

NUMBED REALISM: THE CRUEL OPTIMISM IN HIROKAZU KORE-EDA'S

NOBODY KNOWS (2004) AND ***SHOPLIFTERS*** (2018)

A THESIS

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Film and Media Studies

The Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

By

Bingqing Zhou

April 2020

Numbed Realism: the Cruel Optimism in Hirokazu Kore-eda's ***Nobody***

Knows (2004)* and *Shoplifters (2018)

Hirokazu Kore-eda is one of the most active and celebrated living Japanese directors today, whose films are famous for his naturalistic aesthetics. Although he is most well-known for his realist films such as *Nobody Knows* (2004) and *Shoplifters* (2018), and also his more Ozu-istic family dramas such as *Still Walking* (2008) and *After the Storm* (2016), Kore-eda has experimented with different genres and styles. Kore-eda started his career making television documentaries. Some of his early fiction films, such as *After Life* (1998) and *Nobody Knows*, exhibit documentary-like qualities through handheld camera work, cooperation with unprofessional actors and close association with real-life events. Later in his career, he directed *Air Doll* (2009), a fantasy drama about an

inflatable sex doll coming to life, and *The Third Murder* (2017), a legal thriller that centers its story around a murder trial. Both films divert from the style that he is most known for.

However, despite the variation in genres, as a writer-director, Kore-eda explores some recurring themes that run throughout his filmography. In many of his films, even the more distinct ones like *Air Doll* and *The Third Murder*, he touches on topics of family, intimacy, marginalization and the desire for inclusion. In many cases, his characters are outsiders in the society who desire for a “normal” life. Thus, we see in *Air Doll* an inflatable sex doll who longs for becoming a human; in *Shoplifters*, individuals abandoned by their own biological families build a makeshift family; in both *Nobody Knows* and *Shoplifters*, we see teenage boys who cannot go to school cravingly look at schoolboys playing baseball. In a more extreme situation, a single mother in *Nobody Knows* leaves her four children behind to marry a man, which enables her to approximate the normal life that she desires. These desires and attachments that Kore-eda presents almost always lead to tragic results that are the opposite of what is promising and optimistic about these attachments initially. The experiences of these characters in Kore-eda’s films resonate well with the concept of *cruel optimism*. Among his body of work, his

narratives and audio-visual style in *Nobody Knows* and *Shoplifters* most effectively exhibit forms of cruel optimism.

Laurent Berlant coins the word cruel optimism to describe an affect in the contemporary U.S. and European society where the old systems of support are wearing down. The subjects experience cruel optimism when they are attached to a cluster of promises provided by their objects of desire, which can be fantasies of the good life, upward mobility, intimacy, etc., but these attachments eventually become obstacles that prevent the subject from getting what is wanted at the first place (1). While Berlant proposes this idea in the context of the West, cruel optimism can be experienced in other parts of the world as going through neoliberalism and globalization. I would like to use my family from China as an example of cruel optimism. As self-made small business owners, for my parents, sending their child to a private college in the United States means much more than a college degree. It provides the family, including myself, a cluster of promises. It is supposed to ensure me a good job, a decent salary, upward mobility, and in a nutshell, a better life than the one that my parents had. The entire family worked hard for years to achieve that goal. We had a fantasy that everything will be different when I get to the U.S., and this fantasy animated our lives. But after I got to

the U.S., I soon realized what we thought the degree would ensure is not there in the first place. It is highly possible that I may not get a good job or a conventionally good life after graduation. My family struggled financially because of my tuition, which is the opposite of what we desired to get out from this choice. In my family's case, we do not face everyday survival struggles, but the insecurity and anxiety living in an everchanging society stimulate us to attach to the fantasy of upward mobility and stability. According to Berlant, the sense of precarity is spreading across different classes and localities in contemporary society (192), and the term *cruel optimism* describes a new aesthetics that draws from this archive of precarious contemporary lives (7).

Berlant proposes that the new aesthetics that *cruel optimism* depicts includes what she calls "the Cinema of Precarity (7)," and I argue that many of Kore-eda's films exemplify characteristics of this new genre. Berlant defines the Cinema of Precarity as a global style that "melds melodrama and politics into a more reticent aesthetic" to record the wearing down of traditional support systems as well as normative forms of reciprocity (201). According to Berlant, the Cinema of Precarity investigates how subjects with different identities and in different circumstances can share similar adjustment styles to keep up with the changing

new ordinariness (202). Berlant analyzes the precarious cinema by French director Laurent Cantet and the Dardenne brothers from Belgium as vehicles to elaborate on cruel optimism. The theory of cruel optimism can also be an effective tool for analyzing and understanding the cinema from geographical regions other than the U.S. or Europe. Hirokazu Kore-eda is one of the directors who devote deeply in manifesting realism in a reticent manner. Both *Nobody Knows* and *Shoplifters* tell stories about people abandoned by the society making adjustments to normative forms of reciprocity to maintain bare survival, and these two films exhibit forms of cruel optimism.

To better illustrate how Kore-eda's films show forms of cruel optimism, I would compare the Dardenne brothers' *Rosetta* (1999), which Berlant closely analyzes in her book *Cruel Optimism*, with Kore-eda's 2004 film *Nobody Knows*. The two films share many similarities theme-wise despite the difference in geographical regions. However, although both films can be considered realist films and take on similar subject matters, they adopt very different formal choices. The film *Rosetta* follows a seventeen-year-old girl Rosseta (Émilie Dequenne) who lives with her alcoholic mother and desires a secure job. She befriends her co-worker Riquet (Fabrizio Rongione) from the waffle place where they work at, but Rosetta

soon gets fired and she eventually betrays Riquet to get his position. According to Berlant, the Dardenne brothers calls this film a “war film” because it points to the politics in daily life and contemporary struggles (163). The turbulent handheld camera, relentless moving, fighting, yelling of the characters suffuse the film with a sense of battle-like exhaustion even though it depicts everyday life.

Kore-eda’s *Nobody Knows* also tells a story of children in precarity. The story of *Nobody Knows* is based on the 1988 Sugamo child abandonment case of young children being abandoned by their mother. In the film, Keiko (You) is a young single mother with four children, but her childish voice and behavior are nowhere near what is traditionally expected in motherhood. Keiko’s four children have different biological fathers and are not legally registered. Because it will be difficult for a single mother with four children to get an apartment, Keiko hides the existence of her children to the outside world and pretends that she only has one twelve-year-old son Akira (Yūya Yagira). Three younger children are not allowed to leave the house and Akira is the only child who can go out and buy groceries. None of the children can attend schools. Akira and Kyōko (Ayu Kitaura), Keiko’s eleven-year-old daughter, take care of the household. As the story proceeds, Keiko leaves her children behind in order to marry a man, and eventually, she does not come

back. These four children are forced to survive by themselves in a constraint of money and resources.

In both *Rosetta* and *Nobody Knows*, our main characters are stuck in the situation where a significant traditional mode of reciprocity – family – is failing them. The attrition of normative family structure can be seen in the reverse in roles of parents and children. When analyzing Rosetta's circumstances, Berlant talks about the mix-up in vertical attachments and horizontal attachments (169). According to Berlant, vertical attachments involve a structure of authority and subordination. Vertical attachments include child-parent relationships and boss-employee relationships. On the other hand, horizontal attachments exist in relationships between friends, co-workers, and couples, and these attachments are less reliable ones compared to vertical attachments (169). In Rosetta's family, the vertical attachments and horizontal attachments are mixed up. Rosetta, as a child, needs to take up the parental role in the family and her mother takes up the role of a child. As the traditional structure of authority and subordination is diminished in this family, confusion emerges because there is no known answer to where this life is leading to.

The confusion caused by the mix-up of vertical and horizontal relationships is also evident in *Nobody Knows*. Keiko, the mother of the family, interacts with her children like they are friends. When they move into their new apartment, Keiko takes Akira to see the landlords, an elderly man and his young wife. Keiko lies to the landlords that her husband is abroad, and she lives with her only son Akira. Then, Keiko and Akira smuggle the two little children, Shigeru and Yuki, into the apartments in suitcases. After sending the moving company away, she wraps her arm around Akira's shoulder and says that the male landlord's first wife must have died, and he remarries a young woman (00:03:25). Keiko's interaction with Akira makes it seem like the two are at the same age. Keiko deals with lying and smuggling with a lighthearted attitude, as if it is only a game. The next morning, Akira brushes his teeth while looking at Keiko putting on make-up (Figure.1). He asks questions that parents would usually ask their children: "will you come home late? Are you going to eat dinner at home?" Keiko in this scene completely takes up the role of a child by asking "what's for dinner tonight?" In this scene, the camera points at the mirror which Keiko is looking at, and the frame is slightly canted. The distance that a mirror image creates, together with the canted frame, creates a

subtle implication on the instability of the current situation. As the traditional form of reciprocity is failing for our characters in *Rosetta* and *Nobody Knows*, there is great uncertainty in what life holds for them, and they need to figure out how to live this life without guidance nor precedence. Enduring this uncertainty, Rosetta and Akira develop attachments to what they think they can hold on to.



Figure 1

According to Berlant, Rosetta dedicates herself to producing what is not a “good life” but the “bad life,” and it is a similar situation for Akira. By the “bad life”, Berlant refers to “a life dedicated to moving toward the good life’s normative/utopian zone but actually stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding on to the ledge, treading water, not-stopping (169).” In Rosetta’s case, she wants to secure a job, and by having a job, she desires to earn a place in the normal world. Berlant addresses that Rosetta has great optimism about becoming a “good worker” because a job will confirm her

legitimacy in the world (163). A job, for Rosetta, ensures a normal life, and a normal life is supposed to bring her out of the everyday war-like pressure that she suffers from. Berlant suggests that Rosetta turns down social welfare out of the desire to be normal. Interestingly, in *Nobody Knows*, Akira also refuses to seek help from the police or child welfare because he wants all his siblings to stay together. For Rosetta, the vehicle to the good life is to have a job. For Akira, it's slightly different. What Akira wants is to reproduce the life that they have now. Living a life separated from the outside world, and not receiving stable parental supports, the intimacy that his siblings share is the only thing that he can grasp upon. "A family should stay together" is the "normal" thing that Akira desperately wants to secure. Later in the film, as the money Keiko leaves dwindles, the four children live in an exacerbating condition with an increasing amount of garbage but without water or electricity. We see the four children keep coming up with different ways to maintain their bare survival, such as getting water from the park after utilities are cut. After food runs out, the youngest son Shigeru starts to eat paper. By striving to hold this fragile family together, these children reproduce a precarious life that they can share, which make them stuck in the non-stopping survival time. Even though staying together means constant struggling in life-or-death situation, they cannot detach

themselves from the fantasy of the reciprocity that a family promises to offer. The optimism that staying together will eventually lead them to a different situation is indeed very cruel.

Apart from keeping the family together, the children in *Nobody Knows* are inspired by other aspects of life that seem “normal,” but different from Rosetta who actively fights to get a place in the normal world, children in *Nobody Knows* are more passive. According to Berlant, Aspirational normalcy describes a collective attachment to fundamentally stressful conventional lives, and getting closer to the fantasy life of normativity can be what animates the subjects to live on (167). Even though in *Nobody Knows*, the children’s lives are removed from the sociality, their aspirations are still influenced by the society, and they have desires to approximate to a normal life. The aspirational normalcy in *Nobody Knows* is frequently implied through characters’ attachments to objects. The recurring appearance of elementary school workbooks, baseball, Kyoko’s toy piano, and Yuki’s cute backpack all point to the children’s desire to be absorbed into the outside world, the normal world. There are moments when these desires are made more explicit. Before Keiko leaves her children, she talks to Akira about falling in love with a man (00:23:20). She says that: this time, everything will be different because this guy is

very sweet. If she marries this man, everyone can live in a big house; all the children can go to school, and Kyoko will be able to play the piano. She asks Akira to hang on a little longer. The fantasy that “this time it will be different,” which means that the struggles at the moment are leading to a “good life,” is passed down by Keiko to her children. Wishing to have a normal life, Akira cannot stop looking at schoolboys playing baseball, and he tries to be friends with them to experience a sense of absorption. To reproduce a life that normal people enjoy, even under strict financial restrictions, Akira still tries to buy his siblings Christmas gifts. On New Year’s Eve, Akira asks a convenience store employee to help him fake *Otoshidama*, a Japanese traditional custom where adults give money to the children in their family in envelopes, and he pretends that these are sent to his siblings from Keiko. Akira tries to build a fantasy for the younger children that mom will come back, the family will stay together, and this life is leading to something different, just like Keiko builds such fantasies for him.

The preceding paragraphs discussed how *Rosetta* and *Nobody Knows* show forms of cruel optimism in their narratives. In both films, the horizontal relationships are mixed up in the main characters’ families, and thus they experience the attrition of a normative system of reciprocity. This unstable

situation encourages them to grasp upon the aspirational normalcy that their parents and the society have passed down to them. Their objects of desire animate their lives, but is not getting them out of their circumstances. By chasing after what they desire, Rosetta and Akira are stuck in the exhausting survival time. Their desire to approximate to a normal world that cannot fulfill what they wish to secure exhibits the idea of cruel optimism. However, although both *Nobody Knows* and *Rosetta* tell stories about children struggling for survival and attached to the fantasy of normativity, the mood of these two films are very different.

Rosetta, suffused with turbulent camera work and overwhelming environmental sound, as the Dardenne brothers describe it, is a war film. *Nobody Knows*, on the other hand, has a calm undertone and the emotions are rather numbed. The different moods are established by different formal choices that the directors made. For example, music is an effective tool in filmmaking that really creates emotions for the audience, but there is almost no music in *Rosetta*. Music only exists in a diegetic form where Rosetta first hangs out with Riquet in his apartment. Rosetta lives in a world without music, but Riquet is a drummer who inhabits a different space. When Riquet asks Rosetta what kind of music she likes, she vaguely answers any kind. Riquet plays the loud, joyful music and invites

Rosetta to dance; Rosetta first reluctantly joins but clearly enjoys it. However, as the music and dancing proceed, Riquet puts his arm around Rosetta's waist, and Rosetta is made uncomfortable; she storms out of Riquet's apartment. The camera lingers on the door through which Rosetta runs out, and the music keeps playing but the camera stays in Riquet's apartment. When the scene cuts to Rosetta standing outside the apartment again, the music abruptly stops. Rosetta is back again in the world with no music. The authentic environmental sound of bustling chaos and the lack of music emphasizes a state of realistic, overwhelming anxiety.

Kore-eda's *Nobody Knows*, on the other hand, is also a film about children in precarity, but the tone of the film is extremely calm. Although *Nobody Knows* also tells a cruel story of precocious children facing everyday struggle, compared to *Rosetta*, *Nobody Knows* uses much more still tripod shots, and even when the camera goes hand-held, the movement is generally slow and mild. Furthermore, uplifting, soothing guitar music appears throughout the film. The music starts very early on in the film when the family move into their new apartment. A piece of music called *Himitsu* (this pronunciation can be interpreted as *secret*) starts to play when Akira looks at the two suitcases with his siblings sitting on the back of a moving truck. The music is cheerful and makes the process of smuggling the two

children feel like playing a game. Different from *Rosetta*, which establish the overwhelmingness of daily struggles by removing music completely from the film, Kore-eda does not take out joyful moments in the children's cruel life. This choice casts sparkles of warmth on an extremely cruel story. This also gives a reason to why Akira has deep attachments to his family and wants to reproduce such a life. Unlike *Rosetta* that really accentuates the cruelty in the character's life, Kore-eda leaves great ambiguity on how the audience should feel about the children's life.

Apart from the camera work and music choices, the treatment of conflicts and events in these two films are also quite different. In *Rosetta*, conflicts are presented rather straightforwardly. We see Rosetta have actual fights with her employers, Riquet, and her mother throughout the film, which indeed contributes to the idea of an everyday-life war film. The scene where Rosetta attempts to send her mother back to the rehabilitation center is one of the roughest conflicts in this story (00:31:20). After Rosetta bumping into her alcoholic mother offering sexual service to their landlord, she decides to send her mother back to rehabilitation center, but her mother is reluctant to go. The scene starts with Rosetta coldly asking her mother to make herself presentable to the outside world by tidying her hair and putting on the shoes. Rosetta's mother escapes from the caravan and locks

Rosetta in. The directors use 3 relatively long tracking shots that highlight real-time urgency to show Rosetta climbing out of the window and chasing her mother.

These fast-moving shots are blurry and shaky, as if the audience are running as well, and Rosetta is not even in focus when the shot pushes in on her face (Figure 2).



Figure 2

When Rosetta catches up with her mother, another long take starts. The camera keeps being extremely shaky and blurry until the mother cries out that she does not want to go back to the rehabilitation center. We hear the mother's cry off-screen while the camera stabilizes and lingers on Rosetta's face, signifying the cooling-off of her anger and the moment of guilt that she is experiencing. She gets up, picks up the shoe that her mother drops when running away. In the next long take, Rosetta and her mother start to walk back, and Rosetta tries to tenderly convince her mother to go back to the rehab. The camera follows the two, stably, while they walk away, but suddenly, the mother tries to run away again. Rosetta grabs for her mother and the two get into another fight. The camera starts to be chaotic again,

and the scene cuts from a wide to a close-up shot, which makes the scene seem more turbulent. The mother throws Rosetta into a pond and runs away. No matter how Rosetta yells for help, her mother does not come back. The intensity of the conflict is expressed compellingly by the camera and editing choices. The long takes and shaky shots, even though are not point of view shots of Rosetta, really put the audience in her situation as if we are running and fighting alongside with her (Figure 3 & 4).

Nobody Knows, on the other hand, use predominantly tripod shots and stable handheld shots. The audience are put in the place to observe rather than actively being in the scene. After leaving her children for a month, Keiko briefly comes back and visit, bringing back gifts but not caring much about how these children have survived the month without her (00:43:12). It turns out that Keiko is not going to stay, and she packs up her clothes for a longer departure. Akira helps Keiko to carry her luggage to the train station and confronts her. On their way to the station, the sequence first shows the two walking side by side in the same frame. When climbing up with the staircase, Akira asks Keiko whether she has told the man that she is seeing about the existence of her children. Keiko does not answer and walks out of the frame. The camera lingers on Akira's face. It cuts to Keiko's back;

she turns around to Akira and says “I will tell him eventually;” she turns back and walks forward. It takes a second for Akira to follow her and re-enter the frame (Figure 5 & 6). Similar to the fighting scene in *Rosetta*, this scene is also showing the opposition between a parent and her child. Moreover, both sequences start with a wide shot of the two and then of each one of them in a separate shot to suggest the separation. However, the opposition in *Rosetta* is made very clear, but the confrontation in *Nobody Knows* is treated so subtly that it bears an immense sense of ambiguity. The downplay of dramatic or traumatic events can be seen in Kore-eda’s films throughout his career, and I argue that this approach shows a great example of what Berlant calls “crisis ordinariness”.



Figure 3 & 4



Figure 5 & 6

The ambiguity in emotions and the de-dramatization of events in Kore-eda's films align with the concept of crisis ordinariness, which is an important idea in describing the tormenting nature of cruel optimism. Crisis ordinariness, according to Berlant, is "the diffusion of trauma through the ordinary (82)." Berlant points out that the traditional interpretation of trauma makes it ahistorical from the ordinary (80), and sometimes presents as "an event that has already concluded (82)." Thus, "crisis ordinariness" offers an opportunity to think about how "the traumatic event is in its focus on the spreading of symbolizations and other inexpressive but life-extending actions throughout the ordinary and its situation of living on (81)." Sianne Ngai suggests in the book review "On Cruel Optimism" that Berlant's concept of "crisis ordinariness" has a great impact especially on forms of realism. According to Ngai, the realist works that attend to "non-event-like events" create an aesthetics that is opposed to what Berlant calls the "genre of the dramatic event," including melodrama and tragedy. When seeing Kore-eda's representation of a society where traditional modes of normativity is wearing out, "crisis ordinariness" can be a useful concept to understand the lack of dramatic events and resolution in his work. In terms of depicting a state of crisis ordinariness, Kore-

eda's cinema better aligns with this part of cruel optimism compared to *Rosetta*.

In many of Kore-eda's films, he almost obsessively emphasizes lingering moments of ordinariness that do not contribute to the development of the story but downplay or even completely cut out the most dramatic moments. In "Reality's Poetry: Kore-eda Hirokazu between Fact and Fiction," Lars-Martin Sørensen writes that "in both films (*Lessons from a Calf* and *Nobody Knows*) Kore-eda places great emphasis on suspended moments of time where the progression of story events grinds to a halt...In *Nobody Knows*, the camera dwells on the kids at play, on their little everyday pastimes which do not do much for story progression (23)."

However, Kore-eda's camera and narrative do not linger on dramatic events as much as on these suspended moments. After Keiko's second departure, Akira is suspicious that Keiko is going to abandon them, and he uses a public telephone to call Keiko's workplace. At the moment when Akira finds out that Keiko has already quit her job a month ago, the frame size suddenly changes from a full shot to a bird-eye-view wide shot. Akira is all alone on an empty street. He hangs up and walks away from the telephone, no emotion revealed. This could have been a dramatic moment with rough emotions upon the realization of abandonment, but instead of showing the character's face and make it easy for the audience to understand what

is going on, we only see the back of Akira in an extreme long shot. The volume of the sound of Akira hanging up the phone and the sound of cars passing by are not reduced as the shot size pulls away, which subtly creates a sense of confusion in space, which implies the shock and helplessness that Akira experiences at that moment (00:56:09). However, despite these implications that are almost too subtle, this scene, which could have been a traumatic event, is treated with great ambiguity (Figure 7).



Figure 7

When discussing trauma, Berlant suggests that the reaction to traumatic events is not always as how we would expect it to be standing out from affects that infuse everyday life. She writes that “but flooding does not always feel like flooding, just as the affective structure of any relation can manifest as a range of emotions. I might be flooded and feel numb, overwhelmed, teary, angry, detached, capacious, sleepy, or *whatever*, for those things that we call traumatic events do not always

induce traumatic responses (81).” In *Nobody Knows*, Kore-eda really de-dramatizes traumatic moments and establishes detachment and numbness as natural responses to trauma. Trauma does not disappear from his film but is not accentuated as a single event with a start, middle and end. Trauma is diffused into the everyday scenes that he carefully illustrates. Sianne Ngai points out that in *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant examines a wide range of art forms, but an aesthetics of “numbed realism” is dominant throughout the book. I argue that “numbed realism” is an apposite word that describes the quality of many Kore-eda films. His particular aesthetics stops the stories from developing into melodrama or tragedy, even when the plots themselves are dramatic enough and can evolve to something very intense.

Compared with *Rosetta*, *Nobody Knows* adopts a more numbed aesthetics that aligns with Berlant’s idea of crisis ordinariness well. This approach is significant because it draws from the archive of contemporary lives with the endless, diffused anxiety and trauma that the concept of cruel optimism attends to. One premise that cruel optimism builds on is the erosion of promises that traditional modes of reciprocity is supposed to offer. Kore-eda’s films also give an account of how people in contemporary society create adjustment styles living

through such fundamental changes, especially in the case of reinventing the family structure. In his films, the characters oftentimes inhabit a contradictory state: they subvert the traditional structure of family, but at the same time they stay attached to it.

In *Nobody Knows*, Kore-eda presents the traditional form of family as a failing mode of reciprocity but also explores the possibility of reinventing modes of new reciprocity. In the later parts of *Nobody Knows*, Kore-eda shows Akira and his siblings inventing a new family by incorporating Saki (Hanae Kan) into the story. Saki is a female high school student who is bullied at school. When she cuts classes and hangs out alone in the park, Shigeru talks to her and she soon gets to know the four children. Different from the relationship between Rosetta and Riquet, which is at an individual to individual level, Saki becomes not only Akira's friend but also a family member to all the children. She comes to their apartment, paints with Yuki, and plays the toy piano with Kyōko. As an older female character, she almost takes up the mother role in this family. After sharing a life with the children, Saki decides to earn money for them by going to karaoke with middle-aged men. Although Saki is from a middle-class family, she is excluded from the realm of intimacy. Being with Akira and his siblings provides her a sense of intimacy that makes her want to join

them and help them sustain this life. At the end of the film, after Yuki dies, Akira finds Saki and they bury Yuki together. Berlant writes about the reinvention of versions of reciprocity that one who is rejected by the social can have a desire to make an event “in which one will matter to something or someone,” and in reinventing some form of reciprocity, which can be the couple, the family, etc., they can feel that they are in the game (177). However, Berlant also points out that communities that these marginalized individuals build are fragile and contingent (167). Saki and the children’s relationship was indeed optimistic but also fragile. This mixture of optimism and fragility of the reinvented family structure continues to exist in his 2018 film *Shoplifters*.

In *Shoplifters*, Kore-eda pushes the investigation of the reinvention of family even further by following the story of a makeshift family. None of the family members are biologically related. The family is consisted of members not related by blood ties but chosen by themselves. One thing that all the members have in common is that they are all to some extent abandoned by their biological or legal families. One night, the family brings home a starving little girl, Juri (Miyu Sasaki), who has been abused by her biological parents, and the shoplifters family decides

to keep her. They give Juri a new name, Lin. Keeping Lin is technically kidnapping, and the family later faces dire consequences. Although *Shoplifters* is 14 years apart from the making of *Nobody Knows*, we see the “numbed realist” style in *Nobody Knows* carries on existing and is even pushed further. In *Nobody Knows*, the stable cinematography style abruptly changes after Akira finds out about Yuki’s death. Akira leaves the house and searches for Saki, and the sequence is shaky and over-exposed, which establishes the shock and helplessness that Akira experiences after Yuki’s death (02:01:47). It was one of the very few moments in the film that the camera goes dynamic and calls attention to itself. However, the minimal use of shaky camera is even more toned down in *Shoplifters*. Even later in the film when the son Shota is caught shoplifting and jumps off the bridge, which is a moment that changes the fate of the family, the camera stays stable on a crane. Not only do we not see the fall, a train passes in the background, and we cannot even hear him falling. Only when Lin starts to run after seeing Shota falling, the camera goes mildly unstable. Kore-eda’s avoidance of using shaky camera is distinct, especially when this technique can effectively evoke tension and a sense of participation and is commonly used in realist cinema. By accentuating the stableness of the camera,

Kore-eda establishes a numbness in emotions and creates a style that distinguishes itself from traditional dramatic storytelling.

Although Kore-eda's camera style is rather consistent throughout *Shoplifters*, he still manages to use subtle visual cues to suggest the shift in space, plot, and mood in his narrative. Kore-eda carefully illustrates a domestic place where intimacy and tenderness exist in contrast with the outside world. Characters in the family share physical intimacy in their domestic space. When the family is together, the camera always occupies a relatively low level as the characters are sitting on the floor. Kore-eda uses many medium shots and close-ups to establish the sense of intimacy. As spectators, we are invited to share their space visually. Through many intimate scenes, we see details from a private scope that only members of the family get to see. For example, we see close-ups of sweat on Nobuyo's body after she and Osamu have sex, close-ups of age spots on Grandma's legs, and Osamu's imperfect naked body after he finishes digging the grave for deceased grandma. Also, when the family is at home, the composition is oftentimes multi-layered, and multiple characters are in the shot. Their domestic space is loosely regulated, and the characters move around freely in the house (Figure 8).



Figure 8

In his plot, Kore-eda also stresses that intimacy is lacking in the outside world. For example, Aki works as a hostess in a peepshow bar and performs soft sexual services during which she and the customer are separated by a reflective glass, and she cannot see the customer's face. The service is strictly timed to register fees. Sex, which is one of the most intimate encounters, when commodified, is rendered so lonely. But when Aki gets home, the family shares physical intimacy in their space. She sleeps in the same futon with grandma, and grandma can sense Aki's mood by the temperature of her feet. Moreover, although conflicts happen in the family constantly, their quarrels are fleeting and ambiguous. There is no clear opposition among specific individuals in this household. When conflicts happen, different members jump into the conversation freely and sometimes drift off to different topics. The composition remains relatively wide and multi-layered. However, when conflicts happen between the outside world and the

household, direct opposition emerges immediately.

To establish the opposition between the outside world and the existence of the family, Kore-eda uses many shot reverse shots in contrast with the multi-layered compositions seen in the domestic place. When Nobuyo's company decides to fire either Nobuyo or her co-worker, her co-worker uses Lin as leverage to threaten Nobuyo to give up her job (00:54:28). In this scene, as Nobuyo realizes the blackmailing going on, the two characters are each placed in the center of the frame on their own (Figure 9 & 10). By changing the frame composition, Kore-eda indicates the direct opposition between the characters subtly. This shot-reverse-shot composition appears constantly later in the interrogation sequences after the family's existence is exposed to the public. In these scenes, all family members are separated and interrogated. Compared to the outdoor blackmailing scene, the interrogations happen in confined spaces. There is no depth in the composition and the characters are situated against bare walls. The feeling of the outside world "closing in" and confining them is subtly suggested by this claustrophobic framing choice.



Figure 9 & 10

It is interesting to see how the visual choices resonate with the plot in this interrogation scene. As Kore-eda places the characters all by themselves in the claustrophobic shots, conceptually, they are being categorized by the outside world as criminals or victims. These characters earlier share an open, minimally regulated space where direct opposition does not exist. But now, they are forced into “boxes” by the camera and labeled as opposing parties by the society (Figure 11 & 12). During the interrogation, Omasu and Nobuyo are pressured to admit their “crimes.” When interrogating the younger members in the family, the police officers try to convince them that they are victims who have been used and that what they cherish about the family does not exist. The police officers tell Aki that the grandma asks money from her biological parents every month, and make her wonder whether their relationship is only bounded by money. They tell Shota that the family was about to abandon him after he gets caught. By offering partial truths, the police officers try to make them feel betrayed again by their chosen family. In

this way, the social institution tries to devalue the existence of such a family and destroy it not only physically but also conceptually. Through the interrogation, we see the people who built the undefinable, unprecedented community separated and forced to fit into known concepts. In *Shoplifters*, Kore-eda pushes numbed realism even further. Even though the opposition between the family and the public is clear, the tone of the interrogation sequence is still very calm. He uses very subtle formal choices to imply that the family members are being forced into known categories by creating the contrast between the unrestricted domestic space and the antagonistic public institutions.

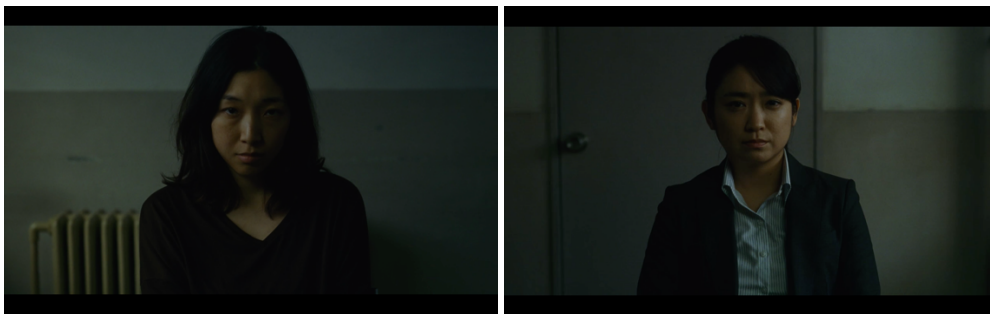


Figure 11 & 12

The story of *Shoplifters* also exhibits a great sense of cruel optimism. The family that these members built simultaneously endorse and subvert the traditional family structure. This family is their object of desire. Even though abandoned by their own biological and legal families, they still attach to the family structure and hope that it will provide stability, durable intimacy and reciprocity. However,

eventually, it becomes what hurts them the most. The cruel optimism of Nobuyo and Omasu is slightly different from that of the children in *Nobody Knows*. Nobuyo and Omasu are the parent figures in this makeshift family, and instead of hoping this family to make their own lives different, they hope that the family they build can create a different life for the children that they bring in. Through making these children's life different, they feel that they are reliving and correcting their own lives. They become the guiding figure that they needed when they were abandoned by their families. In the film, Kore-eda repeatedly suggests the similarity in the two pairs: Nobuyo and Lin; Omasu and Shota. Nobuyo and Juri have the same burn scar from the domestic violence that they are subjected to. Omasu's original name is Shota, and he names the boy they found after himself. By maintaining this family, they wish that this time, things can finally be different, not for themselves, but for the children. Because the desire to make things different is so strong that they decide to take the risk of keep Lin even after news television covers her missing. However, what is cruel about their optimism is that the family structure that they are attached to is so fragile that it cannot fulfill promises that it is supposed to offer.

In *Nobody Knows* and *Shoplifters*, Kore-eda examines how people cope with the attrition of the traditional family structure but at the same time staying

attached to it. Both films reveal the cruelty of holding such optimism that inventing a new family structure will lead to a different life. In his stories of cruel optimism, Kore-eda's numbed realist aesthetics greatly aligns with the idea of crisis ordinariness which depicts a state of endless, diffused traumatic experience that subjects go through in the contemporary society. He avoids turbulent camera works and melodramatic emotion reveals to portray lives suffused with trauma not as a singular event but as a consistent state of living. Both Kore-eda's films and Berlant's theoretical work are sensitive to how people navigate their lives nowadays. While attending to the individuals navigating their lives in an uncertain era, they contemplate upon the rules and promises of the old systems that forcefully impose on these individuals. In his autobiography, Kore-eda expresses that he is confused by how television always establishes a clear opposition between "the poor victim" and "the evil perpetrator" when covering crimes. Thus, in his own work, he strives to jump outside the dogma and explore the grey space where the duality is reconciled. In his films, we are invited to live with "the kidnappers" in *Shoplifters*, and we see Keiko, the mother who abandons her children in *Nobody Knows* quietly cries in her sleep. His characters resist any easy categorization as heroes or villains. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant also wrote that this book is not

about offering empirical cases about who beats the system and who succumbs to it, but an account of how people live now. Throughout the book, Berlant shows immense care and empathy for individual subjects and explores how different forms of art can create an archive of how people live now. Hirokazu Kore-eda dedicates to tell stories that closely examines how people navigate their lives. His work contributes to the archive that record forms of contemporary lives and align conceptually and aesthetically well with the concept of cruel optimism.

Bibliography

Rosetta. Directed by Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne, performances by Émilie Dequenne,
Fabrizio Rongione, Olivier Gourmet, and Anne Yernaux, Les Films du Fleuve,
1999.

Nobody Knows. Directed by Kore-eda Hirokazu, performances by Yūya Yagira, Ayu Kitaura,
and Hiei Kimura, Cinequanon, Bandai Visual, 2004.

Still Walking. Directed by Kore-eda Hirokazu, performances by Hiroshi Abe, Yui Natsukawa,
You, Kirin Kiki, and Yoshio Harada, Cinequanon, 2008.

Air Doll. Directed by Kore-eda Hirokazu, performances by Bae Doona, Arata, and Itsuji Itao,
Asmik Ace Entertainment, Fortissimo Films, Ocean Films, 2009.

After the Storm. Directed by Kore-eda Hirokazu, performances by Hiroshi Abe,
Kirin Kiki, and
Yōko Maki, Fuji Television, Bandai Visual, Aoi Pro., Gaga, 2016.

The Third Murderer. Directed by Kore-eda Hirokazu, performances by Masaharu Fukuyama,
Suzu Hirose, Shinnosuke Mitsushima, Mikako Ichikawa, and Izumi Matsuoka,
Fuji
Television Network, Amuse, GAGA Corporation, 2017.

Shoplifters. Directed by Kore-eda Hirokazu, performances by Lily Franky, Sakura Ando, Kairi
Jō, Miyu Sasaki, and Kirin Kiki, Aoi Pro, Inc., 2018.

Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.

Ngai, Sianne. "On Cruel Optimism." socialtextjournal.org, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/on-cruel-optimism/. Accessed 2 May 2020.

Sørensen, Lars-Martin. "Reality's Poetry: Kore-Eda Hirokazu between Fact and Fiction." *Film Criticism*, vol. 35, no. 2/3, 2011, pp. 21–36. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44019317. Accessed 2 May 2020.