8 The Rashomon effect

Considerations for existential anthropology

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In one of his most perceptive essays, Isaiah Berlin writes of Johann Gottfried von Herder as a symptom of the future, ‘the albatross before the coming storm’ (1998: 434). Much the same can be said of Akira Kurosawa. He too is like the albatross circling the ship in ominous weather, a portent before the second storm, after the war, indicating further troublesome times ahead. Every one of his films leaves one searching for words to comprehend its deep impact. In film after film, Dodeskaden, Rashomon, Seven Samurai, Dersu Uzala, Dreams, Madadayo and others, he was able to express the sentiments and anxieties of the generation after World War II who were trying to make sense of recent turmoil that had disrupted so many lives. Creative artists were facing a much more chaotic intellectual and spiritual world than what had gone before.

Though Rashomon was first screened in 1950, it hit the ordinary popular cinemas in the West in the early 1950s, when Japanese culture was still strange to outsiders. The film’s searching exploration of what is taken to be real and true during an exotic incident in the mountains of medieval Japan, became a suggestive metaphor for the uncertainties facing the generations after the horrendous bloodletting in the war in China and the rest of Asia. Rashomon reminded us that what appeared to be realities could be unmasked, and that human action was capable of multiple interpretations. In the way Kurosawa presented the events in that ill-fated forest grove in ancient Japan, there was an almost Buddhist sense of maya, reality as illusion. When I saw Rashomon for the first time about 1960, I had myself recently returned from years of anthropological fieldwork among Buddhists in Sri Lanka. It soon seemed appropriate to me to express these inchoate sentiments of human ambiguity as the Rashomon effect. Kurosawa’s vision of multiple possible realities fitted in with the problems faced by anthropologists when they tried to understand the colorful but alien reality of other cultures and interpret them to Western academic audiences. What was their reality we asked? Could a single account, however authoritative, do justice to the richness and immediacy of their own experiences? What kinds of intellectual presuppositions had already colored the spectacles of the observer? As anthropological accounts of other peoples multiplied, these questions became more troubling and more insistent for the development of an intellectual discipline.
We all can now see that the Rashomon effect, which highlighted the difficulties of understanding events in history and human motivation, fits well with existentialist philosophy, both of the German kind (Dilthey, Weber, Jaspers) and French kind (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty). There had already been much discussion of the difficulties faced by historians in interpreting the behavior of people caught in the current of their history. Von Ranke and Dilthey writing in Germany had long ago distinguished between the physical sciences (Naturwissenschaft / the science of nature) where the process of understanding (Verstehen) was relatively direct, in contrast to the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaft / the science of the spirit) where the intentions and purposes, the consciousness of individual actors had to be taken into account. As Sartre wrote in his critique of Durkheim, it would be impossible to investigate social facts as if they were physical objects (things), since even things were themselves social facts. Purely objective analysis, he said, would turn out to be a chimera. In other words, there was no way to escape the intermediary role of human consciousness in understanding the world out there. So the myriad problems arising out of the understanding, interpretation and misinterpretation of the consciousness of others necessarily introduced a layer of special complexity in the relations of individuals to one another. In the interpersonal effort to attempt to understand what the other person, or persons, have in mind, Sartre referred to understanding this complexity as dialectical reason.

In his preceding chapter, Robert Anderson refers to the play Copenhagen by Michael Frayn, which describes the tragic situation into which two brilliant nuclear physicists, Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, very old friends, find themselves trapped by World War II. The subject of the play is the search for nuclear power, and the fate of nations was at stake. Bohr is Danish with British sympathies, and Heisenberg is German. In that impossible context fraught with such danger, two friends who know and understand one another tried to divine the intentions of the other. No clearer example of the difficulty of the human condition with regards to the uncertainty of understanding each other could be imagined.

All significant human action is purposive action; therefore, intelligibility – the understanding of the intentions and purpose of the other – is always potentially ambiguous. This may not seem too significant for most practical purposes in our ordinary lives, but it can turn into a serious conundrum when ambiguous situations arise – in those cases the intentions of the individuals involved do have to be questioned. That question was the frame of Frayn’s play Copenhagen.

Action without a purpose is meaningless by definition, and therefore incomprehensible to observers. So comprehensible action has been understood by anthropologists in terms of the purposes and intentions of the actors. However, being internal to the individual, private and perhaps even unconscious, these personal intentions present a real barrier to rational analysis, and hence to anthropology.
Jean-Paul Sartre can be accused of many failings, but it cannot be denied that he had a way of looking into men’s and women’s souls. Who can forget the intense exploration of human emotion in that brilliant play, *Huis Clos*, which so marked the existentialist episode after the horrors of World War II? Two men and a woman, caught together in a stifling room, explore their emotions toward each other with a pathos and ambivalence which constantly borders on miscomprehension and suspicion. The difficulty of understanding the other person, even a very close and intimate person, was a subject at the center of Sartre’s thinking about human action, explored so passionately in his novels and plays. It formed the basis of his existential philosophy, and presented a real challenge to the claims of an objective anthropology.

In his well-known *Search for a Method*, and his remarkable exploration of collective action in his Marxist mode in *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Sartre returned to the question of how to understand the motivations of people not just as individuals but as collectivities. He describes how even ordinary actions are not easily understood: simple acts of behavior may be open to interpretations and those interpretations may thus lead to misunderstandings. To understand someone else’s action, even a simple act like opening a window in a stuffy room, one has to infer or surmise the purpose for which the act was committed. And, obviously, the moment that purpose is mentioned, all kinds of ambiguities crowd the scene. The act may well be a simple one, but to uncover the purpose of an act, even of someone well known to us, is no simple matter. So, Sartre argues, if this is true about simple acts, committed by persons well known to us, consider how very much more challenging is the understanding of larger actions, undertaken by collectivities. Then he offered us a complex illustration of this ambiguity;

A member of the ground crew at an air base on the outskirts of London took a plane and, with no experience as a pilot, flew it across the Channel. He is colored; he is prevented from becoming a member of the flying personnel. This prohibition becomes for him a subjective impoverishment … This denied future reflects to him the fate of his ‘race’ and the racism of the English. The general revolt on the part of colored men against colonialists is expressed in him by his particular refusal of this prohibition. He affirms that a future possible for whites is possible for everyone. This political position, of which he doubtless has no clear awareness, he lives as a personal obsession; aviation becomes his possibility as a clandestine future.

(1963: 95–6)

Sartre continues,

this man did not want to make a political demonstration; he was concerned with his individual destiny. But we know also that what he was doing … had to be implicitly contained by what he believed himself to
be doing (what, moreover, he was doing, too, for he stole the plane, he piloted it, and he was killed in France).

(1963: 109)

This is how Sartre placed the individual action, conscious or unconscious, in the context of the wider surmised (possibly suspected) circumstances that surround the particular incident. But the full circumstances can only be surmised or suspected – the interpretation reaches its limit.

In other words, how can we understand events in history, even when we know some of the context? If history presents us with major challenges of interpretation with our own past, consider then the problem of anthropological analysis of other peoples in the context of their particular histories. This renders the task of anthropologists even more challenging, beyond all the difficult languages, the challenging customs, the bizarre foods, and all the other features of cultural distance. How do we understand the other?

These matters became the subject of a profound inquiry in the hands of Lévi-Strauss in the last two chapters of his justly celebrated *The Savage Mind*. He writes of the distinction between dialectical reason and analytic reason to claim that, in the last resort, analytic reason has to go beyond the difficulties presented by dialectical reason. Lévi-Strauss was saying that Sartre is right to raise those problems, but we have to move beyond him. Lévi-Strauss at least thought that collective facts can lend themselves to certain kinds of systematic analysis because they are often structured. Structures, in turn, whether in the form of institutions – social, economic, political structures – or communication systems – language, music, myth, art – can be examined as patterns of order. This is without the interference of the ambiguities I just described, namely the ambiguities which surround meaning and purpose.

So the difficulty of penetrating other minds is now clear, but how can one argue that collective forms are more amenable to analysis? What Lévi-Strauss and those who followed him had in mind is that there are large areas of social life that are structured. They are organized in such a way that the kind of ambiguity mentioned above does not arise, and can be analyzed objectively without the interference of individual intentions. The most obvious of these collective structures lies in the realm of language. It is clear that the phonemics, morphemics and grammar of languages are astonishingly ordered. Moreover the intrinsic order is almost completely unconscious to the collective speakers. As we speak, we can communicate because the very sounds we utter are patterned into their most intimate details. These patterns are decoded by the listener since their order or pattern is also in his/her mind. Note here that the very slightest phonemic signal, such as a foreign accent, or the slightest hint of difference is immediately registered. The slightest hint of a difference in accent or the selection of a phrase is noted. Education, high class, low class, region, fluency, etc. all come to attention and are expressed. This is structured experience, and can be analyzed as such. There are other areas of social life – collective rituals, social, political and economic organizations,
the extraordinary variety of family structures, patrilineal tribes, marriage systems, matrilineal organizations, polygyny, polyandry and similar matters – which have been successfully investigated by social anthropologists. This was the structured world of a Japanese audience which Kurosawa was addressing, which he thought he knew.

Such considerations led Lévi-Strauss and those who have followed him to explore the possibility of investigating the structure of human consciousness. This meant that different cultures have organized their cultural worlds into completely different patterns. So quite apart from language, the entire cosmos of other people, their worldviews, the categories of land, of animals, of plants, of their utensils, their catamarans, their forms of counting, etc. can be very different. In other words, starting from early on in life our cognition, our mental processes, are culturally patterned. This is the existential world that anthropologists have been writing about, showing us that such different ways of imagining the world around us have been part of the creative activity of peoples in very diverse geographical areas of our world. So the Inuit have created a particular way of life suitable for their surroundings, and the peoples of Australia created a totally different universe appropriate for them to survive in their particular surroundings. This much can be taken for granted.

But the observation that cognition patterns are culturally structured does not negate individual or collective creativity. On the contrary, just as the orderly grammatical and phonemic structures of language permit infinite permutations and combinations of newly formed phrases, similarly both individuals and collectively different cultures can and do change their outlook on their lives. The Iron Curtain and its physical presence in the form of the Berlin Wall may have appeared solid for many decades, but the dramatic events of its collapse in 1989 showed how such collective representations would become ephemeral if and when the mentality that supported them underwent significant changes. So collective mentalities, however structured, are always at the mercy of history.

Lévi-Strauss took these considerations concerning imagined realities to the next level: What is the relationship between their myths and ours? He writes of his astonishment at what our scientists have been telling us; that there are many senses in which reality is not what appears on the surface, just as in *Rashomon*. Just like the aboriginal peoples, our imagination also has the capacity to create myths which attempt to provide a sense of order to matters of grand mystery around us.

Lévi-Strauss wrote of his skeptics as follows:

What is the use … of analyzing … a strategy that myths have repeated without renewal for dozens or perhaps even of hundreds of millennia at a time when rational thought, when scientific method and techniques, have definitely supplanted them in explaining the world? Did myths not already lose the game a long time ago?
That position may not be so ‘certain any more’, said Lévi-Strauss:

In societies without writing, positive knowledge fell well short of the power of imagination, and it was the task of myths to fill this gap ... With us, positive knowledge so greatly overflows our imaginative powers that our imagination, unable to apprehend the world that is revealed to it, has no alternative than to turn to myth again. In other words, between the scientist who through calculations gains access to a reality that is unimaginable and the public eager to know something of this reality ... mythical thought ... becomes ... the only means for physicists to communicate with non physicists.

(1995a: xii)

So, for Lévi-Strauss human imagination makes sense of the world by creating meaningful, orderly, often symmetrical structures which may or may not relate directly to what may exist out there. It is this deep imaginative impulse which renders the cultural worlds of different peoples so alien to one another, so difficult to penetrate. We are fortunate when a creative artist such as Kurosawa can find the common expressive language to be able to tap human emotions that lie beyond such cultural boundaries. Lévi-Strauss expressed even more profound skepticism about what most people take as self-evident: his own personal identity. In a challenging passage he says that he has always felt that his personality was as if he was living at a crossroads:

I never had, and still do not have, the perception of feeling my personal identity. I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no ‘I’, no ‘me’. Each of us is a kind of crossroads where things happen. The crossroads is purely passive, something happens there. A different thing, equally valid, happens elsewhere.

(1995b: 3–4)

Those with familiarity with the speculations of the early Buddhist philosophers will recognize the disputes concerning the nature of the self (known as the anatta doctrine) had a very long trajectory in Indian philosophy: consciously or not, Kurosawa’s work harks back to these traditions in Eastern thought which have not lost their speculative appeal.

Despite Lévi-Strauss’ protestations in the concluding chapters of The Savage Mind, these ideas about the malleability of subjectivity, and the ambiguities involved in conceptualizing the sense of self and identity, brought him very close to Sartre’s views about individual selves. Sartre was adamant about the fact that, despite the constraints of social norms, the future was always open to individual decisions, and that individual consciousness mattered. Indeed, individuals gained agency by becoming conscious of their circumstances: Then they could, and did, define their life
trajectories for themselves. They would stand out from their background (just as the word existens means); this is why social structures and norms that appeared so solid in fact always depended upon the constant support of individuals involved.

These ideas concerning subjectivity and consciousness of individuals gained wide currency through the writings of two very different individuals who both followed Sartre’s ideas: Both Fanon and Shariati were concerned to show how individuals could overcome their given historical circumstances. Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist himself, wrote about his experiences in the devastating context of the colonial violence in Algeria. His remarkable work on psychiatry and revolution during the Algerian uprising, the *Wretched of the Earth*, became a handbook for young people who were in revolt against established authority everywhere. Sartre had written a highly controversial foreword to that volume approving of what Fanon was advocating. Similarly, Ali Shariati, who had also studied with Sartre in Paris, took these ideas of consciousness and agency in the direction of a revolutionary interpretation of Islam against the authoritarian regime of the Shah of Iran. Shariati can be said to have prepared the ground for the downfall of the regime, and although he died in 1977, that effort may have (partly) facilitated the return of Ayatullah Khomeini during those dramatic times in 1980.

Even though Sartre, Fanon and Shariati are not often mentioned among social scientists, our difficulties in dealing with individual subjectivity in troubled regions have returned to haunt anthropologists. In a recent lecture, speaking of Java and Sumatra, Byron Good returned to these very issues of psychiatry and violence in post-colonial circumstances. How should we understand the question of subjectivity? He spoke about subjectivity in the context of dangerous landscapes of explosions, noise, alienating silences, disassociation, fears and terror. This is the new place where we have arrived in writing about subjectivity in anthropology – a space and time quite different from those associated with earlier debates over the rationality of witchcraft, narratives of illness, and the lived experience of human suffering. Many anthropologists are working in settings of violence or post-conflict, and Good says they have to face enormous challenges for ethnographic research and writing, concluding,

I no longer aspire to a single, unified theory of the subject or subjectivity, which was suggested by *Medicine, Rationality and Experience*. And I do not believe there is a single mode of inquiry that is adequate to the task at hand. The kinds of settings in which many of us, old and young, work these days, and the world in which we live, provoke a fundamental challenge to understanding. In a world of murderous rage and apparent death instincts, what Freud called thanatos, rationality seems an almost ludicrous presumption, an escape from the Ordinary.

(2010: n.p.)
I recall referring to these works of Lévi-Strauss, Sartre, Fanon and Shariati in my lectures on social theory at the University of Chicago in the 1960s. That experience is anticipated in the preceding chapter by Robert Anderson; it seemed to me at the time that anthropology would sooner or later have to come to terms with the Rashomon effect. The complexities of subjectivity on the part of both the people we were studying as well as the observers involved would, I thought, turn out to be a great challenge for the discipline. I realized at the time that we would be confronted with anthropological accounts of the same place and same setting, but reported by different experts with very different perspectives.

I was well aware of these kinds of differences between my reports about rural Sri Lanka (beginning in the late 1950s) and Edmund Leach’s findings there at the same time. We were both studying the culture and social organization of Sinhalese villagers. Leach was working in the Anuradhapura district in the northern jungles, and I was quite far away in the Walapane area, later in Bintenne and the east, in larger villages which had been very isolated at the time. I visited Leach in his village and was very impressed by his simple accommodations in a little mud hut in close touch with the villagers. Leach later courteously returned the visit by coming to see me in the village where I had settled, walking to me over the mountains for two hours, far away from the nearest vehicle road. We had a very exciting discussion on all the new materials we were finding. We later continued the discussions in an elaborate correspondence when Leach returned to Cambridge. We seemed so much in agreement at the time. In our published work, however, the emphasis on land ownership on his part and on kinship traditions as systems of structured ideas on my part turned out to be strikingly different (Yalman 1967; Leach 1961).

These differences were soon echoed and amplified in the Cambridge Department of Social Anthropology. Leach found an ally in the late Stanley Tambiah to argue that kinship was really about land ownership, as Leach had reported in his 1961 book Pul Eliya. Leach and Tambiah were soon confronted by Meyer Fortes and Jack Goody. Following their own extensive works on West Africa, they argued for the moral, ethical and ideological basis of kinship systems (and not for land as tenure alone). In a similar vein the French anthropologists Lévi-Strauss and Louis Dumont had already drawn attention to the subtleties between thinking in terms of the primacy of infrastructures (i.e. land tenure and the hard practical matters of the economy) as opposed to superstructures (i.e. the moral and ideological aspects of social life).

Could these theoretical differences be reconciled? Can Rashomon help us understand this? If understanding human motivations posed such conundrums in the rarefied intellectual atmosphere of Cambridge University, what were the chances of agreement regarding the motives of ordinary people? Also, if even a subject as apparently technical as kinship systems was capable of generating such discord, one could imagine what difficulties a study of other political and economic formations would present to social scientists.
Given the ambiguities regarding how we understand other people, and how they understand each other, given the dynamics of subjectivity, and the role of myth in our lives and in history, I think we can indeed develop an existential anthropology in the way Sartre and Lévi-Strauss might have conceived it. This means being particularly attentive to the inner lives of individuals, all those who find themselves having to make difficult decisions in the matrix of history, those who are trying to change their lives and change and improve their surroundings. In fact, millions now find themselves in such circumstances: migration and the extraordinary cultural complexities it creates have become a major feature of social life. Social and political distinctions and structures of the past – nationalism, ethnicity, identity, class, power, etc. – cannot be disregarded because they are still confining our agency. But the future is obviously pregnant with unexpected new possibilities. An existential anthropology will have to include both agency and structure into its scope.

Kurosawa was well grounded in Japanese culture and history, adept with its nuances, but able to transcend its limits and speak to others in other parts of the world who do not know Japan at all (and certainly not its twelfth century). He understood the matter of different realities and different perspectives, anticipating an existential anthropology that is attentive to agency in history. These questions apply to other disciplines intent on understanding (verstehen) other people, no matter how far away the other is or was in space or in time. Being a keen student of the feature film industry, Kurosawa was influenced by ripples originating outside the circle called Japan.

This is how Kurosawa startled us with his brilliant work over sixty years ago, leading us back to these matters of empathy for the other today. Rashomon has now become an enduring metaphor for the human condition. With all our scientific rationality, there are still further mysteries which elude us. There is always much that we do not know. As the Russians say, the soul of another person is an unknown continent. Kurosawa knew that this was true even during that fateful incident in a forest grove in the mountains in medieval Japan. The filmmaker is gone, but his deeply moving images, and his exuberant imagination, continue to inspire our speculations about the ways of life and thought of other people.

Akira Kurosawa describing his inspiration for the film’s musical score:

As I was writing the script, I heard the rhythms of a bolero in my head over the episode of the woman’s side of the story.

(Kurosawa 1983: 138)
Publicity still featuring Toshiro Mifune as the bandit and Masayuki Mori as the samurai. The bandit’s lie (promising to sell the samurai antique swords that do not exist as a ruse by which an attack may occur) is the first deception of many to occur in the film’s chronological narrative. The film’s exploration of the complex subjectivity inherent in how concepts like truth are understood is central to the Rashomon effect. (Courtesy of Kadokawa Corporation)