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**DAVID  
THORBURN:**

Kurosawa's *Rashomon* is a particularly dramatic example of a film that understands itself to have the kind of claim on its audience that the greatest art has always imagined itself to have on its audience. So I want to begin by talking very briefly about what I call the moment of *Rashomon*. There's a bit of confusion, or at least chronological confusion, or inconsistency in the principle that we end the course with a film that was made and shown internationally before the last two films that we've seen in our course.

My reasons for that, as I partly explained in an earlier lecture, had to do with my desire to show a certain continuity amongst forms of European cinema and the link between Jean Renoir, and the Italian neorealists, and the French nouvelle vague is so intimate that it seemed to me important to show you that progression in sequence. But if we had been going by strict chronological order, we would have introduced this Kurosawa film a bit earlier, because it was made in 1950. And in 1951, it won an important international prize, The Golden Lion, the highest prize available at the Venice Film Festival in 1951.

And this had a seismic effect on movies around the world. The dramatic and powerful subject matter of Kurosawa's film of course riveted attention. But even more than that, the freedom and imaginative energy of his stylistic innovations in the film had a profound impact on filmmakers around the world.

And when the film was shown at Venice in 1951, another effect it had when it won the prize was to introduce Japanese cinema to a wider world. It was the first significant Japanese film, Kurosawa, the first important Japanese director to gain a reputation outside of Japan itself. In fact, there are many film buffs, and especially specialists in Japanese film, who are somewhat resentful of Kurosawa's eminence, even though no one denies that he is an eminent director, because there are other directors.

The two I've listed under item 2 in our outline are the most dramatic examples, Mizoguchi and Ozu, who are often thought to be his superior, even greater directors than Kurosawa. This is a debate of nuances. All three of these directors are major artists.

But it is true, I think, and it is widely recognized that Kurosawa was the director who crossed that barrier more immediately, more dramatically than any other, and opened the world, not just to Japanese cinema, in some degree, but opened the world in some longer sense to Asian cinema more generally, that the so-called Western world, the European and American cinema universes had been fairly oblivious to Asian cinema and certainly to Japanese cinema prior to this. And the appearance of *Rashomon*, its enormous impact in 1951, began to change that.

So that what was demonstrated in moment when *Rashomon* won this reward, won The Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, was a reinforcement of a principle I've been discussing throughout the semester, the notion of film as an international medium, the notion that directors from different national cinemas were now being deeply influenced by directors from other nations, and that film itself was in some deep way, a global phenomenon, even an international form. And I think it was in the '50s and early '60s that this idea began to become more widely embraced by film goers in the United States and in Europe, but perhaps especially in the United States. And one mark of this, the emergence of cinema as a fully recognized independent art form.

Obviously people had thought this, and many directors had achieved artistic distinction before this. But I'm talking about the public understanding of movies, the way people in different cultures actually recognized and thought about movies. It was as if this is the moment in which movies were understood to enter the museum in a certain way, to earn in a public sense, the status that more traditional art forms had had. And one of the explanations for why this would have been so, why it would have had such a powerful impact-- now, I think I mentioned last time that this insight was partial in the United States-- especially, that is to say, in the '50s and early '60s, it began to dawn on movie critics and scholars of whom there were only a few at that time and then movie audiences that European films and Asian films, especially Japanese films, might have great artistic value. But it was a longer time before Americans began to realize that their own native forms of films had had a similar kind of authority.

So this moment, in the early 1950s, was a deeply significant one. Let's remember historically what it represented in Europe and in the United States. It's the moment of the emergence of Italian neorealism, which itself begins to establish a kind of very powerful claim on people's attention. One irony of *Rashomon's* success was that it was not very successful in Japan when it was released in 1950.

And the producer, the production company responsible for the film was very dubious about entering it in the competition, didn't think it was a significant film, even though it transformed Kurosawa's career because of the immense recognition it finally got. And Kurosawa himself recognized-- he'd been making films for almost a decade before that, but *Rashomon* was his most ambitious film to that point, and it also incorporated more innovative strategy, visual strategies than any he had tried before. It established him as an international director.

And I mentioned the names of two other directors just from different traditions as a way of reminding you of another feature of this phenomenon, another reason, as I began to say earlier, for why this moment was such a significant one. And the term I use here is modernism, modernist cinema. Remember, one of the ways to understand this idea is to recognize that a great revolution in the arts had occurred at the turn of the 20th century, the end of the 19th, and at the turn of the 20th century.

We've talked about this earlier. It's the movement we call modernism. It's the moment of Picasso. It's the moment of James Joyce, and it was a kind of revolution in both visual art, literature, music took place in this period. And among the characteristics of this modernist movement was a newly complicated and self-conscious attitude toward narrative itself, toward storytelling.

So modernism in literature and in art involved, among other things if not a hostility or antagonism, at least a kind of skepticism about inherited traditional categories and ways of doing things. And one form this took in narrative was to dislocate or disorient the narrative line. Instead of telling a story in a chronological sequence, a lot of the great works of fiction of the modernist era, books by writers like Joseph Conrad, or Proust, the great French novelist who was so preoccupied by memory and human subjectivity, or the great German novelist, Thomas Mann, a number of other great figures that we could mention began to construct stories in which chronological order was profoundly disrupted.

And they also began to create stories in which there were multiple narrators. And the effect of multiple narrators begins-- even if you do nothing more than have multiple narrators, you begin to raise questions about the veracity, the truthfulness of any single perspective. And you will understand when you look at *Rashomon* why this movie embodies many of these same modernist principles. But the point is that cinema, as a narrative form, lag behind these more traditional arts.

And it really wasn't until the 1950s, and partly because of films like *Rashomon*, that it began to be recognized that the movies too could embrace and embody the principles of modernism. So one way to understand what happened in the 1950s is to recognize that directors like Kurosawa and Ingmar Bergman, the great Swedish director, and Fellini, the great Italian director, and the inheritor and expander of the neorealist tradition, going far beyond a narrow realism, that directors like that began to create films that in a formal sense, in a structural sense, and also in terms of their content had the kind of complexity, nuance, and skepticism, and even the philosophic self-awareness that was characteristic of high modernism at the turn of the 20th century.

So it's as if what was going on was the movies themselves were now asserting themselves as a modernist art. I don't mean as a contemporary art. I'm referring specifically to the modernist movement, and to the dislocated, and much more demanding kinds of narrative strategies that are characteristic of the modernist movement. So *Rashomon* played a fundamental role in this sort of transformation of what we might call the cultural understanding of movies among ordinary people, as well as among scholars, critics, and other filmmakers.

I want to mention one other point. I'll give you a kind of note to clarify some of what I've been implying, some of what I implied when I talked about Mizoguchi and Ozu as directors who were often even more highly regarded than Kurosawa. I'll leave that to each individual film goer.

All three directors are astonishing and remarkable. But it wouldn't be appropriate to talk, even about this single film, *Rashomon*, without paying respects to those two great directors whose dates I've put on your outline. I won't talk about individual films by these directors, but I urge you all to look them up, read about them in David Cook's history of narrative film, and think about experimenting by extending your knowledge of Japanese cinema by trying films by these two remarkable directors. One of the things that's characteristic of all three of these directors, of Kurosawa, even more fully of Mizoguchi and Ozu, Ozu most fundamentally of all, is that their films are marked by a kind of impulse toward stylization, toward fabular, fable-like equations that distinguish them in some ways from Western, from European, and American films.

And I think that one explanation for this has to do with the longer artistic traditions of Japanese society. Japanese film grows out of theatrical traditions, like kabuki theater, or Noh drama, N-O-H drama, both of which have profoundly stylized and fable like qualities. They're anti-

narrative, in some sense, and any of you who have ever had even a minimal experience with either of these two theatrical traditions will understand what I'm discussing. These are theaters of gesture and of very decisive, symbolic representation.

What we would think of as sort of realistic characters or realistic stories are not a part of these very ancient traditions. These theatrical traditions go back hundreds, even thousands of years. So there's a tradition in Japan of a kind of stylized, of symbolic representation.

And you'll see, I think, how in Russia, how powerfully this principle operates in *Rashomon*. Even when film itself emerged in Japan in the silent era, it emerged in a slightly different way. And one of the most interesting features of silent film tradition in Japan was the appearance of a character who has no counterpart in Western cinema, a character called a benshi, B-E-N-S-H-I.

Any of you heard of it? None. Well, he essentially was a narrator and explainer, and he stood next to the movies in a way and gave explanations. He said now, we will introduce the villain. Now, we will introduce-- he was like a kind of intermediary, a narrator or a concierge who mediated between the audience and the text, who gave the audience information.

Again in one sense, we might think of it as an anti-narrative tradition, as a tradition in which things are presented or spoken rather than literally acted out, and certainly one in which the details of a story are less important than its general outline. So when we talk about stylization, one of the things we're talking about is an impulse toward what we might think of as generalized argument instead of specific argument, an impulse to have one moment stand symbolically for many other moments, and what we might think of as a simplification or a distillation of reality into certain symbolic moments that are thought to be emblematic in certain ways, but don't necessarily have a realistic feel. And you'll see almost instantly when this film begins, there's a kind of prologue.

And then when the film makes a transition into the first sequence that takes place in the forest, you'll begin to see what I mean when I say that the film seems to enter into a kind of symbolic realm in which your sense of reality is in some sense undermined, as if you're entering into a dream or a symbolic space. Kurosawa, talking about that astonishing sequence at the beginning of *Rashomon*, said that camera's complex movements and the movements of a character himself-- everything is in motion in that remarkable opening sequence. Some people have called it the most visually poetic sequence in the history of movies.

Kurosawa called this moment a moment in which the camera was shown to be penetrating into a space where the heart loses its way, as if you're penetrating into an ancestral space, into a space that's dreamlike in fundamental ways. So the very opening of the film, or almost the very opening of the film establishes this kind of complexity. I don't want to exactly call it an ambiguity, but this complexity about the nature of the reality that you're watching. And this is even before the film proceeds to present essentially four different accounts of the same event, these four different accounts conflicting with each other in a variety of ways.

So these abstracting, or symbolizing, or stylizing narrative and dramatic traditions lie behind and shape the movies in Japan, even movies like Kurosawa's, which embrace the camera's freedom in a way that's much more characteristic of Western directors than of Eastern ones. Ozu, the second of the two directors I've listed on your outline, is especially famous for holding his camera almost stationary for a tremendously long time. And in fact, he's sometimes called a director who tries to create a zen aesthetic, because the camera is so quiet, and so stationary, and relatively inactive.

It's a style that lays tremendous emphasis on the nuances of facial expression and vocal tone. And both Mizoguchi and Ozu do, in some sense, have an even greater sense of stylization in many of their films than Kurosawa does. But I don't want to oversimplify, because they are also capable of very great, realistic moments, and they have a moral realism that's at least as powerful in their films as Kurosawa himself.

Kurosawa's career is a very remarkable one. And I wish I had time to talk about it in detail. Organizational structure of Japanese cinema was not unlike the structures that developed in Western societies in the United States or in France. There were essentially monopolies of not a small number, but a relatively larger number of film production companies operating at different levels of significance. So they were second rate, and then they were second level and third level production companies, as well.

But all of them operated in a similar way. The director was a more dominant than major figure in this system, and surrounding each director were a group of workers and a group of creative people, including usually performers who went with a director from film to film, as well as his technical people. They would often use the same people to write their music, and the same crew to work on the film-- if they could succeed, get the same cinematographer.

And Kurosawa's-- so Kurosawa's group was called the Kurosawa gumi, G-U-M-I. It means the

group, or cadre. The Kurosawa group worked on a series of films. I don't mean it was always identical. There were changes, but it was a stable group unified especially by Kurosawa's vision and supervision.

And I've listed here a few of his most famous and fundamental films besides *Rashomon*. *Ikiru*, maybe his greatest film, a realistic film set in the modern world. The title means to live, and it's about a man who discovers that he has only a few months to live. And it stars the actor Takashi Shimura, who plays the woodcutter in *Rashomon*.

The other actor that you'll see in *Rashomon* that is one of Kurosawa's favorites and appears again and again in Kurosawa's films is the actor Toshiro Mifune. *Rashomon*, he plays the bandit. You'll see what a remarkable figure he is. So I've only listed a few of his films here, but among his most important, *Rashomon*, *Ikiru*, *Seven Samurai*-- many people would say the greatest of all samurai movies, and probably the greatest of all Western movies, because it puts most American Westerns to shame.

It's influenced by American Westerns, as Kurosawa himself acknowledged. And it was itself, that film, made in 1954, remade as an American film some years later under the title, *The Magnificent Seven*. And it was so successful that a sequel was made, something like *The Magnificent Seven Return*.

And in fact, one of the deep features of Kurosawa's work is that many of his films have been remade by other directors, both American and European directors. *Rashomon* was made 14 years later, remade 14 years later, with Kurosawa given screenplay credit in a film directed by Martin Ritt in the United States called *The Outrage*. And it retells the story that's at the heart of Kurosawa's film. It starred Paul Newman among others, and Edward G. Robinson, among other significant American actors.

*Throne of Blood* I mentioned, because many people see it as the most successful of all adaptations of Shakespeare. It's a Japanese kabuki-ized version of *Macbeth* starring Toshiro Mifune. And many people think of it as the greatest of all Shakespearean adaptations. *Yojimbo* is a samurai film, a much more straightforward samurai film in many ways than *Seven Samurai*, also stars Mifune, and it has brilliant, brilliant sword fight sequences in it that anticipate the kind of thing that is now common in Asian cinema, but much less trivially done in Kurosawa's than in many of these later films that merely seem to want to entertain us by their sword play and the physical grace of their actors, but don't connect nearly so powerfully as

Kurosawa's films do to a profound and serious historical setting and story.

*Yojimbo* was also made into an American movie called *Last Man Standing*, in 1966. I mentioned *Kagemusha*, only because it's a later film, and many people admire it, because it shows that Kurosawa was working effectively, even in old age. He made another film in 1985, one of his final films called *Ran*, R-A-N, which is a remake of *King Lear*.

And these two older films, later films, *Kagemusha* and *Ran*, show Kurosawa's visual sense, visual imagination to great effect, but they feel stylized in the way that they're-- stylized may not be the right word. They feel abstract in a way that earlier, Kurosawa's films do not. They are extraordinary spectacles, but they don't have the same interest in character, the same focus on character that his earlier films, despite their stylisation, seem to do.

I've saved most of my time to talk about *Rashomon* itself, because it's such a central and significant film. And I hope when you watch it, you'll not be impatient, and especially that you watch for the ways in which from sequence to sequence, the visual style alters. It's a very demanding film, in that sense.

Let's begin by talking a little bit about the problem of rape in cultural stories, because I think that one of the problems with responding fully to *Rashomon* is that we, especially in the Western world, are newly struggling with notions of gender identity and of the legacy of patriarchy that put us in a fraught and complex position in relation to stories like that of this film. And I want to confront it right in the beginning.

As some of you may know, the story of *Rashomon* is the story of a rape. There are four different-- a rape occurs at the center of the film, and there are four different accounts of what happened, of how the rape occurred. And the film is partly a meditation on what motives do the different tellers have for putting this particular spin on the story?

And part of what's subtle and disturbing about the movie is that when the first testimony is given, it's not fully clear yet to us that we should be skeptical of the testimony. And I think the first time-- one of the people whose testimony we heard is the murderer himself, or the rapist himself, the Mifune character. He's the first one to testify.

And as he's testifying, it begins to dawn on an attentive viewer that maybe his testimony is self-serving in certain ways, that there's certain things he's saying that maybe we shouldn't fully accept. And then, when the next account comes, our sense of skepticism is reinforced

and fortified. We begin to worry.

And then the film itself reminds us of the fact that these tales are problematic, because the film's structure is so interesting. Roughly every 10 minutes or so, I've timed most of them-- a little less than 10 minutes in some cases, a little longer than some-- you'll have an extended narrative sequence which will last about 10 minutes. Usually it's the testimony of one of the people appearing before the court.

And then after that happens, the film sort of shifts into another mode. And the way you can tell is that it shifts back to the scene with which the film opens. All the way through the scene, it's marked by this. The structure of the film is marked by this return to a scene at *Rashomon* gate, which I'll explain in a moment.

So one point that I'm trying to get to here is the idea that as we watched the film and we begin to weigh the accounts that different people give of this rape, many of us are likely to feel uneasy and disturbed, because one of the things that disturbs me in the film is the woman's reaction to her rape. She feels terrible shame. It's as if she felt-- and there seems to be an impulse in the film that certainly some people have certainly gotten there.

At least they perceive an impulse in the film or an impulse in the narrative to blame the victim. In some sense, what I'm suggesting is not that that response is inappropriate, but that it's a little bit off key, off center, because if you recall the idea that the film is deeply stylized, and it's set in an ancestral past, in a medieval Japan, in a moment of terrible social breakdown in which vestigial or ancestral attitudes towards sexuality and gender are being mobilized or awakened. And if we understand it in that way, we can begin to recognize that our own discomfort with the subject matter is a discomfort that the film itself may even be aware of and may even be encouraging.

And as you're watching the film, watch how, in some sense, especially in one moment where the victim of rape makes an appeal to her husband right after-- there's a sequence where we see her embracing her husband and looking into his face. Now the problem is she's giving this testimony, and there's some reason. It's after the fact, and there's some reason to doubt what she's saying, especially as the film goes on.

Nonetheless, it's a moment of great power. And that moment at least mobilizes a sympathy for the victim of rape. That is very significant, because you hear so little of it elsewhere in the film. Not that the woman is treated badly, but she's subjected to the same suspicions as the other

central characters.

But there's a larger thing to think about, a larger way in which we can accommodate ourselves to the slight discomfort we might feel at turning a story of rape into a philosophic discourse as this film does. And here's how we might do that. Let me just remind you that stories about rape are at the heart of many cultures.

How many of you have heard of the story of *The Rape of Europa*? It's a Greek myth. None of you?

In many ways, it's the story of the foundation of Europe. Zeus disguised as a white bull, the great Greek god, the god of all gods. One of Zeus's best habits or the most remarkable habits in these mythological stories is that when he gets a yen for a human female, he will disguise himself as a creature of the earth and go down and rape her. And he does this with Europa.

The rape of Europa is a kind of symbolic story which later Europeans actually took as one of the founding tails of how Europe itself was founded. Can you think of another story in which Zeus was a rapist? How many of you know the story of Leda and the Swan, about which Yeats wrote such beautiful poems?

Again, Zeus, the god of gods, disguises himself as a great spawn and swoops down on lead of this beautiful woman and rapes her in the guise of a swan. And there's a brilliant, almost pornographically powerful poem by W. B. Yeats in which he describes this terrible moment of rape. It's one of the great poems of the Western world, and it's about this rape.

So what I'm reminding you of is that the misogyny, that you may sense there is a misogyny that's embedded in culture. It's a misogyny that's embedded in all the stories that human beings tell, in many of the stories that human beings tell themselves about the world, about the relations of men and women, and often, especially about the foundations of society, so that this meditation on human frailty and human deceit focused on a rape from that perspective is one of many such stories. Not a unique object at all.

And it seems to me that that's one of the ways in which we can recognize that what Kurosawa is doing is part of a long, and complex, and in many ways, very disturbing habit of mind that many, many cultures share. The title-- *Rashomon*. Western students are often puzzled by it. It's a reference to the name of the gate, but the word gate is complicated too, because it's not an American gate that just opens and closes. It's a great, massive entrance to the city of Kyoto

in the southern part of Japan in the late 11th or early 12th century.

It's a period of complete disillusion and destructive poverty, political chaos. And the broken down condition of the gate, which you get long shots of, you see this massive structure. There's a terrible rainstorm going on, under which certain people come to get shelter from the rain. And that is *Rashomon* gate.

And its broken down condition symbolizes the broken down condition politically and socially of the society that is represented there. And again and again, the characters gathered beneath the gate to protect themselves from the weather and gauge in conversation about human nature. Are human beings innately evil? Do they always lie? Can we never trust them?

And one of the characters who carries on this discourse is a priest who has an idealizing tendency, which another of the character's a commoner. He's called the commoner. He's an ordinary man is constantly mocking and arguing against.

It's almost a kind of argument that reminds me in some ways of the argument between spirit and flesh in Cervante's *Don Quixote*, in which Sancho Panza is constantly reminding the idealizing Quixote of the miserable actuality of the world. Look, when you get stabbed, you bleed. When you haven't eaten, you're hungry.

The world is real in a way and miserable in some respects in a way that idealists don't like. And so that's a kind of argument that runs through these interludes as the film goes on. So the title refers to the Rashomon Gate, and Rashomon Gate is itself a massive symbol for the breakdown of order for the miserable circumstances that individuals find themselves in.

And one of the things you'll see is that it's chilly. It's cold. It's raining like mad, a tremendous torrent, a downpour incidentally created partly by fire trucks. In his autobiography, Kurosawa talks about how difficult it was to create this sense of an immense ongoing, almost a tsunami of rain, and he talked about the technical difficulties of doing so.

Very impressive rain, the most impressive rainstorm in the history of movies, I think. So these people are gathered beneath the gate in order to protect themselves, and the gate's symbolic significance is important. We will notice that one of the things they do when they get cold is they go over to certain parts of the building. It's a wooden structure already half broken down and in decay. And they'll break off banisters or other pieces of wood, and break them up, and burn them up.

And the implication is if things go on like this, pretty soon the whole gate will have been consumed by people who have tried to take shelter under it. So it's a symbol of the breakdown of social order and of the society. I've already mentioned the medium. The Japanese word is miko.

And I mentioned it here, just because I wanted to be sure all of you understood what was going on there. The husband is dead when the testimony begins. He's a samurai who was the husband of the rape victim.

And as the story unfolds, you'll get the basic facts, but even when the film is over, there are many fundamental things you won't be able to have decided. And I think that's certainly part of Kurosawa's point. So the medium is just this clairvoyant type apparently real characters believed in and socially recognizable in late medieval Japan, a character who claims to have access to the words and beliefs of dead people.

So the dead man testifies. And another way of reminding you that we're looking at a very stylised, a story that isn't in a narrow sense, realistic at all. The visual style of a film is especially remarkable and astounding, in some ways. It's almost as if each form of testimony has its own style. And you might want to watch the way in which Kurosawa builds his eclectic and dynamic way in which Kurosawa's editing camerawork use of music combine to a kind of almost constant visual excitement.

One of the most remarkable things about the film is how many sequences in it are without dialogue-- extended, wordless sequences, truly entirely cinematic. The opening sequence-- almost the opening sequence-- the first extended sequence in a forest, which comes after the sort of introduction, which I've described earlier, is a magnificently clear example of that process. And one of the things that you may notice in that sequence especially is the way in which you become increasingly disoriented about the direction in which the woodcutter is going.

He's apparently narrating the story, and his narration sort of segues into a visual experience, as happens again and again in the film. And the visual experience we have shows him going into the woods, walking, and then discovering first the woman's hat, and then discovering other things, and discovering a body, and then running away in fear. And as he penetrates into the woods, one of the things that happens is the camera is always moving. And the camera becomes as interested in the forest itself, in this densely wooded forest and in the play of light

and dark, because the sunlight comes through the wooded canopy in odd and profoundly visually powerful ways.

You begin to have a sense that the camera is at least as interested in the woods and in the play of sunlight as it is in the motions of the woodcutter. And the whole sequence has a kind of profoundly lyrical, but also in some degree, disorienting sense that as Kurosawa said, you're entering a space that's dreamlike, that's dangerous, a place where the heart will lose its way, as if you're entering a symbolic space, not a realistic space-- a stylized space in some deep way. And there are a couple of specific strategies that Kurosawa uses in the film to reinforce, I think, our sense that he's engaging every element of his cinematic palate in order to create his effects.

One thing he does, he violate certain rules, especially at the time where it would have been tremendously shocking to professional directors. One thing he does in the film was he points the camera at the sun, and he creates sun effects. That was a no-no. It was a sort of a rule that directors should never do that. Kurosawa does it.

And you watch how he does it. It's very powerful. It also has a disorienting effect, the effect of making us understand more deeply what it's like to work our way through the incredible dense forest in which the crime occurs, as if the forest itself is a space so complex and so private, so cut off from the outer world that almost anything could happen there-- a space of dream, a space of terror, a space of symbolic fable. And there are a couple of other things I wanted to mention about the way his camera behaved.

One is that Kurosawa uses here a device at certain points in the film, a very interesting device. The official name for it, the fancy name for it, the technical name for it is he makes what is called an axial cut, A-X-I-A-L. It's really a form of a jump cut-- that is to say, an abrupt edit which you're not fully prepared for. A jump card, as you know, breaks the action in mid-stride, or in mid-action, and then jumps to something else in a way that's slightly disorienting that eliminates.

It's elliptical. It eliminates connection or transitions. But the axial cut does this in a very dramatic way that also calls attention to the apparatus of the movies.

The most dramatic places in which this occurs in the film are certain scenes in which you see the samurai husband tied up, sitting on the ground, tied up like this, kneeling on the ground. And the camera's at some distance from him and moved toward him, but it doesn't move

toward him in a smooth trucking motion characteristic of most films. What it does is it moves forward, and it stops, and then it jumps.

It moves forward. And what you feel is it leaps forward. And what's happening, of course, is that he stops the camera's forward movement, moves it further, makes a cut.

So the effect is the camera moves-- not that the camera's jerky, but it's as if it's speeded up in some sense. We can feel that the camera is becoming elliptical. So say this fellow in the front is the person I'm focusing on.

I'll be here. You'll see this shot. And then you'll see this shot, and the effect is very abrupt. Watch how it happens.

One effect, one consequence of this kind of a shot is that watching it, you can feel how mechanical it is. You begin to think to yourself well, how could that have been created? You're aware of its mechanical qualities.

That is to say, you become partly aware of the apparatus behind the making of the movie. It's a moment of self-consciousness that other elements on the film also reinforce. So the visual style is profoundly eclectic and dynamic.

I've mentioned the axial code in pointing the camera at the sun. Maybe I'll mention one other device. One of the other technically intricate, and at the time, revolutionary thing that Kurosawa did was he violates what's called the 180 degree rule.

And the 180 degree rule essentially has to do with your sense of spatial orientation within the frame. Essentially the 180 degree rule holds that if you're showing characters moving in this direction, so you're showing a character moving this way, you won't suddenly, if you're still going in the same direction, show him walking this way, because it disorients the viewer. In our film, in *Rashomon*, there are certain moments. There are hints of it in that opening sequence, that lyrical, first sequence in the forest that I mentioned in which you can see that the camera's own movements complicate, and in some sense, confuse our sense of where the woodcutter is going.

And it's in that sequence and some other places in the film as well, where the 180 degree rule is violated. And the effect again is to disorient us, is to feel gee, I don't know whether I'm coming or going. This guy doesn't know whether he's coming or going. What kind of a space is

he in?

Again, violating certain conventions of traditional filmmaking in order to create new effect. And the consequence of these choices, the impact of these choices in 1951, when the film won its prize, was profound. I want to say one other thing, another aspect of the film's structure, which I've described here perfectly. And I apologize for being so tongue tied about it.

But as I tried to describe earlier, the basic structure of the film becomes fairly clear. What happens is you get testimony. Then there are interruptions in which you-- essentially, all four of the primary pieces of testimony takes place in the past.

So what we have are flashbacks, but competing flashbacks. And at various points, the film returns to our scene of reign at Rashomon Gate in which the people under the gate, the three people under the gate-- two of them are actually partial participants. The third, the commoner, is just a kind of listener to the story, although a profound commentator on it.

The Sancho Panza type who says, look. The world is miserable. Why should you believe anyone? And the priest is constantly resisting him.

Well when we return to these moments-- so we return to *Rashomon* Gate several times, many times in the film. And every time we return to that spot, where are we? We're in the present time of the film.

So one of the things the film does, it creates what I call a drama of the telling of the story in which the conversation that's going on underneath Rashomon Gate is a kind of metacommentary on the story that we're watching. The characters inside the film comment on well, can we believe her? Is this credible? Why did she say this?

And the effect of this metacommentary is to create essentially a separate story. What's the separate story? It's a philosophic topic. The topic is the telling of stories.

In other words, this interruption creates a new kind of moral and thematic complexity in the film, something that's characteristic of the great novels and fiction works I mentioned earlier in the lecture that appeared at the turn of the 20th century. Not is the principle of unreliable narration being introduced, and the principle of competing flashbacks being introduced, and the principle of dislocated chronology being introduced-- all of those things are operating. But what is even more important about it is that these moments of conversation amongst those three characters at Rashomon Gate also constitute a kind of philosophic meditation on the

nature of storytelling and the nature of truth.

And they actually say oh, how can you believe a person? Or what is truth? How can we believe what anybody says?

So the film calls attention not only to the profound subjectivity of human responses and the profoundly unreliable nature of memory, but also the extent to which individuals themselves have reasons developing from their egos to distort and tell stories that are more flattering to themselves and so that by the time we come to the end of the film, it isn't clear at all, when the film is over, whether there is a truth, whether there is any final truth that we can embrace. The issues are not finally resolved.

But what is resolved for us is the idea that human reality is immensely complex, that human beings are endlessly deceitful, that the stories they tell about themselves and others may not be trustworthy. So in other words, the film opens out into a kind of philosophic profundity that's partly a function of its structure. So it's another example, one of the most remarkable examples that we've seen in our course, of what I call organic form, of a text whose structure helps us understand what it's about and whose structure is part of what it means, whose structure is essential to its meaning.

We couldn't imagine this film as a straightforward, chronological sequence. It wouldn't be able to do what it does. So what I mean by the drama of the telling of the story is literally that. That is to say, there's a second story, a second subject matter in these interludes-- let's call them interludes in these interruptions in which we return to the present time, get out of the past. And those interludes are an extended, philosophic, and moral conversation about human nature, about the nature of our human capacity to understand the world, and our capacity to talk about it, to narrate it accurately and fully. So this drama of the telling of the story, this drama of the screening, this drama of the making of the story is as important a dimension of the film as its actual story, as the actual story that it wants to tell.

I have two other points to make about this remarkable film, and I'll be done. The first is that one of the things I think you'll notice, as the story goes on, and as different people give different accounts of what happened is that the actual physical conflict between the two male characters, which one would expect to be grand and heroic, is almost always clownish and unheroic. We expect this great-- he's a samurai warrior, after all, and the man he's doing battle with is a very famous or infamous bandit, criminal-- so gifted a criminal that he's famous.

And one realizes in retrospect that when the criminal, the Toshiro Mifune character, gives his testimony. In the beginning, in the early part of the film, he's exaggerating his own martial genius. Although we don't fully realize that at first, but it becomes clearer and clearer to us as the film goes on that he has a motive to exaggerate his heroic stature, and his strength, and so forth. Not to mention, a motive to exaggerate and maybe to lie about the woman's reaction to his forced attentions.

So all of that is an essential part of our understanding of what is at stake, I guess, when we think about the various subject that *Rashomon* gestures toward. So the clownish, unheroic behavior of these fighters is something to note, because there's a deep skepticism in the film itself about all forms of human aggrandizement. There's a skepticism that the film shares with the commoner who maybe is too negative about human nature, who thinks human beings are completely abject, and that this is the justification for the most selfish kind of behavior, because no one can behave well.

I have hardly exhausted the film, but I hope I've said some things that will be valuable and useful to you on your first viewing. But let me end by talking about the ending, because the ending of *Rashomon* presents us with a problem similar to the problem that we confronted in a film like *The Last Laugh*, *Der Letzte Mann*, in which there seems to be a kind of optimistic or reassuring ending to this film. The film has been very dark and rainy.

And in fact, one of the ways you can tell that the film has changed registers is that the rain finally disappears. Well as you're watching the ending, which is quite explicit, even heavy handed about its attempt to return us to a sort of more hopeful view of mankind, you should ask yourself, does it deserve to be deleted? All through the '40s, when Kurosawa was first learning his trade, he began to direct early in the '40s. And this film in 1950 is his first real masterwork.

He's become more and more confident and ambitious as a director during this period, but he hadn't displayed his full capacities as a director until this point, most accounts of his career suggest. But during this period, in the 1940s, Kurosawa took up part of himself what he regarded as a social project, which was to try to help renovate Japan after the devastations of the war. And his films of the '40s almost always try to suggest various forms various ways in which people could behave decently and heroically-- if not heroically, at least decently in an effort to renovate and reconstitute a damaged society, a broken society.

One of the reasons that the breakdown of ancient Japan is so powerful in *Rashomon*, no question, is that Kurosawa and his cast believed that in some sense, there was a symbolic analogy to be made between conditions in Japan, actual Japan in the 1940s and early '50s, and the broken, terrifying conditions of society in the 11th and 12th centuries in the past parable that the narrative is telling us. And this film continues that tradition. But I think many, many viewers, I among them, have the feeling that this is more wish fulfillment on Kurosawa's part than reality.

And one could say from an artistic standpoint then, one might conclude that it's a weakness in the film. I think I might say that the film might be more powerful, more truthful to itself, that the ending that's tacked on may undermine its deepest energies in disturbing ways. So it's another example in which commercial and social imperatives may be interfering with the artistic integrity of the text. But it's significant, important to understand that this was a tendency that was present in Kurosawa's work all the way through the '40s, and that therefore, it's a kind of expression of a moral sense that the director had that begins to become less powerful after *Rashomon*, although he remains a deeply moral director. So the ending is a question, and you might want to ask yourself how you would respond to the question of the relevance of the ending to the rest to the rest of the film.

Let me end with a reminder about maybe what is, in some ways, the most powerful aspect of what happens when you're watching *Rashomon*. I've said that you feel that you've entered into if not a dream, into a kind of uniquely stylized space in which what happens resembles what happens in real life, but also distills what happens in real life, highlights it in a way that isn't true of actuality. And I think you feel this mythic tendency all the way through the film.

In a certain sense, one way of capturing what I'm saying is to say that there is a tension in the film between this impulse to be mythic, to tell a story that it understands to have a fable-like significance and its sense of the complexity and concreteness of actuality. That is to say, so there's this wonderful, constant tension in the film between the enormous persuasiveness of the individual images that you see. But you sense also that you're in a world that's not totally real.

So the tension I'm trying to get you to feel, you can feel it in the dialogue. But especially you can feel it in the visual images, in the visual texture of the film. You can feel a kind of tension between an impulse to mythologize, and to fable-ize, and an impulse to show the world in its deepest and most concrete elements, in its most authentic actuality. And the tension between

the two-- gee, this is so real. Gee, this is so unreal.

This is so fable-like, is part of the secret of the movie. And one way you can feel it with an immensely intense power is sometimes when you see the way the film deals with human flesh, there are certain scenes, for example, where a woman's hand will be on a man's body-- talk about how you can be erotic without offending anyone. There's a moment where you can see the woman's fingers pressing into the man's flesh.

It's an immensely erotic and powerfully concretizing moment. It reminds you of flesh. It reminds you of film's power to capture actuality with a vividness that goes far beyond what words can ever do, the visual power of movie.

And that's what I mean when I say that there's this constant tension in the film between the mythologizing tendencies of the story, and of Kurosawa's imagination, and what we might call the breaking tendency, the concretizing tendency of the film medium, which has this capacity to register the gross, concrete reality of our experiences with a detail and a power that no other medium can. Now this sense of tension between a story that wants to be a fable and a story that wants to persuade you of its concrete reality is part of what makes the film so memorable and so significant.