

# Kurosawa's Relativity

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## ABSTRACT

Akira Kurosawa is a Japanese film maker who is known as "the master of relativity." Two of his films, *Rashomon* and *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams*, are analyzed using concepts from Descriptive Psychology. Questions about what the relativity problem means to Kurosawa, how the problem plays out in his dreams and in his life, and why he is unable to solve it, are examined.

Akira Kurosawa is a Japanese film maker whose career has spanned more than five decades. In these years he has directed 29 feature films, including such well-known films as *Seven Samurai*, *Red Beard*, and the Academy Award-winning *Dersu Uzala*. But Kurosawa is best known for a movie he made when he was 40 years old: *Rashomon*.

In *Rashomon*, a samurai and his wife are traveling through the forest. A bandit captures a glimpse of the wife's beauty and wants her. So he tricks the samurai into following him into a bamboo grove, ties him up, and then rapes his wife in front of him. Later the samurai is found dead.

Who killed the samurai? This is the focal question of the movie. Each member of the trio claims to be the murderer. The dead samurai attests *via* a medium that

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he took his own life. The wife testifies that she killed her husband because he spurned her after the rape. The bandit swears that he knifed the samurai in a duel following the rape.

Kurosawa succeeds in making all of their claims convincing. His portrayals of all of their stories are visually and psychologically compelling. Because of this achievement, Kurosawa is known as "the master of relativity."

But who *really* killed the samurai? We do not know. Ironically, the master of relativity does not solve the relativity problem in *Rashomon*, nor does he provide a paradigm for how to deal with it. At the end of the film Kurosawa leaves us with a set of compelling stories about the murder. But however compelling they are, the stories cannot all be true. They are fundamentally irreconcilable.

What is Kurosawa doing by laying out these irreconcilable stories? Is he simply presenting us with an unsolved murder mystery? Is he merely showing us the relativity of the perspectives? If not, what is the point of *Rashomon*?

There is a point, and it is worth understanding, both in terms of the film itself and in terms of Kurosawa's personal life. At age 72, in writing *Something Like an Autobiography*, Kurosawa found himself at an impasse when he reached the filming of *Rashomon*. After writing about his early life and films, he stopped abruptly with the making of this film. In an Epilogue he noted:

I have come this far in writing something resembling an autobiography, but I doubt that I have managed to achieve real honesty about myself in its pages. I suspect that I have left out my uglier traits and more or less beautified the rest. In any case, I find myself incapable of continuing to put pen to paper in good faith. *Rashomon* became the gateway for my entry into the international film world, and yet as an autobiographer it is impossible for me to pass through the Rashomon gate and on to the rest of my life. Perhaps someday I will be able to do so. (Kurosawa, 1982, p. 188)

Why is Kurosawa stuck at the Rashomon gate in writing his autobiography? What is the personal significance of *Rashomon* to him? How else does the problem he portrays in *Rashomon* play out in his life?

## The One True Story

*Rashomon* is based on a short story by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, a Japanese writer who suicided at age 35. His story "In a Grove" consists of seven conflicting testimonies about a murder, presented starkly without any connecting narrative or commentary. In *Rashomon*, Kurosawa uses some of the conflicting testimonies from Akutagawa's story, but he does not use his stark format. Instead, Kurosawa introduces a trio of characters to discuss the accounts and attempt to make sense of the differences for us.

This trio—a firewood dealer, a commoner, and a Buddhist priest – come together in the ruined gate, Rashomon, seeking shelter from the pouring rain. The firewood dealer and the Buddhist priest have just come from the prison, where they heard the accounts of the murder. As the rain pours down, the priest moans in anguish, “War, earthquake, wind, fire, famine, plague... Yes, each year is full of disasters. And now every night the bandits descend upon us. I, for one, have seen hundreds of men dying like animals, but I’ve never before heard anything... anything as horrible as this. Horrible... It’s horrible! There’s never been anything as terrible as this.”

Once Kurosawa has our attention riveted on the question of “What is so horrible?,” he uses the dialogue among the men to make the point of *Rashomon* clear. First the firewood dealer declares that the accounts are “lies... all lies.” Then the commoner matter-of-factly observes, “Well, men are only men. That’s why they lie. They can’t tell the truth, even to themselves.” And the priest tentatively acknowledges, “That may be true.” He adds, “It’s because men are so weak. That’s why they lie. That’s why they must deceive themselves.”

In *Rashomon*, Kurosawa is not simply presenting a murder mystery, and he is not merely showing us the relativity of the perspectives. He is raising the question “Can anyone tell the Truth?” And the answer he gives is “No. No one can tell the Truth. No one has the strength of character to see things as they really are.”

Kurosawa assumes that if only people were stronger, they would tell the Truth. They would do this by telling their stories. The stories would be like the lies they tell except they would be *true*. But Kurosawa’s message is that no one, not even the priest, is able to see or tell the One True Story about the murder. This is the relativity problem that Kurosawa portrays in *Rashomon*.

## Akira Kurosawa's Dreams

To the extent that the question of *Rashomon* (“Can anyone tell the Truth?”) is personally salient for Kurosawa, we would expect him to explore this and/or related issues in his dreams (cf. Roberts, 1985). We turn, therefore, to *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams*. This film, made when Kurosawa was 80 years old, consists of eight dreams that Kurosawa singled out as being significant in his life.

In understanding *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams*, we follow some basic rules of thumb for interpreting dreams given by Ossorio (1976). The first rule of thumb is “Don’t make anything up.” Notice what we do *not* know about Kurosawa’s dreams. We do not know what age he was when he dreamt them. We do not know the order in which he dreamt them. We do not know what events were occurring in his life when he dreamt them. We do not know which dreams, if any, came before *Rashomon* and which dreams came after. What we do know is that Kurosawa considered these dreams significant and chose to include them together in one set.

Other rules of thumb for interpreting dreams are "Drop the details and look for the pattern that remains" and "Check the applicability of the interpretation to the real life of the person." The use of the rules of thumb is illustrated both in understanding the individual dreams and in understanding the set as a whole.

The order of the dreams in the film is as follows: "Sunshine through the Rain," "The Peach Orchard," "The Blizzard...," "The Tunnel," "Crows," "Mount Fuji in Red," "The Weeping Demon," and "Village of the Watermills." Four of the dreams are introduced in this section, and the others are discussed later.

"Sunshine through the Rain," the opening dream of the movie, features an unusual wedding procession, one that is especially intriguing because it is forbidden for us to see.

It is raining but the sun is shining. A boy's mother tells him, "You're staying home. Foxes hold their wedding processions in this weather and they don't like anyone to see them. If you do, they'll be very angry." In spite of this, the boy goes into the forest where he watches a fox wedding procession until the foxes frighten him.

He runs home, but his mother will not let him enter. She gives him a dagger in a sheath, which she says was left for him by an angry fox. She tells him: "You're supposed to kill yourself." She offers him only one way out, to go and ask the foxes for forgiveness. Then she adds, "They don't usually forgive. You must be ready to die."

The boy counters: "But I don't know where they live." She replies: "You'll find out. On days like this there are always rainbows. Foxes live under the rainbows." She slams the door and bolts it against him. He tests the doors, studies the dagger, and then sets out.

This synopsis does not begin to do justice to the existential dismay and despair that we experience when we see Kurosawa's portrayal of the dream in film. Frightened after his childish indiscretion, the little boy comes running home, seeking the reassurance and protection of his mother. She meets him at the door, but she does not offer him protection. Instead she acts against him as an agent of arbitrary, inimical forces. His own mother, whom he ought to be able to trust above all others, hands him a dagger to kill himself, bolts the door against him, and sends him out alone to die. We watch in horror as the boy sets out, his odds of "making it home" next to impossible.

In the fourth dream of the movie, "The Tunnel," we see a military officer traveling alone.

As he approaches a tunnel, the officer hears howling from within it. A dog, wearing a body vest with ammunition, emerges and growls savagely at the officer. Nonetheless, the officer proceeds.

Just as the tunnel is behind him, the officer hears something else and turns back. He sees the ghost of a private who served under him during the war. The private asks him: "Commander, is it true? Was I really killed in action? I can't believe I'm really dead." The private looks out to a home on the hillside and adds, "My parents don't believe that I am dead." The officer tells him that he died in his arms. He salutes the dead man and waits as he returns to the tunnel.

But as he waits he hears marching. A ghostly platoon emerges and presents arms: "Third Platoon returning to base, sir. No casualties." The officer asserts that all the men are dead: "They call you 'heroes' but you died like dogs." He confesses that his own thoughtlessness and misconduct contributed to their deaths, and then asks them to go back and "rest in peace." When no one moves, he orders them back.

When they are gone, he falls to the ground and weeps. The growling dog emerges from the tunnel and threatens him again.

The war is apparently over, and the officer seeks to leave the guilt, the lies, and the horrors of war behind him. But wherever he goes, he encounters the ghostly aftermath of war. There is no escape for him. The horrors of war pursue him even from beyond the grave.

The ghost of a young private, and then an entire platoon of ghosts, present themselves before him, claiming to be alive. In spite of their uncanny appearance, the officer does not shirk from engaging with them. He tries to comfort them, to confess to them, and to appeal to them, but his attempts all fail. There is nothing the officer can do to get them to believe that they are dead.

Recall that one of the claimants in *Rashomon* was the dead samurai who communicated through a medium. By including his testimony with those of the living, Kurosawa emphasized that there is no illumination beyond the grave. Even the dead deceive themselves. That idea is powerfully reiterated in "The Tunnel" dream. In contrast to the Corinthian belief that "now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face...", Kurosawa shows us that there is no clarity to hope for in the future. The dead cannot know or tell the Truth any more than the living.

In the fifth dream of the movie, "Crows," we enter into the world of the artist. (Note that "Crows in the Wheat Field" is one of the final works that van Gogh painted just before his suicide.)

A young artist is in a gallery of van Gogh's paintings, standing before "The Langlois Bridge with Women Washing." He literally enters the painting and asks the women where he can find van Gogh. They tell him the way but also warn him, "Be careful. He's been in a lunatic asylum."

The artist moves through van Gogh's landscapes until he finds van Gogh painting in a wheat field. Van Gogh speaks to him about his work and tells

him, "I consume this natural setting. I devour it completely and wholly. And then when I'm through, the picture appears before me, complete."

Van Gogh reveals that he drives himself "like a locomotive" to paint. The day before, when he could not get his ear right in a self-portrait, he simply cut it off. Abruptly van Gogh takes off: "The sun compels me to paint. I can't stand here wasting my time talking to you."

The artist runs after him through several van Gogh landscapes. But in "Crows in the Wheat Field," Van Gogh disappears over the horizon. The black crows swirl and screech maniacally around the young artist.

The young artist rejoices in seeing the world through van Gogh's eyes. He marvels at van Gogh's personal style and vision as a painter, and yearns to achieve that kind of sensitivity and vision himself. But then van Gogh reveals to him who he is: He is driven like a locomotive. He chops off body parts if they do not fit his (complete) picture. He runs off like the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. For the young man, the meeting with his hero turns into an encounter with the grotesque. It is as if van Gogh had pulled back the skin on his arm and laid bare a network of wires underneath. The young man is left aghast, realizing that his hero is a machine, a robot, not human.

The sixth dream, "Mount Fuji in Red," takes place in the world of the scientist.

There are throngs of people trying to escape as six nuclear reactors behind Mount Fuji explode. A young man, a mother with two children, and a scientist flee together to the edge of a cliff. The whole area is strewn with abandoned luggage, bicycles, baby strollers, etc.

The scientist explains the different effects of deadly radioactive gases, each of which has been given a distinctive color by scientists. The mother cries out: "The scientists told us that nuclear plants were safe... No accidents, no danger. That's what they told us. What liars! If they're not hanged for this, I'll kill them myself." The scientist then identifies himself as "one of those who deserves to die."

The young man and mother see a cloud of red gas engulfing the area. They try to fight it off and protect the children, but the scientist is gone.

Here an entire community reacts in shock, horror, and terror as the nuclear reactors explode. This dream parallels the first dream. Just as his mother is someone that the boy ought to be able to trust, scientists are a group that the community ought to be able to trust. Instead they lie like everyone else and the consequences are horrible. People are suiciding en masse with their children. Those who do not suicide will die slow, gruesome deaths, poisoned by the radioactive gases that the scientists have meticulously made identifiable.

## The Face in the Wall

The sense of trauma is powerful and pervasive in *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams*. Just as the priest in *Rashomon* is in a state of shock where he can do little more than mutter "It's horrible... horrible," the dreamer/viewer is left stunned and traumatized by the individual dreams we have seen.

The nature of the trauma in both films is captured by the image of "The Face in the Wall" (Ossorio, 1976, pp. 6–8).

Imagine that we're sitting here talking, and we're the only ones here, and you're the only one who can see the wall in back of me. Imagine that as we're sitting here talking, a huge Easter Island type of face emerges from that wall, glares at you threateningly for a second, and then fades back into the wall. You have two main options there. One is you can say, "You know, I just had the most interesting hallucination." The other is you can walk out of here knowing that the world is a vastly different place from what you thought it was.

For the priest in *Rashomon*, the realization that no one can tell the Truth is like seeing the face emerge from the wall. If he could dismiss the testimonies he heard at the prison merely as "tales told by idiots," he would be like the person who says "I just had the most interesting hallucination." But being who he is, the priest cannot so easily and cheaply explain away what he has seen.

Instead, he begins to consider the implications of what he has seen. What kind of world is this where a demonic face can emerge from a wall? What kind of world is this where no one can tell the truth? In the film the priest realizes that if no one can tell the Truth, then no one can trust anyone. He moans in agony, "It's horrible. If men cannot trust one another, then the earth becomes a hell."

The priest is like a mathematician who appreciates what a contradiction does to a logical system. If there is a contradiction, then all of the interrelationships within the system are undermined. The whole system is poisoned. The priest sees that if people cannot tell the Truth, then all of the relationships between people are undermined. Life is poisoned.

The Face in the Wall represents a paradigm for psychological trauma (cf. Wechsler, 1995). If a face like that can emerge from the wall, that is such a violation of everything familiar and understandable that anything – literally anything – might go along with that. When a person accepts the face as real, the person's entire world is shattered, and it becomes wholly uncertain, wholly problematic. There is no basis for acting or for anticipating or for expecting or for hoping. In the vernacular, we say that the person is "nowhere." (We could also say that the person is "no one.")

In *Rashomon*, we are primarily observers of the trauma of the priest. We do not have a Face in the Wall experience ourselves. In *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams*, however, our Face in the Wall experiences are direct and powerful. We are devastated when the little boy is betrayed by his own mother in "Sunshine through the Rain." We are overwhelmed by the uncanny engagements of "The Tunnel," and we are wiped out by van Gogh's inhumanity in "Crows." If this is what life is like and it is not "just a movie," then the world is a vastly different place from the one we take for granted.

With each of these dreams, our experience fits the paradigmatic experience captured by the Face in the Wall image. But a few of the ways that Kurosawa intensifies the experience are worth noting. In "Sunshine through the Rain," for example, the Face in the Wall experience is magnified by the fact that the boy completely accepts his mother's degradation of him. He only speaks once in his own behalf, and then it is more of a question than a protest ("But I don't know where they live."). His silent acceptance of her edict dramatically heightens our sense of his vulnerability and of her betrayal. Inside we scream, "What kind of mother are you? He's just a child. He doesn't stand a chance..."

In "Crows," the Face in the Wall experience is intensified by the anticipation and hopefulness of the young artist as he moves through van Gogh's landscapes. The young artist even seems to have found a promise of the One True Story when van Gogh says that he "devours [a situation] completely and wholly. And then ... the picture appears before me, complete." The prelude of hope and beauty makes the experience much more shattering when van Gogh reveals what kind of being he is.

## Ways of Living

Four of the dreams from *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams* have been introduced, each encapsulating a vision of how horrible the world can be, and each evoking a Face in the Wall experience in the dreamer/viewer. Kurosawa's genius as a maker of films is evident not only in the way that he creates the Face in the Wall experience in the individual dreams, but also in the way that he combines the dreams to create a Face in the Wall experience from the set as a whole.

The Face in the Wall aspect of the set as a whole attests to the overwhelming impact of ... what? What links the dreams? What is the common significance that can have such an impact?

Kurosawa offers no help in answering these questions. In creating the script for *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams*, he uses the stark format of the Akutagawa short story on which *Rashomon* was based. Just as Akutagawa's testimonies are separated only by subtitles, Kurosawa's dreams are separated only by black screens with subtitles. Noticeably missing are commentators like the firewood dealer, the commoner, and the Buddhist priest of *Rashomon* to make explicit the meaning of the dreams.



Missing, too, are any comments by Kurosawa himself. I was unable to find any explanation from Kurosawa in the film reviews and interviews that I searched. One film reviewer notes that even the press handout was "unusually austere, a sequence of stills and the cast-list" (Le Fanu, 1990, p. 204).

Rather than looking to Kurosawa for explanation, we need to take another look at the film. So far we have seen the way of life of a military man, the way of life of an artist, and the way of life of a scientist. In the dreams to be discussed below, we will also see the way of life of a mountain man, the way of life of a farmer, and the life of tradition and nature. What these ways of living have in common in *Dreams* is that they all fail in fundamental, dismaying ways. They lead to betrayal, torment, insanity, despair, suicide, etc.

Obviously the set of ways of living portrayed in the film is not an exhaustive set of all known ways of living. But given that all of the ways of living that Kurosawa includes in the film are failures, it is easy to conclude that for Kurosawa, all existing ways of living fail. The question of the movie is "Can anyone live a good life?" and the answer is "No."

Showing that no one can live a good life would be enough for the film to have a traumatic impact, but Kurosawa's portrayal does more than merely convey this conclusion. Rather, we are overwhelmed by his vision of evil, grotesque inhumanity, needless suffering, and complete futility in human life. This is the Face in the Wall impact of the film as a whole.

Where else has Kurosawa portrayed a set of failures? In *Rashomon*, of course. Notice the parallels between the two films. In the way that Kurosawa lays out murder testimonies for inspection in *Rashomon*, he lays out worlds for inspection in *Dreams*. In the way that he surveys the stories of the samurai, the wife, and the bandit in *Rashomon*, he surveys the ways of living of a military man, an artist, a scientist and others in *Dreams*.

But *Rashomon* is not merely a survey of stories. It is an indictment of them. The stories in *Rashomon* are "lies, all lies." Likewise, *Dreams* is not merely a survey of ways of living. It is an indictment of them. The ways of living in *Dreams* are failures, all failures.

Surely this is more than coincidence.

## The Old Lament

"If I only knew for sure..." This ubiquitous lament has many versions: "If I only knew for sure what I really want..." "If I only knew for sure who I really am..." "If I only knew for sure how she really feels about me..." "If I only knew for sure what he really thinks..." "If I only knew for sure what really happened..."

At face value, each of these statements looks like a lament over the absence of knowledge: "If I only knew for sure..." And of course, each one *is* overtly that kind

of lament. But in the real life settings in which the lament occurs, there is a suppressed final clause.

The missing clause is "...then I'd know what to do." If this clause is not volunteered by people expressing the lament, it is easily elicited from them. "If I only knew for sure what I really want, then I'd know what to do." "If I only knew for sure what really happened, then I'd know what to do."

In its full rendering The Old Lament shows the connection between knowledge and action. In general people do not want to "know for sure" for its own sake. (What would be the point?) They want the assurance about knowledge for the sake of the assurance it gives them about action and living.

In *Rashomon*, Kurosawa's concern with knowledge is explicit: "If we only knew who *really* murdered the samurai..." But the message of *Rashomon* is not about knowledge for its own sake. The priest is horrified because he has a glimpse of what it does to human life if no one can know the Truth.

Kurosawa's concern with action and living is evident in *Dreams*. He seeks a humanly satisfying way of living, one in which things are not arbitrary and capricious, one in which people do not deceive themselves, one that allows people to be people, one in which people do not lie. But what he finds is that all our ways of living are failures.

Taken together, *Rashomon* and *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams* may be understood as expressing "Kurosawa's Lament." A variation of The Old Lament, Kurosawa's Lament is "If only we could know the Truth, then we could live good lives."

Notice the "we" in Kurosawa's Lament. Kurosawa's concern is with communities and cultures more than with individuals. This is vividly seen in the "Mount Fuji in Red" dream introduced above, and will also be evident in "The Way the World Ends" dreams to be discussed below.

In light of Kurosawa's Lament, we can understand the ending of *Rashomon*. In the end, all the stories/lies about the murder have been told and commented upon when out of nowhere, an abandoned baby is heard crying. After the commoner finds the baby and steals its clothes, the firewood dealer decides to take the naked baby home. Because of the firewood dealer's choice, the priest says "I think I will be able to keep my faith in men."

This ending has been criticized as arbitrary and irrelevant to the film, and indeed there is no connection between the baby and the Truth about the murder. We know that the episode involving the baby was in fact "tacked on." Kurosawa reports that when he gave the original script for *Rashomon* to the film company, the head of the company did not understand it and kept asking "But what is it about?" In response Kurosawa "put on a beginning and an ending" (Richie, 1970, p. 70).

Both the trauma of the priest at the beginning of the film, and his affirmation of hope at the end, serve as indicators that Kurosawa's primary concern is with living rather than with Truth per se. At the end of *Rashomon*, the priest holds on to the hope that even if people cannot know the Truth, maybe they can nonetheless be good to one another. Maybe life will not become hell...

## The Hell of the Egoists

By the time of *Dreams*, that hope is gone. All of the dreams we have seen show that people cannot be good to one another: A mother betrays her own child. An officer betrays the men who serve under him. Scientists betray their entire community. All of the dreams portray life as hell.

Kurosawa's most explicit portrayal of life as hell, however, is in "The Weeping Demon," the seventh dream of *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams*.

A man, making his way across a radiation-polluted landscape, meets a groaning demon. The demon says that he himself was once human. When he was a man, he was a farmer, and he used to dump gallons of milk and bury potatoes with a bulldozer to keep the prices up. Now he feeds upon other demons.

He shows the man how the earth is poisoned, how nature has vanished, how all the surviving creatures are deformed, and how monster dandelions grow taller than houses.

Then he takes the man to see the suffering of the "powerful and pretentious" demons, who are condemned to live for eternity tortured by their sins. The man hears the demons moaning and sees them moving continually, their shadows reflected blood red in a lake.

Suddenly the demon tells the man "Go." When the man does not leave at once, the demon demands of him "Do you want to become a demon, too?" The man flees with the demon in pursuit.

Our guide in Kurosawa's hell is not the noble Virgil, ever concerned for the safety and well-being of Dante. Instead our guide is a demon, scratching himself with dungy nails, crouching with hunger, clutching his horn in pain. When he shows us what life is like in the post-nuclear world, we are filled with revulsion: "A life like *this*?" Our Face in the Wall reaction crystallizes when we see the monster dandelions, obscenely thriving in a world where nothing else can live.

Kurosawa's vision of hell includes a special place for the "pretentious," for those who have embellished their own importance. Their dwelling place is beside the lake of blood that is said to exist in Buddhist hell. There they walk eternally round and round, moaning in misery, or they writhe in pain on the ground. Watching the suffering of these lost souls, we cry out like the priest in *Rashomon*, "Horrible... It's horrible!"

Why does Kurosawa single out the pretentious to suffer for eternity? Why does he choose this sin as opposed to all the others? Recall Kurosawa's Lament: "If only we could know the Truth, then we could live good lives." The most heinous sin for Kurosawa would be the sin that keeps people from knowing the Truth. He identifies "egoism" as this sin in his autobiography. He writes:

Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing. This script [*Rashomon*] 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. (Kurosawa, 1982, p. 183)

Those who cannot survive without lies are condemned to live forever in a Kurosawan hell.

### The Way the World Ends

Not all of the dreams in *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams* evoke in us a Face in the Wall experience. In some of the dreams, there is no sheath knife, no dog/soldier, no flock of screeching crows. There is not the traumatic wiping out of behavior potential that we experience in the Face in the Wall dreams.

In "The Peach Orchard," the second dream of *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams*, the boy's life with his family does not end abruptly like the boy's in "Sunshine through the Rain." Even though the boy in "The Peach Orchard" acts in violation of a rule, he is not dealt a single, annihilating blow.

A boy takes a tray to his sister and her friends, who are celebrating the Doll Festival. He studies the set of festival dolls in the room with them, and then realizes that one of the girls is missing.

He tries to confront his sister about the missing girl, but his sister acts as though he's crazy. He sees the missing girl in a soft peach kimono just outside the room. He runs after her even though his sister warns him, "You're not allowed out."

Suddenly his way is blocked by tiers of dolls who have come to life. They confront him: Because his family cut down the trees in the peach orchard, the dolls will never again share their exquisite beauty with his family. The boy, crying, affirms that *he* loved the peach orchard.

The dolls relent and dance for him once more. Their dance evokes the orchard in bloom and the boy sees the girl again. He runs to her, but she vanishes. He finds himself in the razed orchard.

The boy tries to be helpful, but he does not really fit in his family. His values and concerns are different from theirs, and he seeks a kindred spirit. In the face of

misunderstanding and degradation, he affirms who he is. He is able to create a temporary illusion of a world where he belongs, and he enjoys the loveliness of the peach orchard and sees the girl he seeks. But a good heart is not enough. In the end the boy is back in the destructive world of the larger community.

The boy's life goes on at home, but what kind of life is it? It is a life in which the boy suffers for the sins of his family. It is a life in which the values and choices of the community present him with only a procrustean pattern for who he can be and what he can do. This is the life that continues for him at home.

Another dream where life goes on is "The Blizzard...." The opening of the dream is almost six full minutes of men plodding in waist-deep snow with near-zero visibility, their only connection the rope that joins them.

A group of mountain men, obviously exhausted, is struggling to keep going. It is getting dark from another impending storm and the morale of the men is failing. One man declares the storm is simply "waiting for us to die."

The men insist on stopping, and their leader finally agrees to a short break. Then the men hear someone coming. The leader asserts "No one's coming. It's an illusion." He exhorts the men to stay awake, but they fall asleep in the snow.

The leader himself collapses at the edge of a ravine he cannot see. While the storm is raging, the leader sees a beautiful woman who drapes a shroud over him and gently pushes him down into the snow.

Suddenly he wakes up. He wakes his men, and they realize that the snow is letting up. They see their campsite very close ahead.

The men come close to being completely obliterated by the blizzard. They are delusional from exhaustion when they fall asleep in the raging storm. Ordinarily this would mean certain death, but by sheer luck they survive. Having been lucky, what do they get? They get to keep trudging, half-crazed, through waist-deep snow until some future date when their luck does run out.

The final dream of the film, "Village of the Watermills," also ends without a wipe-out. Instead there is a powerful sense of life moving endlessly in circles.

A man comes to a village on a river where stately watermills turn. Children are picking wildflowers and leaving them on a huge stone. As the watermills turn, an 103-year-old man explains to the man that the villagers try to live the way men used to, preserving the changeless patterns.

The visitor asks the old man why the children leave flowers on the stone, and the old man says that "not only the children but most of the villagers do not know why." His own father told him once long ago that a sick traveler died and was buried there.

There are joyful sounds in the distance, the sounds of a "nice, happy funeral." The body of an aged woman is being carried to the hills for burial to the raucous sounds of a brass band and the noisy shouts and claps of the villagers. The old man says that the woman was his first love. "But she broke my heart. She left me for another."

Adding that "life is exciting," the old man joins in the funeral procession. The visitor watches, then leaves a flower on the huge stone and goes on his way.

Life moves forever round and round in the "Village of the Watermills," and it is a life in which individuals do not matter. Everyone goes through the same motions in life, not knowing why, and everyone is carried to death in the same way.

Two memories included in Kurosawa's autobiography are helpful in appreciating this dream. When Kurosawa was in fourth grade, his favorite sister died, and he could not sit through her funeral service. He left in the middle because it seemed so absurd and idiotic to him. His sister was "delicate and fragile," and Kurosawa doubted that she would have been "consoled" by the service, with its noisy drum and sounding gong (Kurosawa, 1982, pp. 18-19). Watching the dream, we doubt if the elderly woman would have felt valued or appreciated by the villagers who "paid their final respects" to her (and to everyone else who died) in this way.

The second memory relevant to the dream comes from Kurosawa's middle school years, when he made several visits to his father's home in the country. He recalls that:

Near the main thoroughfare of the village stood a huge rock, and there were always cut flowers on top of it. All the children who passed by it picked wild flowers and laid them atop the stone. When I wondered why they did this and asked, the children said they didn't know. I found out later by asking one of the old men of the village. In the Battle of Boshin, a hundred years ago, someone died at that spot. Feeling sorry for him, the villagers buried him, put the stone over the grave and laid flowers on it. The flowers became a custom of the village, which the children maintained without ever knowing why. (Kurosawa, 1982, p. 63)

In contrast to the children, the sojourner in the dream pays his respects knowingly to the fellow traveler before he goes on his way.

These three dreams – "The Peach Orchard," "The Blizzard..." and the "Village of the Watermills" – are not traumatic in the way that the Face in the Wall dreams are. They do not overwhelm us. Rather, they drain the life out of us. They leave us dismayed, disheartened, discouraged, and, perhaps, resigned.

The hope for a good life ends not with a bang but a whimper.

## The Rashomon Gate

Kurosawa presents his relativity formulation in *Rashomon* with the priest as his spokesman. Like the priest, Kurosawa had seen more than his share of horrible disasters by the time he made *Rashomon*. He had experienced the Great Earthquake in Tokyo where 40,000 people died. He was in Japan when bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But if we take the priest's word for it, these were not as traumatic for Kurosawa as seeing that no one could tell the Truth.

*Akira Kurosawa's Dreams* may be seen as an exploration of the possibilities inherent in the problem Kurosawa raised in *Rashomon*. If no one can know and tell the Truth, how can we live good lives? A good heart is not enough ("The Peach Orchard") and neither is good luck ("The Blizzard..."). Knowledge of the Truth is essential as the foundation for a good life, for otherwise we have only arbitrary and capricious rules ("Sunshine through the Rain"), meaningless and absurd social practices ("Village of the Watermills"), and destructive self-interest ("Mount Fuji in Red"). If no one can tell the Truth, life is hell: uncanny, grotesque, obscene ("The Tunnel," "Crows," "The Weeping Demon").

Given the way the issue plays out in Kurosawa's dreams, the personal significance of *Rashomon* to Kurosawa seems obvious. In the film that established his international reputation as a film maker, Kurosawa portrayed the intractable problem of his life.

Why does Kurosawa insist on the Truth, the One True Story, as a foundation for his life? We know that Kurosawa's father was extremely strict and had very definite ideas about how his sons should live. The sons had to "toe the line" or be nowhere. Kurosawa's closest brother, Heigo, refused to toe the line. Confrontations between the father and brother were frequent. Kurosawa reports:

In father's eyes Heigo was always wrong. His way of life was too much for him because father was a former soldier and retained a soldier's outlook. Heigo liked to play around with art and it looked frivolous – that is why father always had it in for him. When Heigo said that he wanted to go and live with his girl, father got furious and threw him out of the house. (Richie, 1970, p. 11)

The brother, whom Kurosawa loved very much, ended up committing suicide.

In order to stand up to his father, Kurosawa needed a solid foundation like Truth, something that would enable him to show his father that he was *right*. Otherwise, he would just be acting arbitrarily if he clashed with his father. But if he knew the Truth, then he would be on solid ground. Then he could refuse to toe the line and still be somebody.

In *Rashomon*, however, Kurosawa portrays that all we have are arbitrary, conflicting points of view. No one can know the Truth. This left him without a foundation for his life, and we have seen the resulting despair and hopelessness in

his dreams. Kurosawa's despair and hopelessness were not restricted merely to dreams. In December, 1971, a maid found Kurosawa in a half-filled bathtub with twenty-two slashes on his neck, wrists, and hands (Erens, 1979).

In light of Kurosawa's problem formulation in *Rashomon*, we can understand why he could not pass through the Rashomon gate in writing his autobiography. The making of *Rashomon* appears to be the time when it crystallized for him that no one, including himself, could tell the One True Story. In the years before *Rashomon*, he may have had hope that this was possible and he was able to write about those years. Beyond this crystallization point, however, Kurosawa was unable to write in good faith.

His choice of format for *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams* may be understood in the same light. Recall that Kurosawa presented his dreams separated only by subtitles, without any explanatory dialogue either in the movie or in press handouts or interviews. If we cannot tell the Truth, perhaps it is better to say nothing.

"If I only knew for sure, then I could tell you."

## Another View

For Kurosawa, it was a given that there had to be one single, right answer to the question "Who *really* murdered the samurai?" Likewise, for many physicists it was a given that there had to be one single, right answer to the question "How fast is the earth *really* moving?"

Of course, physicists had known since the time of Galileo that all motion is relative to a frame of reference. To illustrate the relativity of motion, Galileo used the example of a fish swimming in a large bowl of water aboard a ship moving steadily over the sea. The movement of the fish with respect to the bowl of water is very different from the movement of the fish with respect to the sea. The frame of reference, e.g. fish bowl or sea, is an essential part of any description of motion.

While appreciating the relativity of motion, physicists nonetheless assumed that there must be an absolute frame of reference, one that is truly at rest. They would find the *real* velocity of the earth relative to this absolute frame of reference, if only they could find the absolute frame of reference. Physicists knew that the earth could not be the absolute frame of reference, because it is not at rest. The sun could not be the absolute frame of reference, because the sun moves with respect to the center of our galaxy. Our galaxy could not be the absolute frame of reference, because the galaxy is moving...

At the start of the century, Einstein showed that there is no frame of reference that we can claim as being at absolute rest. His work established that one frame of reference is as valid as another. No frame of reference is legitimately privileged.

This means that there is no One True Story to be told about the motion of an object, and there is no single, right answer to the question "How fast is the earth



*really* moving?" Instead, what we have is a set of correspondences among motion descriptions within particular frames of reference. The earth moves at *this* velocity with respect to the sun, at *this* velocity with respect to the Milky Way galaxy, at *this* velocity with respect to the center of a more distant galaxy, etc.

Each motion description/frame of reference pair gives a true answer to the question "How fast is the earth *really* moving?" And each pair is consistent with every other pair. By the simple addition of velocities, a motion description within one frame of reference can be transformed into a motion description in another frame of reference. (Part of Einstein's genius was to give a formula for the addition of velocities close to the speed of light.)

But isn't there One True Story to be told about the murder? Isn't there One True Story to be told about our behavior? Ossorio (1978) uses the analogy of relative motion to help people see that there is not.

Every description is someone's description. Every description is given by a person from some point of view. There is no "view from nowhere." In order to see the world at all, we have to see it *from* some place.

"Where a person is coming from" is therefore an essential part of any description of behavior, just as the frame of reference is an essential part of any description of motion. Usually these are not specified in ordinary conversation but are understood from the context. Only in special circumstances do we need to make them explicit, e.g. "I was driving at 55 mph relative to the earth" or "Here's what happened from my point of view."

If we consider each person as a frame of reference, it is easy to see that there is no privileged frame of reference for giving descriptions of behavior. No one has a God's Eye View. One person's point of view is as valid as another person's.

This means that there are many true stories, but there is no One True Story. A given behavior in a given situation is something that would be described *this* way by this kind of person, *this* way by this kind of person, *this* way by this kind of person, etc. A behavior corresponds to a relativity set of behavior description/person characteristic pairs, just as the motion of an object corresponds to a relativity set of motion description/frame of reference pairs.

Does this mean that all we have are arbitrary, conflicting descriptions? No. While our descriptions may be different, that does not make them arbitrary and/or conflicting. Our descriptions differ systematically depending on who we are ("where we are coming from"). Just as the addition of velocities enables us to transform a motion description given in one frame of reference into a motion description in a different frame of reference, person characteristics enable us to make the adjustments that are needed to understand how someone else sees the world.

Understanding a behavior as corresponding to a relativity set gives us a different perspective on agreement among people. Across a wide range of situations, agreement requires that people see things differently. In general if someone is a different kind of person from me, that person needs to give a different description

from mine in order to agree with me, i.e., in order for both of us to be describing the same thing. Given who the other person is and given who I am, our descriptions could not be the same and be in agreement.

This is not to say that people always or necessarily give different descriptions if they are coming from different places. Consider people looking at a simple sphere from different positions in a room. Given normative competence, descriptions of the light reflecting from the sphere will vary depending on a person's position, but descriptions of the shape of the sphere will be the same regardless of position. Likewise with human behavior, descriptions of simple behaviors ("He is drinking coffee") tend to be the same, whereas descriptions of less simple behaviors or less visible behaviors (e.g. what he is doing by drinking the coffee) show more of the variability that reflects person characteristics.

A normative relativity set for behavior is made up of behavior description/person characteristic pairs that are true and reconcilable. This means that we do not include just any old description in a normative relativity set. Some descriptions are dismissed as inaccurate, incomplete, etc. In these cases, person characteristic descriptions may be used to identify the nature of the deficit, disability, or motivation that kept the person from giving a true description. "He was too scared to notice." "She's tone deaf." "He doesn't know how to do arithmetic." "She wasn't paying attention." "He's insensitive to things like that." "He was purposely exaggerating because..."

But how can we live good lives if all we have are relativity sets? In fact an understanding of the relativity of behavior description is what *enables* us to interact effectively with one another without insisting that we all tell the same story. We can recognize when our differences are legitimate and treat each other appropriately without imputing shortcomings or defects because we do not see things the same way. We are not missing anything if we are missing the One True Story.

This understanding of relativity is, of course, orthogonal to Kurosawa's. People have sometimes taken it that Kurosawa is presenting a normative relativity set in *Rashomon*. But notice that Kurosawa's set is *not* a set of true, reconcilable descriptions about a murder. Instead, each of the descriptions is a lie, and each description is fundamentally irreconcilable with every other.

For Kurosawa, the One True Story *is* the solution to the relativity problem, and there is no evidence that he ever considered that there might not be One True Story. Even though the assumption of the One True Story was questioned in physics and philosophy during his lifetime, he apparently never considered another view of the relativity problem.

## Conclusion

Given Kurosawa's genius as a film maker, it is difficult not to lament that he did not know of any alternative to the One True Story, and that he never explored in film the resolution of the relativity issue that comes with a better understanding of person characteristics. To be sure, if he had resolved the relativity issue, we might then have missed many of the extraordinary movies for which we are indebted to him.

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