

Article**Anis Pervez****Death of A Samurai: Reader-Response Analysis of *Rashomon*****Abstract:**

*Rashomon*, the celebrated film of Akira Kurosawa, was revisited to understand the process of sense-making in the film from a constructive perspective. Viewers' comments at Amazon.com provided evidence of how these individuals observe the film and make sense of it by making distinctions. A reader-response analysis was used to interpret the comments. The researcher's analysis is yet another scale of indication of observation towards another level of meaning.

**Introduction**

Death of a samurai remains a mystery—was it a suicide or murder, and who killed with what motivation—in Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon* as different testimonies narrate the death from contrasting perspectives. Film reviewers, scholars, and general audiences have been interpreting the mystery with various analyses of human nature since the premiere of the film. The riddle of contradictory interpretation of a single event has given birth to a phrase “the Rashomon effect” denoting the subjectivity of perception, by which observers of an event tend to produce significantly different but equally believable accounts of the same event. Differences in human observations assign different meanings to the same phenomenon.

The Rashomon Effect celebrates the constructive nature of human being, and construction is a self-referential process (Maturana, 1970; Pervez, 2006; Nöth & Bishara, 2007) as people—individually or in groups—cognize and phenomenize from their own perspectives aligned to their biographies, beliefs and stocks of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Drawing on empirical evidence, Uexküll argued that organisms perceived the experience of living in terms of species-specific, spatio-temporal, 'self-in-world' subjective reference frames that he called *umwelt* (Uexküll, 1957). Maturana and Varela (1980) elaborately described a similar understanding of constructivism based on *umwelt* in their theory of autopoiesis.

One of the most important premises of autopoiesis, and constructivism as well, is seeing perception and construction as a self-reflexive phenomenological act, which, in other words, puts reader response in the middle ground especially in understanding the ways people makes indication of what they observe. Reader response is both an approach to see construction from the actor's point of view and also a methodology to investigate, indicate and understand such observation.

**Reader-response analysis**

Reader-response is primarily a method of literary criticism; it argues that literature should be viewed as a performing art in which each reader creates his or her own text-driven performance. This research method developed in response to the textual emphasis of New Criticism from the 1940s to the 1960s. Opposing the omnipotent power and authenticity of text, reader-response proposes that meaning and value are

transactional and dialogic—created by the interaction of the reader and the text. Reader-response has now wider use in various disciplines. It has attained the status of empirical investigation for written or verbal data (Andringa, 1990), psychological and cognitive domains (Goodblatt, 2001), consumer research (Scot, 1994), and film reception (Shull, 1987). Kuiken and Miall's (2001) work on numerically aided phenomenology is a technical support illustrating how to conduct a readers-response analysis systematically.

In a nutshell, Reader-response is a phenomenological approach (Iser, 1980) where a reader actively participates in the production of textual meaning. Here lies the strength of reader-response to support an investigation of how audiences make sense of what they watch in a film in their indication of that film. The act of indication (creating form) is marked in people's expressions (forms) and these expressions or tokens are the empirical clues or data that becomes the basis for a reader-response analysis. Reader-response, as part of interpretation, draws on discourse analysis of indications of observations. In this way discourse analysis can be considered as an embedded technique of reader-response.

I have employed readers-response analysis of 100 audiences' comments on *Rashomon* posted on the Amazon.com. Analysis was done on two levels: at the first level, I have used the qualitative data analysis software *NVivo*, to identify indications made by viewers as found in the reader's comments archived at Amazon.com. These indications are then synchronized with the film in the second level of analysis. At the second level, various aspects—like narrative, style etc.—of the film were examined to identify what could have perturbed viewers to make their distinction. In other words, the relationship between the film form and audience's distinctions of these forms helped us understand film as an environment capable of perturbation, and viewers as assigning meaning to it.

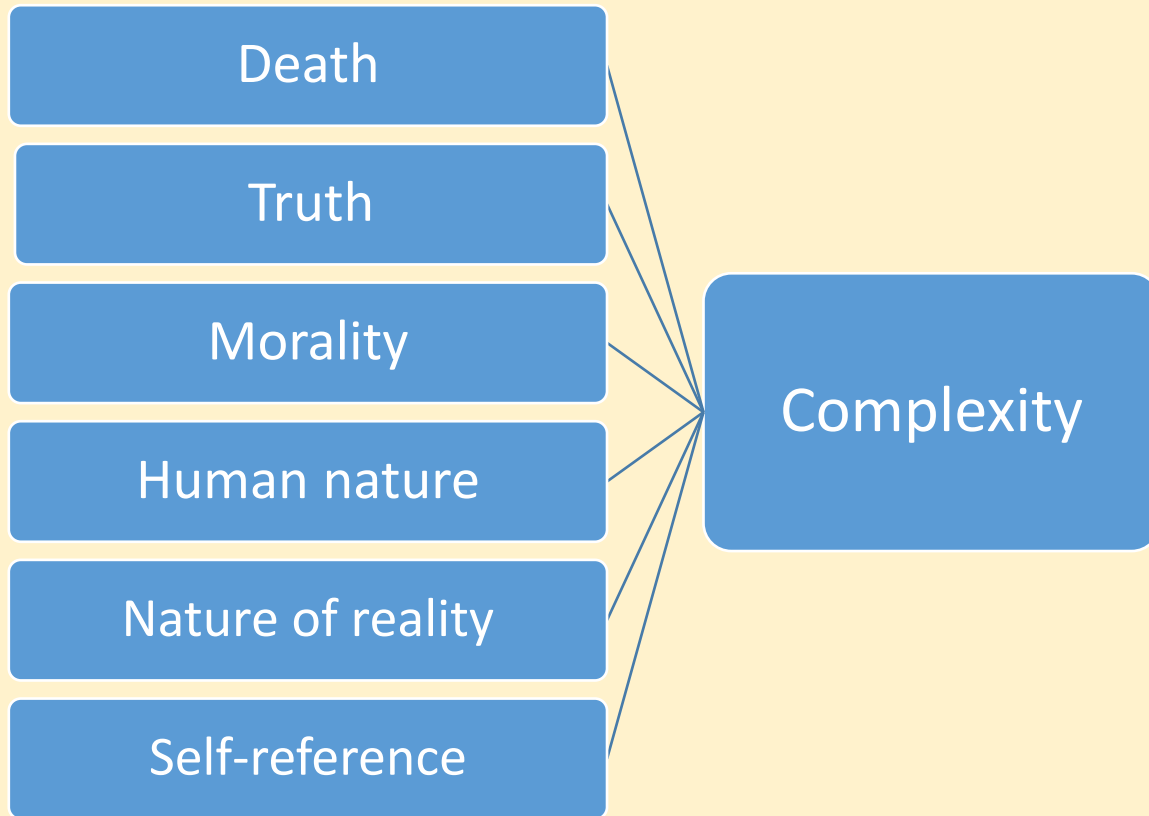
## Audiences' response

Death of the Samurai appears as inexplicable as the observers indicate several rather contradictory reasons that the death occurred. The nature of death is questioned—was it suicide or murder? The central focus of the film—investigating the reason for the death—perturbs observers indicating at least four reasons:



**Figure 1: Varying causes for death**

Understanding the mystery of the death—nature and reason—as explained by the observers generates multiple accounts. Based on these, I developed six trajectories. The trajectories, as they unsettle to reach a consensus, mark *Rashomon* as a film of complexity.



**Figure 2: Trajectories**

The puzzle of death is syntactically developed in the film as the bandit, the wife and the samurai describe the death in their own ways with underlying reasons to justify their acts.

Tajomaru, the bandit, takes responsibility for killing the samurai because, according to him, the samurai's wife after first being panic-stricken and then willingly, as seen in shot 174, gives herself to the bandit as she was forcefully kissed and then they made love. She wanted to get rid of being doubly disgraced. Therefore, she wanted one of them to be killed.



The audience sees on the screen, from shot 165 to 180, Tajomaru testifying, and perhaps justifying, his killing of the samurai:

165 MS of Tajomaru's back, the woman in his arms. The camera slowly dollies toward them during the kiss. Her hand encircles his back, her fingers move caressingly; she tightens her grip on him. Shot ends with ECU of the back of Tajomaru's head and an area of the woman's face as the kiss continues.

166 MS: in the prison courtyard, Tajomaru is laughing and kicking his feet exultantly.

TAJOMARU (CONT'D) And so I had her-just as I'd planned, and without killing the husband. And that was how I did it. Besides, I hadn't intended to kill him. But then...

177 Shot of Tajomaru's back, beginning in close range, as he walks away from the camera to go off into the woods; the woman rushes after him (LS).

MS from reverse angle. She throws herself at his feet.

## WOMAN

Wait. Stop. One of you must die. Either you or my husband.

178 MCU of her husband. Bound up, he stares without expression.

179 MCU of Tajomaru staring at the samurai; then he looks down at the woman.

180 MCU of the woman kneeling, seen from over Tajomaru's shoulder.

## WOMAN (CONT'D)

Either you or he must die. To be doubly disgraced, disgraced before two men, is more than I can bear. Tajomaru indulges in a sword fight and eventually kills the samurai.



Contrary to this, the woman asserts that she has killed her husband because she saw hatred and rejection in his eyes. She finds such a look unbearable and agonizing, as she says in shot 235, "Don't look at me like that. Don't! But kill me if you must, but do not look at me like that. Please don't!" Nothing brings change in her husband's reaction, which is followed by the following shots:

249 MS, The woman continues to move, the camera seeming to weave with her painful approach and retreat before her husband. She holds the dagger almost absent-mindedly; her desperation grows.

250 CU, as in 244, of the husband, staring implacably.

251 MCU of the woman as she moves steadily forward now; her world forever destroyed, she holds the dagger high, without seeming to be aware of it. The camera tracks with her in the direction of her husband until she suddenly lunges off screen.

252 MS, as in 234, of the woman in the prison courtyard, continuing her testimony.

WOMAN (CONT'D)

And then I fainted. When I opened my eyes and looked around, I saw there, in my husband's chest, the dagger.







As the dead husband presents his testimony through a medium, he claims to have killed himself because he was shocked to see his wife asking the bandit to kill him as she seems being happy with the bandit. He finds his wife's eyes dreamy (in CU, shot 275) when the bandit says that he had attacked her only because of his great love for her. This enveloped him into a deep silence. As he returns to senses the film displays:

300 MCU of the husband crying. The camera dollies back and he rises to his feet. He moves painfully (pan), rests his head against a tree. There is the soft sound of grief, but it comes from the husband himself.

301 MCU as he rests his head against the tree, sobbing. Finally he raises his head and begins to wander off, but stops when he notices something on the ground.

302 MS from behind the husband, the dagger sticking up before him. Slowly he goes to it, picks it up, and turns to walk back toward the camera, staring at the dagger.

303 MS as he moves forward into the clearing; he stops, raises the dagger high above his head and brutally thrusts it into his chest. He begins to fall.

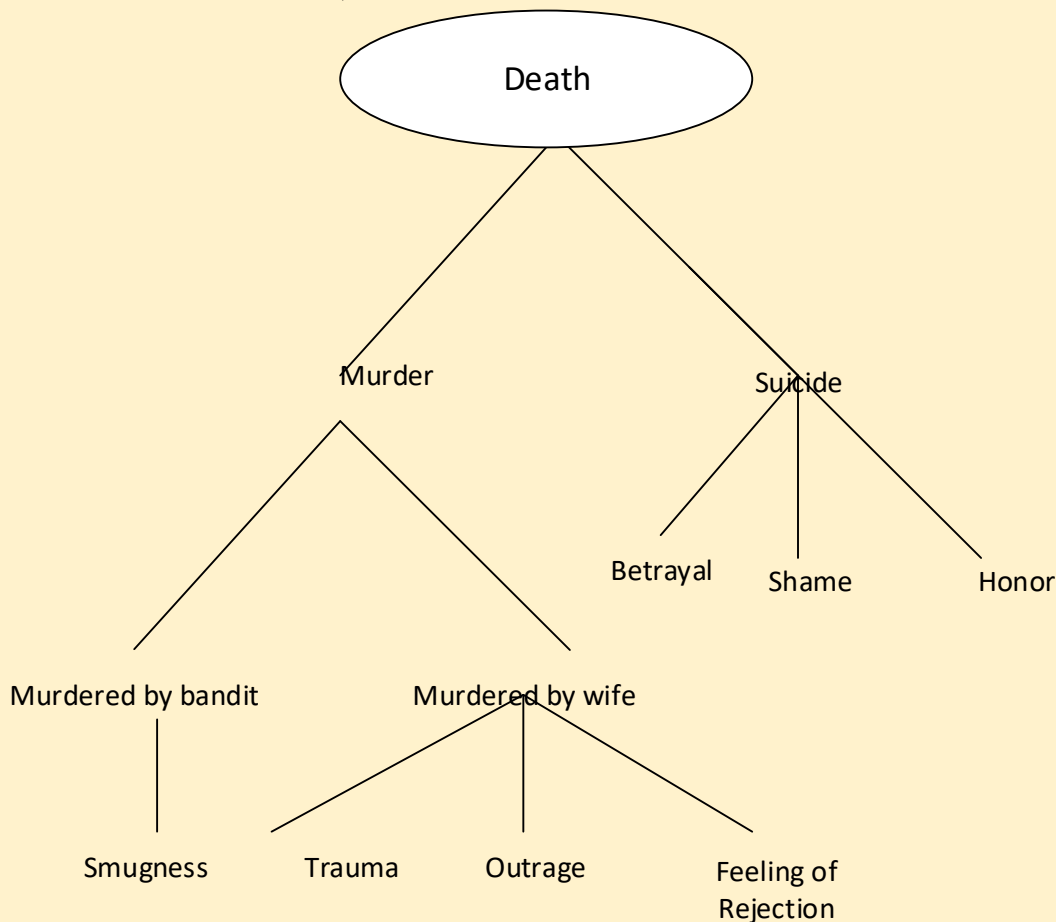
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All three characters take the blame for the killing, or rather take responsibility in a persuasive way, which certainly perturbs observers' understandings of whether it was a murder or suicide, and who has actually executed it. Moreover, what is the motive—psychological, existential, or philosophical—of the claim? Comments, meaning reader responses, center on such a quandary whether it is a murder caused by smugness, trauma, outrage or feeling of rejection, or it is a betrayal, shame and honor driven suicide.



The puzzle of death, which in a discursive way sheds light on a wide aspect of human nature, is displayed below in a top-down tree structure, a popular way to visualize sentence and phrase structure in linguistics (Fromkin and Rodman, 1993).



**Figure 3: Discussion of death in tree-structure**

Thus, as comment 8 indicates:

It's the story of the murder of a man told from several different angles; the robber; the wife; the murdered man; and the woodcutter. Each view varies differently and every story is changed a little (or a lot). It makes the viewer constantly question which story is true or which parts of each story are true, even after watching the movie dozens of times. It also makes the viewer consider "point of view" in everyday life, how the same incident is seen in several different lights and how can it be that 3 people can witness the same thing and come to different conclusions.

The persistent ambiguity around the death eventually drags the observer into a deeper level of questioning about what is truth. Comment 10 indicates:

The 4 different versions of the story not only create a deep layering effect on the question of what really happened but also create a sort of 3-D effect in terms of gaining some understanding of human nature. While Kurosawa's actors wanted to know which was the "real" story, the big K told them that no single one was correct. Even though, personally, this irks me just a little, the truth is that the movie reveals a lot about human nature.

It is evident that not all the testimonies could be true at the same time, or probably they are only partly true; therefore, the observers transfer from the death puzzle over to humans' inherent tendency to manipulate

truth. Comment 18 reads, “The film is about the human tendency to DENY the truth, which is both real and essential to the growth of the individual. Kurosawa himself said of the film's message: ‘Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves.’ They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing.” The comment continues:

The film makes no statement about the reality of truth, or even its attainability, but instead about our unwillingness to take an objective look at ourselves. The film's characters embody the variety of responses and choices we take in life: selfish cynicism to moral despair, to true responsibility in the face of an unpleasant view of our true natures. The characters are similar in that they lie to themselves, to "save face", and to see themselves as better than they actually are. And yet they differ in their willingness to suffer the pain of a view of themselves.

One of the comments (25) even asserts that, “In a world of relativist perceptions and competing ways of interpreting the world, can there ever be any such thing as absolute truth? Like Socrates arguing the sophists on the nature of virtue, truth slips away as we try to pinpoint it, and eventually we realize absolute truth is unknowable.” And the truth is so ambiguous that one observer (comment 50) is in doubt about whether the ending of the film was redemptive, wondering “if the woodcutter would go off and sell the child if it was a girl.”

With the obscure nature of truth and people's inability to be honest to themselves, the question of morality arises in some observations. For example, the film is a “masterpiece of human emotion with great depth which questions morality in man.” (Comment 24) Nevertheless, in the crisis of broken morality, one also sees that *Rashomon* leaves the viewer with a strong sense of the evil of humanity but also with the possibility of redemption (Comment 4). Comment 24 expresses hope:

This film's ending is one of the great arcs I have seen in that it delivers such a punch of emotion and hope into you. I center my attention on the priest at the end of the film as the thief questions the morality of man and rocks the priest's belief in the good of man, but I exclude the real whammy, as all hope is not lost.

Considering human nature, which for many is the consuming drive of the film, comment 43 divides humans into three categories according to their nature—natural or animalistic, moral and civilized man. These categories have reference to the characters in the film. The commoner, who says that it is human to lie and men believe in the made-up good stuff, represents the natural or animalistic nature, the priest possesses a moral nature while the woodcutter, who adopts the abandoned child despite having trouble with his six children, represents the civilized nature. Thus, human nature looks like a wider palette with different vices and virtues.

The observers describe *Rashomon* as a film about competing realities; how different people can view the same events differently. A number of observers' echo this; for example comment 75 mentions we all invent our own little worlds, and our version of a story flatters our own self-concept. While discussing the relativistic idea of reality, comment 80 draws on Goethe's four levels of reality—lineal, literal, metaphorical and cosmic. It goes further: “the human being always will keep his dignity, pride and a set of values above all the odds; and through this process, the truth is always put in a second place, by obvious reasons.” Therefore, reality is not necessarily true or actual, rather it is constructed. Reality is how we perceive a phenomenon, therefore, according to comment 86, “‘*Rashomon*’ reminds us that all is not necessarily as it

seems.” Likewise, comment 97 says that Kurosawa is trying to show us how our reality is altered by our perception. This is supported by comment 46, that Kurosawa was examining life and our perceptions of it—the idea that nothing we know is true in any empirical sense, that all of it is filtered through our perceptions. Comment 37 expands the discussion of reality as displayed in this film by drawing on postmodern perspective:

"*Rashomon*" is one of the great movies for the ages. It challenges us to think about what "reality" might be, and leads us to wonder if we can truly comprehend "reality." Let me begin this review with a fragment about postmodern perspectives. One key point here is that subject and object cannot be separated. We cannot "get outside" ourselves in order to objectively observe the world around us—including the world of human affairs. This is oversimplified, of course, but it provides one lens through which to consider Akira Kurosawa's great work, "*Rashomon*." ..... postmodernists argue that it is difficult for people to step outside themselves and their unique perspectives and biases to observe "objective reality." And contemporary psychologists tell us the same: humans are remarkably able to distort reality to protect self-image and make their motives appear to be good (and competitors' to be not so good). In that sense, there is a great deal of human nature, psychology, and philosophy at stake in this movie.

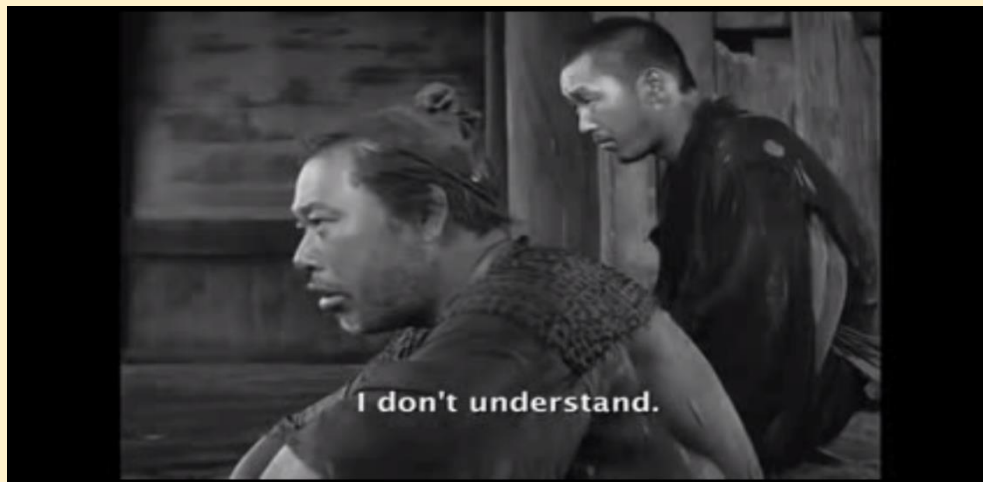
Constructing reality based on one's own perception is the notion of self-reference, i.e. we comprehend objects and ideas from our own perspective, or, in other words, we are self-reflexive. Comment 22 elaborates this by noting that the truth is never found; eventually the truth is all dependent on the individuals, all of whom are convicts in some way or another. Further:

The guilt in each individual as well as the attempt to save themselves determines the stories. The movie actually throws up a very important question that if the essential data is kept intact the interpretation is completely dependent on the stakeholders.

Observers further say that belief is subject to our own interpretation. We are fundamentally biased with regard to ourselves and phenomena are interpreted and assigned self-reflexively.

### **Syntactic structure of *Rashomon*: Clues for perturbation**

The film begins with a question of cognitive obscurity, compounded by perturbation—not knowing what has happened. As the *Rashomon* gate washes with heavy rain, two men, an woodcutter and a priest, wearing a bleak look confirm their confusion uttering "*I don't understand*." Understanding remains unresolved as observers indicate observations differently or in other words assign different meaning to the token they observe.



Form and narrative of *Rashomon* are “pervaded by a dialectic of symbols of light and darkness” (McDonald, p. 183, 1994). The film has a narrative of three contrasting testimonies (bandit, wife and samurai) and another ambiguous version of description of a witness (woodcutter). Testimonies are persuading in themselves if taken as independent stories. However, they conflict with one another when seen as constituent of an organic whole and thus generate complexity and perturb observers’ minds because one cannot know which one is true. Impressionistically crafted, *Rashomon* is weaved with light and darkness perturbing towards demystifying what is narrated.

McDonald (*Ibid*, p.183) elaborates the form by commenting:

The murder takes place in a dense, dark forest. The main actions of the priest, the woodcutter, and the commoner are set against the pouring rain. The half-ruined gate standing in the torrent gives the film a gloomy setting. In sharp contrast to these dark images are impressionistically filmed images of sunlight. The blazing sun piercing the clouds dominates the police station. Sunlight comes through the trees and flickers on the woodcutter’s ax. When the wife yields to the bandit, she looks up at the sun glittering through the branches. At the conclusion of the film the woodcutter walks into the sunlight after the rainstorm is over. The juxtaposition of these symbols serves as an important constituent, which contributes to a unified version of the film.

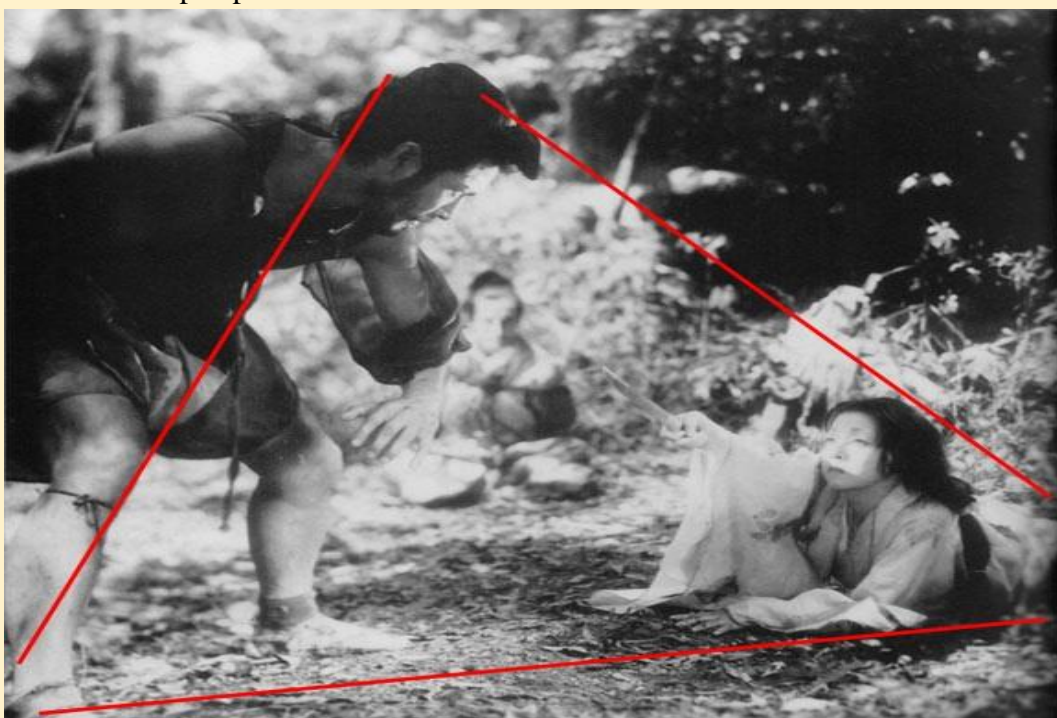


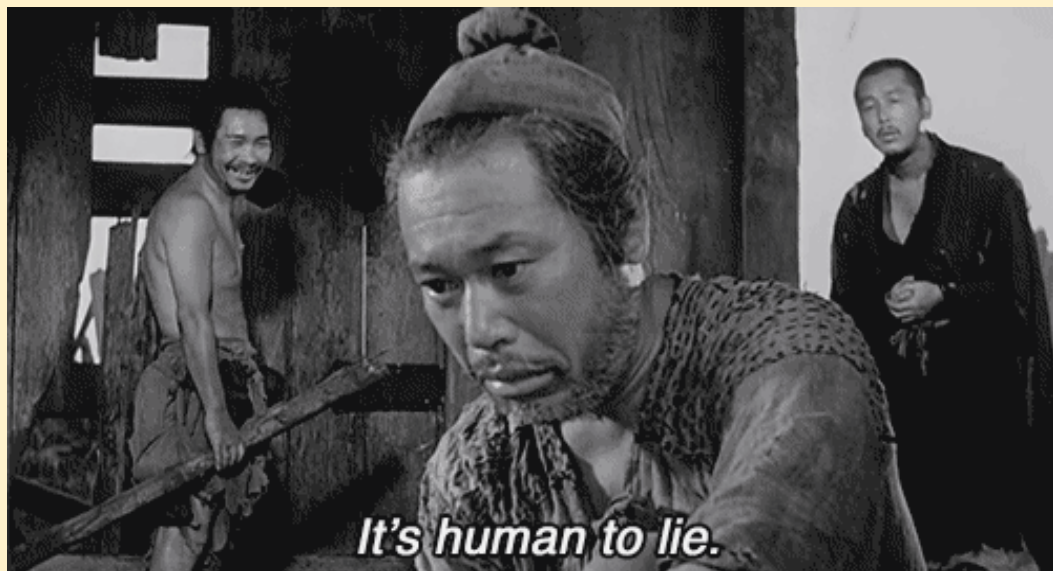




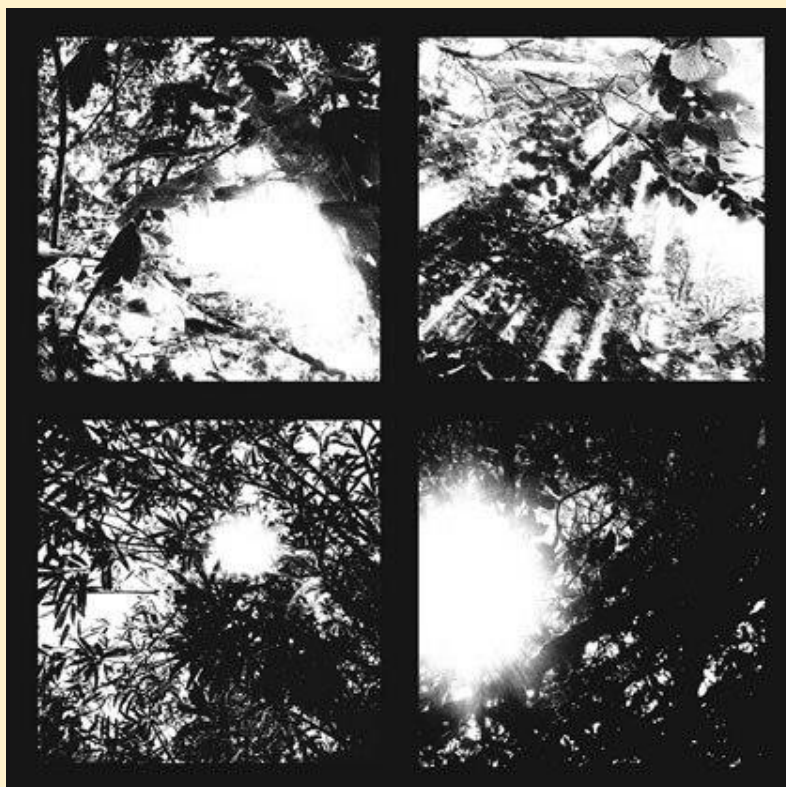
Light and darkness are observed in the landscape, sky, objects and as well as when human faces are shown in close up shots, which gradually constitutes in observers' minds a semiosis wrestling about the meaning not just not of the film, but also of human nature. The repeated juxtaposition of light and darkness, especially capturing the sun directly—which violated cinema conventions—provides impressionistic cues for human nature: “light represents reason whereas darkness represents impulse” (*Ibid.*, p.186). Human cognition follows schemata—drawing on representations internalized through our socialization. This impressionistic milieu for interpretation and constructing meaning is likely to perturb observers, indicating phenomena that may seem complex.

*Rashomon* is made of 407 shots crafted with many close ups and mid-close ups and characters are often set into triangular composition. Close ups perturb observers' intensive attention while triangulation depicts conflicts and pervasiveness of perspectives.





In triangulation, especially evident at the Rashomon gate, Kurosawa makes a confrontation between the rational and impulsive, between the realist and idealist. We observe a transformation in the woodcutter, perhaps a redemptive feeling affects him as he takes the responsibility of the abandoned child despite his poverty. Nevertheless, some observers are not yet sure about the woodcutter's seemingly good conduct. They suggest that he would sell the child if were a girl. The complex narrative of *Rashomon* and its making—cinematography, character composition, shots etc.—do not always lead one to a straightforward conclusion. Thus, *Rashomon* remain an enigma, which observers reveal and interpret according to their own horizons of understanding and reasoning. The light and darkness, and contrasting testimonies present a mystic environment perturbing observers to demystify in their own ways.



**Figure 4: Light and darkness: the enigma**

Besides complex narrative of showing a single event in varying ways, *Rashomon* also keeps some ambiguity. It does not explicitly show that the wife stabs the dagger, which is just a hint but not confirming her killing of the samurai. The shot 246 in mid-close-up follows the women holding the dagger. The camera tracks with her in the direction of her husband until she suddenly lunges off screen. Killing is not distinctive in the shot, and in the following shot shows the woman saying, “And then I fainted. When opened my eyes and looked around, I saw there, in my husband’s chest, the dagger.” Such ambiguities only heightens the perturbation leading to varying indications.

## Conclusion

My analysis employed a constructivist approach to understanding how viewers assign meaning to the films they watch. The research is based on two premises: meaning emerges from people’s indications of an environment as they observe it, and the film as an environment for the observation becomes informative as spectators make indications of their observations of film. Myself, as the observer of observation, my selection of comments and their interpretation is another scale of observation of observation. My observation cues me to indicate that *Rashomon*, an impressionistic film seen from its cinematic style, has taken an expressionist form because of the discourse constructed, and being constructed, by various observers generating meaning over an open-ended palette. This way of understanding meaning in film assigned by spectators, I would suggest holds the potential for developing a cybernetic understanding of film as the second-order cybernetics aim to examine observers’ observation.

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