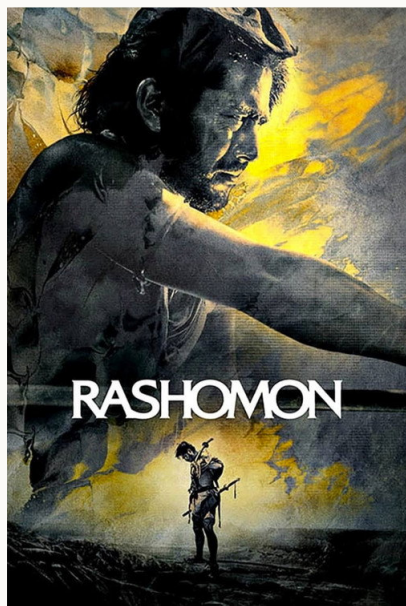




CRIME · DRAMA · MYSTERY

Rashomon

1950 · Directed by Akira Kurosawa

- Japanese Golden Age

Art Cinema

Auteur Cinema

In a ruined gateway during a downpour, three men shelter and try to make sense of a killing in the forest and the trial that followed. Each witness has a story to tell. Part courtroom puzzle, part moral fable, set in medieval Kyoto.

DIRECTOR	Akira Kurosawa
YEAR	1950
RUNTIME	1h 28m (88 min)
COUNTRY	Japan
GENRES	Crime, Drama, Mystery
CAST	Toshirō Mifune, Machiko Kyō, Takashi Shimura, Masayuki Mori, Minoru Chiaki
MUSIC	Fumio Hayasaka
IMDB	8.1 / 10 (195,453 votes)
ROTTEN TOMATOES	98% (critics)
METACRITIC	98 / 100
TMDB SCORE	8.0 / 10 (2,623 votes)
WHERE TO WATCH	Stream (US): HBO Max Amazon Channel, HBO Max Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Fandango At Home Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 The film that opened Western eyes to Japanese cinema

Its Golden Lion at Venice in 1951 made Akira Kurosawa an international name and drew Western audiences and festivals to Japanese film. Mizoguchi, Ozu and the rest of the golden age reached the West partly through it.

2 A story-telling method still copied today

Rashomon treats a flashback as someone's claim rather than as proof. The phrase 'Rashomon effect' now describes any story told from conflicting viewpoints, and it all starts here.

3 Pure cinema in 88 minutes

Mifune, Kyō and Mori give vivid, physical performances. Kazuo Miyagawa's camera moves through forest light, and Fumio Hayasaka's score adds to the tension. It is compact, strange and gripping.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of Japan's postwar golden age and the work that introduced Japanese cinema to a global audience. It also established the multi-perspective narrative as a lasting form.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Treat every flashback as a performance by the person telling it, and ask what each narrator wants you to believe about them.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How the camera and light behave in the gate scenes (heavy rain, shadow, stillness) compared with the forest scenes (dappled sunlight, movement).
- How Toshirō Mifune, Machiko Kyō and Masayuki Mori shift their physical manner from one telling to the next.
- How Hayasaka's score and long stretches without dialogue steer the mood, including a rhythm that builds like Ravel's Boléro.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

When a story is told in the first person and the teller has something at stake, what would make you trust it?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Industry:** Japan was under Allied occupation until 1952. Studios such as Daiei were rebuilding, and period films (jidaigeki) were a staple, though the Western audience barely knew Japanese cinema.
- **Director's moment:** Kurosawa had made Drunken Angel (1948) and Stray Dog (1949), contemporary dramas with Mifune. Rashomon was a smaller, riskier experiment in a medieval setting, and some executives were unconvinced.
- **Source:** The script draws on two short stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, 'Rashōmon' and 'In a Grove', adapted by Kurosawa and Shinobu Hashimoto.
- **Dominant styles:** Mainstream narrative cinema, Japanese and Hollywood alike, usually treated flashbacks as reliable. Kurosawa also drew on silent-film technique, relying on image and rhythm over dialogue.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILMMAKER

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

His short stories 'In a Grove' and 'Rashōmon' supplied the crime, the conflicting accounts and the gate setting.



TRADITION

Silent cinema

Kurosawa wanted to recover the visual storytelling of silent film, with its physical acting and images that carry meaning without dialogue.



FILM

Citizen Kane (1941)

An earlier landmark that builds a story from several people's recollections, though the approach and purpose differ.



THIS FILM

Rashomon (1950)

NEW AT THE TIME *Flashbacks were framed as testimony from different narrators, each shown as a full scene, instead of as an objective record of what happened.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in Japan under Allied Occupation, amid postwar devastation and moral uncertainty, by a director who was just becoming known at home.

- **Country and moment:** Japan in 1950 was still occupied by Allied forces, mainly American, after defeat in 1945. Cities were damaged, food and housing were scarce, and many people were questioning the wartime values they had been taught.
- **Politics and censorship:** Occupation authorities censored film content. Samurai swordfights and feudal loyalty themes were discouraged because they were linked to militarism, so period films were treated cautiously, and the story's medieval setting was a sensitive choice.
- **Society and audience:** Postwar audiences lived with broken trust in authority and in official versions of events. A film about people who cannot agree on what they saw, and about whether anyone can be honest, spoke to that mood.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Kurosawa was in his early forties and had made films since 1943, with recent contemporary dramas such as *Drunken Angel*. He made this one for Daiei, a studio that was not expecting much from it.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Brisk at 88 minutes, built from a few long, dense sequences. The framing story is slow and reflective, the forest scenes more kinetic.
- **Style:** Stylised, theatrical and often dreamlike. Acting is expressive and broad in places, more so than in Hollywood films of the period.
- **Colour / B&W:** Black and white, with strong contrasts between sunlit forest and dark gate.
- **Language:** Japanese with subtitles. Dialogue is sparse, and long passages rely on images and music.

- **Content:** Centres on a violent crime, including sexual assault. It is handled through implication and performance, not graphic display.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

13+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings range from FR all-audiences and GB 12A to DE 16, with US unrated; 13 suits the sexual violence theme and subtitled, talky style, with older teens getting most from it.

Official ratings: US NR · UK 12A · Germany 16 · France TP

- **Good for:** Curious teens who like mysteries and debating who to believe. It is short, visually striking and hugely influential, a good first step into classic world cinema.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Sexual assault is central to the story. It is not shown graphically, but it is discussed repeatedly and shapes the whole film.
- **May unsettle, violence:** Sword fighting and a killing, shown in a raw, unglamorous way rather than as stylised action. Brief and not gory.
- **May unsettle, bleak outlook:** The film dwells on deceit, selfishness and distrust, and asks hard questions about human nature.
- **May unsettle, dated attitudes:** Its portrayal of women and of class reflects 1950 and a medieval setting, and may be worth discussing.
- **Explain first:** It is in Japanese with subtitles and in black and white, so be ready to read along and settle into a slower rhythm.
- **Explain first:** The story is set in medieval Japan, with samurai, bandits and a ruined city gate, and told through people recounting events.
- **Explain first:** Several characters describe the same event differently, so part of the fun is deciding for yourself what to believe.

Talk about it after: *Why might people remember the same event differently, and does it matter more to find out what really happened or why each person tells it their way?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film can be read as an inquiry into why people lie, not only to others but to themselves. It suggests that self-image, pride and fear shape memory so strongly that even honest witnesses distort events, and it asks what faith in people survives that.

THEMES

- **Subjective truth:** Each narrator's version flatters them. Memory and testimony are shaped by what a person needs to be true.
- **Vanity and self-deception:** The film can be read as arguing that people will lie even in death, and to themselves, to preserve their honour or self-image.
- **Faith in human nature:** The rain-soaked gate frame debates whether people are basically selfish, a question that becomes a test of the priest's belief.
- **Desire, shame and power:** The crime exposes how masculine honour and a woman's fate are bound up with how the story gets told.
- **A ruined world:** The collapsing gate and constant rain place the story in a society where order has broken down, so moral certainty is harder to find.

Key scenes

The woodcutter's walk into the forest

A long, nearly wordless sequence of camera tracking through trees and shooting upward into the sun. It establishes the film's visual language and treats the forest as a place of confusion and dappled light.

The wife's testimony

Machiko Kyō's testimony changes what we think we saw and shows how a narrator's self-presentation shifts a scene. The long close-up stretches the film's tension.

The medium channelling the dead samurai

The most stylised moment, with a ghostly voice and wind in the frame. It pushes the film from a crime puzzle into something more unsettling and moves the story beyond human witnesses.

The woodcutter's confession and the ending at the gate

The last account does not settle the puzzle so much as test the narrators. The final act at the gate returns to the framing question of whether faith in people can be justified.

Filmmaking

- **Cinematography:** Kazuo Miyagawa shot directly toward the sun, then thought risky, and used mirrors to throw light into the forest. The dappled, shifting light makes the forest feel both beautiful and untrustworthy.
- **Structure:** A frame story at the gate holds three layers of narration: testimony at the court, recounted by the men at the gate, relived through each witness's version. The structure makes the audience a juror.
- **Performance:** Mifune plays the bandit with feral energy, while Kyō and Mori shift tone between tellings. The same events look different in each performance, which is the film's argument in acting.
- **Music:** Fumio Hayasaka's score borrows the slow, accumulating pulse of Ravel's Boléro, giving the central sequences a ritual build-up. Silence is used just as deliberately.
- **Editing and design:** The rhythm of cutting speeds up in the forest scenes and slows at the gate. The huge gate set and ceaseless rain were built to feel heavy and oppressive.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

During a heavy rainstorm, a woodcutter and a priest shelter beneath the ruined Rashōmon gate in Kyoto. Both are shaken by a case they witnessed at the police court: a samurai found dead in the forest and his wife violated. A commoner joins them and asks to hear the story.

The bandit Tajōmaru says he tricked the samurai, tied him up, seduced the wife, then killed the samurai in a fair, heroic duel. The wife says that after the assault her husband looked at her only with contempt, and she blacked out holding a dagger, waking to find him dead. Through a medium, the dead samurai says his wife asked the bandit to kill him, and that after the bandit left in disgust, he took his own life.

Then the woodcutter, who found the body, admits he saw the whole encounter. In his version, the bandit begged the wife to go with him, she goaded the two men into fighting, and the duel was an ugly, frightened scramble. The commoner points out that the woodcutter has left something out: the missing dagger, which he evidently stole.

As the rain eases, a baby cries in the gate. The commoner steals its clothing, and the woodcutter shames him for it. Then the woodcutter offers to take the child home, and the priest's belief in human goodness is partly restored.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **A reluctant studio:** Daiei executives reportedly found the script puzzling and the film was made on a modest budget. After a poor reaction in its first screenings, it went on to international success.
- **Entered without Kurosawa's knowledge:** Kurosawa did not know the film had been submitted to the 1951 Venice Film Festival. Italian-Film representative Giuliana Stramigioli had championed it, and it won the Golden Lion.

- **Shooting into the sun:** Cinematographer Kazuo Miyagawa pointed the camera at the sun through the leaves, which was considered bad practice. Mirrors helped bounce sunlight where needed, producing the film's famous forest look.
- **The gate set:** The huge Rashōmon gate set, built for the frame story, was drenched in artificial rain. Water was dyed with ink so that it showed up on black-and-white film.
- **Silent-film ambitions:** Kurosawa said he wanted to recover the pure visual storytelling of silent cinema. The sparse dialogue, the physical performances and the long forest sequence reflect that aim.
- **Myth:** The film argues that truth is impossible to know and every account is equally valid. **Reality:** The 'Rashomon effect' is often used that way, but the film itself invites judgment. Each narrator has a clear motive for distorting events, and the ending turns on a moral question.
- **Myth:** Rashomon is a faithful adaptation of one Akutagawa story. **Reality:** It combines two stories: the structure and the crime come from 'In a Grove', while the gate setting and the framing come from 'Rashōmon'. The ending is the film's own addition.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILMMAKER

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

His short stories 'In a Grove' and 'Rashōmon' supplied the crime, the conflicting accounts and the gate setting.



TRADITION

Silent cinema

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FILM

Citizen Kane (1941)

An earlier landmark that builds a story from several people's recollections, though the approach and purpose differ.



THIS FILM

Rashomon (1950)



FILM

The Outrage (1964)

Martin Ritt's Hollywood remake transplants the story to the American West, with Paul Newman in the bandit role.



FILM

Hero (2002)

Zhang Yimou's martial-arts film tells one story through competing versions, each in its own colour and style.



MOVEMENT

Postwar Japanese cinema abroad

Its festival success prompted Western interest in Mizoguchi, Ozu and Kurosawa's later work.

Reception and reputation

In Japan the film had a muted response on release in 1950. Its Golden Lion at Venice in 1951 changed that, and it then travelled widely in Europe and the United States, where critics and audiences were amazed by its form and by Japanese film itself. Some Japanese critics were uneasy that Western success had come first.

Rashomon is now regarded as one of the key films of world cinema and the one that made Kurosawa an international figure. Its reputation has held steadily, though its Western success is now understood as the start of a wider discovery of Japanese cinema, not the whole of it.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: the film received an Honorary Award as the best foreign-language film released in the US in 1951, before a competitive foreign-language category existed.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Rashomon effect:** The title became everyday shorthand for the way different people give conflicting, self-serving accounts of the same event. The phrase is used in journalism, law, psychology, sociology and history, well beyond discussion of the film itself.
- **Classroom staple:** The film is widely used in teaching, in film courses and in subjects such as ethics, law and the study of memory, as a way into questions about subjective perception, truth and the reliability of witnesses.
- **Source stories:** The film draws on two short stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, "In a Grove" and "Rashōmon". Its success brought greater international attention to Akutagawa's fiction and to Japanese literature in translation.
- **Parody and homage:** Television series, including comedies and crime dramas, have borrowed its device of one event retold from clashing viewpoints. Such episodes are often labelled "Rashomon episodes", and audiences recognise the format without having seen the film.

Its lasting influence

Its conflicting-testimony structure shaped countless courtroom dramas, thrillers and TV episodes, and gave film and social science the term 'Rashomon effect'. It was remade as *The Outrage* (1964) and influenced films such as *Hero* (2002). It also helped open the way for the Western reception of Japanese cinema.

WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Seven Samurai (1954)

Kurosawa's epic returns to the period setting with Mifune and Shimura, trading ambiguity for large-scale action and a clear moral structure.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Tokyo Story (1953)

Ozu's quiet family drama shows the other great side of Japanese cinema from the same period, with a still camera and a very different approach to storytelling.

FOLLOW THE IDEA

12 Angry Men (1957)

Another film about weighing testimony and doubt, in which a group has to decide what to believe about a crime.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Citizen Kane (1941)

Both build a story from several perspectives, but Kane sets out to build a portrait while Rashomon questions the teller.

FULL CAST AND CREW



Akira Kurosawa
DIRECTOR



Toshirō Mifune
ACTOR
as Tajōmaru



Machiko Kyō
ACTOR
as Masako



Takashi Shimura
ACTOR
as Woodcutter



Masayuki Mori
ACTOR
as Takehiro



Minoru Chiaki
ACTOR
as Priest



Fumio Hayasaka
COMPOSER