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# Storytelling in the Rashomon Gate: Kurosawa, *Konjaku monogatari-shu*, and Buddhism

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## I. Introduction

Since its modest entry into the Venice Film Festival and surprising reception of the Grand Prix in 1951, Kurosawa Akira (黒澤明)'s *Rashomon* (羅生門) has left an indelible mark on world cinema and beyond. It has surely been one of the most widely circulated and highly acclaimed Japanese films in global art-house cinema. Its profound impact is notable across a wide range of social and cultural institutions in the West. The irreducible contradictions at the crux of the film's narrative spawn loaded implications for art, philosophy, law, education, and anthropology, to name a few, and now for science fields as well. The multivalent applicability of Kurosawa's theme and style is succinctly captured by the term "Rashomon effect," which refers to multiperspectivism and interpretive conundrum.<sup>1</sup> A slight hyperbole permitting, Kurosawa's masterpiece may indeed have "entered our consciousness, its name synonymous with contradictory versions of reality" (Galbraith IV 127).

It is well known that *Rashomon* is based on Akutagawa Ryunosuke (芥川龍之介)'s two short stories, "Rashomon" and "In a Grove" (藪の中).<sup>2</sup> Hashimoto Shinobu (橋本忍) and Kurosawa's collaborative scenario, and especially the changes made by the director in the source material, have been examined by many scholars. The rich history of the film's critical reception, however,

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1. Cf. Anderson, Robert. "What Is the Rashomon Effect?" *Rashomon Effects: Kurosawa, Rashomon, and Their Legacies*, edited by Blair Davis, Robert Anderson, and Jan Walls, Routledge, 2016, pp. 66–85; Heider, K. G., "The Rashomon Effect: When Ethnographers Disagree." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 90, no. 1, 1988, pp. 73–81.
  2. In order to maintain consistency in the romanization of Japanese words, diacritical marks are omitted in this article. For example, "Rashōmon" is transcribed as "Rashomon."

reveals an odd yet undeniable lacuna in the absence of serious attention to the connection between Kurosawa's film and *Konjaku monogatari-shu* (今昔物語集, Anthology of Tales from Times Now Past), a classical collection of folktales, which provided primary material for Akutagawa's stories. In the previous scholarship on *Rashomon*, mentions are made of this anthology in relation to Kurosawa's intertextuality, but they are rather sporadic and superficial. A careful comparison of *Rashomon* and the medieval tales shows a striking parallel in a number of respects. This article is concerned with the salient points of correspondence between *Rashomon* and the three *Konjaku* anecdotes. The folklore resonates most powerfully in Kurosawa's reflexive storytelling method. In addition, the epistemological and ethical issues raised by the complex cinematic text deserve an in-depth analysis for their indebtedness to a Buddhist worldview, which prevails in *Konjaku monogatari-shu*.

## II. Narrative Styles in *Konjaku monogatari-shu* and Akutagawa Ryunosuke's Short Stories

*Konjaku monogatari-shu* is a multivolume anthology that contains over one thousand pieces of *setsuwa* (説話, spoken story), which had been orally passed down for centuries until they were recorded in the early twelfth century (c. 1120). Although its authorship still remains unidentified, the collection is the largest and perhaps the most celebrated example of Japanese anecdotal literature in terms of its sheer size and breadth of topics, sustained popular appeal, and historical and cultural significance. The three tales that Akutagawa borrowed from this anthology are: "How a Thief Climbed to the Upper Story of Rashomon Gate and Came on a Corpse" (羅城門登上層見死人盗人語); "How a Man Who Was Traveling with His Wife to Tanba and Got Tied Up at Oeyama" (具妻行丹波国男於大江山被縛語); and "About the Old Woman Who Sold Fish at the Headquarters of the Crown Prince's Guard" (太刀帶陣壳魚姫語).

Before discussing the pertinence of these tales to Akutagawa and then to Kurosawa, a summary of each story is in order.<sup>3</sup> Akutagawa's "Rashomon" is

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3. For the first two tales, I use Burton Watson's translation, and for the third one, I use Marian Ury's. The page numbers of the quotations from the three tales are provided in parentheses in the text.

adapted from the first anecdote listed above. An unnamed man from Settsu Province has just arrived in the capital, Heiankyo (平安京, modern-day Kyoto) for a career of robbery. To shun suspicion from passers-by on Sujaku Avenue, he climbs up the upper story of the Rashomon gate. There he sees a light coming from the interior, so he peers into it to discover an old woman pulling out hair from a corpse. Terrified by the sight and the thought of an ogre allegedly living in the gate, he approaches the hag with his sword drawn and asks for an explanation. The old woman confesses that the young female body was that of her mistress, and that she is gathering the girl's beautiful hair to survive. Hearing this story, the man suddenly strips both the corpse and the hag, robs the latter of the collected hair, and runs away.

The second anecdote, which became the basis of Akutagawa's "In a Grove" is centered on a samurai couple from the capital who are duped by a conniving young man whom they chance upon during their travel to the wife's hometown in Tanba. Carrying a fine sword, the young man coaxes the credulous husband into lowering his guard and into entrusting his bow and arrows to him. Sensing that the samurai covets his sword, the young man lets him carry it in exchange for the bow and arrows. As lunch time nears, he persuades the couple to move away from the road and go deep into the mountains. When they get to a thick bamboo grove, the young man suddenly threatens the samurai with an arrow. After trussing up the husband, he rapes the woman. After violating the wife before her husband, the wicked man seizes the samurai's bow and quiver, takes back his sword, and flees on the horse that the wife rode. The enraged wife unties her husband and tells him how foolish and unreliable he is. They then resume their journey.

The last of the three *Konjaku* tales concerns an old woman who sells dried snake meat disguised as fish. The guards of the crown prince's palace enjoy her fish so much that it becomes a staple of their meals. One day they encounter her in a place where she is unlikely to be found. The suspicious soldiers interrogate her to discover that she hunts snakes there for her business. They also find out that the fish they ate with pleasure was in fact snake meat that she had prepared and sold with a pretext. The old woman in this anecdote is incorporated in Akutagawa's "Rashomon" as the corpse whose hair another hag plucks to make a wig.

A typical *Konjaku* tale develops in a short chain of events. Its plot is compact, linear, dramatic, and action-driven. Among its formal properties, the most intriguing is the powerful narrative voice. The source of the voice, that is, the

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narrating agent, exists outside the immediate world of characters and far away from the time of events. Despite both the spatial and the temporal distances, it is only through his voice and point of view that the audience can access the story world. In other words, no anecdotes in *Konjaku monogatari-shu* are presented transparently but always filtered through the narrator's consciousness. This means that the narrator in the anthology functions as more than a simple storyteller. With authority tantamount, if not equal, to that of the implied author, the *Konjaku* narrator controls all aspects of the tale.<sup>4</sup> Empowered by his metadiegetic position and vantage point of view, the narrator sometimes speaks to the audience directly and affects their reaction to the story.

Reflexivity in *Konjaku monogatari-shu* manifests itself in the narrator's textual intrusion. His most prominent task is declaring specially formulated phrases to announce the beginning and ending of the tale. The conventional opening expression is "*ima wa mukashi*" (今は昔), which is generally interpreted as "times now past." An effort to preserve historical memory was a driving force behind compiling, copying, and editing the oral traditions from different regions. As a homage to the bygone era, the opening phrase forces the audience to recollect the past. Similarly to the way of unfolding a new story, the narrator closes it by saying "*to namu katari-tsutaetaru to ya*" (となむ語り伝へたとや). This customary sentence can roughly be translated into "so the story has been told." Placed as the last line of each anecdote, the phrase highlights the "secondhand" nature of the *Konjaku* tales (Ury 9). Demarcating the textual boundaries of each tale, the above pair of utterances reverberate throughout the anthology like ritual incantations.

Another vital charge of the *Konjaku* narrator is providing commentary on narrative events and characters. As an integral part of the anecdote, this commentary is located in the penultimate section of the tale. Referred to as *kotowaza* (諺), the narrator's aphorisms give a moral to the episode. Edifying and witty, *kotowaza* often spices up the story. While enriching its content, the metadiegetic comment tends to exhibit elements of reflexivity. The commentary also bestows dimensionality on the otherwise, simple, paratactic structure of the folktale.

The nature of the commentary varies from one episode to another. Its message and tone are not uniform, as is illustrated by the three tales. The

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4. The concept of "implied author" is proposed by Wayne Booth (71-76). Cf. Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed., Chicago UP, 1983.

narrator of the first one explains in a low-keyed voice how the Rashomon gate has deteriorated into a dump ground for dead bodies that cannot receive a proper burial. By supplying the background information on the gate, the narrator betrays his knowledge of the gate's glorious past while imparting an acute sense of loss about its abysmal condition in the present.

Cynical and playful, the commentator's tone in the second tale drastically differs from the subdued voice in the previous one. With regard to the incident that transpired in the bamboo grove, the narrator first offers a sarcastic compliment to the rapist: "The young man had some sense of decency — at least he didn't rob the woman of her clothes" (Watson 90). Afterwards, the narrator turns his caustic tongue to the samurai, making a stark contrast between his gullibility and the villain's slyness. What ensues is a scathing condemnation on the samurai's folly: "But the man from the capital — what hopeless stupidity! Off somewhere in the mountains, to hand your bow and arrows over to a man you've never laid eyes on before — a real idiot!" (90). The narrator attacks both men, but his criticism of the husband exudes more frustration. The samurai is supposedly educated and urbane as coming from the metropolis. Therefore, his imprudence is all the more upsetting. Echoing the infuriated wife, the narrator exposes the husband's greed as the root cause of the trouble. The narrator's unequivocal emotional attitude firmly sets the orientation of the audience's reaction to the story.

In the anecdote about the fishmonger, the commentary is directed at the audience, while a stereotypical moralizing on the deceitful vendor is elided entirely. In lieu of a banal lecture, the narrator alerts his audience to the danger of food poisoning: "Now think: it's said that eating snakes makes people sick. You wonder why they weren't poisoned" (Ury 198). This warning is followed by his friendly advice for the general public: "Everyone who's heard this story agrees that you must have your wits about you when you buy fish to eat. Don't buy it if it's been cut so fine that you can't tell what it looked like originally" (198). Obviously, the narrator utilizes his commentary as an occasion for intimating his sagacity and experience as a storyteller. By bringing up the positive responses that he garnered from his previous audiences, he reinforces his reliability as a narrator.

The narrator's vibrant, engaging, and direct speech posits the audience as an invisible but cooperative interlocutor or narratee.<sup>5</sup> His communicative style

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5. Gerald Prince defines "narratee" as "someone whom the narrator addresses" (7).

of utterance foregrounds the orality and performativity of the anecdotes in their original mode of existence, circulation, and transmission. These defining qualities of the *Konjaku* anecdotes are imprinted in the narrative voice of the written text. This point is borne out by the use of a vernacular form of speech. Certain repeated expressions, such as “*so no toki ni*” (その時に, just at that time), “*so no nochi*” (その後, after that), and “*shikaru aida*” (然る間, now, however) are residual markers of the original verbal storytelling. Although fossilized in the script, they continue to “underscore the rhythm of the events and provide breathing spaces” (Ury 8). This kind of linguistic code helps conjure up the plausible image of a real-life person who recites the tales in a live performance. The vestiges of the oral performance in the recorded anecdotes support the idea that the narrator may be the compiler and/or recorder of the anthology, as it is suggested by W. Michael Kelsey (134–35).

The three *Konjaku* tales undergo noticeable changes in the hands of Akutagawa, a dazzling and eccentric writer in modern Japanese literature. On the whole, “Rashomon” remains close to the original folktale in its plot, character composition, and sinister mood. The motifs of corpse, hair, and robbery are also retained. However, Akutagawa supplies a wealth of detail to paint a realistic picture of the decrepit gate, a symbol of late Heian society. The vivid sensory images—visual, aural, olfactory, and tactile—are deftly synthesized to generate an intense, eerie ambience in the narrative. The Baudelairean synesthesia is even topped with Akutagawa’s signatory ironic twist. Akutagawa states that he is fascinated with the “beauty of brutality” of *Konjaku monogatari-shu*, an attribute “remote from [...] elegance and grace” (qtd. in Goodwin 118). The somber atmosphere of the story functions as a potent objective correlative for the inscrutable psychological landscape of humanity that Akutagawa attempts to sketch.

“In a Grove” is the product of Akutagawa’s radical alteration. The original anecdote is expanded into the story of a double crime with the murder of the samurai added. Moreover, the tale is metamorphosed into a drama composed of seven monologues: four testimonies by a woodcutter, a Buddhist monk, a police agent, and an old woman; and three confessions by a bandit, a samurai (through a medium), and his wife, Masago.<sup>6</sup> In Akutagawa’s modern rendition,

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6. The motif of murder, the use of a medium, and the depositions in “In a Grove” are inspired by Ambrose Bierce’s “The Moonlit Road.” Akutagawa says in an essay that he admires Bierce most among Western writers (Dykstra and Dykstra 25). Cf.

four new characters are introduced as police witnesses, and the young man from the second *Konjaku* tale becomes the bandit. Akutagawa's shift from the third- to first-person narration amplifies and intensifies the unsolvable conflict among the four versions of the grove event, only accentuating the murder mystery.

### III. Reflexivity and Buddhist Discourse in *Konjaku monogatari-shu* and *Rashomon*

Akutagawa's "Rashomon" furnishes Kurosawa with the overarching setting of the decaying gate, whereas "In a Grove" constitutes the main story of rape and murder. Kurosawa's pivotal and most decisive change is the layering of the narrative in the form of a story within a story. He uses the title piece, "Rashomon," as a framing device for "In a Grove." In adapting the latter story, Kurosawa uses the original monologues almost verbatim. He also transfers most of Akutagawa's characters to his film world and deploys them to two different narrative levels. The woodcutter, the monk, and the commoner appear in the frame story-space, while the bandit, the samurai, and Masago appear in the framed one. Thus, the linear, panoramic mode of Akutagawa's dramatic monologues is drastically transformed into a double-layered triangular structure. Kurosawa's remarkable architectonic sense of economy and balance is demonstrated by the rule of "threeness," which eliminates the old woman as a way of tightening up the narrative structure.<sup>7</sup> Since her testimony is

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Dykstra, Yoshiko, and Andrew Dykstra. "Kirishitan Stories by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: Introduction and Translation." *Japanese Religions*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2006, pp. 23–65. *NCC*, [japanese-religions.jp/publications/assets/JR31\\_1\\_a\\_Dykstra.pdf](http://japanese-religions.jp/publications/assets/JR31_1_a_Dykstra.pdf).

7. This rule is noted by many critics, including G. W. Linden and Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto. Its examples abound: the three locations, three characters, three-day gap between the scenes at the police and those at the gate, and even the three Chinese characters for "Rashomon" that are carved on the gate's signboard (Yoshimoto 185). The cinematic equilibrium of Kurosawa's triangle pattern is "scientifically" proved by Nick Redfern who analyses the relationships among the four accounts in terms of shot scale, camera movement, camera angle and the use of point-of-view shots, reverse-angle cuts and axial cuts, and concludes that Kurosawa's "deliberately and precisely constructed artwork" poses an "epistemological puzzle" (21). Cf. Linden, G. W. "Five Views of *Rashomon*." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 56, no. 4, 1973, pp. 393–411; Redfern, Nick. "Film Style and Narration in *Rashomon*." *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, vol. 5, 2013,

limited to soliciting sympathy for her daughter, Masago, it would mar the tightly controlled aesthetic tension in Kurosawa's geometric design. In detail, however, Kurosawa's narrative is more convoluted than it appears because of the police courtyard inserted as a third space in between the grove and the gate. On the screen, therefore, the characters' testimonies constantly intercut the three planes of the narrative space and time. The filmmaker's ingenious scaffolding of the triple layers of the cinematic diegesis functions as a formal linchpin of the epistemological questions in *Rashomon*.

Although a wide consensus exists as to Akutagawa's influence on *Rashomon*, Kurosawa's framing device ironically harks back to *Konjaku monogatari-shu*. In form, the film's atavistic kinship with its folkloric ancestor is identified in its storytelling method and especially its reflexive narration. Thematically, Kurosawa's probe into egoism and interpretive dilemma has a strong resonance with the *Konjaku* tales, which focus on unpredictable human nature and behavior. A conceptual framework that can appropriately address the shared thematic thrust of the film and the anthology can be found in Buddhist epistemology and morality.

The frame story of *Rashomon* shows a noticeable affinity with the ancient conventions of reciting anecdotes in a communal environment. The woodcutter and the monk tell stories that they saw and heard. Their narrations concur in essence with the way in which the *Konjaku* narrator recounts tales that he heard. Moreover, the three characters at the Rashomon gate interact in a manner that takes the film audience back to the time prior to the birth of *Konjaku monogatari-shu*. The three men's storytelling and listening stir up the image of the pre-*Konjaku* era in which a raconteur delivers strange stories, legends, and myths to his audience, who then spread what they heard, through word of mouth. Haruo Shirane explains various forms of narration practiced in the Heian period, including the "round-table" format in which participants take turns telling stories (3–4). Although a miniscule community of just the three men, the storytelling in *Rashomon* also alternates between two narrators.

Kurosawa's bifurcation of the narrating agency into the woodcutter and the monk alludes to the secular and the sacred realms that they represent respectively. The distinction between the lay and the monastic narrators also accords with the division of the Japanese folktales in the *Konjaku* collection into

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pp. 21–36; Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro. *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*. Duke UP, 2000.

the mundane and the Buddhist categories. As an impoverished family provider with an immediate material gain at stake, the woodcutter's narration is tinted with self-conscious performativity with a view to the narratee's response. The woodcutter is driven by a motive to convince the commoner that his storytelling is trustworthy. His aim in his first account is to conceal his lies about the missing dagger, and in the second, to thwart the commoner's cognizance of his theft. The woodcutter's sensitivity to his narratee is reminiscent of the *Konjaku* narrator's subtle yet measured control over his audience. One major difference between the film and the anthology is that in the former, the narratee is physically co-present with the narrator in the same space, whereas in the latter, the audience looms over the text as an imaginary participant.

The monk's role as a storyteller in *Rashomon* heightens the film's Buddhist linkage with the *Konjaku* tales. Kurosawa's monk delivers sermon-style lines filled with pity and compassion for those involved in the crime. It is Akutagawa who created this character. But it is Kurosawa who enhances his textual function. The monastic character facilitates the director's philosophical dwelling on humanity and the existential and ethical implications of such an inquiry. Germane to Kurosawa's film narrative, these interrelated concerns are vested with Buddhist ideas and values. As will be shown below, it is mostly through the monk that Kurosawa divulges the operation of Buddhist discourse in his cinematic text.

*Konjaku monogatari-shu* is deeply permeated by Buddhism. The anthology is organized into three geographical origins: India, China, and Japan. The order of the three countries delineates the transmission route of Buddhism to Japan. The contents and usage of the anthology are chiefly for propagating Buddhist teachings. The religious inclination of the anecdotes reflects the historical context in which they were collected and edited. The late Heian period witnessed the decline of aristocratic culture and the ascendancy of military leaders as the new power elites. With the large-scale socio-political upheaval, a doomed sense of the age of *mappo* (末法, latter days of the Dharma) gripped the masses, giving rise to the Pure Land cult of *Amitābha* Buddha with its apocalyptic vision of the Western paradise. In this age of instability and uncertainty, Buddhist monks employed the short didactic tales in *Konjaku monogatari-shu* as a useful aid in preaching religious morals to their audience. The wondrous stories on various evil deeds mirror the dark social realities of the time. By using such tales, monks offered the public, especially commoners who were unable to read sutras, ways of coping with imminent disasters by

taking refuge in Buddhist faith.

Kurosawa's traveling monk is not situated where he can assume an imposing clerical authority, as he would normally do in a formal dharma meeting with a congregation. Nevertheless, he spontaneously propagates Buddhist tenets when he narrates the inexplicable stories that he heard at the police station. Horrified by the death of the samurai, he stresses the impermanence of life: "Oh, it is true—life is ephemeral, as fleeting as the morning dew. But the pity of it. What a pity that he should have died like that" (Hashimoto and Kurosawa 42). His religious speech is preceded by the sounds of a gong, a typical aural sign of a temple. He also inculcates the importance of pity when he emphasizes that people lie because they are weak. He advocates human frailty, refuting the commoner's insistence that men are innately selfish. The monk's action clearly resembles what many of his real-life predecessors did with the didactic stories in "times now past."

The monk's religious "mission" is highlighted by his location in the Rashomon gate whose thematic significance is derived from the Buddhist culture of medieval Japan. "Rashomon" refers to a gate in which *Rasetsu* (羅剎) inhabits. Evolved from the Hindu demon, *Rāksasa*, *Rasetsu* is notorious as the most terrifying figure in the Buddhist mythologies. Living on human flesh and blood, *Rasetsu* was previously a dreadful monster tormenting men fallen to hell. But after being converted into the Buddhist pantheon, *Rasetsu* joined the lineage of *Vaiśravaṇa*, the Heavenly King of the North, and began to serve as a protector of Buddhism. Colorful stories of *Rasetsu* made their ways into the Buddhist cannon, specifically into two major scriptures: the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (Nirvana Sutra) and the *Saddharmapūṇḍarikā Sūtra* (Lotus Sutra).

Historically, the gigantic Rashomon gate represented the splendor of the Heian era. It was originally called "Rajomon" (羅城門) in Heiankyo, "rajo" indicating the outer precincts of the castle. The gate was built at the southern end of Sujaku Avenue, the main road of the capital that led all the way to the imperial palace. But the name of the gate was changed later to "Rashomon" by Kanze Nobumitsu (觀世信光) in his eponymous *Nob* (能) play. Without a doubt, Kurosawa appropriates the legend of the magnificent gate in view of its importance as a medieval Buddhist cultural icon. As is anticipated, the gate's towering presence in the film signifies Buddhist thought as the ideological backbone of the cinematic text. This argument is justified by enormous research that the filmmaker conducted prior to reconstructing the gate of a "mammoth" size on the film set (Kurosawa 180–81).

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Of course, what is projected on the silver screen is not the legendary grand edifice but its dilapidated ruins. Its dreary image points to the late Heian period when Japanese society suffered incessantly from a vortex of disasters, both human and natural. In the opening of the film, the monk laments wars, earthquakes, storms, fires, famines, plagues, and bandits (Hashimoto and Kurosawa 37). The broken gate serves as an apt synecdoche of a society in shambles with no moral vision in sight.

In the film, the Rashomon gate functions as a temple where the monk contemplates and philosophizes on the unfathomable human heart. Reversely, his presence strengthens the role of the gate as the physical and metaphysical center of gravity in the film. Under the dark gate drenched by a rainstorm, he undergoes “gut-wrenching periods of enlightenment” (Galbraith IV 133). Although looking timid and occasionally even naïve, the monk is the only person who remains consistently sincere and conscientious throughout the film. The meditative monk-narrator inside the gate recalls the *Konjaku* tradition, according to which, “the storytelling scenes in *setsuwa* are often set near or at a temple or shrine, where the narrators have implicitly close access to divine spirits” (Shirane 7).

As a shrine, the Rashomon gate contributes to broadening the diegetic space of the film narrative far into the transcendental realm. The monk mulls over the murder mystery, enveloped by dark clouds, torrential rain, and stormy winds. As Stuart Galbraith IV observes, “fierce winds” in Kurosawa’s films often “[signal] the arrival of key characters” (133). In *Rashomon*, the ominous gust, thunder, and lightening presage the appearance of the dead samurai. When his ghost does return to this world embodied by the female shaman, the medium’s grotesque face, creepy voice, and cryptic body movement suffice to allow the spectator a glimpse into the dark and cold netherworld where the samurai is locked in agony. One might argue that it is not the gate but the prison courtyard where his spirit is brought back. The difference, however, is inconsequential. In terms of its effect of fostering a hospitable mood for the supernatural, the whitewashed, lifeless image of the prison courtyard is the same as the dark image of the gate that harbors unclaimed corpses in its top. Incidentally, the narrating agent who summons the samurai’s spirit is the monk, who initiates the session by saying, “But according to the husband’s story [...]” (Hashimoto and Kurosawa 69). A cleric representing the spiritual domain, the monk seems to officiate the shamanic rite as *memento mori* for his audience. As is exemplified by the mysteriously howling whirlwind accompanying

the shaman's mad dance, Kurosawa maneuvers the climate to connote the abeyance of normalcy in this sequence. A "tremendous flash of lightning" and a "roll of thunder" are coupled with a "fallen statue outside of the gate" and "rapid cascades" of a flood (69). Illuminating the gate's ceiling and beams, the abode of *Rasetsu*, the lightning lets loose the samurai's spirit from the underworld. Closed up on the screen, the fallen statue and a violently shaken hand bell indicate a narrative transition, serving as a vehicle for transporting the spectator instantly from the gate to the prison courtyard. Kurosawa's superb coordination of the atmospheric elements throws an insightful light on the "magical" power of the monk's words. In this respect, his role bolsters the film's tie to *Konjaku monogatari-shu*, which deals with all sorts of divine gods, otherworldly beings, and the spirits of the dead (Shirane 7).

#### IV. Delusive Self, Elusive Reality, and the Illusive Camera

For over half a century, a host of critical readings have been proposed on *Rashomon* from a variety of theoretical and technical standpoints. Diverse as their conceptual bases may be, their central concerns tend to revolve around egoism, subjective truth, moral ambiguity, and other corollaries to these. Occasionally, an analysis of the film as an allegorical depiction of post-WWII Japan has been undertaken.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars investigate the conflicting testimonies strictly from the viewpoint of a legal system (Kamir).<sup>9</sup> The majority of these critics agree that *Rashomon* dramatizes a search for a "single 'theological' meaning" of elusive reality and the ethical ramifications of the failure to find it (Barthes 152).

Before delving into the epistemological problem at the core of the film, it is important to recognize that the principal object of Kurosawa's philosophical rumination is the enigma of human nature. In his comment on Akutagawa's "In a Grove," the director states that the story "goes into the depths of the human heart as if with a surgeon's scalpel, laying bare its dark complexities and bizarre

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8. Cf. Davidson, James F. "Memory of Defeat in Japan: A Reappraisal of *Rashomon*." *Rashomon: Akira Kurosawa, Director*, edited by Donald Richie, Rutgers UP, 1987, pp. 159–66; Sugimoto, Mike. "The Fifty-year War: *Rashomon*, *After Life*, and Japanese Film Narratives of Remembering." *Japan Studies Review*, vol. 7, 2003, pp. 1–19; Yoshimoto.
9. Cf. Medine, David. "Law and Kurosawa's *Rashomon*." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 20, 1992, pp. 55–60.

twists” (182). The bandit, the samurai, and Masago present laudable images of themselves. Tajomaru brags about his unsurpassable swordsmanship; the samurai defends his honor as a noble warrior; and Masago stresses her fidelity to the feudal ideology of chastity. But the visual replays of their actions in the woods debunk their ideal self-images. The bandit turns out to be a coward; the samurai, a greedy and cold-hearted husband; and Masago, a frustrated woman intimating her not so happy marriage.

Their self-perceptions only disclose their self-deceptions. The three characters lie not just to others but to themselves as well. Their self-delusion seems to be what the monk intuitively discerns when he describes the grove incident as “more horrible than fires or wars or epidemics—or bandits” (Hashimoto and Kurosawa 38). The problematic selfhood, according to Buddhism, is caused by the misconception that man has a unique, unchanging, and permanent entity. Man’s adherence to the essential “self” is the fundamental delusion that Kurosawa masterfully and mercilessly tackles in *Rashomon*. Although he does not use doctrinal terms, such as *ātman* (self) and *śūnyatā* (emptiness), he squarely and pointedly expounds the Buddhist tenet on the illusion of the self:

Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing. The script portrays such human beings—the kind who cannot survive without lies to make them feel they are better people than they really are. It even shows this sinful need for flattering falsehood going beyond the grave—even the character who dies cannot give up his lies when he speaks to the living through a medium. Egoism is a sin the human being carries with him from birth; it is the most difficult to redeem. This film is like a strange picture scroll that is unrolled and displayed by the ego. (Kurosawa 183)

Evidently, Kurosawa identifies the ego as the first cause of the hermeneutic quandaries in *Rashomon*. A meticulous triangulation of the four contradictory testimonies confirms that all of them can be truthful or untruthful, or both simultaneously.<sup>10</sup>

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10. The phenomenon of the multiple versions of reality is duly compared to Pablo Picasso’s cubist painting *Girl before a Mirror* by Parker Tyler’s “*Rashomon* as Modern Art.” Cf. Tyler, Parker. “*Rashomon* as Modern Art.” *Rashomon: Akira Kurosawa, Director*, edited by Donald Richie, Rutgers UP, 1987, pp. 149–58.

In cinematizing the interrelated subjects of elusive reality, epistemic crisis, and indeterminacy of meaning, Kurosawa's brilliant camera makes a key contribution. Although the four versions of the crime scene are all first-person narrations by either the woodcutter or the priest, it is not always clear on the screen whether the spectator sees the central event separately from the narrator, conjointly with him, or through him. Except for the fourth one, that is, the woodcutter's observation of the entire occurrence in the forest, the spectator cannot easily determine who recounts which testimony, because the camera itself supplies the testifier's flashbacks directly on the screen. The first three accounts are introduced through each witness' own narrative voice, and all their flashbacks unfurl visually in the mixture of "enactment," "enacted recounting," and simple "recounting."<sup>11</sup> For instance, the bandit's version starts by showing Tajomaru in the prison courtyard verbally recollecting the circumstances of his crime (recounting). Soon the screen shifts to the forest with his narrative voice running over the visual images (enacted recounting). Then his voice-over disappears, and the spectator sees the crime scene as if it is taking place in the present before his own eyes (enactment).

The inside story unfolds itself in the mode of a flashback within a flashback. By presenting the bandit and the samurai couple as if they are the real narrators recounting their firsthand experiences directly on the screen, the film frequently leads the spectator to forget that what he is actually seeing and hearing is the woodcutter's or the monk's recounting. This technique generates a vivid sense of immediacy in the spectator, who feels as if he has direct access to the forest and can investigate the crime without going through the shield of the narrator's eyes and reasoning mechanism. On the conceptual level, the spectator knows that each version is being presented by one of the two narrators in the frame story. On the perceptual level, however, the spectator is under the cinematic illusion that he is witnessing the crime without any intermediary narrating agency. In fact, all three versions are hearsay, as they have been filtered and sifted through two consciousnesses; one of the three characters in the inside story and the other, either the woodcutter or the priest

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11. According to David Bordwell, when characters report information about prior events, we have "recounting." When they present events as if they are occurring at the moment in direct representation, we have "enactment." A mixed case is the convention of "enacted recounting": A character tells about past events, and the discourse then presents the events in a flashback (77-78). Cf. Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. U of Wisconsin P, 1985.

of the frame story.

Kurosawa's cinematic storytelling relies on the skillful maneuvering of the relationship between visual images and the linguistic medium. For example, the trial scenes present testimonies without questions or responses from the magistrate, who, located in the off-screen space, is neither seen nor heard. All the witnesses kneel down and look up toward the camera in frontal shots, thus creating a false sense of authority in the spectator as if he is in the magistrate's position. This type of cinematic manipulation has immense impact on the spectator, as

[b]y seeing the witnesses' stories (rather than hearing them, as a judge would), the viewer is offered a glimpse into their souls, their memories, their deepest inner selves. He is also offered the sense that his cinematic judgment is well founded, ultimate, and absolute." (Kamir 52)

With regard to this unique trait of the cinematic text, Alain Robbe-Grillet states in the introduction to *Last Year at Marienbad*:

The essential characteristic of the image is its presentness. Whereas literature has a whole gamut of grammatical tense which makes it possible to narrate events in relation to each other, one might say that on the screen verbs are always in the present tense; by its nature, what we see on the screen is in the act of happening, we are given the gesture itself, not an account of it. (qtd. in Veja 229)

Along with its "presentness," Kurosawa's camera further confounds the spectator's cognition by a deceptive movement. More often than not, it veers away from a testifier's viewpoint and field of vision. The enactment sequence in Tajomaru's account contains shots that are at odds with his subjective point of view. The bandit hides himself up in the hill and looks down at Masago by a brook. Since the camera is anchored in the bandit's position with its eye aligned with his, the spectator supposedly sees Masago's back from his perspective. During this brief moment, the spectator is presented with a close-up of her hand playing with the water, which is followed by a medium close-up of her sudden turn to the camera on her side. These two shots, however, cannot be the images that Tajomaru's eyes can capture given the distance between him and Masago. This kind of unmediated vision onscreen belongs

to the autonomous camera eye, which acts as the “fifth witness” in *Rashomon* (Barbarow 146). In theory, the camera is controlled by a “large narrative agent, the cinematic show-er” (Chatman 113). As a way of explaining this type of unreliable flashback, Jimmy Billingham proposes to use Daniel Frampton’s concept of the transsubjective “film-thinking” or “filmind” as “immanent narrative agency” (Billingham 3).<sup>12</sup> Frampton’s idea helps elucidate Kurosawa’s dynamic and fluid camera style, which at once underlines and undermines each character’s subjective vision and voice without a jarring effect.

The visually and verbally conflicting testimonies inevitably lead to an analytical impasse. Interestingly, such an interpretive dead-end is foreshadowed from the beginning when the woodcutter says, “I can’t understand it. I just can’t understand it at all” (Hashimoto and Kurosawa 35). The self-referential opening lines prefigure the baffling exercise of examining and cross-examining that the spectator is forced to undertake repeatedly in *Rashomon*. Kurosawa’s is an inexhaustible, open text in which different viewpoints collide with each other and constantly cancel out the validity of the others. In this process, the spectator is pressured to engage his “wandering viewpoint” dialectically through a “referential field” of intertwining textual perspectives (Iser 197–203).<sup>13</sup>

In the course of the labyrinthine textual travel through *Rashomon*, the commoner emerges as an intelligent spokesperson for the spectator. Inquisitive and cynical, the commoner scrutinizes and judges the feasibility of each story. He is a character evolved from the discharged servant in Akutagawa’s “Rashomon,” who in turn originates from the “career thief” in the *Konjaku* tale. He represents a disinterested party detached from the crime site as well as the police station. Thus, he is expected to hold an objective viewpoint. On the whole, his curiosity and interpretive position are nearly identical with the spectator’s. In *Rashomon*, the relationship between the frame and framed stories is analogous to that between the spectator and the film. The three men at the gate form a diegesis for the spectator, but their action is metadiegetic of the interior crime story. In light of this structural reflexivity, the spectator’s film viewing can be juxtaposed with the commoner’s action in the frame story.<sup>14</sup>

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12. Cf. Frampton, Daniel. *Filmosophy*. Wallpaper, 2006.

13. Blair Davis and Jef Burnham call the spectator going through this process a “negotiator.” Cf. Davis, Blair, and Jef Burnham. “Screening Truths: *Rashomon* and Cinematic Negotiation.” *Rashomon Effects: Kurosawa, Rashomon, and Their Legacies*, edited by Blair Davis, Robert Anderson, and Jan Walls, Routledge, 2016, pp. 96–114.

14. Hence, the commoner is viewed as the spectator’s “surrogate” (Yoshimoto 187).

The commoner is an active narratee who tries to piece the puzzle together into a logical whole and thereby moves the plot forward. He engages himself vigorously in a debate with the narrators, clarifying their ambiguities and giving sharp comments like a Greek “chorus” every time they put forth a new version (Richie 71). According to Gerald Prince, a fully developed narratee characterizes the narrator (G. Prince 23). The commoner fits such a type, as is demonstrated by the way he extracts the woodcutter’s admission to the theft. As a realist, he also foregrounds the monk’s idealism by contrasting their antithetical worldviews. By mediating the spectator and the narrators with his prodding questions, the commoner earns trust from the former as a reliable channel through which the necessary information is elicited, relayed, and perused.

## V. Buddhist Ethics in *Rashomon*

Kurosawa, however, prevents the spectator from completely identifying his perspective with the commoner’s by interjecting a foundling sequence. By unveiling the moral values held by the three characters, the sequence conveys Kurosawa’s message that the ethical foundation of the source of information is just as important as the accuracy of the information. The commoner robs the baby of its clothes, justifying his immoral act with the “logic of starvation” (qtd. in Yu 28). His culpability thus shifts the narrative focus from the epistemological to the ethical and existential dilemmas. The commoner’s cruelty shocks the woodcutter and the monk, disrupting the narrative flow, as is suggested by their silent, static images. Their doldrums signify the exhaustion of the linguistic and visual media as investigative tools for the complex human psyche. The long time-lapse is indicated by the dissolves of the two figures standing awkwardly against the wall of the gate. With each dissolve, their image comes closer to the camera. The narrative suspension due to their stupefaction ushers the spectator into an interpretive stalemate.

What catalyzes this deadlock is the woodcutter’s adoption of the orphaned baby. The new motif of compassion precipitates a turning point, accelerating the film toward a denouement. The foundling sequence has drawn much criticism as sentimental and contrived. Joan Mellen finds the episode “false and gratuitous” (206), and George Barbarow decries its banality as the “worst” flaw of the film (147). In general, the woodcutter’s saving of the helpless infant is viewed as an abrupt intervention of Kurosawa’s humanism,

which is incongruent with the radical philosophical premises of the film. The director's blatant moralizing is held responsible for curbing the modernist edge of his innovative artwork. At best, the woodcutter is valued for adumbrating "Kurosawa's hero" who recurs in many of his subsequent films. Kurosawa's proclivity for the courageous action of an ordinary person as a regenerative force of a fallen community is often cited as evidence for the director's subscription to the Western, rather than traditional Japanese, idea of the relationship between the individual and society.

However, the woodcutter's compassionate act can be more meaningfully and coherently understood when it is contextualized in the underpinning Buddhist thought of the film rather than Western humanism. His unconditional altruism reflects first and foremost the ideal of bodhisattvahood in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. The cogency of this argument is corroborated by several textual elements. Above all, it is the monk who sanctions and blesses the woodcutter's decision to bring the baby into his family despite his heavy responsibility for the six children he already has at home.

A second sign of the influence of the Eastern, rather than Western, cultural legacies on the founding sequence is Kurosawa's choice of a distinctly traditional Japanese tune as the non-diegetic atmospheric music for the narrative closure. Kurosawa states that he has his own "pet theory" on sound, according to which, "cinematic strength derives from the multiplier effect of sound and visual image being brought together" (107). Given that he uses sound "aggressively and as an essential component of cinema," his switch to the traditional native music in this sequence emits a weighty implication (S. Prince, "Kurosawa's" 124). Reiterating the film's setting in the medieval period, the slow, elegiac traditional Japanese instrumental music is sharply contrasted with the *Boléro*-like Western music with a fast tempo and a strong beat that the director uses as the main theme of the soundtrack throughout the film.

Lastly, before they separate, the monk and the woodcutter mutually recognize the indispensability of each other in understanding their own shortcomings. The woodcutter repeatedly bows to the monk as if in a repentance ritual for his wrongdoings. Likewise, the monk apologizes that his prejudice against the woodcutter led him to misinterpret the latter's sudden grasp of the baby as yet another harmful deed to the vulnerable infant. The monk then confesses his gratitude to the woodcutter for his act of compassion that restores his faith in humanity. Unlike the rest of the characters in the film, the monk and the woodcutter finally come to face the greed, anger, and foolishness that

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momentarily poisoned their minds.<sup>15</sup> In the wake of this spiritual realization, the weather changes on the screen. The return of the radiant sun in the sky implies the clearing of the mental cloud that deluded their minds and occluded their vision. For the itinerant monk, the profound experience of awakening in the temple of the gate warrants progress on his tumultuous path to ultimate attainment. In hindsight, their storytelling in *Rashomon* turns out to be a spiritual shelter that has led them to cultivate wisdom and practice compassion.

## VI. Conclusion

It is most likely that Kurosawa was not a practicing Buddhist. In modern Japan, Buddhism is perceived predominantly as a funeral religion (Covell 166–67). Yet as with the majority of his countrymen, Kurosawa must have imbibed its core doctrine from their cultural environment that has been steeped in Buddhist spirituality for more than a millennium. Although limited in number and uneven in quality, studies of Buddhist elements in Kurosawa's works are available. Most notably, Stephen Prince addresses Zen Buddhism and *bushido* (武士道) in Kurosawa's samurai films (*Warrior's Camera*). But Dolores Martinez points out that Prince's analysis is framed in “a sort of Westernized version of Buddhism” (38). Kenneth D. Nordin carefully enumerates Buddhist images and symbols in *Ran* (乱). Unlike Nordin's concentration on one film, James Shield surveys a “Buddhist flavor” in Kurosawa's oeuvre, including *Rashomon*, *Kagemusha* (影武者), and *Ran*, among others.<sup>16</sup> Despite these efforts, the critical discourse on Kurosawa's cinematic achievements is still dominated by Western theory and ideology.

It is in this Western-bent intellectual context that the importance of *Konjaku monogatari-shu* should be recognized as a rich and powerful source of inspiration for *Rashomon*. Although the historical thread between the anthology and the film is mediated by Akutagawa's pen, it can duly be surmised that the director was fully knowledgeable of the timeless, piercing insight that the extraordinary stories in the collection provide into human psychology. *Rashomon* is an extremely polished text to lend itself to a simple juxtaposition

15. These are called the “three poisons” or “three unwholesome roots” in Buddhism.

16. Cf. Shields, James M. “Kurosawa, Akira (1910–1998).” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film*, edited by Eric Michael Mazur, ABC-CLIO, 2011, pp. 279–83.

with the terse anecdotes. Notwithstanding its semblance of simplicity, however, the *Konjaku* anthology encourages a fresh look at Kurosawa's film on the basis of Buddhist ideas on human nature, obscure reality, moral relativism, and salvation.

Buddhism bridges *Rashomon* and *Konjaku monogatari-shu* in form and theme. The film is full of pictorial signs of Buddhism, ranging from the gate to the monk. References and allusions to Buddhism are also strewn within the dialogues: Tajomaru's description of Masago's first impression as a bodhisattva (菩薩); the monk's respect for Abbot Konin (光仁) of the Kiyomizu Temple (清水寺) as a sage; and Masago's escape to a mountain hermitage after the rape. Far more important than the sundry Buddhist motifs are Kurosawa's reflexive narrative method, extensive use of the monk storyteller, and the thematic interplay of compassion and wisdom. Intentional or unintentional, Kurosawa revitalizes the ancient literary conventions and cultural practices that he has inherited from *Konjaku monogatari-shu*. His cinematic revival of the *Konjaku* style storytelling with an exquisite modernist touch can be understood as a non-dualistic balancing act between old and new media, orality and textuality, literary and visual narratives, and even between secular entertainment and spiritual enlightenment in a true Buddhist spirit.

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## Abstract

This article is concerned with the relationship between Kurosawa Akira's *Rashomon* and *Konjaku monogatari-shu*, an anthology of anecdotes from the Heian period. Kurosawa's film is adapted from two short stories by Akutagawa Ryunosuke, which are in turn based on three *Konjaku* tales. This article consists of four parts. In the first part, plot summaries of the three *Konjaku* tales are provided, and the role of the narrator is examined in each. Special attention is paid to the elements of reflexivity in the commentaries by the *Konjaku* narrator. The second part of the article investigates the narrative structure of *Rashomon* and then discusses a striking affinity between the medieval storytelling conventions and the verbal interactions among the three characters in Kurosawa's frame story. The extensive role of the monk-narrator in *Rashomon* is analyzed in light of the didactic use of the *Konjaku* tales in a Buddhist temple in late Heian society. The third section relates Kurosawa's concern with the enigma of human nature to the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness. The epistemological issues raised in *Rashomon* are defined as the results of each character's self-delusion. In cinematizing the interrelated subjects of elusive reality, epistemic crisis, and indeterminacy of meaning, Kurosawa makes brilliant use of his fluid camera. The last section of the article reviews the critical controversy surrounding the foundling sequence and also the problematic association of this episode with Kurosawa's espousal of Western humanism. Three pieces of evidence are presented to argue that the sequence can be more coherently and meaningfully understood when it is contextualized in the Japanese Buddhist tradition rather than Western humanism.

**Keywords:** *Rashomon*, Akira Kurosawa, *Konjaku monogatari-shu*, Buddhism, narrative reflexivity

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