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To Tell the Truth

Rashomon

Directed by Akira Kurosawa
Written by Kurosawa
and Shinobu Hashimoto
A Kino International re-release
At Film Forum
February 27 through March 12

The Real Blonde

Written and directed by Tom DiCillo
A Paramount Pictures release
Opens February 27

BY J. HOBERMAN

Movies are simultaneously among the most personal of experiences and most public of public arts. How satisfying then that Akira Kurosawa's 1950 *Rashomon*, a movie about the vagaries of individual perception, would project its title far beyond the screen as the code word for any multifaceted, contradictory version of reality.

A quick electronic search suggests the term "Rashomon" or "Rashomon-effect" is most often used by crime reporters and book reviewers; it's frequently applied to matters of racial perception, sexual harassment, and historical testimony. Showbiz usage is relatively minor, although Tracey Ullman describes her HBO show as presenting life "Rashomon-like, from many points of view;" while, pondering different views of a *Cagney & Lacey* special, Liz Smith confessed there was "nothing like a little Rashomon to liven up one's day."

As recounted by viewers, all movies are *Rashomon* stories, but Kurosawa's ritualistic, exotic, philosophical action flick effectively invented Japanese cinema for non-Japanese filmgoers. (Talk about your subjective "truth" in "timeless" Asia.) The great French critic André Bazin found the story of a lurid rape-murder involving three participants and told four different ways to be "deeply disconcerting," as it tossed him into "an absolutely Oriental aesthetic universe." Aesthetic, perhaps; absolutely Oriental, perhaps not.

Rashomon is unlike any previous Japanese movie, although its attitude is hardly sui generis. Kurosawa's mesmerizing composition in dappled lighting and sweaty close-up, his combination of open-ended humanism and flashback fatalism (not to mention the convoluted chronological development and perverse sexuality), suggests a form of neorealist noir. "If it hadn't been for that breeze, I might not have killed," the bandit played by Toshiro Mifune sneers, expressing a view of life that any reader of American tough-guy fiction would recognize as bleak, passionate, and ruled by chance.

A crime story with an investigative *Citizen Kane* structure, *Rashomon* seemed like a new sort of art film, in which relative truth superseded the honest objectivity of *Open City* and *The Bicycle Thief*. Westerners assumed Kurosawa's source to be traditional; in fact, *Rashomon* was adapted from two stories by the early-20th-century Japanese modernist Ryunosuke Akutagawa. The movie is a play on the mechanisms of fiction; it inspired *Last Year at Marienbad* and may count recent descendants as varied as *JFK*, *The Usual Suspects*, Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Time of Love*,

narrators known as *benshi* to explain the movie, while, pace Bazin, Japanese critics found the movie to be somewhat Western in questioning reality and then leaving audiences with a quasi-Christian moral. (In fact, the hopeful ending was imposed by the producers.) Still, if Japanese audiences were mildly shocked by the prolonged kiss between the mangy Mifune and the aristocratic Machiko Kyo, they were more amazed

as the stylized acting, fantastic costumes, matter-of-fact supernaturalism, and soundtrack pastiche of Ravel's "Bolero." For some, the hoopla poisoned their response. Writing in *The New Republic*, Manny Farber cited *Rashomon*'s "Louvre-conscious, waiting-for-prizes attitude," and, indeed, the movie did win the Oscar for best foreign film.

A half-century later, *Rashomon* seems one of the key global-village syntheses of post-World War II movies. Where Kurosawa claimed to have found inspiration in French silent cinema, Hollywood (which transformed his *Seven Samurai* into 1960's *The Magnificent Seven*) would remake *Rashomon* with cowboys. By transposing the Western classics—Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Dashiell Hammett—to weirdest Japan, Kurosawa blazed a trail of defamiliarization broad enough for acolytes as disparate as Sergio Leone and George Lucas to reinvent traditional genre entertainment. Or at least that's one way of telling the story.

A HUMOROUSLY FRACTURED vision of independent film production, Tom DiCillo's *Living in Oblivion* may be counted among *Rashomon*'s distant progeny. DiCillo's latest, *The Real Blonde*, is solipsistic in another way—albeit as self-mockingly fashionable as its vibe and finger-snap credit music would suggest.

DiCillo is one of the few Amerindies who can direct comedy, and—having recovered from *Box of Moonlight*'s fumbling New Age sincerity—he orchestrates a bit of fun in the land of midlife crisis. Interrupted wake-up sex is ultimately transformed into long-postponed makeup sex as a Downtown, thirtysomething couple, Matthew Modine and the always welcome DiCillo axiom Catherine Keener, are propelled through a screwball comedy (in which each almost sleeps with someone else) to resolve all issues of career, commitment, and procreation.

As Modine plays a struggling actor and Keener a successful yet frustrated makeup artist, the movie thrives on inside baseball—waiter gigs, fashion shoots, the beach-themed Madonna video for which Modine, alone among extras showing up in boxer trunks, is exiled to the back row and then fired for debating the reality of the Holocaust with the opinionated black assistant director. The model is mid-period Woody Allen. A riff on *The Piano* might have been lifted from *Annie Hall* and, like that prototypical modern romance, the couple stuff has the ring of truth—right down to the self-absorption.

The movie's title refers to Modine colleague Maxwell Caulfield's spurious quest for female authenticity—ironically (but not too ironically) embodied by soap queen Daryl Hannah. Fact is, reality itself is kinda blond here. The coolness of casting Elizabeth Berkley as Madonna's body double notwithstanding, *The Real Blonde* seems so imprisoned in its particular worldview that any character who is not a white heterosexual runs the risk of severe stereotyping. ■



Flashback fatalism with Mifune and Kyo in *Rashomon*

and half the films of Raul Ruiz.

What's striking is how Kurosawa uses geography to suggest mental constructs. The narrative unfolds in three distinct zones—the rain-swept temple gate that gives the movie its name and where a woodchopper and priest chew over the story, the austere rock garden where the trial is held, and the deep woods of tangled memory where the crime takes place. (The latter is pure visual tumult. Kurosawa may have been the first director to point his camera directly at the sun and film white light bursting through the trees.) There is even a certain logic: each self-serving story, as Parker Tyler suggested, demonstrates truth to be a factor of psychological need, re-creating "what took place far away in the forest as consistent with [each person's] ideal image of himself."

Rashomon was only a moderate hit when it premiered in Japan during the summer of 1950. In a striking regression, some theaters hired the silent-film

when *Rashomon* took first prize at the 1951 Venice Film Festival.

The Japanese movie industry was one of the world's largest when little *Rashomon* put it on the international map. "The discovery of Japanese film is unquestionably the most important cinematic event since Italian neo-realism," Bazin wrote in *Cahiers du Cinema*. (Kurosawa, however, was soon deemed old hat. Bazin's hipster protégés, Godard and Rivette, preferred the more arcane Mizoguchi.) RKO bought the American rights and opened *Rashomon* in New York for Christmas—the first Japanese movie to show in the 14 years since Mikio Naruse's *Wife! Be Like a Rose*.

As accomplished as it is, *Rashomon* is not a movie to wear its significance lightly. Has any rape-murder received a bigger buildup? "There's never been anything as terrible as this," the priest cries. "Worse than fires, wars, epidemics, bandits." American audiences also puzzled over the meaning, as well