

# THE INVISIBLE FAMILY

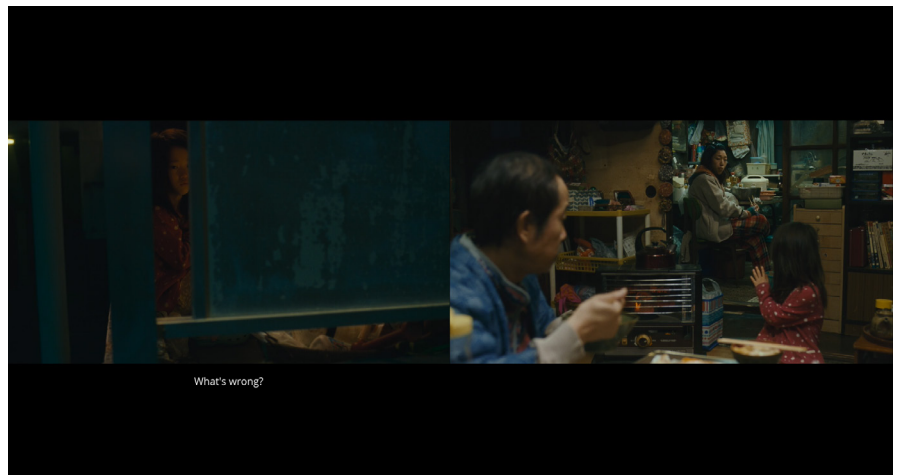
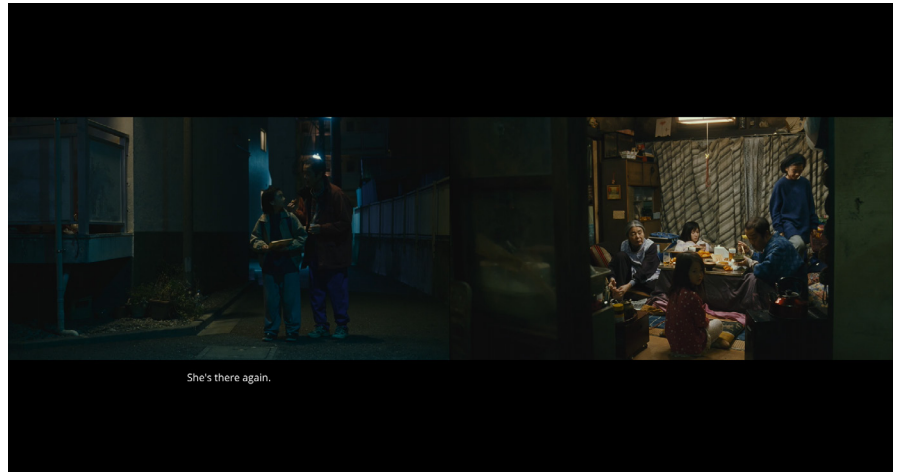
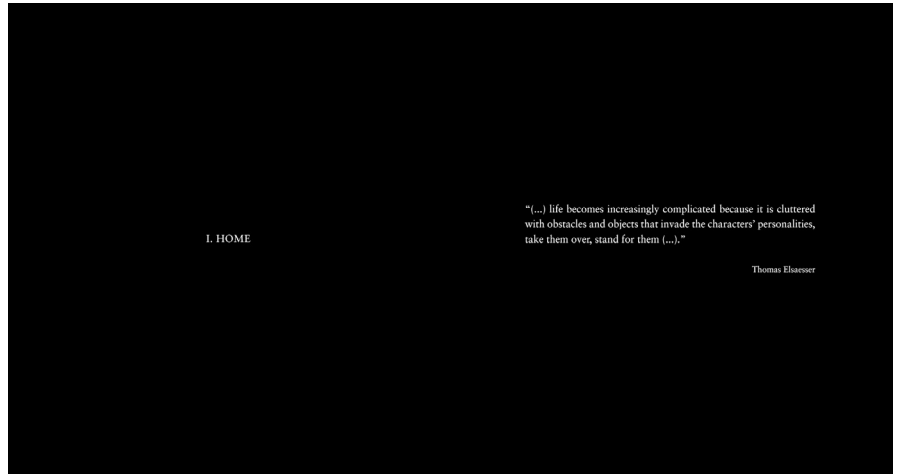
 **FRANCISCO DIAS**

Universidade Católica Portuguesa,  
School of Arts  
xicocsd@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

*Shoplifters* is a 2018 feature film directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda. It is about a family with no blood ties living in a low-class neighbourhood in Tokyo who find a girl locked at a balcony in the cold day after day. Understanding that she is being mistreated by her parents, the Shibata family decide to take Yuri in. The audiovisual essay *The Invisible Family* analyses *Shoplifters* according to three key concepts of melodrama: house, family and society. Each one of them, introduced by a quotation, is composed of three diptychs with scenes from the film. The small and cluttered houses in *Shoplifters* constrict the characters and render their inner selves visible. As the Shibata fall apart throughout the film, their care and respect for each other grow deeper. Shoplifting and using others are unacceptable in society. However, these are carried out by the Shibata, because their income is not enough to provide for the family. It is, thus, urgent to improve work regulations, to provide more and better employment opportunities and to support families. All in all, the conflict emerges within the family, gathered in a house which suffocates them and pressured by a society which not only imposes rigid norms of respectability but also makes the weakest invisible.

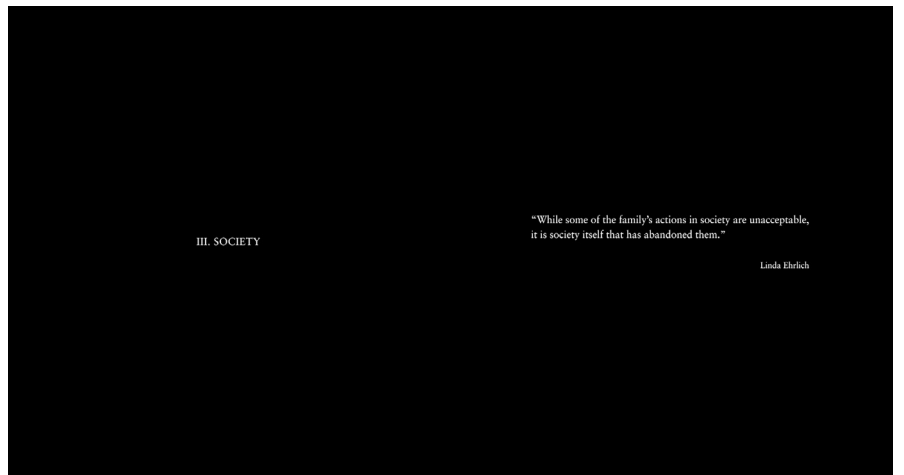
Keywords: Shoplifters; Hirokazu Kore-eda; Audiovisual essay; Melodrama; House; Family; Society.



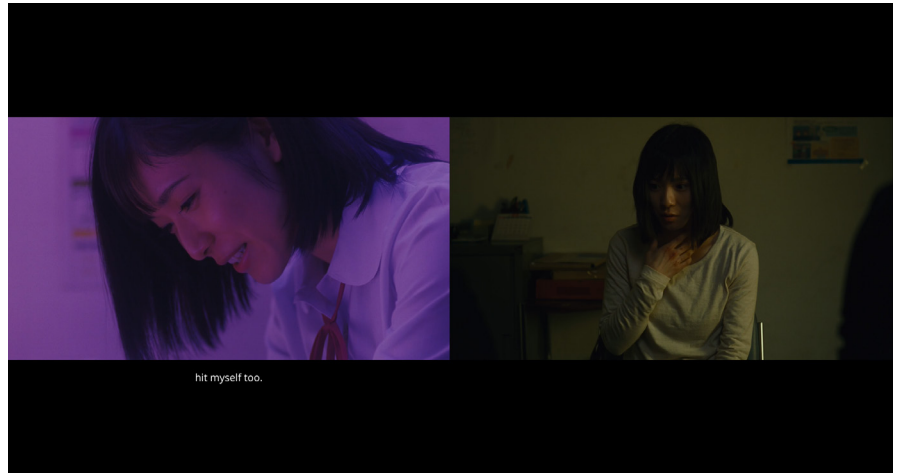














*Shoplifters* is a 2018 feature film directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda. It is about a family with no blood ties living in a low-class neighbourhood in Tokyo who find a girl locked at a balcony in the cold day after day. Understanding that she is being mistreated by her parents, the Shibata family decide to take Yuri in. The audiovisual essay *The Invisible Family* analyses *Shoplifters* according to three key concepts of melodrama: house, family and society. Each one of them, introduced by a quotation, is composed of three diptychs with scenes from the film. Even though melodrama emerged in the western culture, Christine Gledhill (1987, p. 1) considers it to be transcultural, Hannah Airriess (2018, p. 81) defends that it spans across several media and Catherine Russell (1993, p. 143) claims that it has deep roots in the history of Japanese culture, possibly dominating Japanese cinema as a “metagenre”. Analysing *Shoplifters* in light of melodrama conventions provides new insight into the film.

The initial chapter of the audiovisual essay, house, begins with a quotation from Thomas Elsaesser (2003, p. 388), saying that life becomes gradually suffocating for being obstructed with objects and obstacles which invade the characters' personalities, dominating them. In this case, the *mise en scène* becomes functional and integral for the construction of meaning. The first diptych contrasts the balcony where Yuri is locked with the interior of the Shibata's traditional house. While the balcony is lit by a cold blue light, the traditional house is warm, comforting, but also claustrophobic and dirty. The second diptych opposes the apartment under construction which Osamu Shibata, the man, pretends to own with the abandoned car which Shōta Shibata, the boy, uses as a workshop and a refuge. Imagination and reality, side by side, express the wishes of Osamu having a good life and being called dad by Shōta. The third compares the Shibata's house, now empty, with the moment in which a colleague brings Osamu home after he had a work accident. While entering the house, the colleague is surprised by Osamu having a family, since he has never mentioned them. In this diptych, the perennial house coexists with the volatility of the bonds between the Shibata.

The following chapter starts with a quotation in which the director says that the film begins and ends with the formation of the family (Riskier & Kore-eda, 2019, p. 42), an idea which resonates with the thesis of Peter Brooks (1976/1995, pp. 28-32) and of Linda Williams (1998, p. 65) that melodrama begins and ends with the display of innocence. In one of the scenes of the first diptych, Nobuyo Shibata, Osamu's partner, asks the police officer who interrogates her whether giving birth is what turns someone into a mother. The answer is given by the contiguous scene, in which Nobuyo and Yuri burn the pyjamas the latter had when they found her, a gesture which integrates the girl into the family. In the second diptych, Yuri tells Shōta that she wants to be part of them, while Hatsue Shibata, the older woman, and Nobuyo are aware that, sooner or later, everyone will be caught. In the last diptych, Nobuyo and Osamu let the boy go. Only by assuming their errors and

distancing themselves from Shōta for not being good influences might they have become his parents.

The final chapter, society, begins with a quotation in which Linda Ehrlich (2019, p. 208) defends that, despite some of the Shibata's actions being unacceptable, they are victims of society. The first diptych shows the precariousness of Osamu and of Nobuyo's jobs in a country affected by a difficult socioeconomic situation, in which work regulations lack. The second compares the theft of the fishing rods perpetrated by Osamu, Shōta and Yuri to Hatsue usurping the pension of her ex-husband. They are all inside the same aquarium. One day, they will be caught. The third diptych connects the scene in which Aki Shibata, the young woman, is with a customer at a peep show establishment to the one where the police interrogate her after having caught the family. The detectives reveal that Aki was being used by Hatsue after having been excluded by her biological parents. The pathos of Aki at this moment is accentuated by the suffering she and her customer demonstrate on the adjacent scene by sharing their experiences of self-harm. This closing diptych speaks about abandonment and the necessity of coming to grips with it.

The audiovisual essay invites the spectator to relate the concepts of house, family and society with the quotations and the diptychs which appear in each chapter. The small and cluttered houses in *Shoplifters* constrict the characters and render their inner selves visible. As the Shibata fall apart throughout the film, their care and respect for each other grow deeper. The traditional idea of family is, therefore, questioned. Shoplifting and using others are unacceptable in society. However, these are carried out by the Shibata, because their income is not enough to provide for the family. It is, thus, urgent to improve work regulations, to provide more and better employment opportunities and to support families. All in all, the conflict emerges within the family, gathered in a house which suffocates them and pressured by a society which not only imposes rigid norms of respectability but also makes the weakest invisible.

## REFERENCES

Airriess, H. (2018). Global melodrama and transmediality in turn-of-the-century Japan. In C. Gledhill & L. Williams (Eds.), *Melodrama unbound: Across history, media and national cultures* (pp. 69-82). Columbia University Press.

Brooks, P. (1995). *The melodramatic imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess*. Yale University Press.

Ehrlich, L. (2019). *The films of Kore-eda Hirokazu: An elemental cinema*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Elsaesser, T. (2003). Tales of sound and fury: Observations on the family melodrama. In B. K. Grant (Ed.), *Film genre reader III* (pp. 366-395). University of Texas Press.

Gledhill, C. (1987). Introduction. In C. Gledhill (Ed.), *Home is where the heart is: Studies in melodrama and the woman's film* (pp. 1-4). British Film Institute.

Riskier, P., & Kore-eda, H. (2019). Questioning the nature of family bonds: An interview with Hirokazu Kore-eda. *Cinéaste*, 44(2), 42-43. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26664273>

Russell, C. (1993). Insides and outsides: Cross-cultural criticism and Japanese film melodrama. In W. Dissanayake (Ed.), *Melodrama and Asian cinema* (pp. 143-154). Cambridge University Press.

Williams, L. (1998). Melodrama revised. In N. Browne (Ed.), *Refiguring American film genres: History and theory* (pp. 42-88). University of California Press.

Audiovisual essay received on 16/11/2021 and accepted on 14/12/2021.

[Creative Commons Attribution License](#) | This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.