7. Rashomon: Conflicting Perspectives, Self-Interest and Honor

By switching perspectives, we can learn and gain deeper understanding. It’s not ‘the truth’ that matters, but the fullest understanding of a situation. Akira Kurasawa’s Rashomon (1950) made an important contribution to the idea of multiperspectivism.

It’s pouring. The ruins of an elegant building are silhouetted against the grey sky: the Rasho-mon or devil’s gate. A woodcutter and a priest have taken shelter from the rain under the building’s archway. They’re staring at the rain while mulling over this morning’s court case. Hurried footsteps approach, squelching in the mud. A third man joins the other two. It takes this man, a commoner, some time to convince the other two men to tell him their stories.

The entire film presents seven stories by six narrators (the woodcutter tells two of them). All of the stories take place either in the forest or in court. They are interspersed with speculations from the three men under the archway.

The woodcutter’s first account starts with him walking into the forest three days previously to cut down trees. Before long, his foray into an idyllic, sun-dappled forest
(note the camera angles) takes on a menacing quality. First, the woodcutter finds clothing and an amulet. Then, he stumbles upon a dead body and runs off to alert the police.

We cut to this morning’s trial, where the priest gives us his brief account. Three days earlier, he saw an armed man, a samurai, leading a horse with his wife on it through the woods.

The third account is also given in the setting of the trial. The policeman claims that he happened to see Tajomaru, the notorious bandit, two days ago. The bandit was sick and lying on the bank of a river close to the woods. He was in possession of the woman’s horse and the samurai’s weapons.

The policeman’s statement is corroborated by the bandit’s version of events. He claims he ambushed the samurai and raped the woman. After a long heroic fight he killed the samurai and took his weapons. The only thing he left behind was the valuable dagger the woman used to defend herself. The bandit then became sick and collapsed on the riverbank after drinking contaminated water.

At this point in the film, the dead body has been identified and the bandit has confessed a rape and a murder. But then the plot thickens: the woman, the samurai – through a medium – and the woodcutter (in his second story) all say things that contradict each other’s stories or their own earlier statements. The samurai is dead, that much is clear, but who committed the crime?

The woman, in the fifth story, confesses that she used her dagger to kill her husband. She was in a state of shock, because she read cold hatred in his eyes after she was raped. She knew he would never accept her again.

In the sixth story, the dead samurai speaks through a psychic medium and claims that the woman wanted to leave with the bandit after the rape. She asked him to kill her husband. The bandit refused, the woman fled, and eventually the bandit let the samurai go. Having lost his honor, he thrust his wife’s dagger into his own heart. While his spirit was leaving his body, he felt the dagger being pulled out.

In the last three stories, the narrators all point the finger at themselves. And because all three maintain that they are personally responsible for the samurai’s death, it becomes impossible to unequivocally decide who the perpetrator is.

But then the woodcutter slips up – he knows more. In the seventh story (his second), he makes clear that what really happened in the woods is quite different from the stories told by the three people directly involved. As the woodcutter tells it, when he entered the scene and hid behind the shrubs, the rape had already taken place and the bandit was pleading with the woman to marry him. She indicated that, being a woman, she could not decide this, and that the men would have to settle the dispute in
a duel. Neither man was happy with this, but the woman managed to pit them against each other. A tiring and less than heroic fight ensued, which the bandit eventually won by killing the samurai with his sword. The wife got away.

Each of the three men under the archway has his own part to play. The woodcutter is angry:

It’s a lie. It’s all a lie. Tajomaru’s story and the woman’s.

The commoner is a realist and a cynic:

It’s human to lie. Most of the time we can’t even be honest with ourselves.

The priest is devout and an idealist:

That may be. But it’s because men are weak that they lie, even to themselves.

Toward the end of the movie, the contrasts between these characters become sharper. The commoner says:

Man just wants to forget the bad stuff and believe in the made-up good stuff. It’s easier that way.

The priest says:

It’s horrifying… If men don’t trust each other, this earth might as well be hell.

The woodcutter vacillates between the commoner’s sceptical realism and the priest’s
idealistic beliefs. He feels the need for mediation between the conflicting narratives and their possible interpretations.

Meanwhile the rain has let up a bit, and we hear a baby crying. On the other side of the gate, someone has abandoned a child. Without hesitation, the commoner steals the kimono the baby is wrapped in and the amulet attached to it. This again angers the woodcutter, who accuses the commoner of being evil. The latter’s response is laconic:

Evil? What about this kid’s parents?

But the woodcutter retorts:

Damn it. Everyone is selfish and dishonest. Making excuses. The bandit, the woman, the man and you!

The woodcutter attacks the commoner, until the latter screams:

You may have fooled the court, but not me.

This stops the woodcutter in his tracks. The commoner continues:

So what did you do with the dagger? The valuable one with the pearl inlay that Tajomaru was talking about? What happened to it? Did it disappear in the grass? If you didn’t, who stole it? It seems I’m right. A bandit calling another a bandit. Now that’s selfish.

Again, the woodcutter hasn’t given full disclosure. Just as in his first narrative he has left some things out. The commoner’s accusation stops him in his tracks, he falls silent. The commoner disappears as fast as he appeared.

The woodcutter and the priest are alone again. The priest is holding the baby, who is no longer crying. They huddle against the wall of the building, waiting for the weather to subside. Finally, the downpour stops.

In the end, the woodcutter decides to take the baby home. He has six kids of his own and one more won’t make a difference. The priest says this restores his belief in man. We see the woodcutter walk away from the devil’s gate, cradling the baby in his arms. The priest stands in the background, a tiny figure under the dilapidated archway, silhouetted against the sky.

Rashomon, 1950, Akira Kurosawa, Japan.
Virtues and values

The priest and the policeman seem to be reliable narrators. The bandit, however, tells a story in which he manipulates everyone; the samurai claims he killed himself because he saw no other way; the woman claims she killed the samurai because she saw no future with him anymore. All three protagonists in the forest act out of a sense of honor. The fourth, the woodcutter, initially tells lies to avoid getting involved and then later, to hide his theft. His silence when the commoner accuses him seems to confirm his guilt. Each perspective is biased by self-interest and Japanese honor-shame culture. The woodcutter makes up for his lies (and possible theft) by taking responsibility for the abandoned baby.

Form

Sunlight accompanies the woodcutter at the beginning and the end of the movie. At the time, the use of a handheld camera in the woods was innovative. The film score is basically Japanese, with the exception of the woman’s story. Then we hear a version of Ravel’s *Bolero*.

In the courtroom scenes we never get to see the judge or the chief of police, nor do we hear the questions they ask. The only thing we see and hear are the responses and testimony by the bandit, the policeman, the woman and the psychic medium who is channeling the dead samurai. They make their statements facing the camera. This turns the viewer into the judge, the determiner of truth and morality. We are dealing with unreliable narrators. Wayne C. Booth was the first to thoroughly analyze the idea of the unreliable narrator in his work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961).
Rashomon is based on two short stories by Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927). Both are set in the late Heian period, in the 12th century. The movie’s title, the dilapidated gate and the idea of stealing the clothes off the backs of those who cannot defend themselves, are taken from Rashomon (1915, The Devil’s Gate). The different narratives about a single event in the woods are derived from Yabu no naka (1921, In the Forest). Kurosawa and his co-author Shinobu Hashimoto interwove these stories and added the woodcutter’s second narrative. Rashomon is a movie about moviemaking, a meta-movie. It’s a film about the intertwined acts of a small group of people in the forest and another group under an archway who talk about what happened to the group in the woods.

Like the three men under the archway, the viewer struggles with an epistemological problem in reconstructing the story. It is not possible to come up with a well-reasoned reconstruction of the event. In social settings, truth isn’t some timeless insight waiting to be uncovered, but an agreement on the most plausible interpretation. The personal and the social are intertwined, as are knowledge and norms. Contemplation is an internal dialogue that unites old and new information into temporary insights. Such a dialogue takes place in the woodcutter’s head during the long silence towards the end of the movie, prior to his decision to take responsibility for the foundling.

The film gained fame for what is known as the Rashomon Effect. This may refer to two or three of the following characteristics: 1. Several contradictory narratives are told about a serious incident; 2. Several narrators claim responsibility for the act, making it impossible to identify the perpetrator; and 3. The narrators are unreliable.

The ensuing mist of interpretation has had great appeal for directors and screenwriters. In 1960, Sidney Lumet directed a made-for-TV movie called Rashomon (1960), which later served as the basis for Martin Rit’s film The Outrage (1964). In Italy, it inspired Mario Bava’s romantic comedy Quante volte..quella notte (1972). In the 1990s, we witnessed a true Rashomon revival, whose main proponents were Reservoir Dogs (1992), The Usual Suspects (1995), Courage under Fire (1996), Jackie Brown (1997), The Matrix (1999), Go (1999) and Ghost Dog (1999). Recent Rashomon variations from Asia include Thai director Dhewakul’s U morg par meung (2011), whose plot centers around a monk, and the crimedy Ulidavaru Kandanthe (2014) by Indian actor and director Rakshit Shetty.