Persistent Ambiguity and Moral Responsibility in *Rashomon*

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**Introduction**

In the seventeenth century Blaise Pascal already wondered who was to indicate the right point of view “when truth is at stake or in morality.” In the end Pascal found his answer in the traditional perspective from above: God. Two centuries later Nietzsche formulated the same question, but gave the opposite answer. The real free spirit does not believe in “the truth” and knows that perspectives are human and that all standpoints are subjective. The movement of multi-perspectivism is inspired by Nietzsche but does not share his value relativism. The multitude of perspectives is used as a delta of information to strengthen intersubjectivity. Multi-perspectivism means making optimal use of the richness of perspectives to understand a situation most fully. In changing one perspective for another we have the opportunity to learn something, to acquire new insights. In the twentieth century more and more people started to realize that they are not merely actors playing their parts in the theater of life, but also co-directors able to change the play—or at least a scene.

An important contribution to the rise of multi-perspectivism in cinema was made by Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998) with the film *Rashomon* (1951). Supported by a well-considered narrative, the film poses an important basic question: How do we judge an event when stories about facts and norms conflict and where ambiguity is persistent? In this article a film interpretation in the phenomenological tradition will be developed,
using theories of social constructivism and moral negotiating. When interpretations do not agree, epistemological ambiguity is persistent. The viable way to handle persistent ambiguity is an ethical one: taking moral responsibility.

After a description of the narrative (1), an inventory of the reception of the film in the Netherlands brings us to consider three themes in Rashomon (2). For a careful reflection on these themes a reconstruction of the Japanese perspective is needed (3). More background is supplied by a description of the sources of the film, and a typification of the later academic film criticism (4). A fitting theoretical view focuses on roles and realities in a combination of social constructivism and moral negotiation (5). This brings us to the coherence between two kinds of responsibility and the importance of actually taking responsibility (6). The conclusions offer an answer to the basic question of the film and a sketch of the most integrative interpretation of the film.

1. The Film *Rashomon*

Right from the beginning the stage is set for an intriguing story. It is pouring with rain. A graceful and huge but dilapidated building stands out against the pale gray sky: the Rasho-mon or Devil’s gate. Two men are sitting down under its roof: a woodcutter and a priest. They stare at the rain. Rapid footsteps are heard through the mud, on their way to find shelter. The camera follows the seeker of shelter, the commoner, as he arrives at the gate and joins the other men. These two are not interested in the dreary weather. They are obsessed by an event that happened that morning. At first they are vague about what happened and this arouses the commoner’s curiosity. The event had something to do with a court session. After some pressure the woodcutter starts to tell his story.

The framing story of the film offers seven accounts given by six tellers: the woodcutter tells two stories. All of the accounts are located in the woods and in a courtyard. They are interspersed by the interludes of the three men under the roof of the gate. The Rasho-gate is also the location of the final scenes.

In his first account the woodcutter says that he went into the woods three days ago to do his work. What at first seems to be a happy walk amidst sunshine turns into an unpleasant surprise. Suddenly he finds clothes and an amulet in the bushes and nearby the dead body of a samurai. He disappears from the scene to notify the police. The film then moves to the court session of that morning where the second storyteller, the priest, gives a short report. Three days earlier he saw an armed man, the
samurai, escorting his wife on a horse on their way through the woods. The third account is given by the policeman. Two days ago he ran into the well-known bandit, Tajomaru, whom he found ill on a riverbank, not far from the woods. The bandit was in possession of the woman’s horse and the samurai’s weapons. This account is confirmed in court by the bandit. He states that he ambushed the samurai and raped the woman. After a long and superb fight he killed the man and took all the things with him that he wanted. The only thing he forgot was the valuable dagger the woman used to defend herself. Later he was found ill near a river because he had drunk contaminated water.

So the dead body is identified and the suspect has already confessed murder and rape. But then complications arise: the wife, the samurai through a medium and the woodcutter in his second account all tell stories that do not match. The samurai is dead, but who is responsible? The wife, in the fifth account, confesses that she killed her husband with her dagger in a state of shock because, after the rape, she saw cold hatred in his eyes and she knew for sure he would never accept her again. In the sixth story the dead samurai states through a medium that after the rape his wife preferred to stay with the bandit and asked the bandit to kill her husband. The bandit refused, the woman escaped and finally the bandit let the husband go. Completely dishonored, he plunged his wife’s dagger into his heart. When his spirit started to rise up he felt the dagger being pulled out of his body.

In the three latter statements the people directly involved all accuse themselves. Because all three of them stated “I am responsible for the death of the samurai,” no one can be blamed. In the following interlude under the gate, the woodcutter makes a slip of the tongue. He did not want to be involved, but he knows more. In his second account, the woodcutter makes it clear that the event in the woods was different from the statements given by the three people involved. When he came on the scene the rape had already taken place and the bandit was begging the wife to marry him. She indicated that she, as a woman, could not decide this and implied that the men should fight over it. Both men were not enthusiastic about this, but the wife succeeded in setting them against each other. A tiring and clumsy fight was won by the bandit, who killed the samurai with his sword. The woman escaped.

The film continues and ends under the Rasho-gate. Each of the three men has acquired his own role. The woodcutter is full of common sense, but now he is bewildered: “They’re all lies! Tajomaru’s confession, the woman’s story—they’re lies!” The commoner is a realist and a cynic: “Well, men are only men. That’s why they lie. They can’t tell the truth, not even to themselves.” The priest, of course, is a believer and an idealist: “It is
Toshiro Mifune stars as the fearsome bandit in Akira Kurosawa’s classic film about truth-seeking and truth-telling, *Rashomon* (1951). (Photofest)
because men are so weak. That’s why they lie. That’s why they must deceive
themselves.” Near the end of the film the roles become sharply defined.
The commoner: “Everyone wants to forget unpleasant things. So they
make up stories. It’s easier that way.” The priest: “If men do not tell the
truth, do not trust one another, then the earth becomes a kind of hell.”
The woodcutter still requires answers and mediation, not only between
the conflicting stories, but also about the way to interpret them. He must
mediate between the skeptical realism of the commoner and the idealis-
tic belief of the priest. “I don’t understand any of them. They don’t make
any sense.” To which the commoner replies: “Well, don’t worry about that.
It isn’t as though men were reasonable.”

Meanwhile it has stopped raining and suddenly crying is heard. On
the other side of the gate a baby has been abandoned. The commoner
does not think twice and steals some valuable clothes and an amulet from
the child. The woodcutter gets worked up about this and accuses the com-
moner fiercely. The latter reacts laconically: “Evil? Me? And if that is so,
then what does that make the parents of that baby?” But the woodcutter
insists: “Brute! All men are selfish and dishonest. They all have excuses.
The bandit, the husband, you!” A struggle starts, but the commoner
shouts: “Look, you may have fooled the police, but you don’t fool me.”
The struggle stops. “Where is that valuable dagger that was pulled out of
the samurai’s body? Now that is a really selfish action for you.” As in his
first story the woodcutter has not told everything in his second story. This
disclosure takes the edge off the woodcutter’s anger and the commoner
vanishes.

The woodcutter and the priest are alone again, while the priest holds
the baby, who has stopped crying. They just stand there and remain silent,
as time passes by and the weather brightens. Finally, the woodcutter
decides to take the baby home; he already has six children and one more
is not going to be a problem, so he says. The priest states this will enable
him to keep his faith in men. The woodcutter walks away from the Rasho-
gate with the baby in his arms, set against the sun breaking through. The
priest is seen as a small figure, standing under the huge gate.

2. The Reception of Rashomon in the West

In the Western world Rashomon caught the public eye: it received the
Grand Prize of the Venice Film Festival and the USA Academy Award as
the best foreign film for 1951. The following year Rashomon was shown
for months in New York, London and Paris; in Amsterdam the first show-
ing was not until May 1953. There is no doubt: the initial reception of the
film by the critics was favorable, with minor exceptions. But the film is not a simple story and it is certainly not a portrait of everyday Western society in the fifties. Or was it? Those who mediate between films and the public have the job of interpreting and evaluating the film, just as the three men under the gate tried to interpret and evaluate the conflicting stories about a rape and a death.

For analyzing the reception of *Rashomon* in the Netherlands I collected reviews from newspapers, weeklies and monthlies, published in 1952 and 1953. A complete collection of 18 Dutch reviews was added to 7 prominent reviews from other European and American newspapers and magazines. After analysis each review appeared to be characterized by one of three themes.

**Theme 1: Telling the Truth**

Some reviews defined the theme of the film in terms of discovering the truth. This was formulated quite simply as: “Where can we find truth?, the film asks.” Sometimes the theme of the film was formulated more momentously: “The problem of the truth and the high and low of human conduct are dealt with on a basic level.” And: “The painful doubt, caused by the contrary statements, leads from the question of who is speaking the truth to the question of what is truth.” The film would be successful in “showing the relativity of [what] seems to be the truth for three people,” the climax of which is “even the woodcutter appears to be lying.” That remained unnoticed by some critics. Referring to the second account of the woodcutter, some of them claimed: “for it is the final part that is the true story,” and “when we see what really happens the camera speaks as only it can” or “the woodcutter knows the reality.” For these critics, the perspective of the observer equals reality. At the same time they convincingly show how difficult it is to be an objective observer. Another critic presented the summarized story of the bandit as the core issue of the film, and then added: “So far the facts, which, in their horribleness, are quite simple.”

Confronted with the cohesion of lie and truth, some critics shifted their attention to trustworthiness: “Who is lying? Can one trust the conversation of people?” and “Now what is lie and what is truth? No one can say. Man is unreliable.” Only one critic considered the film a good example of critical nuance, an example “which makes a mockery of the naive human trust in the possibility of a distinction between truth and fiction, between the objective and the subjective.”
Theme 2: Selfishness and Moralism

Other critics’ reviews defined the theme of the film in terms of egoistic motivation. Some of them used a careful formulation: “When he must tell the truth every stakeholder appears to have his one, selfish truth, in which he claims the honorable role for himself. In this way everyone sketches the image he wants to see of himself and thereby distorts reality.” A similar characterization is: “Each person involved gives another twist to the story, with the aim of coming out the best.” In plain English: “they all speak to their own advantage” and “everyone lies as much as it suits him.” One step further is that “the theme of the picture is moral anarchy.” Sometimes the typification gets close to branding Rashomon as a type of horror film, as the director reveals his characters, “and in this revelation, suggests the dark perversities of man.” In some criticisms the moral dimension of the film is reduced to the last scene in which an act of charity or altruism seems to come out of the blue and suggests a happy ending. For one critic this was an exhortation and he found it insulting shortly after the Second World War: “[O]ne asks astonished, whether the Japanese are the right people to lecture humankind.”

Theme 3: Constructing Social Reality

The third set of reviews focused on the bias of human perception, the relativity of opinion and the ambiguity of events. This is dangerous territory full of dubious qualifications. For instance, the film treats “the presented problem in a typically Eastern way by stressing the concept of relativity, the relativity of human observation, the personal color of every judgment.” An interesting classification of the film, but the qualification “typically Eastern” is not explained. The film shows us that “all human perception is relative, that each man colors the truth differently, because what he is himself determines that truth.” The tenor of the film is “that every human being transforms the facts consciously or subconsciously in a way that fits one’s character and the situation one is in.” The most concise typification of the film was as follows: “Human beings describe things the way they want them to appear.” Truth and reality are co-products of judgment and imagination. Being involved in the process of interpreting brings a critic to see the purpose of the film as “manifesting ‘multiplicity’, just as modern painting does.” What this third set of reviews brings us is the insight that interaction also is negotiating the meaning of things as to what is true and what is right.

Not every critic was accessible for such interpretations. The film was
not everybody's cup of tea. A British critic concluded that "there are some impressive moments, but the general impression is one of confusion and noise."²⁶

3. The Japanese Perspective

On August 25, 1950 Rashomon opened in Tokyo and was shown for six weeks in several cinemas. One of the operators had little faith in its success and hired a benshi. Such commentators were good practice in the days of the silent movies, but Rashomon had its own recording tape and the benshi talked right through it. The confusing result contributed to the Western myth that the film was an underestimated masterpiece, misunderstood and undervalued by the Japanese public right from the start. This was simply not the case. The film was neither a blockbuster nor a commercial failure. It was valued by the audience and the Daiei film production company made a profit on the investment.

Guilliane Stramigoli, head of Italia film in Japan, was enthusiastic about the film. When Venice invited Japan to contribute a film to the yearly film festival in 1950, Rashomon was recommended. At first the Japanese commission in question was not willing to enter the film. The film was not made for export and would be incomprehensible to Westerners, especially a historical “costume drama” like Rashomon. What is more, the film was not acceptable because traditional Japanese critics disapproved of it. In their view the original literary sources were violated, the moral message of egoism was in conflict with Japanese culture and was in itself unacceptable, and the classical tradition of the sword fight was made a laughing-stock in the film. Furthermore, there were too many influences from the West: swearing, serious kissing and a happy ending.²⁷ And finally, the scenario was too complicated; only few people would understand it. The tenor of this series of arguments was obvious: as a Japanese film Rashomon was not up to the mark.

To avoid a scandal in cultural diplomacy the commission reluctantly agreed with Stramigoli. Most members of this commission were amazed when Rashomon received the Golden Lion in Venice six months later. They stuck to their standpoint but changed their explanation: Rashomon was still neither good nor a representative Japanese film, but the critics in the West loved exoticism. This Japanese perspective on the film clearly indicates that Rashomon is not a typically “Eastern” or Japanese film. The film falls in between two cultures, mixing elements of the East and the West. This made it easier for Western critics to praise it and for Japanese critics to condemn it.
4. Film Sources and Film Criticism

*Rashomon* was not based on an original film scenario, but on two stories from Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Both stories take place at the end of the Heian period, in the 12th century. The title, the decay of the gate, and the stealing of clothes from someone who cannot defend himself were adapted from the short story “*Rashomon—The Devilsgate.*” Almost everything has been adapted from the other short story “*Yabu no naka—In a Grove.*” The story contains the incompatible accounts of the witnesses in the woods. The central themes of Akutagawa are relativism and irony: everybody has his own point of view and how something happens depends on the viewer.

While incorporating these stories into a film scenario, Kurosawa and his co-writer Shinobu Hashimoto constructed a more complex tale. The two stories are interwoven and the second account of the woodcutter is added. David Boyd’s analysis of this process of adapting is helpful. The short story “*Yabu no naka*” is a modern meditation on the relativity of truth. For the film it provides the story of a crime in the woods: the killing of the samurai and the probable rape of his wife. The short story *Rashomon* is a study in moral psychology, focusing on the moral deliberation of its protagonists. For the film it is the story of the investigation of the crime: what really happened and how can this be evaluated?

In academic film criticism in the seventies and eighties, two major topics emerged in analyzing the film: egoism and social criticism. The first topic is character-related egoism. The film goes beyond relativism, according to Stanley Kaufman, to reveal “the element that generates the relativism: the element of ego, of self.” The opposing stories show how the narrators color their experiences: “Each participant is justified in reconstructing it in a manner to redeem the prestige of the moral sense.” Kurosawa referred to this interpretation himself when he explained the script to three assistant directors. The bandit, the wife and the husband present their positions with pride: they only tell things of which they are proud. This is stimulated by their reified notion of character: “Each thinks of his character as being fully formed, of being a thing and therefore being capable of only a certain number of reactions.”

The second topic is history-related social criticism. The characters in the film are not frank in their stories. Not because they do not want to be, but because they cannot be frank under the circumstances. The limited range of social roles in Japanese feudal society did not allow frankness. People were bound to the characters and roles that were assigned: going beyond these roles was unacceptable. The historical setting was portrayed to offer the viewer a look in the mirror. As one commentator stated:
“It is hard to believe that a Japanese audience was not being led to refer to their own experience and to see the events of the story accordingly.” When the film was made World War II was very recent history. The film poses the question as to the way in which Japanese society had improved its flexibility to handle roles and responsibility. Japanese adults still lack the freedom to step outside these roles and be frank, the film suggests.

When Kurosawa was asked what the film was all about, he paused a moment and said: “Well, you see, it’s about this rape,” smiled for a second and chose to be silent. In a nutshell this is an excellent description of the film. Rashomon is a film about coherent actions of a small number of people in the woods and another small group under a gate recounting what happened in those woods. Therefore, the first theme offered by Western reviews just misses the point: in the film the existence of truth is simply not assumed. What remains are the second and third themes of the reviews: selfishness and the construction of social reality. Later film criticism offers two topics: egoism and social criticism. However justified the idea of social criticism might be, it does not capture the heart of the film: it presents a sociological side topic. The analysis brings us two promising paths for ongoing reflection: constructing and negotiating roles and realities, and taking moral responsibility in the face of epistemological ambiguity.

5. Negotiating Roles and Realities

As viewers of Rashomon we are explicitly invited to come up with our version of reality. In the scenes at the court the judge or the commissioner of police is never seen and the viewer does not hear his questions. What is seen are the reactions and statements made by the bandit Tajomara, a policeman, the wife and the dead samurai through a medium. They make their statements in front of the camera. The viewer is given suggestions to construct and connect facts and values. As such the viewer is the judge of truth and morality, helped by the three men under the gate. But facts and values are not clear.

In reconstructing this story the three men under the gate and the viewers struggle with an epistemological problem. A closely reasoned argument about the event is not possible. Hashimoto and Kurosawa succeeded in presenting a labyrinth of interpretation from their cinematic narrative. In this respect the film mirrors life. We are in constant need of interpretation, but we are seldom sure of validation. Other interpretations are possible and may have the same right to exist. Every agreement is tentative. In social matters truth is not an eternal insight waiting to be
uncovered. It is an agreement on an interpretation, and its validation is only temporary.

In constructivism, knowing and valuing are in a state of change. The personal aspect is not separated from the social but is a necessary part of it. In the words of George Herbert Mead: “The ‘I’ reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitudes of others,” therefore “the self is essentially a social process.”\textsuperscript{36} The interaction between the two components of the self, the I and the me, produces thinking: “Thinking is simply the reasoning of the individual, the carrying-on of a conversation between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’.”\textsuperscript{37} This conversation mediates old and new information into temporary stabilizations. Such a conversation is going on in the woodcutter’s mind during the long silence near the end of the film.

In everyday life, agents learn to present themselves in a way that is fitting and effective for the role that they play in society. For instance, the presentation of self is ironically overacted by both the bandit and the wife, although most people only notice the overacting of the bandit. Presenting the self like this is presenting a frame for interpreting one’s behavior. It is not always easy to question or criticize such a frame; paradoxes occur. In the second story of the woodcutter, the bandit, after raping the wife, kneels beside her and proposes: “I’ll do anything to please you if you’ll only come away with me, marry me.” She does not immediately know what to do. The interpretation of this behavior (Is he serious? Is he crazy? Is he stupid?) takes some time. Finally, she does not give him a straight answer, but refers to her social role: “How could I, a woman, answer a question like that?” The bandit is obviously not stupid, because he is able to place this reaction, accepts it, and confirms her communication explicitly on a meta-level: “I understand. You mean that we men must decide.” This pattern of action and reaction produces an effective coupling of perspectives and roles.

People do not simply perceive reality, but actually “put things out there” that they then perceive and negotiate about: an initial implanting of reality. For Karl Weick such enactment is the bracketing of a portion of the stream of experiences for closer attention.\textsuperscript{38} First, the bandit in the woods saw the woman’s face: “[T]here was this cool breeze. If it hadn’t been for that breeze,” and “It was just a glimpse.” He decided to act upon this glimpse: “I thought I had seen an angel. And right then I decided I would take her.” This was his mental model or causal map, which had proven useful on previous occasions. The bandit was accustomed to getting what he wanted on impulse or if necessary by force.

The importance of enactment and mental models is demonstrated throughout the film. A distinction between two kinds of negotiating might
be helpful. In intrapersonal negotiating, an individual tries to reach an agreement between different drives, wishes and norms within him; in interpersonal negotiating, a group of individuals tries to strike a compromise between the different perspectives and interests each of them has.

First, let us concentrate on intrapersonal negotiating. The woodcutter was not simply watching an event; he was involved in the event that he witnessed. He decided not to interfere although he was carrying an axe. He stole the dagger by pulling it out of the dead body. He did not tell everything he knew in his first or in his second story. He was not only letting it all happen, but he was in fact co-directing the scene by taking these decisions. Contrary to his wish, he was already involved. When he became aware of this, his mental mode “entered into an ongoing negotiation.”

The mental model of the commoner is quite clear. He was continually looking for possible selfish behavior. For him only the model of egoism could be taken seriously. This model was on his mind when he arrived at the gate and nothing had changed when he left with the stolen goods. Mental models that are kept closed easily lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. Learning something was never the commoner’s intention. The will to learn demands the willingness to question the mental model in use. Maybe it was not in the commoner’s character, as it was not in the character of the wife, to give a firm answer. However, treating an abstraction like a thing is a form of reification. In constructivism a character is not a thing but a relation extended in time. A character is always changing in time. Some elements will never be absent, but they are not fixed. Conceiving of character as a thing denies its processual aspect.

Second, let us look for interpersonal negotiating between the three men under the gate. They mirror the event of the three people in the woods, but the nature of the event changes from action to reflection. Their story is an interpretive re-enactment of the earlier drama. The bandit, the wife and the samurai return on a meta-level in the guise of the commoner, the priest and the woodcutter. In their responses to the situation the bandit and the commoner both represent roughness and cynicism. The wife and the priest represent disbelief and disillusionment, and the samurai and the woodcutter represent astonishment and bewilderment. The last couple also offers unusual viewpoints: the samurai after his death relates that a dagger is pulled out of his body; the woodcutter appears to be the only one with an observer perspective of the event. The men under the gate try to reach some sort of agreement on the happenings in the wood. The main reason why these constructs failed was the lack of interdependency between the three men. They live in the same area, they have heard about the bandit, and they know their country is in decay. But for their further well-being they do not depend on each other and they owe each
other nothing. Between agents there must be a minimum of interdependency to arrive at new negotiated interpretations of facts and values.  

6. Taking Moral Responsibility

When we attribute responsibility to a person we are doing one of two things: we either address the person or her function. When we say “She is a responsible person” we praise her character. Responsibility that
is completely directed to personal qualities such as carefulness, openness and fairness is called “character-oriented responsibility.”\textsuperscript{41} It is moral appraisal based on experience. Under the gate, the commoner has no high opinion of responsibility: men are not reasonable, they do not tell the truth and they make up stories. The commoner scores low on character-oriented responsibility. The priest on the other hand believes in responsibility: we can trust each other and tell the truth. Typically we expect him to be a responsible person. The woodcutter hovers in between these two poles.

When we say “He is responsible for an action in the past or in the future” we link an action or event to a person. We are making a functional connection. This is “action-oriented responsibility,” often found in structured contexts such as organizations or local societies. Action-oriented responsibility is also moral responsibility when the agent is able to reflect on his causation and is able to choose otherwise. Is this causation congruent with his conception of “the good life”? And if so, has he got the will to live in accordance with that conception? These are the questions all three men under the gate had to answer. It is only the woodcutter who lives through the entire experience of doubt and hesitation, asking himself what is real and what is just, finally to take position in the stream of ambiguity.

Character-oriented responsibility is being trusted on the basis of experience: it is the personal aspect of moral responsibility. Action-oriented responsibility is being held responsible for actions or events: it is the social aspect of moral responsibility. Both types of responsibility can be recognized in the film.

Concentrating on the personal aspect, we view the woodcutter as the central agent. He is the only one struggling with questions of moral responsibility. In his search for answers his two companions fulfill important supporting roles. The commoner is the skeptical and even cynical realist, but also an egoist and a thief. The priest is the idealistic believer: he holds to the goodness of man, in spite of countervailing evidence. Between the two the woodcutter is in agony: he is confronted with confusing stories, an attack on his person, and the fact that he lied two times. He entails a sense of loss and regret. At the end of the film he makes up his mind.

During a long silence of deliberation the woodcutter mediates between conflicting accounts, meanings and values. Being a rational man, making optimal use of all information available, he finally negotiates for himself a new personal order, a compromise of facts and values. He accomplishes this on his own, on the basis of adequate subjectivism: the morally right thing to do is whatever a completely reasonable person
would approve. The woodcutter arrives at a narrative self-constitution. He decides for a discontinuity in his life’s story. To pay off his moral debt for not being honest in his first and second story he decides to demonstrate a non-selfish act. He is going to take care of the foundling. In this way he can make up for his earlier shortcomings and restore his moral self-respect. He can again uphold his conception of the good life, and live in accordance with that conception. He re-establishes his moral responsibility by creating a new equilibrium in which his moral identity is at least partly confirmed.

Concentrating on the social aspect of moral responsibility, the three men under the gate are in fact a microcosm of society. The commoner represents cynicism and belief in egoism. The priest stands for idealism and belief in altruism. The woodcutter does not know what to think and must come up with something, but has dirty hands himself. As such he offers a role with which most viewers can identify. These three men are dealing with conflicting information and no simple solution is available. Although the men under the gate mirror the event in the woods, it does not mean they have to imitate it. What they try to do is negotiate a new social order. They do not succeed in reaching such a compromise because their lack of interdependency is obvious: after the rain everyone will go his own way. The attempt, however, to negotiate a compromise can influence the participants. Not the commoner. He imitates the bandit by being selfish, taking the valuables and running away. Not the priest, because he is a symbol of spirituality, and shuts himself off from dissonant information, making negotiation a priori impossible. But the attempt to negotiate did have an impact on the woodcutter. He chooses to manifest non-selfish behavior. Following character-oriented responsibility, he wishes to be known as a better man and this desire motivates him to act. This brings him to action-oriented responsibility: he accepts the responsibility of taking care of someone who cannot take care of himself. In doing so, he restores his moral reputation in front of the priest. This demonstration of moral character is confirmed by the priest.

In the end the two men reach a compromise, not on the epistemological question of what happened in the woods, but on the moral question of how to handle responsibility under the gate. In this they succeed, but does this really mean a happy ending? The film closes with the always hopeful and positive priest rightly seen as a small figure under a huge dilapidated gate. The woodcutter makes his exit bowed, knowing that he still has to pay off his moral shortcomings: for years he has another mouth to feed.
Conclusions

The first conclusion concerns the basic question of the film and the second concerns the film interpretation. The basic question posed by the film is: How do we judge an event when stories about facts and norms conflict and where epistemological ambiguity is persistent? Not only the men under the gate but also the viewers have to answer this question. A multiplicity of stories and interpretations is offered. When we try to negotiate a temporary agreement about those interpretations, we must be aware of the fact that our perspectives are linked to social roles and are produced by our mental models. If ambiguity persists we must fall back on these models and the way they are structured. In mental models the personal and social are connected, as character-oriented responsibility often is the drive to action-oriented responsibility. Character will be an important input for our intrapersonal negotiating: maybe a discontinuity of our life story is needed. Interpersonal negotiating may confirm our decision. An interpersonal compromise is more likely when there is a minimum of interdependency between us.

The integrative interpretation takes Rashomon to be a meta-picture that expresses multi-perspectivism with a moral edge. The film offers an interpretative labyrinth by showing us seven different stories from six perspectives. On crucial points the stories are in conflict. This leads to an unsolvable epistemological problem: we do not know what exactly happened in the woods and who is responsible for what. In this sea of ambiguity people are thrown back upon themselves. The two core themes of the film are the social construction of reality and egoism. At the end of the film our interpreters under the gate turn out morally to be no different from the people in the wood. With one exception. The woodcutter is willing to learn from the experience, negotiates himself a new personal order, and makes a moral decision out of character-oriented responsibility. There is no happy ending in this film. The film is hopeful: out of three adult men, one is willing to question his own mental model. One man is willing and able to learn something.

Notes

1. Pascal, *Pensee* 381.
27. The “happy end” of the film is criticized in the West as being a cheap and clichéd ending. However, in the Japanese film of that time, a happy end was an exception. Again, Kurosawa’s choice was out of line with Japanese convention, but this time it was not appreciated by Western critics.

28. Ryonosuke Akutagawa, “Rashomon—The Devilsgate” (1915), and “Yabu no naka—In a Grove” (1922), in Rashomon and Other Stories (New York: Liveright, 1952).


33. Richie, Donald (Ed.), Rashomon (New Jersey: Rutgers State University, 1987), 12.


35. Of each individual life different interpretations can be given, depending on the episodes which one wants to stress and connect. Because in each episode of Rashomon the illusion of the reality of time and space remains untouched, the interpretative labyrinth of the film is still accessible. Reality only becomes problematic when the narrative episodes are united in an overall interpretation. At the end of the fifties, the time-space unity of each narrative episode was also undermined in the films of Alain Resnais (Hiroshima mon amour, France, 1959, and l’Anneé dernier a Marienbad, France, 1961). In the nineties even the objective
camera shots are no more than possible interpretations of the course of events, as in the film *The Usual Suspects* by Bryan Singer (USA, 1995).


37. Ibid., 335.


