central to Kurosawa's philosophy. The old clerk's family and friends think they've witnessed his decline and fall in "Ikiru" (1952), but we have seen a process of self-discovery and redemption. The seven samurai are heroes when they save the village, but thugs when they demand payment after the threat has passed. The old king in "Ran" (1985) places his trust in the literal meaning of words, and talks himself out of his kingdom and life itself.

Kurosawa's last film, "Madadayo" made in 1993 when he was 83, was about an old master teacher who is visited once a year by his students. At the end of the annual party, he lifts a beer and shouts out the ritual cry "Not yet!" Death is near, but not yet--so life goes on. The film's hero is in some sense Kurosawa. He is a reliable witness that he is not yet dead, but when he dies no one will know less about it than he will.

It wouldn't be a stretch to name legendary Japanese film maker Akira Kurosawa as one of the ten greatest motion picture directors of all time. Kurosawa's brilliant work speaks for itself, and, with over five decades of movie making to his credit, he has more than earned his place alongside the likes of Alfred Hitchcock, Ingmar Bergman, Martin Scorsese, and anyone else who belongs in such lofty company. And, like all of the best directors, Kurosawa did not produce his movies with an elite audience in mind. Though always intelligent, his body of work plays

as well to the "average" movie-goer as it does to the true cineaste. That's the reason why Hollywood has plundered Kurosawa's pictures on a regular basis. His *The Seven Samurai* was remade into one of the greatest Westerns ever -- *The Magnificent Seven*. *Yojimbo* has received two American treatments -- *A Fistful of Dollars* and *Last Man Standing*. *The Hidden Fortress* was one of the inspirations behind George Lucas' *Star Wars*. And *Rashomon*'s unique approach to divergent narratives became a linchpin for *Courage Under Fire*.

Kurosawa began his career in 1943 with a movie called *Sugata Sanshiro*, about a boy learning the meaning of life through judo. Over the next several years, Kurosawa became one of his country most prolific and respected film makers. In 1948, with the film *Drunken Angel*, he first collaborated with actor Toshiro Mifune, beginning a director/actor partnership that would span decades and prove highly rewarding for both men. *Rashomon*, made in 1950, was the pair's fifth movie together, and the film that first garnered Kurosawa widespread international attention (it won the 1952 Best Foreign Language Film Oscar).

The story told by *Rashomon* is both surprisingly simple and deceptively complex. The central tale, which tells of the rape of a woman (Machiko Kyo) and the murder of a man (Masayuki Mori), possibly by a bandit (Toshiro Mifune), is presented entirely in flashbacks from the perspectives of four narrators. The framing portions of the movie transpire at Kyoto's crumbling Rashomon gate, where several people seek shelter from a pelting rain storm and discuss the recent crime, which has shocked the region. One of the men, a woodcutter (Takashi Shimura), was a witness to the events, and, with the help of a priest (Minoru Chiaki), he puzzles over what really happened, and what such a horrible occurrence says about human nature.

In each of the four versions of the story, the characters are the same, as are many of the details. But much is different, as well. In the first account, that of the bandit, the criminal accepts culpability for the murder but refutes the charge of

rape, saying that it was an act of mutual consent. The woman's story affirms that the bandit attacked her, but indicates that she may have been the murderess. The dead man's tale (told through a medium) claims rape and suicide. The only "impartial" witness, the woodcutter, weaves a story that intertwines elements of the other three, leaving the viewer wondering if he truly saw anything at all.

Many people watch *Rashomon* with the intent of piecing together a picture of what really occurred. However, the accounts are so divergent that such an approach seems doomed to futility. *Rashomon* isn't about determining a chronology of what happened in the woods. It's not about culpability or innocence. Instead, it focuses on something far more profound and thought-provoking: the inability of any one man to know the truth, no matter how clearly he thinks he sees things. Perspective distorts reality and makes the absolute truth unknowable.

All of the narrators in *Rashomon* tell compelling and believable stories, but, for a variety of reasons, each of them must be deemed unreliable. It's impossible to determine to what degree their versions are fabrications, and how many discrepancies are the result of legitimate differences in points-of-view. It's said that four witnesses to an accident will all offer different accounts of the same event, but there are things in *Rashomon* (namely, that each of the three participants names himself or herself as the murderer) that cannot be explained away on this basis. And the impressions of the "impartial" observer further muddy the waters, because, despite his protestations that he doesn't lie, we trust his tale the least.

In the end, we are left recognizing only one thing: that there is no such thing as an objective truth. It is a grail to be sought after, but which will never be found, only approximated. Kurosawa's most brilliant move in *Rashomon* is never to reveal what really happened. We are left to make our own deductions. Every time I watch the film, I come away with a slightly different opinion of what transpired in

the woods. But not knowing remains a source of fascination, not one of frustration, and therein lies Kurosawa's greatest achievement.

It's worth saying something about the style employed by the director. The tone and approach of *Rashomon* are radically different from anything Western viewers are likely to be familiar with. The film is presented almost as visual poetry, paying a great deal of attention to sights and images while sound and dialogue have lesser importance. The cinematography is singularly evocative. It would be possible to watch *Rashomon* without subtitles and still capture more than a small fraction of its essence. Likewise, this film could have probably been equally successful during the silent era. Nowhere is this more evident than in one standout, 3 1/2 minute sequence: a kaleidoscope of black-and-white images accompanied only by Fumio Hayasaka's evocative score as the woodcutter makes his way into the woods and discovers the dead body.

As has been true throughout his entire career, Kurosawa draws the best performances out of his actors. As the brash rogue at the center of the controversy, Toshiro Mifune is wonderfully robust. He shades his character differently in each of the four versions, presenting an individual who is unmistakably the same man, yet subtly different. We see the bandit not only as he sees himself, but through the eyes of three others, as well. That's the brilliance of Kurosawa's vision and Mifune's performance. Equally good is Masayuki Mori as the doomed noble. Depending on who is telling the story, he can appear good and noble or cowardly. Once again, the differences serve to emphasize that this is the same person seen from different perspectives.

The most striking portrayal, however, belongs to the radiant Machiko Kyo, whose mesmerizing, seductive character varies the most from narrative to narrative. She can be wholesome, treacherous, sexy, sympathetic, or vicious. Depending on who's painting her portrait, she is a victim, a manipulator, an innocent, or a vixen. At times, she's "like a child trying to be serious"; at others, she's "fierce."



As good as Mifune and Mori are, they are constantly upstaged by Kyo. In casting her, an unknown at the time, Kurosawa knew what he was doing.

Today, nearly fifty years after it was made, *Rashomon* has lost none of its fascination or power. It's still a marvelous piece of cinema that asks unanswerable questions of great import. Films like *Courage Under Fire* may capture some of the spirit of *Rashomon*, but no movie before or since has presented these issues in quite the same unique and intense fashion. In every sense of the word, this is a true classic. It's hard to find a more rewarding way to spend ninety minutes.

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Rashomon, the film that first exposed Japanese master Akira Kurosawa to Western audiences, has had so much written about it already that it feels almost impossible to bring something new to the table while discussing it. As one of the few foreign films to have entered fully into the American popular vernacular, it is an important film not only because of its own technical prowess, but because its Golden Lion win at the Venice Film Festival prompted a golden age in Japanese cinema. Set in eleventh-century Japan, it tells the same brief account of a rape and a murder from four different slanted perspectives, under the pretense that the telling of the truth is a malleable thing, warped by the self-serving intentions of the storyteller.

Kurosawa is one storyteller whose intentions are made abundantly clear. He wants to do nothing less than illustrate the illusory and tremendously personal nature of reality. To do this, he saturates each recounting of the events in the forest with shots taken from a



subjective, constantly moving camera. The sweaty, frenzy that characterizes one telling of the story clashes with teary-eyed version another narrator weaves. Several cinematic elements recur in each episode, however, with an abundance of complex tracking shots, compositions that resemble the triangle that powers the dynamic of the event, similar editing rhythms, and feverish glances skyward throughout. This repetition of visual touchstones suggests that although each person's motivation might have differed, feelings in a broader sense are more similar than different. The cast is uniformly excellent, especially when considering how they subtly alter their performances to show the divergence in the perception of their characters. Toshiro Mifune, Kurosawa's frequent collaborator, is a particular delight. His exaggerated performance isn't naturalistic, but believable nonetheless. The way that he stops during a duel to scratch himself or plays casually with his sword after seeing the girl he desires for the first time demonstrates his wonderful physicality and the sense of humor that he imbues himself with.

Because of the way that he frames us as the judge to the characters' testimonies, the wonderful, pulsating score seems the most obvious directorial comment on the events of *Rashomon* until near the end when Kurosawa's humanism starts to rear its head, to the detriment of the picture. The moral ambiguities of the film are certainly enlightening, but I don't know that the rain-soaked hell-on-earth that Kurosawa presents in his framing device is really deserved. Still, the heavy-handed moralizing of the framing device, and the rank sentimentalism of the ending don't seem a much more comfortable fit than the

pessimism (perhaps if we had this story told by another director, one who was less given to the bathetic, it would be eschewed), so perhaps offering the entire stew of human experience to us is the right choice, after all.