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# The Films of Kore-eda Hirokazu

## An Elemental Cinema

Linda C. Ehrlich

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# East Asian Popular Culture

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Linda C. Ehrlich

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East Asian Popular Culture

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Nozomi first experiences water (*Air Doll*)



Linda C. Ehrlich and Kore-eda Hirokazu (holding the special edition of *Film Criticism*)

## PREFACE

Kore-eda's films are "shaped by a lyrical but sharply observant eye for details and routines of everyday life."<sup>1</sup>

### THE LYRIC ESSAY

I approach Kore-eda Hirokazu's films with the lyric essay as my framework.<sup>2</sup> Less journalistic than works of creative nonfiction, the lyric essay invites the reader's participation as it moves through uncharted areas in a fresh and unexpected way. It suggests rather than expounds; it is "aware of the compliment it pays the reader by dint of understatement."<sup>3</sup> It does not yearn for closure.

The associative links I see between Kore-eda's films and other films are my own. Those associative links help me see Kore-eda's films anew. As French anthropologist Marc Augé reminds us "every film we have enjoyed one day takes a place in our memory next to others."<sup>4</sup>

As a background for my writing in *An Elemental Cinema*, I draw inspiration from the idea of a "poetics of cinema" explored by scholars and filmmakers as diverse as Pasolini (*il cinema di poesia*), David Bordwell, Raúl Ruiz, Andrey Tarkovsky, Maya Deren, and Stan Brakhage (moving visual thinking).<sup>5</sup> Ruiz poignantly asserts: "Cinema is condemned to be poetic."<sup>6</sup> Film scholar P. Adams Sitney explains that, for Tarkovsky, "poetic thinking weaves an intuitive associative web within the infrastructure of his films."<sup>7</sup> The Russian director cites two Japanese haiku to show the power of "pure observation...aptness and precision."<sup>8</sup>



I do not follow a strict chronological order, in terms of the release dates of Kore-eda's films. I group the films according to a discussion of the five elements: earth, water, fire, air, metal. Although all of the elements figure into the films, I've decided on one main element for each film, with some films (*Maborosi*, *Distance*, *The Third Murder*, *Shoplifters* [in particular]) offering actual and metaphorical references to several elements. This book has an intentionally "ragged" style reflecting a new, and experimental, contemplation of all of Kore-eda's films. As Philip Lopate points out in his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, "the essay... possesses the freedom to move anywhere, in all directions... This freedom can be daunting for the critic attempting to pin down its formal properties."<sup>9</sup>

The original manuscript had 200 images, including some in color; it was difficult to cut that number down to 65 to meet the Press's (generous) designations. Hopefully my words will convey the impact of the deleted images.

### PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT

I have interviewed Kore-eda Hirokazu twice in Japan, and I had the honor of presenting him with the special 2011 issue of *Film Criticism* (image on preceding page). When I interviewed him in Tokyo, I was struck by his intense gaze. What draws me to Kore-eda's films is their lack of pretentiousness, and the way they turn an empathetic lens on the overlooked in society. I admire Kore-eda's integrity as an artist—his unflinching, yet compassionate, stance. He depicts people "we don't see or pretend not to see."<sup>10</sup>

In terms of the works of Kore-eda, I have been an invited writer about his films for the catalogue of the *Viennale* (Vienna International Film Festival), the Spanish Film Festival of Las Palmas de Gran Canarias, and for *Film Quarterly*, *Asian Cinema*, *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* (Wayne State University Press), and other sites. Although I draw on those earlier writings, I completely reconsider them, expand them, and move in new directions. My decades of writing about Japanese film, and my years of living in Japan, all come into play in the writing of this book.

In researching *An Elemental Cinema*, I have gained insights from the many articles about Kore-eda's work which have appeared in English, Japanese, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Italian, but the final "mix" (and any mistakes) are entirely my own. I have enjoyed the experience of finding connecting threads in the *oeuvre* of a filmmaker who delights in giving himself new challenges with each new film.

## NOTES

1. Imogen Sara Smith, “Loving Memory: *After Life* and *Shoplifters*,” *Film Comment* (26 November 2018). <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/loving-memory-life-shoplifters/>.
2. *The Seneca Review* (special issue, Fall 1997). <https://www.hws.edu/senecareview/lyricessay.aspx>.
3. “The Lyric Essay,” *Eastern Iowa Review*. This site compiles various voices reflecting on the characteristics of the lyric essay. <http://www.portyonderpress.com/the-lyric-essay.html>.
4. Marc Augé, *Casablanca: Movies and Memory*. Translated by Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 10. Marc Augé (b. 1935) is a French anthropologist who has conducted research on West African cultures and, more recently, has written about global modernism. In addition to *Casablanca: Movies and Memory*, his books *In the Metro*, *Oblivion* and *Everyone Dies Young: Time Without Age* have been translated into English.
5. In his essay “Five Lessons from Stealth Poetics,” film scholar David Bordwell argues for a (flexible) historical poetics of cinema, and asks the deceptively straightforward question: “according to what principles are artworks made?” (15). In essence, he calls for a “close look” and a “close listen” to films—advice I have taken to heart.
6. Raúl Ruiz (2007). *Poetics of Cinema* 2. Translated by Carlos Morreo. Paris: Dis Voir, 22.
7. P. Adams Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8. In film scholar Dina Iordanova’s words, Tarkovsky insisted that his “associative collages...be seen as metaphorical expressions of a self-contained reality and not as symbolic” (Criterion DVD essay, 2).
8. Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art*. Translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 66. The two haiku are:  
  
As it passes by  
The full moon barely touches  
fishhooks in the waves  
  
The dew has fallen  
on all the spikes of blackthorn  
there hang little drops.
9. Philip Lopate. *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), xxxviii.
10. Koreeda.com BLOG (5 June 2018) “Invisible” to *in kotoba o megutte. Dai 71kai Cannes Kokusai Eigasai ni sanku shite kangaeta koto*. <http://www.kore-eda.com/message/20180605.html>.

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- Koreeda.com BLOG. “Invisible” to iu kotoba o megutte. *Dai 71kai Cannes Kokusai Eigasai ni sankā shite kangaeta koto.*, June 5, 2018. <http://www.kore-eda.com/message/20180605.html>.
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- Tarkovsky, Andrey. *Sculpting in Time: The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art*. Translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.
- The Seneca Review* (special issue), Fall 1997. <https://www.hws.edu/senecareview/lyricessay.aspx>.

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I offer my thanks for the assistance I have received (In Japan) from Ohmori Kayo, Takada-Amick Hiroko, Ogasawara Miyoko, the Kawakita Memorial Film Institute, and Fukuda Yūko. I also thank director Kore-eda Hirokazu for the two interviews, and for the inspiration.<sup>1</sup> I thank my colleagues in Film Studies and Japanese Studies: David Desser, John Lent, Diane Carson, Angela Dalle Vacche, Kevin Salfen, Arthur Nolletti, Julia Sapin, Otavio Bueno, Allan Casebier, Stephen Prince, Aaron Gerow, Laura Montero Plata, Antonio Míguez, and Pete Timmermann (Webster University Film Series). A special thanks to Amy Heller and Dennis Doros of Milestone Film and Video who encouraged my work on their beautifully remastered DVD/blu-ray of *Maborosi no hikari/Maborosi* (2017, first released in 1995).<sup>2</sup> Also thanks to Film Movement for the permission to use images from two of their Kore-eda films.

In North Carolina I received support from Professor Simon Partner, Lilly Library of Duke University, Joanne Gard Marshall, and Luis Melodelgado and Ryan Chamberlain of the Chapel Hill Public Library (CHPL). I was able to grab images that were not the “usual suspects” with the help of the Digital Media Lab at the CHPL. Thanks also to a writer’s residency at the (perhaps haunted) Weymouth Center for the Arts and Humanities (Southern Pines, NC).

Colleagues in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Case Western Reserve University, assisted me with paraphrases from Italian and Japanese: (Denise Caterinacci [Italian], Togawa Yuki and Kishi Yoshiko [Japanese], and Elena Fernández [Spanish]) and with support

for my talk at the Cleveland Cinematheque. A special thanks to the Cleveland Museum of Art (where I spent many happy hours) for the art reproductions. I have received expert advice from Cleveland-based lawyers Richard Cooper and Andrew Jenkins and IT specialist Corey Wright.

The Pickford Film Center (curator Jeff Purdue) and Western Washington University (Bellingham, Washington), the Toronto International Film Festival Lightbox (curator James Quandt), Film Fest 919, the Cleveland Cinematheque (curator John Ewing), and the Webster University Film Series (St. Louis, Missouri, curator Pete Timmermann) encouraged my presentations about the films of Kore-eda.

My thanks to Camille Davies, Zobariya Jidda, and the other Palgrave staff who worked so diligently on this book.

Although all of the chapters in *An Elemental Cinema* are completely new, some of my earlier writings about Kore-eda Hirokazu's films have appeared in<sup>3</sup> *Film Quarterly* (a review of *Nobody Knows*), *Framework* ("Turning Away from the Fire," primarily about *Maborosi*, *Distance*, and *The Third Murder*), *Film Criticism* ("Kore-eda's Ocean Views," primarily about *Maborosi*, *Distance*, *Still Walking*, *Air Doll*), *Cinema Scope*, the *Viennale* catalogue, *Traspases entre la literatura y el cine* (University of Málaga, an essay on the short novel and film of *Maborosi no hikari*), and on the full-length commentary for the remastered DVD/blu-ray of *Maborosi* (Milestone Film and Video).

All translations from the Japanese, Spanish, Italian, and French into English are my own (unless indicated otherwise); thanks to several native speakers who assisted me with details. The English summaries from my 2010 interview with the director are my own; thanks to the script of the recorded interview transcribed by Kishi Yoshiko.

This book is dedicated to Japan—the beautiful, the ambiguous—and in fond memory of Japanese film studies colleagues: Donald Richie, Keiko McDonald, Cynthia Contreras, and Kawakita Kashiko.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. Japanese names will be given in traditional style, with surname first.
2. The titles of Kore-eda films will be listed as: original Japanese title/English title (year of release) when first mentioned, as the title of a section, and in the filmography. After the first mention I only use the English title. Films in languages other than English will also be listed as: original title/English

title (year of release) when first mentioned and in the filmography. The director prefers the spelling of “*maborosi*” to the more standard romanization “*maboroshi*.”

3. Please note the Bibliography listings under my name for exact citations of my publications about the films of Kore-eda Hirokazu.
4. The dedication refers to the titles of talks given by the first two Japanese recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature: Kawabata Yasunari (1968, “Japan the Beautiful and Myself”) and Ōe Kenzaburō (1994, “Japan, The Ambiguous, and Myself”).

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- . Review, *Dare mo shiranai (Nobody Knows)*, *Film Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (Winter 2005–2006), 45–50. <http://fq.ucpress.edu/content/59/2/45>.
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- . Full-Length Commentary. *Maborosi no hikari*. Milestone Film and Video, 2017.
- . “Turning Away from the Fire: A New Look at the Films of Kore-eda Hirokazu.” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 116–140.

## PRAISE FOR *THE FILMS OF KORE-EDA HIROKAZU*

“In Linda Ehrlich, Kore-eda Hirokazu has found his most suitable and perfect commentator. Ehrlich possesses an eloquence and sensitivity that matches Kore-eda’s own deep and abiding humanism.”

—David M. Desser, *Professor Emeritus of Cinema Studies,  
University of Illinois, USA*

“It’s difficult to imagine a more insightful and illuminating way of approaching Kore-eda’s films than through the series of lyrical essays that Linda Ehrlich wrote. Like a tapestry of interconnected threads, she beautifully draws out the poetry and the challenges of quotidian life as depicted in his films. Given the carefully selected, crucial still images from the films, the experience on the page is transferred back to the screen, giving new meaning to, and helping us reimagine anew, a body of work that is rich in the elements and associations that it articulates. Not since Gombrich’s *The Story of Art* have I seen the integration of image, experience, and content implemented so elegantly and eloquently.”

—Otávio Bueno, *Professor and Chair, Department of Philosophy, Cooper  
Senior Scholar in Arts and Sciences, University of Miami, USA*

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# Introductory Thoughts

The film of memory is always included in a longer film, the film of life that inflects its meaning because the gaze of he or she who is at once the character, actor, and author always changes.

Marc Augé, *Casablanca: Movies and Memory*<sup>1</sup>

With the eye of O. Henry and the cinematic style of Ken Loach, award-winning Japanese film director Kore-eda Hirokazu (b. 1962) unearths insights into human resilience and human connections. His films (feature and documentaries) are about people who live “betwixt and between” mainstream society. Kore-eda tends to depict survivors rather than those who succumb to despair (Fig. 1).

Some critics have attempted to tie Kore-eda’s work to the films of classical director Ozu Yasujirō (1903–1963), or even to those of contemporary directors like Ron Howard or Alexander Payne. When pushed, Kore-eda sometimes says that he has been influenced by the Dardenne brothers or the British director Ken Loach, or that his approach is closer to that of the classical director Naruse Mikio (1905–1969). It is not that Kore-eda’s films draw on Naruse’s themes per se but rather that the tone of Naruse’s films can be felt in many of Kore-eda’s productions. Naruse’s characters—the resentful young wife (*Anzukko*, 1958), the disillusioned bar hostess (*Onna ga kaidan o noboru toki/When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*, 1960), the irresponsible man (*Ukigumo/Floating Clouds*, 1955)—would probably



Fig. 1 The director, Kore-eda Hirokazu

feel at home in Kore-eda's cinematic universe. In their detailed catalogue about Naruse, film scholars Hasumi Shigehiko and Yamane Sadao note how "Naruse succeeded in depicting the lives of the common people with rich lyricism."<sup>2</sup> This sentiment could also apply to the films of Kore-eda.

On the other hand, there are aspects of Naruse's cinematic work which are distant from Kore-eda's worldview. Film scholar Audie Bock wrote in the catalogue of the 1983 Naruse retrospective in Locarno: "There is no humanism in this cinema, because Naruse does not believe in the perfectibility of Man."<sup>3</sup> In film scholar Catherine Russell's words, Naruse's cinema "evades both idealism and sentimentality....He inserted shots of objects...that helped to ground his storytelling in the detritus of everyday life."<sup>4</sup> Kore-eda certainly also grounds his storytelling in objects, but his films are colored by a richly expressed humanism.

For those who think Kore-eda's films resemble those of Ozu, we would do best to look to Ozu films that differ somewhat from his more famous later ones. In particular, we could keep in mind an Ozu film like *Nagaya shinshiroku/Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (1947), his first film after World War II (Fig. 2).

This bittersweet human comedy offers a moving tale of a cranky spinster and a little boy who has seemingly been abandoned in the hard climate of postwar Japan. Over time, a bond develops between the older lady and the



Fig. 2 *Record of a Tenement Gentleman*, the “street boy” in a corner

boy, but *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* does not offer the kind of “happy ending” often seen in Hollywood films about children. The sequence from this Ozu film depicted in this still image reminds me of the ending of *Manbiki kazoku/Shoplifters* (2018), but the Kore-eda film has far darker implications. Someone with a profound understanding of Ozu’s films, film scholar David Bordwell, makes an important comparison in his Blog, when he writes:

*Shoplifters* reminded me of Ozu’s *Passing Fancy* [1933] and *Inn in Tokyo* [1935], obliquely but sharply condemning the economic conditions that push people into wayward lives. It’s a gently subversive film about people flung together resourcefully trying to survive and find happiness by flouting the comfortable norms of middle-class morality.<sup>5</sup>



Writing of “small families of affection” that form around the lost boy, film critic David Kehr provided an astute comment about Ozu that could be applicable to Kore-eda’s films as well:

Ozu’s coldness, I think, is a vehicle for a humanism of the most profound sort—a humanism that refuses to aggrandize or belittle its objects, but seeks to see people in balance with their surroundings and with each other; as parts of a whole, and not always the determining parts.<sup>6</sup>

As influences, Kore-eda also cites the films of Spanish director Víctor Erice and the Taiwanese Hou Hsiao-Hsien about whom he made a documentary in 1993, *Eiga ga jidai wo utsusu toki/When Cinema Reflects the Time—Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang*. Other names that have appeared in interviews with Kore-eda as possible influences are the Korean director Lee Changdong, the Chinese director Jia Zhangke, and the U.S. director Richard Linklater. Sometimes he is grouped together with a generation of Japanese filmmakers that includes Aoyama Shinji, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Suwa Nobuhiro, and Kawase Naomi, who have been dubbed “The New Japanese New Wave.”<sup>7</sup>

As a student Kore-eda saw films by such directors as Ken Loach, Theo Angelopoulus, Jim Jarmusch, and Wim Wenders. In my view, Kore-eda is closely tied to Ken Loach in terms of the British director’s attitude toward observation. (In the chapter on *Nobody Knows*, I discuss Loach’s 1969 film *Kes* in this context.) In fact, one *Japan Times* article calls Kore-eda “Japan’s answer to Ken Loach.”<sup>8</sup>

## THE DOCUMENTARY IMPULSE

Kore-eda Hirokazu’s films are, first and foremost, grounded in the realistic. And yet, after watching his films for many years, I cannot help but see in his understated “family dramas,” and even in his courtroom dramas and other “quasi-genres,” a certain touch of the poet. Many of Kore-eda’s protagonists have dreams for their lives. By the end of his films, the dreams may, or may not, be realized in any form, but they linger; they haunt our recollections.

Some of Kore-eda’s films certainly are lyrical in tone, while others lean toward the philosophical. In a *Bright Lights Film Journal* interview, Kore-eda offered one explanation of his artistic territory: “I’m interested in the

emotions that arise from the collision between so-called real life and the artifice of film...I simply want to look at people as they are.”<sup>9</sup>

## ORGANIZING STRUCTURE/THE ELEMENTS

*An Elemental Cinema*'s attention to the elements (water, fire, air, earth, metal) is not arbitrary. I first wrote about the theme of water in the *Film Criticism* special issue dedicated to Kore-eda's work (up through *Kūki ningyō/Air Doll* [2009] at the time of that publication).<sup>10</sup> After writing that essay, I sensed I had left out something important. When I saw Kore-eda's *Sandome no satsujin/The Third Murder* (2017), I knew that the striking use of fire in several of his films had to be explored. As I was completing that essay for the journal *Framework*, I again became aware that something essential had been left out. At that point I turned both to images of air and (to a lesser extent) of earth as potent motifs in Kore-eda's cinematic universe. The focus on those four elements helped me to explore connecting aspects of this director's understated films. I also became aware that a fifth element (using a Chinese schema)—metal—is largely absent. To my relief, I realized that—as troubling as many of Kore-eda's stories can be—they are largely lacking in guns, knives, and slashing swords.

Although I have been inspired by systems of four, or five, elements from ancient Greece and India, and by Buddhist thought, I am not referring, in an orthodox manner, to any one system of elements.<sup>11</sup> For me, the elements are expressed most powerfully in poetic form by a range of poets, from the Chilean Gabriela Mistral to the U.S. poet Mary Oliver, from the Tang poet Li Po to the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz. As powerful motifs, the elements are also (to use a Japanese word) *aimai*/subtle, ambiguous. For example, experience the strength, and yet subtlety, of this verse from Gabriela Mistral's poem “*Lo que aguarda*”:

*¡Cómo no ha de llegar si me lo traen  
los elementos a los que fui dada!  
El agua me lo alumbraba en los hondones,  
Me lo apresura el fuego del poniente,  
Y el viento loco lo aguija y apura.*<sup>12</sup>

Although I have tended to place one natural element as a focus for each film, I also point to the symphonic nature of the elements in several of Kore-eda's films. “The elements” are not absolute divisions, nor do they

cover all of the possible frameworks for the films. To those four divisions I have added a chapter on “Liminality” and another on “Endings.” When I was writing this book, I only knew of one other book-length publication about Kore-eda’s films, in Italian. More are sure to follow.

My attention to these four natural elements is not the same as a focus on recurring symbols in the films, such as: tunnels, trains, food (although these are all mentioned in the chapters). Nor is it a focus on production history, genres, acting styles, biographies, and so on. His works for television, and some of his documentaries, are mentioned in my book only in passing.<sup>13</sup>

### JAPANESE TRADITIONAL AESTHETICS

The framework I have chosen links Kore-eda’s stories with a traditional Japanese sensitivity to nature. Japan is a country prone to earthquakes with little arable land. Mountains and seas are rarely far from each other. Even in a metropolis like Tokyo, there are times when distant Mt. Fuji is visible on a clear day. From ancient times, the mountains have been considered dwelling places of ancestral deities, *kami*, spirits of all kinds. It’s no wonder that Buddhism, with its message of the evanescence of life, and Shintō, with its reverence for nature, took hold in this island-nation. All of this can be seen in the following quotation from the introduction to the *Koraifūteishō* (*Collection of Poetic Styles Old and New*) from 1197 by the poet Fujiwara no Shūnzei (1114–1204) who was inspired by Tendai Buddhism:

As the months pass and the seasons change, and as the cherry blossoms give way to bright autumn leaves, we are reminded of the words and images of poems and feel as if we can discern the quality of those poems.<sup>14</sup>

Even the older names of the months in Japanese refer to nature (note, for example: *shimozuki*/November=month of frost; *hazuki*/August=month of leaves; *minazuki*/June=month of no water; *satsuki*/May=month of rice planting; and even *uzuki*/April=month of rabbits).

In Western languages, the word “Nature” tends to signify what lies outside, although one can also speak of a person’s inner nature. In the traditional Japanese concept of nature, the self and the external environment are intrinsically connected. The earlier word for nature—*onozukara*—and the word *mizukara* (self) “originate from the same common ground.”<sup>15</sup> As Tellenbach and Kimura emphasize: “Instead of ascertaining its inherent

laws ‘objectively’, the Japanese lives this great spontaneity of nature ‘subjectively’ as the source of his own self (*jiko*/self=*mizukara*). Nature is itself the creative and, as that which brings itself forth, the divine.”<sup>16</sup>

Italian author Claudia Bertolé finds an emotive, and almost supernatural, aspect of nature in Kore-eda’s films.<sup>17</sup> For example, she describes the forest in *Distance* (2001) as “a site of mourning.” I would add to her list the odd warmth projected in the dream-like Hokkaidō scenes in *The Third Murder*, and the seemingly real (but false) moon in *Wandafuru raifu/After Life* (1998). As filmmaker Raúl Ruíz poignantly wrote in his *Poetics of Cinema* 2: “In shooting, one always transacts with the beyond.”<sup>18</sup>

The celebration of nature in classical Japanese thought brings life and death within the same arena. As film scholar Timothy Iles comments, there is an interdependence of the human world and domain of the spirits in traditional Japanese spirituality.<sup>19</sup>

I am not implying that Kore-eda consciously sits down and decides to draw on traditional Japanese aesthetics. In fact, his reports of his “no frills” childhood and early adult years demonstrate a distance from the elegant world of the tea ceremony, and the austerity of Noh theatre. Nevertheless, the four overarching Japanese aesthetic principles proposed by Japanologist Donald Keene (suggestion, irregularity/imperfection, simplicity, perishability), and the modes of *aware* (pathos, “a gentle sorrow”) and *okashi* (humor/delight) underscore all of Kore-eda’s films, from the most restrained to the ones with unexpected plot twists.<sup>20</sup>

The Japanese aesthetic principle best exemplified by many of Kore-eda’s films is, in my opinion, that of *wabi*. In his essay “The *Wabi* Aesthetic through the Ages,” Haga Kōshirō delineates three aspects of *wabi*:

simple, unpretentious beauty  
imperfect, irregular beauty<sup>21</sup>  
austere, stark beauty<sup>22</sup>

*Wabi* implies a feeling of serenity, and even nobility, despite a rough exterior. Haga Kōshirō affirms that *wabi* “detests excess of expression and loves reticence.”<sup>23</sup> Such forms of unpretentious beauty can be found in Kore-eda’s films, as well as echoes of the original sense of *wabi* which “embraces disappointment, frustration, and poverty.”<sup>24</sup>

While the elusive quality of *yūgen* (“the profound, remote, and mysterious”) can be appreciated better in the classical Noh theatre than in

the cinema, it is not an exaggeration to say that certain scenes, like the penultimate one in *Maborosi* near the funeral pyre, offer us a trace of (the inexplicable) mystery of *yūgen*.<sup>25</sup>

Spanish architect Javier Vives Riego offers several important additions to Keene's aesthetic categories:

1. A sense of “*irrealidad*” (a lack of adherence to strict realism). An example of “*irrealidad*” from Japanese architecture is the way the opening of *fusuma* and *shōji* screens convert a Japanese room “into an imaginary space”<sup>26</sup> in which an object is partially obscured. “Denied vision” is an aspect of Kore-eda's films I discuss in subsequent chapters.
2. A tendency to present fragmentation, abstraction, and a flat plane (erasing a sense of volume, as in the *ukiyo-e*/woodblock print). The latter is not as common in Kore-eda's films where evocative deep-focus shots draw us in.

The *mise-en-scène* of Kore-eda's films often feature a traditional Japanese love of asymmetry.<sup>27</sup> As Donald Keene writes in his essay “Japanese Aesthetics”:

the stones of the [*kare sansui* garden of the] Ryōanji, irregular in shape and position, allow us to participate in the creation of the garden, and thus may move us even more [than the Sistine Chapel].<sup>28</sup>

The asymmetrical gives space for imperfections and helps avoid repetition—sentiments favored both by the tea ceremony and, it could be noted, by Kore-eda as well.<sup>29</sup>

When a handful of critics complain of the “incomplete” nature of the endings of Kore-eda's films, I would point to the Japanese principle of *yojō* (“lingering emotion”). In the slow pacing, and the sustained long takes in many of Kore-eda's films, we can find echoes of the principle of *yojō* in Japanese visual arts and music.

In case it appears that all of these aesthetic qualities lead to an amorphous state, we should keep in mind the words of the editors to *Traditional Japanese Art and Culture*, that “suggestion” in Japanese art is carried out with “great precision.”<sup>30</sup> Critics have noted the surprising precision of Kore-eda's films, even the ones with first-time child actors.

Finally, in an overall sense, Kore-eda's films are in the vein of poet Ki no Tsurayuki's opening lines in his introduction to the tenth-century poetry anthology *Kokinshū* (*Collection from Ancient and Modern Times*):

Japanese poetry, having the human heart as its seed....<sup>31</sup>

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Kore-eda Hirokazu was born in Tokyo on June 6, 1962, and lived for many years in the area featured in his film *After the Storm*. The director was affected by his grandfather's growing senility (from around the time Kore-eda was 6 years old); themes of memory and loss certainly figure into many of his films. He also grew up aware of the memories of his father who had been sent to a forced labor camp in Siberia when the Soviets defeated the Kwantung army in the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1945.

Although Kore-eda never attended a formal film school, he stated that “trial and error” was his film school. As an undergraduate at Waseda University in Tokyo, he majored in literature, but spent a lot of time going to see movies. Kore-eda thought of becoming a novelist (and has written novelizations accompanying some of his original screenplays such as *After Life*, *Distance*, *Still Walking*, *Hana yori mo nao/Hana* [2006], and *Shoplifters*). After graduating from Waseda University in 1987, he joined TV Man Union—a unique enterprise, founded in 1970 as the first independent television company. In 2014 Kore-eda launched his own production company Bun-Buku (a production cooperative, along with the other “core member” directors Nishikawa Miwa and Sunada Mami).<sup>32</sup> So far Bun-Buku has helped produce Kore-eda films *Like Father Like Son*, *Our Little Sister*, and *After the Storm*, as well as Sunada Mami's *Yume to kyōki no ōkoku/The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness* (2013, about Studio Ghibli), Imanaka Kōhei's *Ano Hi: Fukushima wa Ikiteru/That Day: Living Fukushima* (2012), and Pierre Huyghe's *Living Mask* (France, 2014), among other films.

## A SENSE OF PLACE

In recent films, Kore-eda has turned to the antipodes of Japan—Kyūshū (*Kiseki/I Wish* [2011]) and Hokkaidō (*The Third Murder*) before returning to Tokyo for *Shoplifters* and beyond (France, for his 2019 production *La Vérité/The Truth*).