For much of his career Kurosawa was appreciated far more in the West than in Japan. Zhang Yimou (director of Red Sorghum and Raise the Red Lantern) wrote that Kurosawa was accused “of making films for foreigners’ consumption. In the 1950s, Rashomon was criticized as exposing Japan’s ignorance and backwardness to the outside world – a charge that now seems absurd. In China, I have faced the same scoldings, and I use Kurosawa as a shield.” He directed his first film in 1943 but says Drunk Angel in 1948 was really his first film because that was the first time he made without official interference. Rashomon (1950), the first Japanese film to find wide distribution in the West, made Kurosawa internationally famous.

Kurosawa was equally comfortable making films about medieval and modern Japan or films based on Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Maxim Gorki, and businessmen. Mifune had originally planned a film career behind the camera as a cinematographer, but he first worked with Kurosawa in 1948’s Drunken Angel. He made one attempt at directing in 1963, Goju Man-nin no Isan which was a failure; his production company now makes films for TV. Mifune’s forceful personality, projected through baleful expressions and dynamic physical presence, won him international recognition and led to many roles in American productions, including Grand Prix (1966), Hell in the Pacific (1968, in a two-man tour de force opposite Lee Marvin), Kurosawa fan Steven Spielberg’s 1941 (1979), and the TV miniseries "Shogun" (1980)."

RASHOMON (1950, 88 min.) Directed and edited by Akira Kurosawa based on the stories “Rashomon” and “In a Grove” by Ryunosuke Akutagawa script by Shinobu Hashimoto and Akira Kurosawa Produced by Minoru Jingó Cinematography by Kazuo Miyagawa

Toshiro Mifune....Tajomaru Machiko Kyô....Masako Masayuki Mori....Takehiro Takashi Shimura....Woodcutter Minoru Chiaki....Priest Kichijiro Ueda....Commoner Fumiko Honma....Medium Daisuke Katô....Policeman

AKIRA KUROSAWA, FROM SOMETHING LIKE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. KNOPP, 1982

“Rashômon” actually refers to the Rajômon gate; the name was changed in a Noh play written by Kanze Nobumitsu. “Rajo” indicates the outer precincts of the castle, so “Rashômon means the main gate to the castle’s outer grounds. The gate for my film Rashômon was the main gate to the outer precincts of the ancient capital—Kyôto was at that time called “Heian-Kyô.”

One day just before the shooting was to start, the three assistant directors Daiei had assigned me came to see me at the inn where I was staying. I wondered what the problem could be. It turned out they found the script baffling and wanted me to explain it to them. “Please read it again more carefully,” I told them. “If you read it diligently, you should be able to understand it because it was written with the intention of being comprehensible.” But they wouldn’t leave. “We believe we have read it carefully, and we still don’t understand it at all; that’s why we want you to explain it to us.” For their persistence I gave them this simple explanation:

Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing. This script portrays such human beings—the kind who cannot survive without lies to make them feel they are better people than they really are. It even shows this sinful need for flattering falsehood going beyond the grave—even the character who dies cannot give up his lies when he speaks to the living through a medium. Egoism is a sin the human being carries with him from birth; it is the most difficult to redeem. This film is like a strange picture scroll that is unrolled and displayed by the ego. You say that you cannot understand this script at all, but that is because the human heart itself is impossible to understand. If you focus on the impossibility of truly understanding human psychology and read the script one more time, I think you will grasp the point of it.

When our shoot was finished at the Kômyôji location, I went to pay my respects to the abbot. He looked at me with grave seriousness and spoke with
deep feeling. “To be honest with you, at the outset we were very disturbed when you went about cutting down the temple trees as if they belonged to you. But in the end we were won over by your wholehearted enthusiasm. ‘Show the audience something good.’ This was the focus of all your energies and you forgot yourselves. Until I had the chance to watch you, I had no idea that the making of a movie was a crystallization of such effort. I was very deeply impressed.”

The abbot finished and set a folding fan before me. In commemoration of our filming, he had written on the fan three characters forming a Chinese poem: “Benefit all mankind.” I was left speechless.

**Rashômon** 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 Rashômon gate and on to the rest of my life. Perhaps someday I will be able to do so.

But it may be just as well to stop. I am a maker of films; films are my true medium. I think that to learn what became of me after Rashômon the most reasonable procedure would be to look for me in the characters in the films I made after Rashômon. Although human beings are incapable of talking about themselves with total honesty, it is much harder to avoid the truth while pretending to be other people. They often reveal much about themselves in a very straightforward way. I am certain that I did. There is nothing that says more about a creator than the work itself.

What is cinema? The answer to this question is no easy matter. Long ago the Japanese novelist Shiga Naoya presented an essay written by his grandparents in a very straightforward way. I am certain that I did. There is nothing that says more about a creator than the work itself.

Talking about themselves with total honesty, it is much harder to avoid the truth while pretending to be other people. They often reveal much about themselves in a very straightforward way. I am certain that I did. There is nothing that says more about a creator than the work itself.

The Chinese poem: “Benefit all mankind.” I was left speechless.

A Rashômon story follows: “My dog resembles a bear; he also resembles a badger; he also resembles a fox. . . .” It proceeded to enumerate the dog’s special characteristics, comparing each one to yet another animal, developing into a full list of the animal kingdom. However, the essay closed with, “But since he’s a dog, he most resembles a dog.”

I remember bursting out laughing when I read this essay, but it makes a serious point. Cinema resembles so many other arts. If cinema has very literal characteristics, it also has theatrical qualities, a philosophical side, attributes of painting and sculpture and musical elements. But cinema is, in the final analysis cinema.

With a good script a good director can produce a masterpiece; with the same script a mediocre director can make a passable film. But with a bad script even a good director can’t possibly make a good film. For cinematic expression, the camera and the microphone must be able to cross both fire and water. That is what makes a real movie. The script must be something that has the power to do this.

Many people choose to follow the actor’s movements with a zoom lens. Although the most natural way to approach the actor with the cameras is to move it at the speed he moves, many people wait until he stops moving and then zoom in on him. I think this is very wrong. The camera should follow the actor as he moves; it should stop when he stops. If this rule is not followed, the audience will become conscious of the camera.

I think the current method of lighting for color film is wrong. In order to bring out the colors, the entire frame is flooded with light. I always say the lighting should be treated as it is for black-and-white film, whether the colors are strong or not, so that the shadows come out right.

The quality of the set influences the quality of the actors’ performances.

I changed my thinking about musical accompaniment from the time Hayasaka Fumio began working with me as the composer of my film scores. Up until that time film music was nothing more than accompaniment – for a sad scene there was always sad music. This is the way most people use music, and it is effective. But from Drunken Angel onward, I have used light music for some key sad scenes, and my way of using music has differed from the norm – I don’t put it in where most people do. Working with Hayasaka, I began to think in terms of the counterpoint of sound and image as opposed to the union of sound and image.

I am often asked why I don’t pass on to young people what I have accomplished over the years. Actually, I would like very much to do so. Ninety-nine percent of those who worked as my assistant directors have now become directors in their own right. But I don’t think any of them took the trouble to learn the most important things.

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The original script of Rashômon (Rashômon, 1950), possibly the best-known Japanese film outside Japan, was written by Hashimoto Shinobu, who first became interested in the art of film script when he was hospitalized for tuberculosis. . . Kurosawa was shown some of Hashimoto’s scripts, and one of them caught Kurosawa’s attention. It was an adaptation of Akutagawa Ryunosuke’s short story “In a Grove” (Yabu no naka,1921). The script was too short to be made into a feature-length film, and Hashimoto was asked to expand the script further. To respond to Kurosawa’s request, Hashimoto decided to add to his original script another Akutakawa story, “Rashômon” (Rashômon, 1915), consisting of three confessions by the bandit, the wife, and the husband. It was Kurosawa’s idea to create a new character. The woodcutter, as an eyewitness to the crime. The final version of the script was written by Kurosawa alone.

**ZHANG YIMOU (DIRECTOR OF RED SORGHUM AND RAISE THE RED LANTERN) ON KUROSOWA (TIME AUGUST 23-30, 1999):**

I knew nothing about cinema before enrolling at the Beijing Film Academy in 1978. The Cultural Revolution had ended, and I had worked in the countryside and in a factory. I wanted to go to college—I even applied to the Xian Physical Education Institute—to change my fate.

A year later I saw my first Kurosawa film. It was Rashômon. I was immediately besotted. And a few years after that, from my humble seat in the audience, I actually watched Kurosawa receive a lifetime achievement award at Cannes. There he was, a filmmaker from the East loved and admired by people all over the world. I never met him, although I once had the chance. I was on a business trip to Tokyo when a Japanese friend suggested I meet Kurosawa on the set of Ran. I didn’t dare to go. He was, after all, a world-famous dashi (grand master). In the cinema world, I was a very small potato.

Kurosawa was born in Tokyo in 1910, the seventh child of a strict soldier-father. The boy’s early loves were oil painting and literature, including the Western writing that was so influential in Japan at the time. These interests would become vitally important throughout his career. The painter’s eye is particularly obvious in his films, especially in his sumptuous later ones, and Kurosawa adapted film plots from such disparate authors as Shakespeare (twice), Dostoevsky and hard-boiled detective writer Ed McBain. He stumbled into the
AKIRA KUROSAWA PAGE, with good links: http://home.earthlink.net/~ronintom/Kurosawa.htm

The standard reference book on Kurosawa’s work is Donald Ritchie, The Films of Akira Kurosawa

“SCREENING THE FIFTIES” BEGINS THIS THURSDAY AT 7:30 AT THE ALBRIGHT-KNOX ART GALLERY WITH FORBIDDEN PLANET, FRED MCLEOD WILSON’S SCI-FI ADAPTATION OF SHAKESPEARE’S TEMPEST. OTHER FILMS IN THE SERIES ARE:

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March 14, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, Singin’ in the Rain 1952

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MORE GREAT KUROSAWA IN THIS VERY ROOM AT 2:00 P.M. THIS COMING SUNDAY FEBRUARY 17th Michael Faust’s MAFAC Sunday Classics, Mifune is at it again in Kurosawa’s epic SEVEN SAMURAI. It’s one of the great ones.

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