

Rashomon in an English mirror

(This is a revised, but not final, draft of an article commissioned by Dr Robert Anderson for a volume on 'Rashomon'. It was originally written in 2003, revised in 2005, but it is not certain when or whether it will be published.)

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The central emotional and didactic heart of Rashomon is both different and similar to that of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach', a mid Victorian English lament. Arnold's poem reflects on the loss of hope, faith, meaning, trust, and belief in absolutes. Here is the second half of Arnold's poem:

'The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.'

There are major differences between this poem and Rashomon. In the Japanese case, it was not religious faith in a monotheistic God which had disappeared, for this had never been present, but rather the complex web of faith in fellow Japanese and in the innate goodness and trustworthiness of human beings.

The exhortation in Arnold's poem to find salvation in the love between man and woman, romantic love, is not present in Rashomon. Instead, at the curious ending to the film when the priest hands the little baby to the woodcutter, the latter affirms that this act of love by the woodcutter has saved him from despair. Likewise the woodcutter clearly finds in this act of paternal love some healing for his despair at the start of the film: 'I don't understand. I just don't understand'.

Finally, as Kurosawa looked round Japan in the late 1940's it was hardly a 'land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new'. Rather, as the broken gatehouse visually reminds us, and descriptions of a world full of war, famine and plague, of bandits and fire emphasize, this was Japan after the firebombing of Tokyo and after Hiroshima

and Nagasaki. A 'world of dew' which had become a world of death. Even the beautiful woods, the nature which the Japanese worshipped, recalled in the flashbacks, becomes a sinister haunt of violence and lies.

Yet while it is different in many ways, what makes the film so powerful is the same message that makes 'Dover Beach', or *Oedipus Rex* or *King Lear* great. Kurosawa strips away our illusions, leaves us on the blasted heath where we realize that there is no meaning, no trust, a Hobbesian world of a war of all against all. Life is indeed nasty, brutish and short. What makes the film so interesting is the way in which this devastating message, with its minor consolation, achieves the same effect as Hobbes in philosophy, Sophocles and Shakespeare in drama, and Arnold in poetry. The principal method, of course, is the famous device of narrating the story of a crime seen through four recollections of the event.

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At one level this structure is obvious. Anyone who has heard people recalling an event, particularly in a court of law, would be familiar with it. Basically it shows that although there must have been a real set of actions, a man is murdered, beyond that everything is interpretation. Each witness will re-construct, and perhaps come to believe, what they saw. This is not necessarily 'lying', but it shows how far reality is socially constructed.

This could not have been news to Kurosawa's audience in Japan. Much of Japanese thought and ethics had been based for many centuries on the axiom that 'social truth' is more important than 'factual truth', and indeed on the realization that they are inseparable. On the other hand, it may account for part of the 'Rashomon effect' on western audiences. Increasingly brought up on the belief in 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth', in a positivistic world where a once active God ensures the separation of fact and value, with growing confidence in science and technology, it is often forgotten how much we construct.

The film in some ways is a visual working out of the philosopher Bertrand Russell's statement that the great discovery of the twentieth century was the technique of the suspended judgement. All is provisional, uncertain, relative, probabilistic. In fact this was not a new view; it was known well before Descartes, but we constantly forget it.

The uncertainty is particularly evident where we would expect it least, that is in the study of legal process. My wife is a magistrate (lay judge). She sat on an armed robbery case in Cambridge. There were many witnesses to the raid on the post office. She heard their testimonies and was amazed by the discrepancies. People who were standing only a few yards from the scene described the robbers in totally contrary ways. For some they were tall, dark, bearded, driving a red car; for others they were small, fair, clean-shaven, driving a blue car. And so on. Unlike Rashomon, there was no possible reason to lie. All thought they were telling the 'truth'. It was simply that, as cognitive psychologists could no doubt explain, we see what we expect to see. Yet even hardened judges and prosecutors, let alone the general public forget this and the 'Rashomon effect' is a powerful reminder.

If even westerners from their positivistic background should know this, why should the woodcutter find it so hard to accept? Obviously representing the audience, he poses again and again the central question: 'I do not understand'. He also makes this lack of understanding into a huge issue. Although only one person has been killed and a woman ravished, he insists that the events and subsequent trial are worse than all the wars, earthquakes, typhoons, fires, plagues, bandits and other disasters which were going on around him. They are bad, 'But I've never known anything as horrible as this'. He beseeches someone (the filmmaker?) to 'Tell me what it all means'.

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I guess that part of what it all means may be as follows. Kurosawa's film captures a terrible moment in Japanese history. In the thousand years up to 1945 there had been a civilization which lacked many things. There was no universal God who made a sharp distinction between absolute good and evil, no foundational legal system to differentiate right and wrong, no firm social system to provide a clear code of social behaviour. As the great Fukuzawa Yukichi put it, the Japanese were made of rubber, they stretched large or small, this way or that; all depended on context and the particular relationship. This is not an unusual state of affairs, for it has been found in various tribal societies. But as far as I know it is unique as a phenomenon lasting many generations at the level of a whole civilization. So, in many ways, Japan was already existentially much like Arnold's *Dover Beach*. Yet it was not desolate, for while it lacked much, it also contained the antidote to the lack of absolutes.

Japan was indeed a very beautiful world, 'a land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new'. It had perhaps the greatest aesthetic and literary tradition in the history of the world. It might not have had truth, but it had beauty and, as Keats remarked, 'Truth is beauty, beauty truth'. All this was shattered by the war. The ugliness of the industrial revolution in Japan at least produced wealth. Now all that struggle and ugliness which had overlain the earlier beauty was in vain - flattened and torn to pieces like the beautiful gatehouse of Rashomon.

Secondly, while Japan lacked a universalistic, religious and legalistic basis for faith in a single 'truth', and even a categorical moral imperative to trust, in practice a vast set of devices had been elaborated to fill what outside observers often saw as a moral void. In practice, multiple social threads held people together and as visitors noted, the Japanese were in fact truthful, trustworthy, honest, trusting. Their word was their bond, they were honourable. So through some amazing set of convolutions the system worked. They had produced a world which combined individualistic tendencies and communalistic ties, 'Community' and 'Association' in the language of nineteenth century sociology. These tough, binding yet flexible, rigidities had withstood the most rapid industrialization and social transformation in history and had created a mighty empire.

And where was all this when Kurosawa looked round him in the late 1940's? Japan had been invaded successfully for the first time in a thousand years. It had effectively lost its only guarantee of universal allegiance, the Emperor. Whatever had remained of religion, as becomes clear in the film, was dead; State Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, all were empty lies. The economy, and the feeling that there might be much suffering but at least people could live better and compete effectively in a world

market, were in ruins. Worst of all, the social glue which had held the people of Japan together had dissolved.

I think that this is the central message, re-iterated again and again in the film. Much of the discussion is about truth, lying; who is one to believe, who is one to trust in this desolate world? Even the dead, we learn, cannot be trusted, even if one character cries out pathetically 'I can't believe that the dead lie'. The message is stressed again and again and all attempts to avoid its implications are blocked off. The priest laments that while 'life is Hell', he 'has trust in mankind', yet he is then asked 'Just think... which story do you believe?' And of course, he cannot come up with an answer. Likewise, the woodcutter laments again towards the end, 'I don't understand any of them', and the only answer he gets is 'Don't Worry. What people do never makes sense'. But if it never makes sense, of course, how is social action possible? We have to assume it makes sense, is predictable, that we can trust the other; how else, even at a humdrum level, can we survive?

All of this comes to a climax at the end. In the torrential rain in the broken gatehouse, in the desolation of a Japan which no longer had hope, trust, social bonds, beauty, humans are reduced to their Hobbesian basics. Utterly selfish, utterly unpredictable, the social contract revoked. The protagonists in the murder kept acting in contested, unpredictable and often totally selfish ways, forgetting the other, and thus negated the basic premise which had held Japanese society together in the absence of all other over-riding systems. So, in the immediate years after 1945, the Japanese were on the edge of a moral abyss. They had finally found that, like the woodcutter, who had proclaimed his altruism and trustworthiness, they were not to be trusted, liars and thieves like the rest of humanity.

It is this sense of utter worthlessness, of loss of all self-esteem as well as of certainty, which strikes me as such a central feature of the film. Self-disgust is very strong. And this is perhaps what Kurosawa was trying to stave off. Like many great artists he believed that the only way to overcome the void was to gaze deeply into it for a while, and then to draw back. The catharsis which the film provides is not through escapism, but by staring straight into a world stripped of everything, to recognize that humans are as Hobbes described them.

Yet then, as Hobbes described writing after another (Civil) war which had stripped his generation, like the Japanese, of their leader and of all inherited trust, people can build up a world of hope, meaning and beauty from the rubble. It starts with a small gesture, the taking of a baby, the moment of genuine trust, and from that moment all is possible. Again the film has echoes of other great literature, for example the central motif of Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner'. There also, the Mariner finds that in the midst of complete desolation he is rescued by one moment of selfless thought.

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Of course, like all great works of art, there are many other depths and puzzles and unexplored aspects which I have not touched on. One of the most important of these concerns the contrasted accounts of what happened in the few minutes after the husband was tied up. Most of the action concerns this and we are presented with the four different accounts of both how he died and the speeches and actions of those

involved. There is clearly an enormous amount going on here and the appeals to various codes of honour, proper behaviour, correct emotional responses is very powerful - and for me, rather unfathomable. It seems likely that Kurosawa was laying out different ethical possibilities for his Japanese audience, which they would recognize and respond to. How should men and women behave to each other, how should a dishonoured woman or man behave, how even should the bandit (the Americans?) behave. Unfortunately, without a very deep study, I find it impossible to throw much light on all of this.

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The film is reputedly based on four major literary sources. Tracing the movement between these shows the way that its core message has both remained the same and shifted at the same time.

The immediate texts are Ryunosuke Akutagawa's short stories, 'Rashomon' and 'In the Grove'. In the second of these Akutagawa put forward a radical view of the emptiness of the meaning, the meaninglessness of reality and the disintegration of reality. This can be seen in the structure of his story.

The narrative tells of three characters who tell about an incident from their own point of view. The style of the story of 'In the Grove' was based on Robert Browning's 'The Ring and the Book'. In this, three characters also tell stories. Yet though Akutagawa graduated from the Faculty of English Literature at the University of Tokyo and was influenced by western writers, his aim we are told, was contrary to that of Browning.

While Browning extracted reality and rational order from the contradictory accounts, Akutagawa offered no synthesis or rationality to the readers. He just offers the arena in which the stories are told. He fails to integrate or offer consolation. The readers are left in an invisible and disintegrated situation, as they are in Kurosawa's film until almost the last moment. The stories are just put in parallel and we are not told which to believe and are constantly confused by the way people's actions and fates change from story to story, sometimes the murderer, sometimes murdered and so on.¹

Browning in turn took his story from a much earlier source. He found part of the idea in a 'square yellow book' which he picked up in a Florentine market in the middle of the nineteenth century. This described the murder by Count Guido Francheschini of his wife and her reputed parents in Italy in 1698. Each story, if they were compared side by side, is very different, but they all play with the idea of contradictions in truth and reality.

So what happened was that the optimistic and positivist message which the story gave in the west, was turned into a pessimistic and relativist one as it was transmuted by Akutagawa and Kurosawa. In the original two versions, the narrative emphasized that there is only one truth and one reality, and that despite the confusions and lies and

¹ This account is taken from SHIMIZU Koji, 'In the Grove' in *The Critiques: AKUTAGAWA Ryunosuke's Novel* (ed) EBIIYI Eiji & MIYASAKA Satoru, Sobannsha, Tokyo (1990), which was very kindly summarized and translated for me by Professor TAMURA Airi.

differing versions which occur when people are under pressure, as in a murder, we can patiently seek that single truth. This also is the message of western law and science, the grasping of the stable underlying patterns of the world through patient investigation.

When transmuted into its Japanese form, it turned into something black and anti-positivist. Akutagawa seems to have been a young man in despair, who was later attracted by the 'destructive power of Christianity' and the story of Jesus as the tragedy of a man who goes off to eternity, leaving a broken ladder behind him which others cannot climb. He committed suicide at the age of 35.

Kurosawa was faced with an appalling situation. The Japanese were physically and economically shattered. The core unifying tradition of the vertical relations in Japan, the Emperor, was disgraced. The attempt of the Japanese to become part of the ruling club of nations in the world had been rejected. The implicit trust which people had put in their leaders and each other had been undermined.

Like a bee hive which had been broken in half, the Queen killed, the honey stolen, the bees cast off in many directions, Japan found that there was moral, political, social and economic darkness ahead. Rashomon, like King Lear on the blasted heath, goes to the heart of that darkness and tells of the despair that many Japanese felt. Never in the previous thousand years had Japan been defeated in war. Never had its pride been humiliated or self-belief undermined. It was a terrible situation, and this is the terrible film that mirrors that situation and dissects it so beautifully.

Yet the story does not end there, for the narrative then takes us back to the west. An American film based on Rashomon was made. This was 'Outrage', released in 1964 with Paul Newman as the bandit, Claire Bloom as the ravished woman and Edward G. Robinson as the narrator. I have never had a chance to see this film but it would be fascinating to watch a theme which started with an account of a murder trial in late seventeenth century Italy, went through a nineteenth century British poet, by way of a Japanese 1920's novelist, through a Japanese film-maker in the 1940's and then back to the west in the 1960's.

At each stage the central core was re-interpreted and re-structured, each change telling us a great deal about the culture in which it was re-invented. I suspect that in its Hollywood re-telling it is likely to lose the darkness, and to return to the western theme of there really being one truth and one reality, however confused the path to it may be. So I would expect it to turn back into the western message of confidence, partly based on western religion which suggests an orderly and knowable world based on a benevolent creator God. There may be temporary suspensions of understanding, but the faith that things really are true or false, real or unreal is never seriously questioned.

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So in the story of Rashomon, there are many things yet to understand, as the woodcutter would no doubt have said. Yet one thing is certain. Looking back over the half century since the release of the film we can see that hope does indeed spring eternal. Out of the devastation of Japan, there did arise trust, some certainties and a

wealthy and stable society. The baby lived and the gatehouse was re-built. Whether this vindicates western optimism, or is just another deceptive lull in the midst of the storm of doubt we shall see.

(3200)