

KOREEDA HIROKAZU

On the eve of a major retrospective of his films at BFI Southbank in London, the acclaimed Japanese director of *Nobody Knows*, *Still Walking* and the Palme d'Or-winning *Shoplifters* discusses crime and punishment, his instinctive wariness of government authority, his fluency in genres ranging from courtroom dramas to samurai period works – and why he still doesn't understand Ozu. **Interview by Alexander Jacoby**

In a career in feature filmmaking that spans nearly a quarter of a century, Koreeda Hirokazu has become certainly the most critically acclaimed and among the most widely distributed of contemporary Japanese live-action directors. His subjects range from the samurai of *Hana* (2006) to the blow-up doll come to life in *Air Doll* (2009), and his chosen genres from fantasy (*After Life*, 1998) to courtroom drama (*The Third Murder*, 2017).

However, his most fertile territory is that of the family drama, a genre of distinguished pedigree in Japan going back to the era of Ozu Yasujiro and Naruse Mikio, with both of whom Koreeda has often been compared. Like Ozu, Koreeda works with a company of regular actors (most notably Kiki Kirin, who died last September) who enact variations on a set of key themes, helping to imbue his work with a specific and individual flavour. In films such as *Nobody Knows* (2003), *Still Walking* (2008) and *After the Storm* (2016), he has explored aspects of the Japanese family in an era of social transition and economic uncertainty.

When he won the Palme d'Or at Cannes last year for his film *Shoplifters*, he became the first Japanese director to secure that honour in 21 years – since Imamura Shohei shared the prize for *The Eel* with Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*. Koreeda was no stranger to Cannes: in 2013, he won the Jury Prize for *Like Father, Like Son*, and his star Yagira Yuya scooped the youngest ever Best Actor award for his performance in *Nobody Knows*. Before the release of *Shoplifters*, and in anticipation of the BFI's forthcoming retrospective of his work, I spoke to him at Bafta's headquarters in London.

Alexander Jacoby: *Shoplifters* won the Palme d'Or. Do you think it's your best film?

Koreeda Hirokazu: As a filmmaker, it's very difficult to say; it's more up to other people to make that judgement. They probably have more right to do so than I do. But if I think of filmmaking as a birthing process, and the films as my children, then this birthing process was the easiest one. I was using the cameraman [Kondo Ryuto] for the first time, and it was also my first time working with [actress] Ando Sakura, but it worked very well.

AJ: Despite the film's success, you turned down an invitation from the Ministry of Education and Culture to celebrate. You've also talked about the importance of "keeping a clear distance from government authority". Could you say more about your motive for that decision?

KH: I'm a filmmaker, but also a television person; my background is in TV. And I feel concerned about the broadcasting situation in the sense that they don't criticise the current government at all. The media is failing to serve its true purpose. It's probably unheard of in the West that the heads of news outlets have lunch and dinner with top government officials, politicians, the prime minister. They ought to be in the position of criticising, keeping check on the government, but they're not. And say, for example, a sports person wins an award abroad, then the government congratulates that person by inviting him to the prime minister's office to take photographs with him, or by sending a congratulatory message – all that sort of thing. That makes me feel sick; I don't understand why they don't feel more of a sense of danger. The arts and sport are very prone to being used politically. Looking back on Japanese history, it's important for cinema not to get too close to the powers that be.

AJ: One aspect of the film that seems to have caused controversy is that it creates a

rather negative portrait of modern Japanese society, and you could say the same about *Nobody Knows* or *Air Doll*. Do you feel that this film, and perhaps your films more generally, create a picture of a society that's heading in the wrong direction?

KH: Maybe there's a bit of that, but if I depicted just the positive things about Japan, that would be nothing more than a tourist film, a promotional film. I think you should have variety, depict all sorts of things. But it seems that the criticisms and negative comments about this film, since its release, are mainly online. None of them seem to grasp the actual nature of the film; they don't seem to get the point.

AJ: One of the negative things you treat in this film is crime. And it's not the first time you've done so: *The Third Murder* is a courtroom drama; crime is a concern in *Air Doll*; in *Like Father, Like Son*, the babies are swapped in a criminal act; in *Distance* [2001] you explore the aftermath of a terrorist attack. Japan is actually still a rather low-crime society. So why have you chosen to focus on crime? Do your films express a particular attitude to the causes of crime and its possible solutions?

KH: I don't think I'm trying to indicate a solution or anything; there's no way I can do that. But one of the reasons I've treated the subject so many times is that a lot of crimes happen in Japan, but people tend to view crime as a matter of individual responsibility. They see it as this or that person's fault, rather than something born out of society and social ills. So they just punish that person. That's how they solve the problem in Japan. But – maybe this is old-fashioned – I believe crime is born out of society. Crime is something that we, as a society, own collectively; it's something we need to reclaim and accept as our responsibility, rather than the individual's.

AJ: Another parallel between two of those films, *Shoplifters* and *Distance*, is that they end with the same spoken word: "Otosan", "father".

KH: The last line in *Distance* is "father", but in *Shoplifters*, he's mouthing it; you can't hear what he's saying.



Koreeda Hirokazu's *Shoplifters* (2018)



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AJ: That's true. And it points to another factor that unites many of your films: the theme of family. *Shoplifters* is about a very unconventional family; and at one point we hear a character speculate that the bonds you form with a family you choose might be more intense than what you feel for blood relatives. That seems to be your quintessential theme. In *Nobody Knows*; *Like Father, Like Son*; *Our Little Sister* [2015]; and now *Shoplifters*, you've asked, "What matters more, blood ties or human affection?" What has drawn you so frequently to that question? Would it be better if family were a thing we chose?

KH: It's probably not so much a question of what I think or how I feel about the family. I didn't want to present such a stark choice. There are different ways of looking at the question. It's not, "Which is stronger?", but, "Is blood enough to make you a family?" I'm always asking if that's enough. Sometimes I worry that it's just too fragile. But at the same time, blood ties make you much more responsible; there's a lot of baggage that comes with them. And I think what the grandmother is saying, in that line, is that there are so many expectations from your own family, and that these can become an added responsibility, or more baggage. You can have different ideas about the family, different expectations. There are fewer expectations if there are no blood ties, so different types of thinking can exist within the family. In *Shoplifters*, while that father wants to be called 'Dad', I don't think he can be a father. And it's when he lets go, when he's said that he's no longer the dad – maybe that's when he becomes the father. The family isn't quite a real family until they've broken up; once they're apart, they become more of a family.

AJ: Some years ago you said you used to make films from the point of view of a son looking at his father – *Hana*, *Still Walking* – but that now you are a father, you've begun to make films from the father's point of view. *After the Storm* is such a film. But in *Shoplifters*, the centre of sympathy is the boy. As director, where do your sympathies lie?

KH: It was deliberate that the emphasis lies with the boy. The house we used in the film is very similar to the house where I lived until I was nine. The actual house was smaller than that, and there were six of us who used to live there. So I used to live in the cupboard, and I wanted the story to be from the point of view of the boy who slept in that cupboard. Maybe that's not just me myself. The theme is the disappointment a son feels about his father as he grows up, so it's portraying what any other boy, any other family, would go through, as you grow up experiencing disappointment about your own father. It's told from that perspective.

AJ: This film marked your last collaboration with the late actress Kiki Kirin, who plays the grandmother. Could you tell me something about your working relationship with her?

KH: I went to her wake. I couldn't go to the funeral, but I wrote a tribute. She had told me to forget about an old woman like her and said I should go and work with younger people... My opinion, my comment about her was my tribute there; that was all I had to say about her. So I've said there will be no more comments,

no more interviews about her. But for the last ten years it was more than just a partnership between a film director and an actress. So I need to think about what to do without her now, how to make films without her.

AJ: Kirin-san was your most frequent collaborator, but you've also established a kind of team of repertory actors. Just as Ozu did with Ryu Chishu or Hara Setsuko, you've worked regularly with Fukuyama Masaharu, Abe Hiroshi, Lily Franky, to name a few. What do you feel your films gain from these collaborations?

KH: I suppose there's a feeling that we can grow up together and spend time together. That's a big thing. I feel there's something more than a sense of security when, having grown up together on one film, we go on to make another film.

AJ: Is it in part thematic? When I see Fukuyama in *The Third Murder*, am I supposed to make a thematic connection with *Like Father, Like Son*?

KH: Well, Abe Hiroshi plays a 'useless' man in *Still Walking*, and again in the television drama *Going My Home* [2012] and for a third time in *After the Storm*. That strong connection is intentional; even the name of the character, Ryota, is the same in the three productions... although in the serial, Kirin does not play the mother. But it is very personal; I reflected my own experience, so there is a strong connection.

With regard to Fukuyama, in *The Third Murder* the character is very confident, very successful professionally; the role is very close to Fukuyama himself. He has played that role twice, and the films are about peeling off that character, bit by bit. It's as if I was bullying him. So in that sense *The Third Murder* might have something in common with *Like Father, Like Son*. But the connection there was not so intentional; after all, I used a different name for the character.

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AJ: One connection between the characters Abe Hiroshi plays in *Still Walking* and *After the Storm* is that both see themselves in a way as failures. Obviously you have been a success in your career, so what leads you to dramatise characters who wonder, "Why did my life turn out like this?"

KH: Probably there is some kind of misunderstanding, because as a film director, I haven't always been the director I wanted to be. On the contrary, there are more things I haven't been able to do than things I've accomplished. As for myself as someone's son, I have a lot of regrets towards my mother or father, and I can't go back and undo that regret. Now that I'm a father, I try to do well, but I realise I've become the kind of father I didn't want to be. I feel the same way about being a husband. That sentiment is strongly expressed in *Still Walking* and *After the Storm*.

AJ: Some of your films question the value of professional success. The most sympathetic of the two men in *Like Father, Like Son*, for example, is the one who prioritises family over career. The critic Tony Rayns once said to me he felt all your films are about the process of becoming human. Is that fair?

KH: I am indeed interested in that process: for example, people coming together as a family, or a doll coming to life. But through that process, not only positive things emerge, but negative ones too. So I want to describe a complex process. In *Like Father, Like Son*, a man who has absolutely everything loses things one by one. So I try not simply to describe a happy process; there's always something that points in the opposite direction. In that form, perhaps, I am describing a kind of development. Although when people subject it to a lot of analysis, I start wanting to make something different the next time...

AJ: Most of your lead characters are male, but there are exceptions. In *Maborosi* [1995], *Air Doll* and *Our Little Sister*, you focus on female protagonists. Many of the great classical directors of Japanese cinema – like Naruse Mikio, Mizoguchi Kenji, Toyoda Shiro – are renowned for their sympathetic



Welcome to the dollhouse: *Air Doll* (2009)



Like Father, Like Son (2013)

treatment of women. You've often said there is an autobiographical element to many of your films, so how do you stand in relation to your female characters?

KH: In the case of male characters, since I am male, I try to distance myself from them, and so my approach is a bit cynical. I distance myself so that the useless aspects can be turned into something to laugh about. As regards female characters, because I want to understand women, I need to get a bit closer to them... But now that you've asked me the question, I'm not sure if there's a gender difference in my approach.

AJ: Many people have compared you to Ozu; you have spoken about what you owe to Naruse. Could you talk about your debt to those classical directors? And could you tell me which directors you most admire among your contemporaries in Japan and internationally?

KH: I haven't really done research into Ozu or Naruse, so I haven't finished working out what I think about them. But with Naruse, I learn more every time I go back to his films. For example, the way he depicts people, the way he films a house, the position of a camera – because it's so helpful, I go back to look at Naruse whenever I have the chance. Whereas with Ozu, the more I watch him, the more confused I become. I really don't understand why Ozu insists on a particular focus, or why he cuts differently here, or why he places a person there. It's too singular; there's no way of learning from him. It's interesting, but it troubles me when people say I'm like Ozu, because I'm not confident I understand Ozu. Whereas, with Naruse, I understand the reasons why he does things. Ozu is my task for the future.

Among contemporary directors, I revere especially Hou Hsiao-Hsien; I went into cinema because I admired him, so I'll be his fan forever. Of more recent filmmakers, I admire the Korean director Lee Changdong and the Chinese director Jia Zhangke. Lee is older than me, Jia younger, but I'm interested in what they're making, and what kind of issues they're addressing in their films. They are very stimulating and it means a lot to me that they are there.

Beyond that, I'm working with Ethan Hawke at the moment, and I find the methodology of Richard Linklater [who directed Hawke in 1995's *Before Sunrise* and its sequels] very stimulating. Ken Loach is a big encouragement, because I want to be making films like him when I'm 80.

AJ: You're making your next film, *The Truth* [La Vérité], in France. What opportunities do you think the chance to work in Europe with an



Nobody Knows (2003)

international cast will open up to you? And do you expect your work will change as a result?

KH: I have no idea. Because until the film is completed, I cannot say whether it is as I wanted it to be, as in Japan, or whether it will be better. So it's premature to answer the question. We're halfway through filming at the moment, and the collaboration with the actors is going very well. I started half worried, half confident, but now I'm thinking that we might go far! However, if you were to ask me whether I'll stay abroad, then, to be honest, I can't deny that I miss white rice and miso soup, and that I miss my children, so probably I'll go back to Japan and reassess the situation. What I can say at the moment is that by filming abroad, my options have widened and I'm very happy about that.

AJ: So a couple of questions also about the future. One way in which you are definitely not like Ozu is that you work in lots of different genres. Of course, family drama is your mainstay, but you've also worked with *jidai-geki*, courtroom drama, fantasy. Are there any genres left you would like to attempt?

KH: I've always wanted to tell a war story, in particular a story about Japan in the period of World War II... to be specific, about Manchuria and the Man'ei studio [the Japanese-run film studio in the puppet state of Manchukuo in north-eastern China]. Originally I wanted to tell the story of the actress Ri Koran, but now I'm thinking of the story of Man'ei president Amakasu Masahiko – he was

the studio director, and a key figure on the political right. So I want to tell a story centred on Amakasu. But that would cost a lot of time and money, and there are also complicated political issues involved. So it looks like it would be a severe challenge to realise, but I do want to create an epic, or should I say a historical film... perhaps it's not a genre?

AJ: After the Palme d'Or, what remains for you to achieve?

KH: I'm here now in relation to the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film – although it's not exactly a campaign – so I'm aiming for that next. But honestly, I don't make films to win awards. Still, when I won the Palme d'Or, I felt very clearly that it widened my perspective on the films I could make. The realisation that I have more options, and that I don't have to aim only to win awards in Japan – that's very fortunate. And I still have the spirit to meet the challenge and make the best of that situation. That's the way I feel.

AJ: Lastly, what do you feel will be your influence on Japanese cinema?

KH: I'm not sure; that depends on how people feel on the receiving end. But it is good that we now have a director making films outside Japan. I think someone else, not just me, should do so too, because for the past ten or 20 years, Japanese filmmakers and the Japanese film market have been secluding themselves inside Japan. The Asians who go to film schools abroad are all Chinese or Korean. Under such circumstances, while I'm not saying that winning an award at a foreign film festival is a big thing, getting tunnel-vision is not good for Japanese film. I want to continue communicating that realisation, the importance of it, and I hope that we will see more people follow suit. ☺

The interviewer acknowledges the assistance of Hanako Fujino with parts of the Japanese

i The retrospective 'Of Flesh and Blood: The Cinema of Hirokazu Koreeda' is showing at BFI Southbank, London, in April and May. A Blu-ray box-set containing *Maborosi* (1995), *After Life* (1998), *Nobody Knows* (2003) and *Still Walking* (2008) will be released by the BFI in July



Planet terror: Distance (2001) explores the aftermath of an attack by a cult