
“Kore-eda’s *Our Little Sister*. A Return to Japanese Classicism”

Marcos Centeno

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Seven years after making *Air Doll* (2009), based on Yoshiie Goda’s manga, Hirokazu Kore-eda’s latest film, *Our Little Sister*, finds new inspiration in a different Japanese comic, Akimi Yoshida’s *Umimachi Diary* (2007). Kore-eda demonstrates having reached a high degree of maturity in his particular family dramas, starting with *Nobody Knows* (*Daremo shiranai*, 2004), and continuing with *Still Walking* (*Aruitemo aruitemo*, 2008) and *Like Father, Like Son* (*Soshite Chichi ni Naru*, 2013). *Our Little Sister* is another refined, peaceful and poignant work in which Kore-eda has achieved a consistent style that should help to elevate him to the category of a true *auteur* of Japanese cinema.

The story revolves around three sisters who live together in a large house in Kamakura. During the funeral of their father, who has been absent for the last fifteen years, they meet their stepsister, Suzu (Suzu Hirose) for the first time. It becomes clear that Suzu has nobody to look after her when she desperately accepts the impetuous invitation of the three sisters to live with them. After the opening sequence, we witness a hidden story that unfolds little by little through small details. The film moves forward without significant tensions, and thus challenges the narrative structure of the conventional melodrama. The conflict is replaced with a mere representation of the passage of time, symbolically represented by the marks on a wooden pole with the sister’s height at different ages. Additionally, a number of references to the passing of the seasons, a recurrent topic in Japanese literature, are carefully shown through the cherry blossom that takes place at the end of March or the harvest of plums that marks the arrival of the summer.



</f/fc/images/13761232.0040.312-00000001.jpg>

Fig. 1: The oldest sister, Sachi, marking the height of Suzu on a wooden pole in *Our Little Sister*.

Kore-eda reemploys motifs that he has used in previous films. *Our Little Sister* is about life but also about death, as was *After Life* or *Still Walking*. The relation to the deceased in his films is complex; the moments spent with them always return and condition the characters' present. This in turn triggers in the protagonists an inner fight with their unfulfilled desires. They struggle to reorganize their memories, but the film also shows that people are not slaves of their past. There is always room to redefine who they are in the present moment.

Our Little Sister also revolves around the loss of childhood embodied by Suzu and her oldest sister, Sachi (Haruka Ayase), who had adopted the role of mother after their parent's divorce. It is through the eyes of those who have not yet reached adulthood that the director achieves his humanism, connecting with the "tradition of classical Japanese directors of the past." [1][#N1] Kore-eda's oeuvre generates a debate between those who claim that he is the greatest heir of the old master, Yaujirō Ozu, and those who reject that idea. *Our Little Sister's* serenity and awe for quotidian detail definitely help to tip the scales in favor of the former.

There are a number of traits that recall Ozu's classicism. Kore-eda highlights apparently insignificant moments of everyday life and as a result, characters are continuously shown eating, sleeping or walking. The Zen Buddhist term *mono no aware* (a sensitivity to the ephemeral), employed by Donald Richie to describe both filmmakers [2][#N2] can be seen through the passing trains, symbols of the fleeting nature of life. The contemplation of such instants points to the importance of present time. The story does not start at the film's beginning, nor does it end when the film concludes. What is depicted is only a short period in the characters' lives. There are no flashbacks; as a consequence, the past remains to an extent unknown.



[/f/fc/images/13761232.0040.312-00000002.jpg]

Fig. 2: Suzu accepting the invitation of her three half-sisters to live with them.

As in Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953), Kore-eda opts not to show any climax, such as the

death of the beloved grandmother. Instead, the narration places the spectator directly in the funeral ceremony. The rejection of climactic moments is one way to avoid unnecessary sentimentalism. Another is the prominence of silence, which is linked to the Buddhist concept of “emptiness” (*mu*). [3][#N3] Lafleur explains how Zen can be seen through those sequences hoping to express something meaningful in acts of silence. Indeed, Kore-eda's characters speak only infrequently. Yet, he demonstrates that communication through silence ironically may become a powerful asset. We can intuit that Suzu's friend loves her; however, that is never spoken. At the moment we expect a declaration of love, we only hear: “that summer kimono suits you well”. Emotions are only suggested, never directly evoked. Throughout the film, there is room for ambiguity that allows spectators to reflect on what they have seen.

As in Ozu's Zen cinema, good and evil are not represented in absolute terms. Characters have strengths and weaknesses as any other ordinary people. As Kore-eda acknowledges: “I am not interested in creating heroes, superheroes, or antiheroes. I simply want to look at people as they are.” [4][#N4] Notwithstanding the above, Kore-eda rejects any inspiration from Ozu or Buddhism. [5][#N5] As a consequence, it is problematic to consider them as a primary influence. However, we can understand these concepts as a heritage deeply settled in a cultural substratum that can be updated in modern terms. Probably, here is the reason why Kore-eda is able to make films with a Japanese touch, yet at the same time those that express universal values.

Author Biography

Marcos Centeno currently teaches Japanese Cinema at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Centeno is also convener of the MA “Global Cinemas and the Transcultural” at the Centre for Film Studies of the same university. He has been Research Associate at Waseda University (Japan) and Research Fellow (V Segles Program) at the University of Valencia (Spain), where he obtained his Ph.D. with the thesis, *Susumu Hani (1950-1960): The Theoretical and Practical Contribution to the Japanese Documentary and Youth Cinema*.

Notes:

1. Arthur Nolletti, “Introduction: Kore-eda Hirokazu, Director at a Crossroads,” *Film Criticism*, Winter 2010/Spring 2011, vol. 35, issue 23, p. 3♦ [#N1-pt1]
2. Donald Richie, “Kore-eda's *Maborosi*: Showing Only What is Necessary,” *Film Criticism*, Winter 2010/Spring 2011, vol. 35, issue 23, pp. 37-45♦ [#N2-pt1]
3. Richie also employed the concept of *mu* to assess Ozu and Kore-eda's oeuvre. In *ibid.*♦ [#N3-pt1]
4. Kore-eda cited in Nolletti, *ibid.*, p.3♦ [#N4-pt1]
5. Peter Bradshaw, “Hirokazu Kore-eda: “They compare me to Ozu. But I'm more like Ken Loach,”” *The Guardian*, 21-05-2015. Online: <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/21/hirokazu-kore-director-our-little-sister-interview> [<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/21/hirokazu-kore-director-our-little-sister-interview>] >♦ [#N5-pt1]