INVOKING *RASHOMON*

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"But it's horrible - if men do not tell the truth, do not trust one another, then the earth becomes a kind of hell."

"You are right. The world we live in is a hell."

"But I don't want to believe that this world is hell."   n1

*Rashomon* - the classic film directed by Akira Kurosawa - has been receiving quite a few invocations lately. Somehow this cinematic depiction of a single event seen different ways as narrated by four witnesses suggests itself as just the right allusion for these times. Here is a sampling:

To Monica Lewinsky, President Clinton was a powerful man who needed no urging to succumb to sexual temptation.

To Linda Tripp, he was an irresponsible philanderer who needed to be stopped.

To White House aides and security, he was a secretive - and at times duplicitous - boss who needed protection from himself.

These *Rashomon*-like views of the commander-in-chief ...   n2

In their trial briefs, the President's defense team and the House prosecutors present their Senate jury with a legal version of "Rashomon," in which the main characters recall the same events differently.   n3

[CBS Anchor Dan] Rather blithely summed up the proceedings as "less like "Perry Mason' and more like the movie "Rashomon.' The truth is never absolute."   n4

Meanwhile, all this leaves the citizenry, not to mention the president, in a rather unpleasant pickle. From the point of view of justice, this is a tale of *Rashomon* ...   n5

With one hand jauntily in his pocket, one foot tucked behind the other, [President Clinton] turned every question around in a preposterous way, trying to treat "All the President's Men" as "Rashomon," acting as if there were no such thing as the truth, just a bunch of irreconcilable interpretations.   n6

"Rashomon" has not reached the point where it works as a word with an understood meaning (like "Catch-22"). Look at all of the added explanation: "The main characters recall the same events differently," "the truth is never absolute," and "no such thing as the truth, just a bunch of irreconcilable interpretations." Those descriptive tags do not even completely gibe with each other. Are we talking about the imperfection of memory? The notion that there is no truth? "Rashomon" seems to pop up whenever a story is muddled, regardless of why the story is muddled. Are these writers handing us a high-tone cinematic justification for shrugging our shoulders, a sort of fancier way of saying, "Ah well, it's all he-said-she-said"? What does this fashion for invoking *Rashomon* really mean?

Consider how the use of "Rashomon" links up with the Clinton-Era buzzword "triangulation" in this New York Times account:

Like witnesses at a crime scene, the four central players in the unfolding story of President Clinton and Monica S. Lewinsky have offered differing versions of what they saw and said and did.

...

The truth will not emerge from any of the individual accounts, but from the triangulation of the participants' stories with those of peripheral witnesses and the physical evidence...

Are they evidence of perjury and a conspiracy to obstruct justice? Or are they the predictable variations in tales told by witnesses to the same event, *Rashomon*-like accounts filtered through the minds and memories of innocent individuals?   n7

Indeed, the origin of President Clinton's famous "triangulation" strategy itself presents an occasion for invoking *Rashomon*:

Political memoirs are like the film "Rashomon," in which an experience is transmogrified by sharply different memories....

After the Democrats' disastrous 1994 loss of Congress, [Dick] Morris, ever the poll-oriented guru, [writes of] groping for a way for President Clinton to retake the political stage: "I blurted out the strategy I proposed in a single word: triangulate. I found myself shaping my fingers into a triangle, with my thumbs joined at the base and my forefingers raised to meet a point at the top. "Triangulate, create a third position, not just in between the old positions of the two parties but above them as well.' ...I saw triangulation as a way to change, not abandon, the Democratic Party."

But ... [George] Stephanopoulos, [writes of] triangulation [as] an abdication of principles: "Dick explained his theory in elaborate terms, but it boiled down to a relatively simple proposition: Steal the popular-sounding parts of the Republican platform, sign them into law, and you'll win. The fact that it would anger Democrats was not a drawback, but a bonus."   n8

Is that really an example of "experience ... transmogrified by sharply different memories" or consistent and perfectly sound memories reflected upon by two persons with "sharply different" opinions about what is right and wrong and how people ought to behave? Is "triangulation" a way of arriving at a reasonable approximation of the truth or a way to break free from opposing positions that real people actually believe in and concoct a position that no one believes in but you think you can sell?

It is not just the Clinton-Lewinsky affair that has generated invocations of *Rashomon* in recent years. "Rashomon" got a workout back when the Senate deliberated over the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas:

After [the hearings] were over, there was still no strong reason to disbelieve either Anita Hill's accusation that Clarence Thomas sexually harassed her or Thomas' flat-out denial.

Both individuals were more than credible. They both spoke forcefully, as if out of strong centers of moral rectitude....

... It was tempting to try to square the *Rashomon*-like accounts in the hearing room by imagining Thomas might have said things he meant to be funny and benign but that shook Hill's idealized view of him and grew in memory into a lingering offense.   n9

This was riveting television, an emotional roller-coaster that began with the articulate passion of Clarence Thomas' opening statement, then countered by the quiet dignity of Anita Hill, and ended with an irate Thomas coming back to take on the Senate.

But this story was no "Rashomon," where we could see that both sides had elements of truth in their testimony.   n10

Something has been lost in the testimony this weekend in the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill dispute. It is the *Rashomon* possibility - the possibility, to which many people have been clinging, that the terrible conflict can be explained as a difference of interpretation of the same set of events... [But o]ne of the two of them is lying, lying under oath - lying bigtime.   n11

Note that these Thomas-Hill references use "Rashomon" to mean that conflicting witnesses had different interpretations of the same incident and that both sincerely tried to tell the truth as they saw it: "Rashomon" stands as an alternative to saying somebody must be lying. "Rashomon" works as an elegant way to end the thought process, sparing us the ugliness of saying that anyone is dishonest and the hard work of figuring out what really happened. Interestingly, two of those *Rashomon* invocations above go on to reject that faux-closure: They conclude that somebody must be lying.

The Clinton story merges with the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill confrontation in this choice snippet from President Clinton's grand jury testimony:

This reminds me ... of the hearings when Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill were both testifying under oath. Now, in some rational way, they could not have both been telling the truth, since they had directly different accounts of a shared set of facts....

... When I heard both of them testify, ... I believed that they both thought they were telling the truth.

This is - you're dealing with, in some ways, the most mysterious area of human life....

And I think they both thought they were telling the truth. So, maybe Ms. Lewinsky believes she's telling the truth ...   n12

This desire to take refuge in the comforting thought no one is lying prompted those who reported the President's testimony to allude to *Rashomon*:

"You're dealing with ... the most mysterious area of human life," [President Clinton] said of sex, trying to draw *Rashomon*-like parallels with his problem and the clash of accusations seven years ago between Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas ...   n13

Offering the grand jurors a *Rashomon*-like aside, Clinton suggested that persons involved in a sexual relationship can see the same set of facts from entirely different vantage points.   n14

The first lady can't subscribe to the president's "Rashomon" interpretation of the Clarence Thomas hearings ...   n15

[A TV movie about the Thomas hearings portrayed] sexual misconduct in the office as no-fault behavior, a matter of *Rashomon*.

Bill Clinton, during his grand jury testimony, volunteered that although it seemed irrational, Judge Thomas and Ms. Hill "both thought they were telling the truth."   n16

If we have to rely on witnesses we might as well resign ourselves to the fact that we're never going to be able to decide what really  happened - especially if the story is about sex. Such a belief - stoked by the recent Clinton affair - would wreak havoc on rape and sexual harassment trials. Why have a trial at all if we are only going to hear "a bunch of irreconcilable interpretations"? The invocations of *Rashomon* that we have been seeing seem to ease our way toward that destructive and cynical belief. The great cinematic artist Akira Kurosawa revealed to us in his canonic film that the truth is unknowable, therefore those of us who adopt this belief can, instead of appearing morally bankrupt, actually seem to be rather erudite and sophisticated. But does the film *Rashomon* really mean what present-day commentators take it to mean? Can we really claim Kurosawa as our ally when we credit all the witnesses with a sincere intention to tell the truth and explain all their discrepancies as the sort of difference of "interpretation" that naturally complicates human perception? Is *Rashomon* good authority for giving up on deciding what really happened, for just "triangulating" and moving on?

Let us examine the stories in the film *Rashomon* told by the four witnesses: the bandit Tajomaru, the Woman, the Woman's Samurai husband, the Man, and the Woodcutter.

Tajomaru the bandit has been captured and accused of murdering the Man. He is a laughing braggart, who admits the murder immediately: "I know you're going to cut off my head sooner or later ... It was me, Tajomaru, who killed the Man." His testimony thus aims not at avoiding punishment but at portraying the killing as a glorious feat. While resting in the woods, Tajomaru has seen the beautiful Woman, along with her Samurai husband. He decides to "take" the Woman, even if he has to kill the Man, but then determines that he will not kill the Man. A merciful sort, in his self-image, he simply lures the foolish Man away and daringly fights with him. He returns to the Woman and drags her back to the place where he has left the Man tied up. The Woman attacks Tajomaru with her dagger. He fearlessly laughs at her. He never hits her or does anything in defense other than run around; indeed, he finds her fighting spirit quite attractive, and at last, he catches her in his arms. His kisses melt her resistance: We see a close-up of her hand untensing and letting the dagger go. In his view, it is not a rape at all. Nor did he intend murder. But the Woman begs him to kill her husband so that she can become Tajomaru's wife. Tajomaru cuts the Man free of the ropes that have bound him and hands the Man a sword. A thrilling sword fight ensues. Tajomaru emerges the victor: "I wanted to kill him honestly, since I had to kill him. And he fought really well. We crossed swords over twenty-three times." As for the Woman: She had run away by then. But it didn't matter: Tajomaru did not even find her attractive any more, because she had turned out to be "just like any other Woman." He admits to selling the Man's sword and regrets not looking for the dagger so he could have sold that as well.

The Woman displays an extremely fragile, weeping demeanor. Her story blanks out at convenient points. She does not describe her encounter with Tajomaru, but begins after he has gone. n17 The Man is still tied up. The Woman runs to him only to find him staring at her with "a cold hatred." She cries: "Beat me, kill me if you must, but don't look at me like that. Please don't!" Cutting him loose with the dagger, she holds the dagger out to him and begs him to kill her. He continues to look at her with contempt and she continues to weep and beg him. She weaves toward him waving the dagger, but: "And then I fainted!" When she awakens, she sees the dagger in his chest. (In Akutagawa's story, she explicitly admits to stabbing him with the dagger.  n18 ) After a memory lapse, she finds herself standing by a pond. She means to drown herself in the pond, but fails at that, being "a poor helpless Woman." The Commoner's observation, on hearing this story, is: "Women lead you on with their tears; they even fool themselves." The Woman's own story implies that she is the direct agent of his death, yet she finds a fragmented, emotional way to tell the story that makes her seem like an entirely passive victim, even though her husband does nothing more than look at her coldly.

The dead Man tells his tale through a medium. And even the dead man lies, though the Priest insists that dead men cannot lie. Why not? Because "They must not. I must not believe that men are so sinful." The Commoner takes it all in stride: "Oh, I don't object to that. After all, who's honest nowadays? Look, everyone wants to forget unpleasant things, so they make up stories. It's easier that way." (Do we not hear echoes of the Commoner in the many statements of Clinton's supporters that "everyone lies about sex"?)

The dead Man tells of his "suffering in the darkness" and curses "those who cast me into this hell of darkness." The plural pronoun tips us off to his story: Both the Woman and Tajomaru are guilty. After the rape, with the Man still tied up, Tajomaru tries to convince the Woman to go with him, arguing that her husband will never accept her back. The Woman, looking "soft" and "beautiful," asks Tojamaru to take her away. She also demands that Tajomaru kill the Man. "Has anyone ever uttered more pitiless words?" Tajomaru asks the Man, "What do you want me to do? Kill her? Let her go?" This rapprochement with the husband nearly moves him to forgive Tajomaru. The Woman runs away, and Tajomaru pursues her. Time passes. Finally, Tajomaru returns, cuts the Man free, informs him that the Woman has gotten away, and then leaves. The Man weeps; then finds the dagger left sticking in the ground and commits suicide. Just before dying he feels the dagger being pulled from his body.

Finally, the Woodcutter claims that he saw what really happened from a point at which Tajomaru was on his knees begging the Woman to marry him. The Woman, saying she cannot simply answer, instead picks up the dagger, and cuts her husband free: a sign that she wants the two men to fight over her. The Man refuses to fight "for such a woman," calls her a "shameless whore," invites her to kill herself and Tajomaru to go ahead and take her, and turns to walk away. Tajomaru now turns to walk away too, and the Woman calls for him to wait. He tells her not to follow him. She falls to the ground crying, and the Man tells her not to bother trying to influence them with tears. Now Tajomaru steps forward in her defense: "Don't talk to her like that. It's unmanly of you. After all, women cannot help crying. They are naturally weak." This sets the Woman to laughing hysterically at both men and ridiculing them for their weakness: A "real man" would kill the other; a woman's love goes to the man who can win a sword fight. Now the men are shamed into fighting, and we see them fighting in an absurdly defensive, stumbling, frightened manner that is quite different from the way Tajomaru had described the fight. The Woman laughs at them at first, but then grows fearful. Tajomaru finally gets the better of the Man, who cries, "I don't want to die!" After killing the Man, Tajomaru tries to take the Woman's hands, but she pulls away. He threatens her with his sword, causing her to run away. In this version told by the Woodcutter, an onlooker to the event, the three participants bear little resemblance to their preferred self-images. The bandit is cowardly and inept at fighting, manipulated by the Woman and unable to win her over; the Samurai shows no tender love for his wife and no valor or skill in battle and stoops to pleading for his life; and the Woman - not so heavily freighted with the attributes of traditional femininity - actively seeks the things she wants, including retribution.

Compare the way the characters in the movie shaped the stories they told with the supposedly *Rashomon*-like story-shaping that goes on today. Present-day American public figures toy with the meaning of words to take advantage of legal distinctions and avoid retribution, even if it means going through the sort of humiliation President Clinton experienced when he testified to the grand jury. No one in *Rashomon* splits hairs to avoid legal sanction. I can see some connection between *Rashomon* and the story of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. The Woman disguising her act within a passivity story reminds me of President Clinton's "she had sexual relations with me but I didn't have sexual relations with her" explanation.   n19 But the Clinton story falls short when it comes to equivalents for the other *Rashomon* witnesses. Perhaps Monica Lewinsky herself ought to be compared to the swaggering Tajomaru, proud of overstepping the lines that are so important to the established order.

The *Rashomon* witnesses engage in behavior quite different from that of their supposed counterparts from recent American events. They tell extravagantly irreconcilable stories that they shape out of their desire for glory, self-respect, or pride. They do this even when it means confessing to murder: Tajomaru, the Woman, and the Man himself all claim to be the one whose knifing killed the Man. The word "Rashomon" should certainly not convey a notion of weaseling out of responsibility. It is exactly the opposite: The need to preserve honor and avoid humiliation motivates the *Rashomon* characters. Their stories fascinate us because they reveal the depths of a person's inner life. Each story depicts the character's desired self-image, unfolding a greater truth about that person. Present-day commentary invokes *Rashomon* to describe witnesses who shape their stories to conform to a legal standard so that they can get something they want out of the process that is requiring them to testify. We do not learn anything particularly deep about the inner life of the witnesses like that. We simply learn about how a story can be told in such a way as to maximize the chance that a decisionmaker will decide in a person's favor. President Clinton's testimony describing his relationship with Monica Lewinsky did not let us in on his real thoughts about what kind of a man he would like to be or would like others to think he is. It merely underscored something about him that is entirely banal and external: He wanted to tell a story that ran the narrow course between the truth and, given his earlier deposition, perjury law. That neat trick demanded the unerring suppression of his inner being, and his success demonstrates just how different he was from the *Rashomon* characters who could not contain themselves.

"Rashomon" should not stand as authority for the proposition that there is no truth or "the truth is never absolute." Even if there may not be any absolutely true answer to the question whether President Clinton had something officially called "sexual relations" with Monica Lewinsky or what "happened" in the external world between Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill (as opposed to what they believed), it is absurd to think that there is no true answer to the question of who killed the Man in *Rashomon*. That is a specific, concrete event that occurred in the past, that cannot compare to questions whether a particular legal standard has been met or a particular mental state existed. Even if it is difficult to extract evidence from the *Rashomon* witnesses, surely there is one true answer, just as there is a true answer when a trial court today must answer a question of fact about a specific action that occurred in the past. There may be ambiguities about intent and perception that complicate trials and force us to rely on presumptions and burdens of proof to accomplish factfinding, but as to a distinct fact like which hand held the knife that killed the man, there is an answer, not subject to ambiguity.

Can we resolve these conflicting stories and determine who killed the Man? Perhaps not, but if I had to bet, I would say the Woman killed the Man. The Man's committing suicide seems least likely, since his confession to suicide risks no worldly sanction. In the interest of self-respect, he prefers to portray himself as one who chose an honorable death rather than as a man killed by his wife or a Samurai who lost a sword fight to a brutish bandit. Two of the witnesses - Tajomaru and the Woodcutter - portray Tajomaru as the killer, but there is reason to discredit both of them. Tajomaru admits to a murder, but he already faces execution - if not for his banditry then for the rape. Why not go ahead and brag about beating a Samurai in a sword fight? The Woodcutter's corroboration of Tajomaru does not convince me: He has an interest in corroborating the version of the story that shows the sword as the murder weapon, otherwise, since no dagger was found sticking in the dead body, it might very well appear that he was the one whom the dying man felt pulling out the knife.

The Woman is the witness whose self-accusation seems most likely to have been motivated by its truth. She has nothing to gain from admitting to a murder, and she does not admit to an intent to murder, only to feeling intense emotions stirred by her husband's cold look. Indeed, she does not admit to the fatal action: His look affects her to the point where she faints, and since she is pointing the knife at the Man at the time, an unconscious fall could have driven the knife into the Man's chest. So I must concede that I cannot figure out whether the Woman deliberately or passively killed the Man. She might be telling the truth, lying to avoid responsibility, genuinely unable to remember correctly, or creatively describing each aspect of what happened in the most passive terms she can muster. I can only decide that the Woman held the knife in a way that resulted in the Man's death.

It is quite possible that Kurosawa deliberately deprived us of enough information to resolve the questions of fact. After all, he was not attempting to structure a trial to increase the likelihood of accurate fact-finding! He wanted to say something about human nature, about how far people wander "astray in the thicket of their hearts."   n20 The action of travelling into the forest, seen time and again in the film, often in a blurred, confusing pattern of light and shade, symbolizes the way the characters were getting lost inside their own minds. The camera repeatedly makes their confusion and weakness visible: We see a character look up and become dazzled by the sunlight before proceeding with the testimony. When Kurosawa responded to those who complained that the story was incomprehensible, he revealed what interested him most about the conflicting witnesses:

Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing. [They] ... cannot survive without lies to make them feel they are better people than they really are ... Even the character who dies cannot give up his lies ... Egoism is a sin ... most difficult to redeem.   n21

If this were a real trial and not a work of art, good cross-examination and impeachment with conflicting statements could help us get closer to the truth. But even if accurate fact-finding was not Kurosawa's concern in making this film, his film does not encourage us to discount the importance of determining what happened in the past. It does not offer itself as a synonym for "he-said-she-said," a reason to shrug off the duty to determine what happened in the past and to do something about it.

The film tells us, over and over, to anguish over our inability to find out the truth about what happened. Recall how the film begins. *Rashomon* is set, a subtitle tells us, "in the twelfth century when, famines and civil wars had devastated the ancient capital." The great, ruined Rashomon gate - strewn, we are told, with corpses - frames the story. Three characters - the Woodcutter, the Priest, and the Commoner - seek shelter from the rain.

Woodcutter: I just can't understand it at all. I just can't understand it ...

Priest: ... Wars, earthquakes, great winds, fires, famines, plague - each new year is full of disaster ... I, for one, have seen hundreds of men dying, killed like animals. Yet ... even I have never heard anything as horrible as this before.

Woodcutter: Horrible - it's horrible.

Priest: There was never anything as terrible as this. Never. It is more horrible than fires or wars or epidemics ...

Woodcutter [addressing the Commoner]: Maybe you can tell me what it all means. I don't understand it. All three of them ...

The conflicting reports of three persons - Tajomaru, the Woman, and the Man - have driven both the Priest and the Woodcutter into despair. At most, one woman has been raped and one man murdered. Yet this event is supposedly the most horrible thing that has ever happened. We are reminded there have been wars and many other calamities, in which "hundreds of men" have died. So how can one rape and one death amount to the most horrible thing? The horror must lie in the irreconciliability of the stories told by the three. *Rashomon* tells us that worse than the evils of violence are the selfishness and unreliability of our fellow human beings.

After the stories are recounted, the lines quoted at the beginning of this Article are heard and the Woodcutter repeats his original plaint: "I don't understand any of them. They don't make any sense." And the Commoner responds, "Well, don't worry about it. It isn't as though men were reasonable."   n22

To use the word "Rashomon" to convey a shrug of the shoulders - a synonym for "he-said-she-said" - is to adopt the attitude of the Commoner. Yet the film utterly deprives us of the option of indulging in the Commoner's brand of cynicism. The Commoner tears wood from the gate throughout the film to make a little fire: He contributes to the ruin of his city to gain a temporary bit of warmth. Immediately after he makes the dismissive statement "don't worry about it," the Commoner proceeds to steal clothing from an abandoned baby. When the Priest and the Woodcutter confront him - "That's horrible," says the Woodcutter - the Commoner even has the audacity to justify his debased behavior:

What's so horrible about it? Somebody else would have taken those baby clothes if I hadn't. Why shouldn't it be me? ... What's wrong with [being selfish]? That's the way we are, the way we live... You just can't live unless you're what you call "selfish."

Here, Kurosawa returns us to the despair that began the film. The Woodcutter speaks: "Brute! All men are selfish and dishonest. They all have excuses." The Commoner is not ashamed. He counterattacks, pointing out what the four stories have enabled him to deduce: The Woodcutter must have stolen the valuable dagger that figures in the stories told by Tajomaru, the Woman, and the Man. All men are selfish indeed - including the Woodcutter who makes his little display of bewailing selfishness. The Commoner walks off, laughing.

Not every film reveals a message or a point of view. We could have been left to think the Commoner's attitude is perhaps the best way to deal with the mysteries of human life. But Kurosawa has made a didactic film. The Commoner is horrible: He would steal the clothes off an abandoned infant and defend his behavior. He blatantly makes selfishness his highest value. Kurosawa points us to a moral position. The last sequence of the film follows the departure of the Commoner. The Priest and the Woodcutter remain, the Priest holding the baby. The Woodcutter moves to take the baby from the Priest, who accuses him of trying to "take away what little it has left." We see the sorrow in the Woodcutter's face. He says, "I have six children of my own. One more wouldn't make it any more difficult." The Priest apologizes to him. The Woodcutter too apologizes: "Oh, you can't afford not to be suspicious of people these days. I'm the one who ought to be ashamed. I don't know why I did a thing like that." (Presumably, the "thing" he did was to steal the dagger, as the Commoner had accused.)

The Priest responds, "No, I'm grateful to you. Because, thanks to you, I think I will be able to keep my faith in men." These are the last words spoken in the film. The despair that framed the stories told by the conflicting witnesses is now replaced by hope. There is still reason to believe in people; it is possible to overcome selfishness. The Priest gives the baby to the Woodcutter, who walks away, the camera recedes to the point where we see the whole Rashomon gate. The rain that has fallen on the gate throughout the film has ended. We see a sunny sky: a happy ending, rescuing us from despair.

This hopeful ending is Kurosawa's contribution. It does not appear in the Akutagawa stories upon which the film is based. The story *Rashomon*, from which the screenplay takes the setting of the ruined Rashomon gate in the rain, ends with a man stealing clothes from a woman who had been stealing hair from the corpse of a woman who used to sell snake meat saying it was fish.   n23 The story In a Grove consists solely of the testimony of the Woodcutter, the Priest, a Policeman, the Woman's mother, Tajomaru, the Woman, and, finally, the medium channeling the dead Samurai. It contains no added discussion by the Priest, the Woodcutter, and the Commoner reflecting on the testimony.   n24 The Akutagawa story leaves us to decide what to think, perhaps to construct an interpretation like the Commoner's. One might contend that when present-day writers use the word "Rashomon," they are referring to Akutagawa's darker story. But not only is the story far less well known, at least in the United States, the story containing the conflicting witnesses is not called "Rashomon." One might contend - more persuasively - that Kurosawa tacked on a conventional happy ending that merits little regard. Here is one writer's view:

Although Mr. Kurosawa contrived a hopeful denouement ... the weight of the evidence in "Rashomon" emphasizes the likelihood that everyone's story will prove suspect.

Why? Because human beings find it almost impossible not to lie when balancing truth against self-esteem.

...

Mr. Kurosawa's revelation of awful truth out human depravity is so stunning, so impressive as both theater and polemic, that only the faintest silver lining is conceivable at the fadeout.

Akutagawa never envisioned one, and the Kurosawa fabrication remains expedient in an almost definitive way. After being reminded so eloquently of human shortcomings, token consolation becomes self-defeating and slightly insulting.   n25

Here is a contrasting view:

Akutagawa is content to question all moral values, all truth. Kurosawa, obviously, is not. Neither anarchist nor misanthrope, he insists upon hope, upon the possibility of gratuitous action. Like the priest, he cannot believe that men are all evil - and, indeed, if Kurosawa has a spokesman in the film it is probably the priest: weak, confused, but ultimately trusting.   n26

Whether the film gives us any creditable basis for optimism, its heartfelt expression of desire for hope remains clear: Lying, selfish human beings are horrible. The ending may only offer us a false hope, but if people really are incorrigible, we must lament it. We must resist the temptation to think like the Commoner. We cannot enlist Kurosawa as our philosophic ally if what we want to do is sit back and observe coolly that life is certainly "mysterious" and the truth nonexistent.

*Rashomon* is not authority for tolerating conflicting versions of the truth. We should not glibly apply it to today's cases of "characters recalling the same events differently," "accounts filtered through the minds and memories of innocent individuals." Nor should it mean "the truth is never absolute," or that there is "no such thing as the truth, just a bunch of irreconcilable interpretations." To say "this is a ‘Rashomon' situation" should mean: This is horrible. To invoke *Rashomon* should be to express despair at the untrustworthiness and selfishness of human beings and to beg for a reason to believe that altruism is possible. "Rashomon" should be an accusation that egoistic lying has made life hell.

Ah, but that does sound like an awfully harsh thing to say these days! We live in profusely affluent times. How can we possibly see our own society in the crumbling city in *Rashomon*? Am I suggesting that we should? I can see that such a position would risk sounding unappealingly sanctimonious in these post-Kenneth Starr times. Perhaps the Priest's attitude - even if it was Kurosawa's - has lost all resonance. If we no longer can identify with the House Managers and the pundits who sneered at President Clinton and bewailed or pretended to bewail the dismal condition our poor country had reached, perhaps I should just accept the meaning the word "Rashomon" is acquiring in our political culture and abandon my (admittedly hopeless) effort to reinfuse this handy word with the anguish and despair of a postwar Japanese film director speaking through a twelfth-century priest.

Enjoy the new *Rashomon*, freshly laundered of oppressive emotions and ready to use now to shirk the pesky task of deciding who's telling the truth. Everyone lies, deceives, or - one way or another - gets it wrong. Get used to it, grow up, triangulate, and move on.

If something about that sounds very wrong - and I think that it does - I would invite the reader to take the journey back into the film *Rashomon* and become immersed in that different world, where it really mattered, at least to one man - the Priest/Kurosawa - that everyone is lost in an imaginary world constructed out of egoism. People will surely go on invoking *Rashomon* to mean what it is currently useful to think that it means, but it might provide a shred of insight into our own times if we can read these invocations with some glimmer of feeling for what Kurosawa had in mind.

**FOOTNOTES:**

n1. These lines are spoken by the Priest, the Commoner, and the Priest, respectively, in the film *Rashomon* (Janus Films 1950). The translated screenplay, the source of the quotations used throughout this Article, is found in *Rashomon* 29 (Donald Richie ed., 1987) [hereinafter Richie]. This screenplay was written by Shinobu Hashimoto and the film's director Akira Kurosawa, based on two stories by Ryunosuke Akutagawa. See Ryunosuke Akutagawa, *Rashomon*, in id. at 97; Ryunosuke Akutagawa, In a Grove, in id. at 102.

n2. Kevin McCoy, Picture of Bill Depends on View, N.Y. Daily News, Oct. 4, 1998, at 5.

n3. Jill Abramson, The Trial of the President: The Arguments; War of Words: 2 Sides' Briefs Disagree Even in Their Styles, N.Y. Times, Jan. 14, 1999, at A1. Abramson explains:

The House managers, who submitted their brief on Monday, weave an elaborate narrative in which President Clinton is a corrupt protagonist, orchestrating a scheme to hide evidence of an illicit relationship from the lawyers for Paula Corbin Jones....

The 130-page trial memorandum submitted today by the President's lawyers paints an altogether different picture of the same events. The defense brief portrays a President besieged by his enemies, threatened by a politically motivated civil lawsuit and an independent counsel bent on finding wrongdoing by the President after years of fruitlessly investigating the Whitewater real estate deal in Arkansas.

n4. Monica Collins, Monica, Even Now, Sounds Like She's in Love, Boston Herald, Feb. 7, 1999, at A4 (describing a broadcast of the Senate trial of the Clinton impeachment).

n5. Molly Ivins, Yea! Jones Can Proceed; But What Kind of Lawyers Advised Her to File a Suit That Would Harm Both Her and Clinton?, Star Trib., June 5, 1997, at 27A.

n6. Maureen Dowd, Lonely at the Top, N.Y. Times, March 8, 1997, 1, at 23 (describing a news conference).

n7. John M. Broder, Testing of a President: The Investigation; Sifting Through Divergent Stories for the Truth About a Relationship, N.Y. Times, March 7, 1998, at A8.

n8. Thomas Vinciguerra, Word for Word / Political Memoirs; See Dick Recall His Clinton Days; See George Beg to Differ, N.Y. Times, April 18, 1999, 4, at 9 (discussing George Stephanopoulos, All Too Human: A Political Education (1999), and Dick Morris, Behind the Oval Office: Getting Re-Elected Against All Odds (1997)) (blocked paragraphs in source replaced by quotation marks).

n9. Editorial, The Hearings Ended Where They Began, Chi. Trib., Oct. 15, 1991, at C16.

n10. Ed Siegel, Hearings on the Tube: Real-Time Soap Opera of Sex, Lies and Pain, Boston Globe, Oct. 12, 1991, at 4.

n11. Editorial, The New Issue, Wash. Post, Oct 13, 1991, at C6.

n12. Washingtonpost.com, Special Report: Documents from The Starr Referral: Clinton's Grand Jury Testimony, pts. 8-9 (visited Apr. 2, 2000) <http://www.washington-post.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/stories/bctest092198 8htm>.

n13. Francis X. Clines, The Testing of a President: The Deposition; Tape Shows Nation a Clinton Irate and Sad, N.Y. Times, Sept. 22, 1998, at A1.

n14. Andrew J. Glass, Videotape Offers Views Rare Glimpse at Unscripted Clinton, Cox News Service, Sep. 21, 1998, Washington: general news sec. (referring to the Senate hearings on the nomination of Clarence Thomas); see also Andrea Sachs, The National Debate That Will Not End, Legal Times, Dec. 26, 1994, at 50 (reviewing Jane Mayer & Jill Abramson, Strange Justice: The Selling of Clarence Thomas (1994) and John C. Danforth, Resurrection: The Confirmation of Clarence Thomas (1994)):

Both books are based on the same premise. "Since two people with such completely contradictory accounts cannot possibly both be telling the truth, it is clear that one of them not only lied under oath but is continuing to lie," asserts Strange Justice. Likewise, Resurrection declares, "The statements of Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill were flatly contradictory and wholly irreconcilable. One of them was not telling the truth." From there, the books diverge. It is a classic case of *Rashomon*; each book takes the same events, the same parties, the same allegations, and comes to conflicting conclusions.

n15. Suzanne Fields, Hillary's Ordeal by Scandal, Wash. Times, Sep. 24, 1998, at A23.

n16. Maureen Dowd, Liberties; Keep Your Shirt On!, N.Y. Times, Aug. 25, 1999, at A23 (reviewing Strange Justice (Showtime 1999)). Interestingly enough, Clinton's seemingly self-serving view of the Hill-Thomas debacle may trace back to his Yale Law School mentor:

President Clinton is planning to nominate a mentor from his days at Yale Law School ..., Guido Calabresi, for a seat on the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit....

... Though an avowed liberal, [Calabresi] had kind words for Robert H. Bork, his former faculty colleague, and testified on behalf of Clarence Thomas. When Judge Thomas did battle with another Yale graduate, Anita F. Hill, at his Senate confirmation hearings, Mr. Calabresi said he believed them both; if the four protagonists in *Rashomon* had also been Yalies, he would undoubtedly have believed all of them as well.

David Margolick, At the Bar; For President Clinton, Old-School Ties Take Precedence over Senators' Wishes in a Search for a Judge, N.Y. Times, Oct. 29, 1993, at B9.

n17. In the story she describes the encounter this way: He "forced me to yield to him" and "I was violated by the robber." Ryunosuke Akutagawa, In a Grove, in Richie, supra note 1, at 106.

n18. See id. at 107. In the story, the Samurai has been gagged as well as bound, so we are not left wondering, as in the film, why the Man does not speak to her. She claims "his look said only, ‘Kill me.’" The story has the Woman testify that while "neither conscious nor unconscious," she stabbed the man: "I killed by own husband." Id.

n19. Like the Clinton scandal, *Rashomon* can provoke a debate about whether it is really about lying or about sex. As I argue at the end of this Article, allusions to *Rashomon* ought to convey our outrage about lying. But it is quite possible that the real attraction we feel to the film is about sex. When asked why *Rashomon* had become so popular, Kurosawa's own answer was: "Well, you see ... it's about this rape." Donald Richie, Introduction to Richie, supra note 1, at 11.

I had long considered that a very strange thing for him to say, because the film never shows a rape. The versions of the story that would have Tajomaru raping the Woman are elliptical, and the only version of the sexual encounter between Tajomaru and the Woman that we actually see is Tajomaru's version showing the Woman becoming aroused by his embrace and wanting him to kill her husband so she can marry him. I would have thought the central event is the Man's death.

n20. Akira Kurosawa, Something Like an Autobiography, reprinted in Richie, supra note 1, at 113, 116.

n21. Id. I concede that it might be egoism that leads me to the interpretation that the Woman killed her husband. Yet I think it is the Woman in the Woodcutter's story that appeals to me the most. My favorite part of the movie has her laughing at the two men and screeching "I'm tired, tired of this farce!" Too bad the Clinton affair never supplied us with a similar moment.

n22. Id.

n23. See Ryunosuke Akutagawa, *Rashomon*, in Richie, supra note 1, at 97-101. Akutagawa's *Rashomon* gate is far uglier than Kurosawa's. It is a dumping ground for corpses and wild animals live in its crevices. Akutagawa revels in ugliness: He repeatedly draws attention to the "large pimple" on the cheek of his main character, who takes shelter from the rain for the night amid the corpses. Kurosawa has characters refer to corpses on top of the gate without ever showing us a glimpse.

n24. See Ryunosuke Akutagawa, In a Grove, in Richie, supra note 1, at 102-09.

n25. Gary Arnold, "Rashomon": The Artful Truth About Lies, Wash. Times, Feb. 22, 1998, at D3.

n26. Donald Richie, Introduction to Richie, supra note 1, at 4.