October 2, 2018 (XXXVII:6) Akira Kurosawa: RASHOMON (1950, 88 min)

Online versions of The Goldenrod Handouts have color images & hot links: http://csac.buffalo.edu/goldenrodhandouts.html

DIRECTED BY Akira Kurosawa
WRITTEN BY Ryûnosuke Akutagawa (stories), Akira Kurosawa (screenplay) and Shinobu Hashimoto (screenplay)
PRODUCED BY Minoru Jingo, Masaichi Nagata (executive producer)
MUSIC BY Fumio Hayasaka
CINEMATOGRAPHY Kazuo Miyagawa
EDITING Akira Kurosawa
PRODUCTION DESIGN Takashi Matsuyama
SET DECORATION H. Motsumoto
SOUND Tsuchitarô Hayashi, Iwao Ôtani
VISUAL EFFECTS Aurelio x. Vera Jr. (restoration artist, restored version), Rejyna Douglass-Whitman (restoration supervisor)

Academy Awards, USA 1952

Winner Honorary Award: Japan

Voted by the Board of Governors as the most outstanding foreign language film

CAST
Toshirô Mifune...Tajômaru
Machiko Kyô...Masako Kanazawa
Masayuki Mori...Takehiro Kanazawa
Takashi Shimura...Woodcutter
Minoru Chiaki...Priest
Kichijirô Ueda ...Commoner
Noriko Honma...Medium
Daisuke Katô...Policeman

AKIRA KUROSAWA (b. March 23, 1910 in Tokyo, Japan—d. September 6, 1998 (age 88) in Setagaya, Tokyo, Japan) was one of the twentieth century’s most celebrated film auteurs. He was nominated, in 1956, for the Cannes Film Festival’s Palme d’Or for Ikimono no kiroku (I Live in Fear, 1955) and for an Academy Award for Best Director in 1986 for Ran (1985). He won the Cannes Film Festival’s Palme d’Or in 1980 for Kagemusha (1980) in a tie with All That Jazz (1979). He also won an Honorary Award at the 1990 Academy Awards “For cinematic accomplishments that have inspired, delighted, enriched and entertained worldwide audiences and influenced filmmakers throughout the world.”

He directed 33 films, some of which are: Uma (1941, some scenes, uncredited), Sanshiro Sugata (1943), and The Most Beautiful (1944); Sanshiro Sugata, Part Two and The Men Who Tread on the Tiger’s Tail in 1945; Those Who Make Tomorrow and No Regrets for Our Youth in 1946; One Wonderful Sunday (1947) and Drunken Angel (1948); The Quiet Duel and Stray Dog in 1949; Scandal and Rashomon in 1950; The Idiot (1951), Ikiru (1952), and Seven Samurai (1954); Throne of Blood and The Lower Depths in 1957; The Hidden Fortress (1958), The Bad Sleep Well (1960), Yojimbo (1961), Sanjuro (1962), High and Low (1963), and Red Beard (1965); Song of the Horse (TV Movie documentary) and Dodes’ka-den in 1970; Dersu Uzala (1975), Dreams (1990), Rhapsody in August (1991), and Maadadayo (1993). He produced 11 films: Haru no tawamure and Stray Dog in 1949; Throne of Blood and The Lower Depths in 1957; The Hidden Fortress (1958), The Bad Sleep Well (1960), Yojimbo (1961), High and Low (1963), Sanshiro Sugata (1965), Dodes’ka-den (1970), Kagemusha (1980). He also edited 17 films: Uma (1941), Sanshiro Sugata (1943), Sanshiro Sugata, Part Two (1945), No Regrets for Our Youth (1946), Snow Trail (1947), Rashomon (1950), The Idiot (1951), Seven Samurai (1954), Asunaro monogatari (1955), The Lower Depths (1957), The Hidden Fortress (1958), The Bad Sleep Well (1960), Yojimbo (1961), 500,000 (1963), Ran (1985), Rhapsody in August (1991), Maadadayo (1993). He also wrote 77 films.
RYUNOSUKE AKUTAGAWA (b. March 1, 1892 in Tokyo, Japan—d. July 24, 1927 (age 35) in Tokyo, Japan) was a Japanese writer active in the Taishō period in Japan. He is regarded as the 'Father of the Japanese short story' and Japan's premier literary award, the Akutagawa Prize, is named after him. In 1914, Akutagawa and his former high school friends revived the literary journal Shinshichō (New Currents of Thought), publishing translations of William Butler Yeats and Anatole France along with their own works. Akutagawa published his second short story "Rashōmon" the following year in the literary magazine Teikoku Bungaku (Imperial Literature), while still a student. In early 1916 he published "Hana" ("The Nose"), which attracted a letter of praise from his literary hero Natsume Sōseki. Akutagawa wrote over 150 short stories during his brief life. He committed suicide at the age of 35 through an overdose of strychnine. Akutagawa’s "In a Grove". The title and the frame scenes set in the Rashomon Gate are taken from Akutagawa’s "Rashōmon". There are 35 film adaptations of his classic stories.


TOSHIRO MIFUNE (b. April 1, 1920 in Tsingtau, China [Qingdao, Shandong, China]—d. December 24, 1997 (age 77) in Mitaka city, Tokyo, Japan) acted in 183 films, including: Snow Trail and These Foolish Times in 1947; Drunken Angel (1948) and Stray Dog (1949); Scandal, Wedding Ring, and Rashomon in 1950; The Idiot and The Life of a Horse trader in 1951; Sword for Hire (1952), The Last Embrace (1953), The Sound of Waves (1954), and The Underworld (1956); Throne of Blood and Downtown in 1957; The Hidden Fortress (1958) and The Big Boss (1959); The Last Gunfight, The Gambling Samurai, and The Bad Sleep Well in 1960; Yojimbo (1961), Sanjuro (1962), and High and Low (1963); Samurai Assassin and Red Beard in 1965; Samurai Rebellion (1967), Red Lion (1969), Zatoichi Meets Yojimbo (1970), Red Sun (1971), Paper Tiger (1975), Midway (1976), 1941 (1979), and Shogun (1980, TV Mini-Series); Inchon and The Bushido Blade in 1981; Conquest (1982), Sicilian Connection (1987), Picture Bride (1994), and Deep River (1995).

MACHIKO KYO (b. March 25, 1924 in Osaka, Japan) has acted in 86 films and television series, including: Hana kurabe tanuki-goten and Chijin no ai in 1949; The Motherland Far Far Away, Fukkatsu, and Rashomon in 1950; Gate of Hell (1953); Street of Shame and The Teahouse of the August Moon in 1956; The Loyal 47 Ronin (1958), Floating Weeds (1959), The Wandering Princess (1960), The Age of Marriage (1961), Buddha (1962), and Kinkanshoku (1975); The Possessed and Tora's Pure Love in 1976; and Haregi, koko ichiban (2000, TV Series).


TAKASHI SHIMURA (b. March 12, 1905 in Ikuno, Hyogo, Japan—d. February 11, 1982 (age 76) in Tokyo, Japan) acted in 272 films, some of which are: Ren'ai gai ichôme (1934) and Osaka Elegy (1936); The Most Beautiful and Shibaidoi in 1944; Those Who Make Tomorrow (1946) and Drunken Angel (1948); Stray Dog and Onna koroshi abura jikou 1949; Ore wa yojinbo, Ma no ogon, Spring Snow, Penitsuwarazu, bōryoku no machi, Scandal, The Angry Street, Rashomon, Yoru no hiboton, Tenya wanya, and Ginza Sanshiro in 1950; The Idiot (1951), The Life of Oharu and Ikiru in 1952; Seven Samurai (1954), I Live in Fear (1955), Godzilla, King of the Monsters! (1956), and Throne of Blood (1957); The Loyal 47 Ronin and Nichiren and the Great Mongol Invasion in 1958; Storm Over the Pacific and The Bad Sleep Well in 1960; Yojimbo (1961) and Sanjuro (1962); Attack Squadron! and The Lost World of Sinbad in 1963; Kwaidan (1964); Samurai Assassin, Red Beard and Frankenstein Conquers the World in 1965; Zatoichi and the Fugitives (1968), Am I Trying (1969), Zatoichi's Conspiracy (1973), and Kagemusha (1980).


Akira Kurosawa (March 23, 1910-September 5,1998), Japanese director and screenwriter, was born in the Omori district of Tokyo. His father, Yutaka Kurosawa, a native of Akita Prefecture and of samurai descent, was an army officer who became a teacher and administrator of physical education. A
graduate of the Toyama Imperial Military Academy, he earned a moderate income at the Ebara Middle School, famous for its spartan program. The director’s mother, whom he has described as a self-sacrificing realist—‘a typical woman of the Meiji era’—came from an Osaka merchant family. Akira was the last of the couple’s children, following four sisters and three brothers. The oldest sister had already left home and married by the time Kurosawa was born, and the oldest brother left while he was still a child. The second brother had died before Kurosawa was born, so that Akira grew up with three sisters and the one elder brother who was later to be a great influence in his life. The youngest of the sisters, to whom Kurosawa was closest, died at the age of sixteen while he was in the fourth grade.

Kurosawa characterizes himself in childhood as at first backward at school and physically weak, to the disappointment of his father. In spite of that weakness, he soon came to share his father’s enthusiasm for physical challenge, developing a lifelong interest in sports, especially baseball, and an attitude of “single-minded devotion to a discipline.” As a child of ten he practiced kendo, traditional Japanese swordsmanship, and “assumed all the affectations of a boy fencer.” His father’s influence extended in another significant direction. In a time when films were considered frivolous entertainment, Yutaka Kurosawa insisted on their educational value, and took his whole family regularly to the movies as well as to traditional storytellers in the music-halls around Kagurazaka. ...

The great Kanto earthquake of 1923 occurred during Kurosawa’s second year at the Keika Middle School. His brother took him on “an expedition to conquer fear,” forcing him to look at scenes of horrifying destruction. ...He expressed the wish to become a painter. Despite the family’s declining fortunes, his father did not object, but insisted that he go to art school...

Kurosawa found it hard to give his mind to his artistic career during the Depression. His family could not afford to buy the materials he needed, and the distractions of those disturbed times were many. He explored literature, especially the works of Dostoevsky and Gorki; he went to the theatre; he listened to classical music; he became fascinated by movies. In this last he was guided by his brother, who wrote program notes for movie theatres and took part in shows himself as a benshi, a professional commentator, specializing in foreign films. Kurosawa was later to list nearly a hundred films that particularly impressed him in the years up to 1929. The list is mainly composed of films from Russia and the West, and includes most of the great names from Caligari to Chaplin. In 1929 Kurosawa joined the Proletarian Artists’ League, not so much from a commitment to Marxism as out of a fashionable interest in all new movements...He left home at this time, ostensibly to live with his brother, but actually moving between various rented rooms and the homes of Communist friends.

Increasingly disillusioned with the political movement and with his painting, Kurosawa left the League in the spring of 1932 and went to share the bohemian life of his brother, who lived, to the disapproval of the family, with a woman in the tenement district of Kagurazaka. The movie-going continued, of course, but now came the first of the talkies that would mean the end of Heigo’s career. The benshi was no longer required for sound films, and the strike organized to persuade the studios to resist the change was doomed to fail. Heigo found himself a leader of the strike, and it was this painful role above all that led, in Kurosawa’s view, to his brother’s suicide attempt. Kurosawa tried to reconcile Heigo to the family by arranging his marriage to the woman he lived with, but in 1933, at the age of twenty-seven, Heigo’s second suicide attempt succeeded. The effect on Kurosawa was profound, and he came to describe the brother, whom he saw as a more pessimistic version of himself, “as a negative strip of film that led to my own development as a positive image.”

Kurosawa had by this time lost faith in his talent as a painter. He felt himself too easily influenced by the vision of whatever artist he was studying. “In other words, I did not—and still don’t—have a completely, personal, distinctive way of looking at things....Kurosawa answered a newspaper advertisement put out by the newly established PCL (Photo Chemical Laboratory, later to become Toho Motion Picture Company)...Out of more than five hundred applicants, over one hundred and thirty were selected on the basis of the essay, but only seven passed the next test, which involved writing a scenario from a newspaper story. Kurosawa was one of the five who came through the final interview, having already established a rapport with Kajiro Yamamoto, whom he impressed with his knowledge of the visual arts. Kurosawa joined PCL in 1936, when the company was only two years old, a vigorous, open-minded organization that encouraged experiment and trained its assistant directors by giving them every job in the production process. After an uneasy start, Kurosawa joined the group led by director Yamamoto, in whom he discovered “the best teacher of my entire life.”

...Kurosawa now began to win prizes from the Ministry of Education for his filmscripts...Kurosawa resigned himself for a time to turning out formulaic scripts and drinking up the proceeds, usually in the company of his old friend Uekusa, who had come to Tokyo as an extra and stayed on to write scripts himself. The drinking led to a preulcerative stomach condition, which Kurosawa attempted to treat by making strenuous trips into the mountains. One day he saw an advertisement for a new novel, Sugata Sanshiro, by Tsuneo Tomita. Reading through the summary of the story, he knew instinctively that here was the subject for a film that would not only be acceptable to the censors but ideal for himself to direct...

Sanshiro Sugata (the Western order for the name) is a Meiji period story about the origins of judo, tracing the rise of one of its first practitioners. The film was made in accordance with national policy dictated by the Information Bureau. Since
the film’s content was thus restricted, Kurosawa took the opportunity to concern himself with its form. At a time when the received idea was that a Japanese film should be as simple as possible, “I disagreed and got away with disagreeing—that much I could say.” Several critics remark how many of the characteristic features of Kurosawa’s style are already apparent here. Richie points to the kind of story (a young man’s education), to the tendency to “cyclical form,” to the interest in how things are done (in this case the method of judo itself), and to “the extraordinary economy of the way in which he shows his story.” Already Kurosawa is making use of his favorite punctuation device, the wipe, between scenes....

Kurosawa’s next film, \textit{Ichiban utsukishikku} (The Most Beautiful, 1943), belongs to a cycle of “national policy” projects designed to encourage increased industrial production. Unusually for him its subject is women...The style of \textit{The Most Beautiful}, according to Ritchie, was influenced by German and Russian documentary, but he notes also the beginnings of a number of techniques not especially associated with documentary, that Kurosawa was to develop later as his own, such as the “short-cut” for narrative transitions, and a “peculiarly personal use of the flashback.”....

On February 15, 1945, the month \textit{Sanshiro Sugata Part II} was released, Kurosawa married the star of \textit{The Most Beautiful}, Yoko Taguchi (whose real name was Kato Kiyo), at the Meiji shrine in Tokyo, with Yamamoto and his wife as matchmakers. They were at first very poor, his salary being less than a third of what his wife’s had been as an actress. Their son Jisao was born in December of the same year; a daughter, Kuzuko, was born in 1954. As Japan’s defeat in the war approached, Kurosawa wrote a script for a film called \textit{Dokkoi kono yari} (The Lifted Spear), but it was abandoned in the pre-production stage because of a shortage of horses. This led to the hastily assembled production of \textit{Tora no o fumu otokotachi} (They Who Step on the Tiger’s Tail), during which Japan surrendered. Kurosawa clashed angrily over this film with the Japanese censors, who had remained at their post even after the government collapsed. They pronounced it an insult to Japanese traditions. The American censors who succeeded them also banned the film, some say for its feudalism, but according to Kurosawa because the Japanese had failed to submit it for approval....American soldiers were in the habit of visiting the set during production, among them on one occasion John Ford, who left a message which Kurosawa never received. He only learned of the visit when the two met at last in London years later....

Kurosawa’s \textit{Rashomon}, 1950, was a landmark, not only in his own career but also in the history of Japanese cinema and its relation to the cinema of the West. Critics see continuity and gradual change rather than marked turns in Kurosawa’s career. Max Tessier notes a displacement of the early interest in humble suffering humanity towards a hero of stronger personality. Audie Bock sees the topicality of \textit{Drunken Angel} and \textit{Stray Dog} giving way to something more universal. Noël Burch compares the films between 1946 and 1950 to the neorealism of Rossellini and De Sica, but finds in their style the disjunctiveness, pathos, and excess,” which will also be “constants in the mature work of the 1950s,” together with the “characteristic stubbornness of Kurosawa’s protagonists” which affects the structure as well as the theme of many of his films. Even so, \textit{Rashomon} still marks a change, not only because of the unusual nature of the project itself. \textit{Rashomon} came together in Kurosawa’s mind from a number of stimuli. He felt that films had lost something of “peculiar beauty” from the days of silent film. In particular he felt “there was something to be learned from the spirit of French avant-garde films of the 1920s.” \textit{Rashomon} would be a “testing ground” where he could apply his ideas on the aesthetics of those silent films, using an “elaborately fashioned play of light and shadow” to express the “strange impulses of the human heart” explored by the original short story, “In a Grove,” by Ryunosuke Akutagawa.

The story had been made into a script by Shinobu Hashimoto, but it was too short for a feature film until Kurosawa added material from a second Akutagawa story called “Rashomon” as a frame for the first, the whole being set in the Heian period (794-1184). In a dense forest, a triangular encounter takes place between a samurai and his bride and a bandit. The bride is raped, the samurai killed, and the scene is witnessed by a woodcutter. The narrative of the film presents four main versions of this story, each told from the point of view of one of the participants. The captured bandit tells of tying up the husband, raping his bride, then, at her entreaty, dueling with the husband and killing him. The woman’s version is that after the rape her husband rejected her, and she killed him in her angry grief. The third account is spoken though the lips of a medium by the spirit of the dead samurai. He says that after the rape the woman agreed to follow the bandit, but that the bandit rejected her when she insisted that he kill her husband; then the samurai found the woman’s dagger and killed himself. The fourth version is the woodcutter’s, altered by himself as he tells it. He says that he found the bandit after the rape, pleading with the woman to run away with him. She insisted that the two men fight for her. The bandit killed the samurai, then he and the woman left separately. We see these versions as told partly before the police, but also retold by three men sheltering from torrential rain in the ruins of the great Rashomon gate of the medieval city of Kyoto. One of these men is the woodcutter himself, another a priest who was also present at the police interrogation, and the third a common man who questions and comments. Finally, as these three consider the baffling tale, they hear a baby cry. The commoner, finding an abandoned child, steals its clothes, but the woodcutter, who has earlier been suspected of stealing the woman’s dagger, picks up the baby and takes it home, while the priest comments that his faith in humanity has been restored.
The apparent relativism of this intriguingly complex structure, which may have had much to do with its popularity in the West, create some problems in Japan. Daiei were reluctant to approve production because they did not understand the story. The studio head, Masaichi Nagata was particularly scornful, until the film’s success abroad. Although *Rashomon* did well at the box office in Japan, audiences were inclined to miss the point, searching for the one “true” version of events. Some theatres appointed a sort of *benshi* to help. Kurosawa explained the script to three baffled assistants, one of whom refused to cooperate and was sacked, by comparing its difficulty to the difficulty of understanding the psychology of human beings who “are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves.” Donald Ritchie confirms such a reading, distinguishing the rich suggestiveness of Kurosawa’s film from the simpler questioning of all truth in Akutagawa’s original. Turning attention away from any supposed message Tadao Sato says “*Rashomon* is a masterpiece because of the way it is made,” citing in particular the editing of the scene in which the woman yields to the bandit. Noël Burch notes Kurosawa’s revival of the device of the 180-degree-reverse-angle cut as “a basic element of his rough-hewn, jagged editing, and his use of “frequent and sharply contrasting juxtapositions of close-up and long shots, of moving and fixed shot, or shots of contrary movement.” Ritchie on the other hand emphasizes the unobtrusive connecting of the mostly very brief but unusually numerous shots (420 in all).

Kurosawa has acquired the reputation among his collaborators of being, as his production chief Hiroshi Nezu said, “the best editor in the world.” He sees editing as the most important phase of production, giving life to the film, while pointing out that nothing can rescue a bad script. His method is unusual. Instead of shooting scenes in random order of convenience, he prefers to shoot chronologically, following the script, as far as possible, scene by scene. He then edits the rushes when each day’s shooting is over, so that he can maintain the involvement of his crew in the film’s progress, and so that “I have only the fine cut to complete when the shooting is finished.” Although his selection of shots, including the split-second shots of action, includes those that draw attention to the camera, with *Rashomon* he begins to use more frequently that obtrusive punctuation mark, the hard-edged wipe. Kurosawa himself acknowledges that the powerful visual impression of this film is largely due to the work of cameraman Kazuo Miyagawa, with whom he worked here for the first time, and praises in particular the introductory section “which leads the viewer through the light and shadow of the forest into a world where the human heart loses its way.” Miyagawa says that till then he had been shooting for Daiei “in a rather soft key,” but that Kurosawa required many “special effects.” He instances the forest love-scene of Machiko Kyo as the bride and Toshiro Mifune as the bandit. “He wanted Mifune to be like a big sun, like the Hinomaru [the red sun of the Japanese flag] in high contrast with the softness of Machiko Kyo….[As that required contrast between black and white, not the usual grey tone. I even used mirrors against the sun to get that effect, which was something I had never done before.” In the same interview Miyagawa recalled a plan Kurosawa had had, which remained only a plan, for combining tracking shots by four different cameras. Despite Daiei’s doubts, *Rashomon* was released with a certain flourish and, though accounts differ about its success, it was reasonably well received. Patricia Erens says that it “managed only to earn back its production costs” on first release, but it was placed fifth in the Kinema Jumpo list for 1950, and, according to Ritchie and Anderson it was Daiei’s fourth best money earner out of fifty-two films that year. The Tokyo Motion Picture Reviewers’ Club awarded their Blue Ribbon for the screenplay. But wider recognition was to come….

Once Mizoguchi’s new films began to appear, from 1952 on, he and Kurosawa became the opposite poles in critical debates among French New Wave critics, generally to the detriment of Kurosawa. But *Rashomon*’s influence was wide: Robbe-Grillet declared it had inspired *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) and Bergman called his own *Virgin Spring* (1959) “a pale imitation.” The Japanese were equally confused by *Rashomon*’s foreign success, suspecting uneasily that the film appealed in the West because it was “exotic,” or alternatively because it was “Western.” At any rate, according to Kurosawa, Toho were still reluctant to send his next film *Ikiru*, abroad, for fear of its not being understood; this although it was an immediate popular and critical success at home, was placed first on the Kinema Jumpo list for 1952, given the Mainichi Film Concours award for best picture and best screenplay, and awarded a Ministry of Education prize. When the film was finally shown abroad, it was very well received, and at a 1961 Kurosawa retrospective in Berlin, it was awarded the David O. Selznick Golden Laurel. *Ikiru* (Living) tells the story of Watanabe, a minor official in the city administration, widowed and alienated from his married son. He learns that he is suffering from cancer and has only six months to live. ...The film is full of changes of tone and mood, as well as of narrative and visual method. It begins with an x-ray picture of Watanabe’s stomach and the narrating voice tells us about his cancer....

Richie calls the theme existentialist, comparing Dostoevsky and quoting with approval Richard Brown: “It consists of a restrained affirmation within the context of a giant negation.” It is clearly possible in interpretation to emphasize one strand more than another in the structure of this very various film. Burch, in considering it “Kurosawa’s first full-blown masterwork and the most perfect statement of his dramatic geometry,” also finds it “somewhat marred by its complicity with the reformist ideology dominant in that period.” ...Kurosawa saw
himself reaching “a certain maturity” in this film, which he felt was the culmination of the “researches” he had carried out since the war; nevertheless the film left him dissatisfied, and it contains blunders that still embarrassed him when interviewed in 1966 by Cahiers du Cinéma. Asked if he considered himself a realist or a romantic, he replied, “I am a sentimentalist.”

Kurosawa collaborated on the script for Ikiru with two other writers, Shinobu Hashimoto and Hideo Oguni. Since the earliest films he had preferred not to write alone, because of the danger of one-sidedness in interpreting a character, for a character is usually the starting point. The process of writing Kurosawa describes as “a real competition.” The team retires to a hotel or a house isolated from distractions. Then, sitting around one table, each one writes, then takes and rewrites the others; work. “Then we talk about it and decide what to use.” Although he finds scriptwriting the hardest part of his work, he lays great emphasis on its importance. It is the first stage in an essentially collaborative process, of which the next is the careful rehearsal with the cast before any filming takes place. The scripts are often written with particular actors in mind. “We don’t just rehearse the actors, but every part of every scene—the camera movements, the lighting, everything.”...

On January 29, 1959, Kurosawa gave his first press interview and announced the formation of his own company, Kurosawa Productions. Toho was to put up one million yen in an agreement requiring three films over two years, with profits and losses to be shared equally with Kurosawa. It was the first independent company headed by a working director in the history of Japanese cinema....

The story of Tengoku to jigoku (High and Low, 1963) is based on an Ed McBain detective story called King’s Ransom. The son of Gondo, production head of a shoe company (Toshiro Mifune), has apparently been kidnapped and a ransom is demanded. When it turns out that the son of Gondo’s chauffeur has been taken by mistake, Gondo must decide whether he will still pay the ransom—to do so would ruin him and allow his rivals to take over the company. Agreeing to pay, he is instructed to throw a briefcase containing the money from a high-speed train. We then learn the identity of the kidnapper; Takeuchi, a poor medical student, provoked by the sight of Gondo’s ostentatious house on a hill overlooking the Yokohama slums where he himself struggles to live. As the police close in, Takeuchi (also a pusher of heroin) kills his accomplices. He is finally captured, and Gondo visits him in prison. The first part of the film (65 minutes of 143) takes place entirely in Gondo’s hilltop house, the action restricted to phone calls and conversations, filmed in long takes shot with several cameras. Three identical sets were built to represent the scene at different times of day, according to Richie; cameras followed the actors’ movements closely but were positioned outside the set itself. “The effect is one of complete freedom within a very constricted area,” and the camerawork makes the hour-long sequence seem much shorter. It also provides a context for the explosive action that follows, the four-minute sequence on the speeding train. The rest of the narrative is full of incidents, sights and sounds, punctuated by the famous moment when red smoke, in color on the black-and-white screen, appears from a chimney to reveal the location of the discarded briefcase, after which the action accelerates for the final chase. This bold two-part structure is seen by Burch as another outstanding example of Kurosawa’s distinctive “dramatic geometry.” Richie sees it as marking two areas of thematic interest, the first emotionally involving, the second more intellectual. Joan Mellen considers it fortunate that the “rather obvious moral dilemma” of the first part is replaced by the “much more interesting treatment of the personality of the kidnapper.” The second part, after the train sequence, begins by deliberately destroying the pattern of suspense, revealing the kidnapper in his miserable daily existence. For Mellen, this part, with its descent into the slums and its satirical presentation of police and press, “comes close to developing into one of the finest critiques of the inequitable class structure of Japan ever offered in a Japanese film.” She answers Tadao Sato’s objection that a man destined to become a doctor would never have risked his future as Takeuchi does, by reading it as a deliberate irony confirming “the depth of Kurosawa’s social vision.” In the final confrontation, which Richie reads as Dostoevskian, the faces of Gondo and the kidnapper begin to merge with each other’s reflections in the glass screen dividing them, indicating their underlying identity. High and Low placed second on the Kinema Jumpo list and received the Mainichi Concours award for best picture and screenplay. Some French critics, however, saw it as Kurosawa’s worst picture. Informed of this, Kurosawa wondered if they had not liked it because of the Americanness of Gondo’s style of life—something he had to show, since it is a part of real Japanese society. ...In the five years before his next production, [after Akahige/Red Beard], Kurosawa was involved in a number of unhappy projects. Japanese companies refused him support, so he sought financing in the United States. When bad weather postponed shooting in Rochester, New York, of a script called The Runaway Train, Fox invited Kurosawa to direct the Japanese sequences of Tora! Tora! Tora! After a few weeks shooting, bitter disagreements with the studio ended with Fox claiming that Kurosawa had resigned because of bad health (meaning mental health), and Kurosawa insisting that he had been misled (for instance, about the other director supposed to work with him—he had been promised David Lean) and then dismissed against his will.

Disillusioned, Kurosawa returned to Japan, where an independent company was formed, called Yonki no Kai (The Four Musketeers), consisting of Kurosawa, Kinshita, Kon...
Ichikawa, and Masaki Kobayashi. It was an attempt to reassert the power and independence of the director in what Kurosawa has referred to as the Dark Ages of Japanese cinema. Kurosawa’s first venture for the company was *Dodes’kaden* (1970), his first picture in color….Kurosawa next made a television documentary, *Uma no uta* (*The song of the Horse*). Then, on December 22, 1971, a housemaid found him lying in his half-filled bath, wounded with twenty-two slashes on his neck, arms, and hands. He had attempted suicide. Joan Mellen has discussed this attempt in the context of Japanese attitudes toward death and suicide; Kurosawa himself spoke of neurosis, low spirits, and the realization (after an operation for a severe case of gallstones) that he had been in pain for years. His eyesight too had begun to fail. “Letters and telegrams came from all over the world; there were offers from children to help finance my films. I realized I had committed a terrible error.” His spirits were fully restored by an offer in 1972 from the Soviet Union to direct a subject of his choice. Kurosawa chose to write a script based on the writing of Vladimir Aresniev, which he had read in the 1940s. Arseniev was a Russian soldier who, while mapping the Russian-Manchurian border in the early 1900s, formed a friendship with Dersu Uzala, an old hunter who served as a guide for him and his party…

*Dersu Uzala* took almost four years to complete, two of which were spent filming in the Siberian winter. It was shot in 70-mm with six-track stereophonic sound…. *Dersu Uzala* was given the American Academy Award for best foreign picture, a Federation of International Film Critics Award, a Gold Medal at the Ninth Moscow Festival, and in Italy in 1977 the Donatello Prize. In 1976 Kurosawa was given by the Japanese government the highest-ranking cultural award of Order of the Sacred Treasure, designating him a Person of Cultural Merits, the first such in his profession; and in 1978 he received an award for “Humanistic Contribution to Society in Film Production” from the European Film Academy.

Another five years went by before Kurosawa made his next film. He worked on the script for *Ran*, his Japanese *King Lear*, and on a project based on Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death.” With Masato Ide he wrote the script that was to become *Kagemusha* But although this was a film that had to be shot in Japan, no Japanese company was willing to risk money unless it was assured of large returns. Meanwhile Kurosawa produced hundreds of colorful drawings planning every detail of a film that might never be seen, To supplement his own finances he even appeared in whiskey commercials. Since his recovery n 1972, he had become a much ore public person, more open to television and the press. He traveled in 1978 to Europe (visiting his daughter and grandchild in Italy) and to the United States. There he met Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas, two of his admirers who consider themselves his students. Realizing Kurosawa’s difficulties, the two American directors approached Alan Ladd Jr. of 20th Century-Fox, who in turn made a deal for *Kagemusha* with Toho, to whom Fox was to give one and a half million dollars for al the foreign rights. The total cost of six million dollars made it the most expensive film ever made in Japan, but with gross earnings of ten million on its first run, it was one of the most successful Japanese films of 1980. That year it shared the Grand Prize at Cannes…..

If some critics were tempted to see *Kagemusha* as an old man’s culminating statement, his latest picture, *Ran* (1985), had proved even more tempting. The story resembles that of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, but concerns the sixteenth-century Japanese Lord Hidetora, who retires from active leadership of his clan while retaining an over-all title, and transfers power to the eldest of his three son, Taro Takatora, and to a lesser degree to the other two, Jiro Masatora and Saburo Naotara. Saburo scorns Hidetora’s sentimental belief that family ties will prevent conflict and is consequently banished, along with a retainer, Tango, who supports him. Saburo takes sanctuary with a neighboring lord, wile Tango, like Kent, tries to serve Hidetora unrecognized. Goaded by his wife, Kaede, Taro seizes full power from his father, and Hiro backs, and Jiro backs him. Only Saburo’s castle is prepared to shelter Hidetora, but when Taro and Hiro attack (and Taro is killed by one of Jiro’s snipers), the old man wanders crazily, accompanied by his fool, Kyoami, and Tango. In the same wilderness are other wanderers: Sue, wife of Jiro, who now seeks to kill her, having been seduced by his brother’s widow, Lady Kaede, and Sue’s brother Tsuturamaru, blinded in childhood by Hidetora. The conflict among the forces of Jiro, Saburo, and their opportunistic neighbors leaves Kaede dead, Sue beheaded, Saburo shot, and Hidetora dead of grief. In the final scene, the blind Tsuturamaru stands on the edge of a precipice and releases a scroll-painting of the Buddha into the void. Critics were quick to notice similarities between Hidetora and Kurosawa himself, both the same age. It is said that the relationship between Hidetora and the fool is paralleled by Kurosawa’s relationship with Peter, the transvestite actor who plays Kyoami. The twelve-million-dollar budget for *Ran* was put together by French producer Serge Silverman in negotiation with Japanese companies, Nippon Herald, Toho, and Fuji TV , and once the film was completed Kurosawa set off around the world on a promotional tour. A tall, amiable figure, wearing dark glasses to shield his sensitive eyes and surrounded by a busy, protective retinue, he was described by one of his interviewers as “the quiet eye of the storm that blows all around him.” Four months of rehearsal were followed by nine months of shooting, extended because of mourning for the death of Kurosawa’s wife early in 1985. The spectacular production took Kurosawa’s unit once again to the black volcanic slopes of Mount Fuji, where a castle had to be built and then burned down for the scene of Hidetora’s descent into madness.
The Japanese word *ran* means “war,” “riot,” or “conflict,” but it has too an older, broader significance—“chaos.” Tony Rayns describes the vision of the film as “one step further down the road to hell from the ending of *Kagemusha.*” After a startling opening scene depicting a boar hunt, the narrative begins with Hidetora handing over power and giving a little lesson on the value of family unity, declaring that while on arrow alone can be broken, three together cannot. Saburo breaks all three arrows across his knee, saying, “This is a world where men’s cruel and evil instincts are only too evident, where one can survive only by suppressing one’s humanity and all one’s inner feelings.” Rayns sees the film as “essentially a dramatization of this scene, “a tautological gloss on Saburo’s pragmatic pessimism.” He finds the parallel of Shakespeare’s original a problem. Hidetora is denied tragic stature because Kurosawa is more concerned with his hero’s past than with his moral regeneration. To Rayns, Hidetora is credible neither as a “brilliant military leader on the verge of senility nor as a madman in second childhood stricken with remorse.” Tom Milne takes a more positive view, describing a film in which “a certain classicism seems to replace the ferment of invention as virtuosity no longer feels the need to be seen to exist. One is moved, as often as not, less by what is expressed than by what is implied.” Reviewers were impressed by the spectacle of the battle, with its forces sharply differentiated by their colors in the blackness of their world, and by some performances, notably that by Mieko Harada as the startling Lade Kaede. Vincent Canby, reviewing *Ran* in the twenty-fifth week of its New York run, felt that the audience which applauded “had been swept up in the kind of all-embracing movie experience that’s rare in any era.” In March 1986, Kurosawa visited London to be made a Fellow of the British Film Institute.

Throughout his career, from his earliest encounters with Japanese censors, it has been suggested that Kurosawa is too “Western” to be a good Japanese director. In the West a kind of purism began to prefer Ozu and Mizoguchi. But Kurosawa has always insisted on his Japanese outlook. “I am a man who likes Sotatsu, Gyokudo, and Tessai in the same way as Van Gogh, Lautrec and Rouault….I collect old Japanese lacquerware as well as antique French and Dutch glassware. In short, the western and the Japanese live side by side in my mind, naturally, without the least sense of conflict.” Akira Iwasaki agrees, pointing out that, unlike Ozu and Naruse, “Kurosawa belongs to a more recent generation which must look to the west for help defining Japan, which verifies and analyses the one by constant reference to the other.” Audie Bock insists that he “has never catered to a foreign audience and has condemned those that do.” But from his Japanese center, Kurosawa from the first was much in touch with international film culture, as the lists in his autobiography, of the films he admired, show. Interviews from the 1960s onwards show his interest in the latest films. He has always believed cinema should take advantage of technical developments. Among his Japanese “teachers,” either literally or as models, Kurosawa names first “Yama-san” (Kajiro Yamamoto), along with his great friend Sadao Yamanaka then Mizoguchi, Ozu, and Naruse. Of Western directors he speaks with most reverence perhaps of John Ford and Jean Renoir. Kurosawa is himself a teacher in his turn. Among more recent examples in the West alone, Altman, Penn, Coppola, and Lucas have all testified to his influence. The younger Japanese directors, on the other hand, have felt the need to react against the world that Kurosawa represents.

Interpreters of Kurosawa, especially the influential Richie, have always been concerned with his “humanism,” although Richard N. Tucker takes issue with Richie and finds in other directors a less feudal version of that humanism….Like many artists, Kurosawa himself complains of critical over-determination. “I have felt that my works are more nuanced and complex, and they have analyzed them too simplistically.” In 1961, Kurosawa said his aim as a filmmaker was “to give people strength to live and face life; to help them live more powerfully and happily.” At the time of *Kagemusha* he said, “I think it’s impossible in this day and age to be optimistic,” but that, seeing the possibilities still in the medium of film, “I would like to be able to create hope somewhere.”... “When I die I prefer to just drop dead on the set.”

**Donald Ritchie: “Remembering Kurosawa” (Criterion Notes)**

Not that he himself wanted to be remembered. Rather, he wanted his work to be remembered. He once wrote: “Take ‘myself,’ subtract ‘movies,’ and the result is ‘zero.’” It was as though he thought he did not exist except through his movies. When I was writing my book about him, he sometimes complained that there was nothing to write about if I persisted in asking him about himself. He became interested in my project only when he learned it was to be called *The Films of Akira Kurosawa.*

I do not remember one subsequent conversation that was not about the movies, almost invariably the one he was then making. Kurosawa had no interest in small talk—it was all heavy talk about the present project.

He had his reasons. Once I asked about what a certain scene in a prior picture had meant, and he said: “Well, if I could have answered that, it wouldn’t have been necessary for me to film the scene, would it?” I may have had my theories about my subject, but he was not interested in theory.

He was interested only in practice—how to make films more convincing, more real, more right. He would have agreed with Picasso’s remark that when critics get together they talk about theory, but when artists get together they talk about turpentine. He was interested in focal lengths, in multiple camera positions, in color values, just as he was interested in convincing narrative, in consistent characters, and in the moral concern that was his subject.

I do not think he even considered himself an artist. He talked about his methods as though he were a carpenter or a mason. And he was old-fashioned enough to believe in the
traditional Japanese lack of distinction between the arts and the crafts.

Though he sometimes said that he photographed merely in order to have something to edit, he was nonetheless very particular about how and what he filmed. He had the castle for Throne of Blood dismantled, unphotographed, when he found that the carpenters had used nails, an anachronism the long-distance lens would have readily revealed; he allegedly had assistants pour twenty years’ worth of tea into the teacups for the hospital scenes of Red Beard, in order to achieve the proper patina.

To exercise such complete control, Kurosawa had also to exhibit such socially unattractive qualities as egotism and a dictatorial disposition. “Though I am certainly not a militarist,” he once said, “if you compare a production unit to an army, then the script is the battle flag and the director is the commander of the front line.”

I remember a number of consequently bellicose blowups, lots of storming off the set, and an unfortunate habit of needling individuals in order show the others what awaited if they did not behave. It was through the employment of such perhaps necessary strategies that he had earned his sobriquet of Tenno—the Emperor—a title not at all popular in postwar Japan.

It was, indeed, Kurosawa’s concern for perfecting the product that led to his later reversals. Though many film companies would have been delighted by such directorial devotion, Japanese studios are commonly more impressed by cooperation than by innovation. They thus refused to fund his films. He occasionally did not finish a production on time and/or went over the amount of money budgeted; they said he was expensive, difficult to work with. And he was famously uncooperative with the media.

As a result, his films became fewer. Convinced that Kagemusha would never get made, Kurosawa spent his time painting pictures of every scene—this collection would have to take the place of the unrealized film. He had, like many other directors, long used storyboards. These now blossomed into whole galleries—screening rooms for unmade masterpieces.

Finally, fully abandoned by big-business Japan, Kurosawa had to search for funds elsewhere—Russia, the USA, France. Like Lear himself, he wandered the blighted heath to get the money for Ran. All of this was then seen by the local media as yet more proof of horrid Western influence on his films.

Once, exasperated by this repeated canard, he said: “I hear a lot about foreigners being able to understand my movies, but I certainly never thought of them when I was making the films. Perhaps because I am making them for today’s young Japanese, I find a Western-looking format most practical, but I really only make my pictures for young Japanese in their twenties.”

Certainly with the young, the director was different. During one of his birthday parties—there were some Mosfilm guests, so it must have been 1975, when negotiations were concluding on Dersu Uzala—it had been all business talk and grumpiness, and then Kurosawa’s little grandson toddled in. The change in the director was so swift, so dramatic, that I was as surprised as the Russians were. The stern figure of authority, the Emperor himself, melted before our eyes, and here was a doting grandpa and a smiling, trusting grandchild—since children liked him as much as he liked them: just look at the kids in Rhapsody in August, the little tubercular patient in Drunken Angel, even that baby in Rashomon.

And older kids as well. It was perhaps another birthday, or a celebration of some sort, when Kurosawa was suddenly approached by the much younger director Nagisa Oshima. Everyone turned to stare. Oshima had never before spoken to Kurosawa, would have refused to, had attacked him, as well as many another grown-up Japanese film director.

And here was the young perpetrator again setting upon his aging target. But now his purpose was different. I was near enough to the two that I could hear Kurosawa being congratulated, on whatever the occasion was, but also being addressed as “sensei,” a title of the highest respect, “teacher” plus “master.”

What had happened? I have no idea. Perhaps Oshima had reconsidered, and just as Shohei Imamura later decided that his mentor, Yasujiro Ozu, was not the calcified creator he had earlier accused him of being but a teacher from whom he had learned much, so Oshima had come to recognize the worth of Kurosawa.

I wonder what Kurosawa made of this. There is no knowing, but it might have seemed to him a kind of vindication—the most noticeably rebellious of the young rebels was now seeking him out, an indication that his films, always moral and even toward the end moralistic, held lessons that could be imparted across the generations.

And that was what he valued most. Who he himself was interested him very little, because just as he insisted that his heroes neglect the past and live only in the present, so was he unconcerned with anything that had happened to him.

He perhaps initially thought that in my book I was after a summing-up, a taking into account of the past but not the present. If so, then it would follow that I was not properly concerned with life. Life is not that.

And in Kurosawa’s films, the major theme is that the heroes are always, from Sugata on, not being but becoming. They live in a present where, though history may indicate, it does not define. You cannot sum up a living person. You can sum up only the dead.

Maybe that is why the films of Kurosawa remain so alive and why this dedicated director, about whom we really don’t know all that much, becomes so admirably the sum of all of his parts.
Because, like "Catch-22," it expresses something for which there is no better substitute. It belongs to a subtitled film. Its very title has entered the English language, an Academy Award as best foreign film. It set box office records for opening the world of Japanese cinema to the West. It won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, effectively making them half-disappear into the ground beneath. Shadows of overhead leaves cast a web upon the characters, and shortness of breath becomes palpable. In a sequence where thoughts form that will decide life or death. Perhaps the wonder of "Rashomon" is that while the shadowplay of truth and memory is going on, we are absorbed by what we trust is an unfolding story. The film's engine is our faith that we'll get to the bottom of things--even though the woodcutter tells us at the outset he doesn't understand, and if an eyewitness who has heard the testimony of the other three participants doesn't understand, why should we expect to?

The film opens in torrential rain, and five shots move from long shot to close up to reveal two men sitting in the shelter of Kyoto's Rashomon Gate. The rain will be a useful device, unmissably setting apart the present from the past. The two men are a priest and a woodcutter, and when a commoner runs in out of the rain and engages them in conversation, he learns that a samurai has been murdered and his wife raped and a local bandit is suspected. In the course of telling the commoner what they know, the woodcutter and the priest will introduce flashbacks in which the bandit, the wife and the woodcutter say what they saw, or think they saw--and then a medium turns up to channel the ghost of the dead samurai. Although the stories are in radical disagreement, it is unlike any of the original participants are lying for their own advantage, since each claims to be the murderer.

Kurosawa's screenplay is only the ground which the film travels. However, the real gift of "Rashomon" is in its emotions and visuals. The cinematographer Kazuo Miyagawa evokes the heat, light and shade of a semi-tropical forest. (Slugs dropped from trees onto the cast and crew, Kurosawa recalled, and they slathered themselves with salt to repel them.)

The woodcutter's opening journey into the woods is famous as a silent sequence which suggests he is traveling into another realm of reality. Miyagawa shoots directly into the sun (then a taboo) and there are shots where the sharply-contrasted shadows of overhead leaves cast a web upon the characters, making them half-disappear into the ground beneath.

In one long sustained struggle between the bandit (Mifune) and the samurai (Miyagawa), their exhaustion, fear and shortness of breath becomes palpable. In a sequence where the woman (Kyo) taunts both men, there is a silence in which thoughts form that will decide life or death. Perhaps the emotions evolved in that forest clearing are so strong and fearful that they cannot be translated into rational explanation.

The first time I saw the film, I knew hardly a thing about Japanese cinema, and what struck me was the elevated emotional level of the actors. Do all Japanese shout and posture?
so? Having now seen a great many Japanese films, I know that in most of them the Japanese talk in more or less the same way we do (Ozu's films are a model of conversational realism). But Kurosawa was not looking for realism. From his autobiography, we learn he was struck by the honesty of emotion in silent films, where dialog could not carry the weight and actors used their faces, eyes and gestures to express emotion. That heightened acting style, also to be seen in Kurosawa’s “Seven Samurai” and several other period pictures, plays well here because many of the sequences are, essentially, silent.

Film cameras are admirably literal, and faithfully record everything they are pointed at. Because they are usually pointed at real things, we usually think we can believe what we see. The message of “Rashomon” is that we should suspect even what we think we have seen. This insight is central to Kurosawa's philosophy. The old clerk's family and friends think they've witnessed his decline and fall in "Ikiru" (1952), but we have seen a process of self-discovery and redemption. The seven samurai are heroes when they save the village, but thugs when they demand payment after the threat has passed. The old king in "Ran" (1985) places his trust in the literal meaning of words, and talks himself out of his kingdom and life itself.

Kurosawa's last film, "Madadayo" made in 1993 when he was 83, was about an old master teacher who is visited once a year by his students. At the end of the annual party, he lifts a beer and shouts out the ritual cry “Not yet!” Death is near, but not yet--so life goes on. The film's hero is in some sense Kurosawa. He is a reliable witness that he is not yet dead, but when he dies no one will know less about it than he will.

**Some interesting things about Kurosawa and Rashomon online:**

Kurosawa; For Beautiful Movies. A 121-minute film about Kurosawa, much of it him talking about how and why he does what he does. It is a master class in the art of film. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2xOitWldGK](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2xOitWldGK)

*Rashomon* takes its title and its frame story from a short story by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, but most of its plot is based on another Akutagawa story, “In a Grove.” Free downloads of an English translation of that story, in several formats, are available at [http://www.feedbooks.com/book/4205](http://www.feedbooks.com/book/4205). There is a link on that page to free downloads of Ryunosuke’s “Rashomon.”


**COMING UP IN THE FALL 2018 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS SERIES 37**

Oct 9 Pier Paolo Pasolini,


Oct 23 Mike Hodges, *Get Carter*, 1971


Nov 6 Krzysztof Kieslowski, *Three Colors: Blue*, 1993


Nov 20 Martin Scorsese, *The Departed*, 2006

Nov 27 Tom McCarthy, *Spotlight*, 2015


CONTACTS: email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: [http://buffalofilmseminars.com](http://buffalofilmseminars.com)...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com...for cast and crew info on any film: [http://imdb.com](http://imdb.com)

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