Koreeda's Nobody Knows: The Structure of a Fictional Documentary

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Abstract

Koreeda Hirokazu's 2004 film *Nobody Knows,* although inspired by a real event, is a work of fiction that approaches its subject in a way that, due both to the unconventional circumstances of its filming, and to its apparently straightforward, naturalistic plot, looks like that of a documentary. This paper examines a number of motifs – the monorail, suitcases and other bags, a tear, the telephone, the landing of the children's apartment, bills, nail polish, and hands – that give the film not only structural coherence, but also powerful symbolic weight.

Key words: Japanese film, Koreeda Hirokazu, documentary, fiction

Introduction: documentary and fiction

"Documentary" is a word that is all but impossible to avoid in writing on the films of Koreeda Hirokazu, particularly his early features, including *Nobody Knows* (*Dare mo shiranai*, 2004).[1] One critic of the film (Hoffman, 2010) uses the word in three forms, arguing that it is a "straightforward, documentary-like depiction" of its characters' lives, which "patiently documents" their slow decline, but also noting that that those lives are themselves "undocumented". Other critics to use the term include Russell (2004), Jacoby (2008) and the *Time Out London* review of the film ("Nobody Knows," 2004). Koreeda himself has used the word liberally to describe his approach to film-making. In an interview with the *Asahi Evening News*, cited by Richie (2005, p. 246), he explains that "I'm strongly interested in the line between fiction and documentary … In this film I want to capture that moment in between these two".[2] Refering specifically to *Nobody Knows*, he gives details of the techniques involved in an interview with *Midnight Eye* (Sato, 2004), in which he describes modifying the actor-driven, un-storyboarded, handheld camera approach of his previous film *Distance* (2001) in a fictional context, with a screenplay, storyboards and a fixed camera – here, as Schilling (2004) notes, the director is "not just a fly on the wall with a camera" – but also with an unusual, real-time shooting schedule taking place over one year, and incorporating improvisation by the cast. In another interview a year later, Koreeda hints at the thematic reasons behind

1 Except in quotations from external sources, Japanese names are given in the Japanese order of family name followed by first name, throughout this paper, with macrons used to indicate long vowel sounds when transliterating Japanese names and words. Koreeda's name is variously Romanized; the form "Koreeda" is used throughout the body of the paper, but in its variant forms in quotations and references.

2 Richie includes this quotation in his discussion of *Nobody Knows*, but gives the date of the interview as 1999; "this film" cannot therefore be *Nobody Knows*, but may be *After Life* (1998).

these seemingly technical decisions: "By blending elements of documentary and fiction styles, I learned how to show a fuller picture of characters' lives" (Cacoulidis, 2005). This analysis is expanded upon by Dawson (2008), who argues that:

> Koreeda's background in documentary filmmaking doesn't always manifest itself on screen visually … This background more commonly manifests itself on screen thematically - the majority of his films deal with real-life situations, some are inspired or based on real events like *Distance* and *Nobody Knows*, others are deeply personal portrayals of a group of individuals.

Although considerably removed from it in time, and – as Koreeda explains in his own notes on the film (2005) – having evolved considerably during that period, *Nobody Knows* is openly based on a real event that took place in Japan in 1988, the Sugamo child-abandonment incident (*Sugamo Kodomo Okizari Jiken* – 巣鴨子供置き去り事件). Reading like the "all persons ficticious" legal disclaimers that often appear at the end of the closing credits of Hollywood movies, its opening captions tell the viewer that "Although this film was inspired by actual events that took place in Tokyo, the details and characters portrayed in this film are entirely fictional".[3]

Koreeda's background in documentary film-making leads him to eschew both sensationalism and overt didacticism – as he had done, according to Mes and Sharp (2005, p. 207) in his early television documentary about suicide, *However* (*Shikashi… fukushi kirisute no jidai ni*, 1991) – in favour of an approach that is sympathetic, but also meticulous and calm, making the film for the viewer something like "a disturbing waking-dream" (Russell, 2004), or a "punishing immersion in impotent dread" (Scott, 2005). It is the technique of scrutiny itself that achieves this effect. In Richie's words (2005, p. 246): "Kore'eda piles one observation on top of another until the weight crushes all this innocence" – but this accumulation of details is neither random nor entirely naturalistic. *Nobody Knows* may "lack … the usual structuring" (Schilling, 2004), but this is not to say that it lacks any structure. In fact, it is a film packed with structure and symbols.

Structures and symbols

The monorail

Nobody Knows starts at the beginning of its story, and simply continues until it reaches the end of its allotted portion of events. There is little complexity of plot: the camera is turned on the characters and left to run in an linear fashion. Almost, but not entirely linear, as Koreeda does make one deviation from chronology, and this deviation comes immediately after the opening captions, from 0:00:16 to 0:01:20, as we are shown first a long-shot of the interior of the Tokyo Monorail at night, all but empty save for two seated children, then a close-up of the dirty hands of one of the children, resting on a pink suitcase and moving back and forth on its surface as if stroking it, then the head and shoulders of the boy himself, looking down at the suitcase, in a grubby, worn-out T-shirt. There is no music, and the only sound is the faint, rhythmical clanking of the monorail itself. The camera sways along with the carriage; and it

3 References to *Nobody Knows*, including dialogue translations, are to the Bandai Visual (2005) R2 DVD release of the film. Other films referred to in this paper are given the most commonly used English title listed by the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), with full Japanese titles given in the Filmography.

looks away after focusing on the boy's face for ten seconds, to the interior of the train again, and finally dissolving out into the urban blackness, and then into the film's title caption. Taking up little more than a minute at the beginning of a film that runs to nearly two hours and 20 minutes, the scene might well go unnoticed, or be forgotten by a first-time viewer – but it is revisited at the end of the film. This time, the monorail interior is barely glimpsed (2:08:12 to 2:08:28) but its context is now revealed. The pink suitcase is carried gently and carefully passed down the steps of the apartment building (2:06:52), trundled slowly through the shopping arcade (2:07:30), and then carried down the steps of the monorail station, through a tide of passengers (2:07:43). By now, we know its contents and its significance: it contains the body of a five-year-old girl on her way to be buried, by her twelve-year-old brother and his high-school-age friend, in a hand-dug grave in a field near the runway of Haneda Airport.

The monorail appears again at the halfway point of the film (1:06:10). Akira (Yagira Yūya) and his sister Yuki (Shimizu Momoko) stand and watch it at night on Yuki's birthday walk, Akira telling his sister that "It goes to Haneda Airport. Someday, let's get on and go see the planes". The scenes that immediately follow this halfway point are crucial. Akira plays in the park on his own. The elder sister Kyoko (Kitaura Ayu) examines the handwriting on her *otoshidama* (New Year's money) envelopes, noting the difference between that of previous years and that purporting to be from her mother but written instead by a convenience store clerk at Akira's behest. Yuki climbs onto a chair, the same action that will eventually lead to her death. The younger boy of the family, Shigeru (Kimura Hiei), breaks the house rules and goes out onto the balcony. Finally, we see Akira again, following other boys into a game centre instead of returning straight home with the shopping to his brother and sisters. The children's world has changed irrevocably, because their mother – who has already left them on their own for a month – has abandoned them, to start a new life. The monorail punctuates the film, dividing the children's lives into two periods: that in which there is a mother, or her absence and return, or at least the hope of her return; and that in which there is none of these things.

Suitcases and other bags

As it begins and ends on the monorail, *Nobody Knows* begins and ends with bags. The two youngest children are smuggled into the apartment into suitcases, Shigeru in a pink hard case that is bumped up the stairs, and Yuki in a smaller, brown, zipped bag made by Luis Vuitton, the virtually ubiquitous brand of choice of young Japanese women, and the same brand of bag that their mother Keiko (You) takes with her on her second departure. For the younger children, and maybe for their mother, the child-bag-smuggling is a game-like experience:

Akira: Just hold on, Shigeru.
Keiko: Shall we let Shigeru out… [laughs]
Akira: I'll let you out.
Keiko: Here comes the noisy boy. Was it hot?
Shigeru: Super hot.

Later on (0:09:14), Keiko tells Shigeru that he should get "get in the suitcase" if he is going to throw a tantrum. Innocent banter, perhaps, but coming as it does after the children have been made to promise not to leave the apartment, the image of confinement within confinement is an uncomfortable one. Keiko proves herself to be unaware of the symbolism of bags, later giving Yuki an animal-shaped bag as a present, telling her, "You can carry it on your back … Like a backpack. You can put your things inside" (0:43:58).

Keiko cannot, of course, continue her comment with "when you go out for a walk", and the gift is ultimately rather inappropriate for a child who is not allowed to go outside. It is not Keiko but Akira whose hand strokes Shigeru's suitcase nervously at 0:03:07, as he will do again when it contains the body of his sister. Yuki in death will not fit into the brown bag that originally brought her into the apartment, for her final journey out of it, and it is Shigeru's pink suitcase that must serve as her coffin. "Guess Yuki… grew" (2:06:06), her sister observes: the growth of a child unremarked until she is dead, her height measured not by pencil-marks on a door frame but by the bag into which her body must be folded.

A tear, and the telephone

Yuki's death may be the narrative climax of the film, but its presentation is calm and unsensational, in contrast to the grotesqueness of its details: her mother present only in the form of an envelope full of cash, her body stuffed into a suitcase with a few pitiful possessions (a toy animal, squeaky slippers, a plentiful supply of "Apollo Choco"[4]), carried on public transport through the metropolis, and buried in shallow ground at an airport. The children hold a simple ceremony, without words and by candlelight, although by now they have no electricity, of course. Earlier (2:04:58) Kyoko has been shown as perhaps on the verge of crying, although we do not see an actual tear fall.

In fact, only one tear is seen to be shed in the whole film, and not by one of the abandoned children. Koreeda notes in his interview with Sato (2004) not only that crying would be "useless" for the oldest boy, Akira – "He's not in a position to cry" – but also that the relative lack of tears was a directorial decision: "I didn't want the film to become sentimental. That was my bottom line, because I didn't set out to just tell a sad story". Instead, the film's sole tear is shed by the children's mother. Lying in her futon in the morning light, watched by Akira, it wells up in her eye and is about to begin to trickle down her cheek (0:20:42) when she (with intentional timing?) sits up and stretches to begin the day. A very similar tear had been shed by Noriko (Hara Setsuko), the heroine of Ozu Yasujirō's *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō monogatari*, 1953; 1:15:30). Keiko's tear, like Noriko's, is an expression of hidden sadness that leaks out from an exterior of assumed cheer, but Keiko cannot come to a Noriko-like acceptance that life is disappointing as a way of dealing with her burden of responsibilities, and instead abandons them. Accused of selfishness by her son Akira, her response is to pout and ask him, "What is this? I'm not allowed to be happy?" (1:49:33), shortly before leaving her children for the second and final time.

Koreeda's debt to Ozu has been highlighted particularly in regard to his subsequent film, *Still Walking* (*Aruitemo aruitemo*, 2008) – although Koreeda himself seems rather diffident about the extent and nature of the influence (Jenkins, 2010) – but it is also evident here. Richie for example, argues that as with Ozu, "from whom Kore'eda has learned much, the decomposition of the Japanese family is the major theme" (2005, p. 246). Koreeda's family is in an advanced state of decomposition: Keiko's children all have different fathers, with Yuki's paternity uncertain and brusquely denied by one potential candidate: "By the way, Yuki's not my kid. Every time I did it with your mom, I used a condom. Bye, then" (0:41:18). In fact, we barely see a single conventional, whole family throughout the film; instead, we glimpse a number of fragments. There is a small boy left on his own in a car in a pachinko parlour car-park, presumably while his mother or father is inside playing pachinko (0:39:30). There is the recently remarried landlord, who

4 The favourite of the actor playing Yuki, according to Koreeda's note that accompanies the DVD of *Nobody Knows* (2005), and which therefore replaced the originally scripted chocolate.

takes little time to express his views, or those of the neighbourhood, on children – "Once you get to this age [12 years old], it's fine, but little ones, well, other tenants tend to complain about them" (0:02:00) – and his second wife, seldom seen without her pet dog in her arms, and which she caresses lovingly as she turns her back on, and walks away from the squalor of the abandoned children's apartment in one of the most disturbing scenes in the film (1:44:00). The other children in the film – Saki (Kan Hanae), and Akira's friends – must be presumed to have parents, but they are never seen.

Yet it is also the preservation and creation of "families" that lies behind the tragedy of *Nobody Knows*. Akira reveals in a conversation with the convenience store clerk (1:23:43) that his decision to keep their abandonment a secret from the authorities springs from his determination that the children should not be separated:

Clerk: Shouldn't you contact the police or child welfare, or something?
Akira: If I do, the four of us won't be able to stay together.
That happened before and it was an awful mess.
Clerk: I see…

Keiko's second and final abandonment comes when she starts a new family. Unlike Masao in Kitano Takeshi's *Kikujiro* (*Kikujirō no natsu*, 1999), also abandoned by his mother (although he is at least left in the care of his grandmother), Keiko's children are not exposed to the sight of their mother with her new family, but Akira at least hears of it: firstly from his mother before she leaves (0:23:06):

Keiko: Your mother is in love with someone now.
Akira: Again?
Keiko: Not again. This guy's really sweet and serious. I think he's really looking out for me.
So, if he promises to really… to really marry me, then we can all live in a big house and you can all go to school, and Kyoko can play the piano. So just hang on a little longer. I really think this time probably…

He asks her directly about it on the way to the station for her second departure (0:48:11):

Akira: Did you tell the man you're seeing about us?
Keiko: [after a pause] I told you, I'll tell him eventually…

The other contacts with that other family take place on the telephone, a means of communication whose purpose is never realized successfully throughout the film.When Akira calls his mother's workplace at 0:55:50 he manages to talk to someone, but not to Keiko, who is no longer there. At other times, though, there is no conversation. He calls someone between the first and second abandonments, at 0:39:20, but we hear nothing of the call, nor whether it is successful. After Keiko has left for the second time, at New Year, Akira calls directory enquiries and obtains his mother's new phone number (0:58:30). A woman's voice answers (Keiko's? One cannot be entirely sure), but gives a different family name, and Akira says nothing. When, in extreme need, after Yuki's death, he does manage to speak to Keiko's new husband, who goes to fetch her, Akira's money runs out before anything can be said (2:00:45). By the end of the film, public telephones are not loci of connection, just places where, if he is lucky, Shigeru might find a forgotten coin.

The apartment landing

The landing outside the front door of the apartment in *Nobody Knows* functions like the corridor in Ozu's films, as a transitional space in which the static camera is set, and through which characters pass, leaving it empty at the beginning, or empty after they have left it. It appears nine times throughout the

film. At 0:03:30 Akira and his mother appear and walk towards the apartment end where the camera is. A few minutes later, at 0:06:35, Akira and Kyoko run away from the camera toward the apartment and enter, disappearing from the frame. The camera is again at the stairs end at 0:11:30, looking at the apartment door as it opens; Akira comes out and leaves some cardboard packaging from their move, before going back inside. The landing appears completely empty of people only once, at 0:28:04, in an Ozu-like establishing shot; this dawn scene marks the transition between family life and abandonment, immediately preceding Akira's discovery of Keiko's letter explaining that "Your mother's going away for a little while" and asking him to "Please look after Kyoko, Shigeru and Yuki". We hear the sounds of a father and child playing catch together outside; the sounds of a normal family life which Akira and his siblings are denied.

The landing does not reappear until after the second abandonment. At 1:03:15, Akira and Yuki walk away from the camera on their way to the stairs. The scene cuts away, then they are seen again descending the stairs, leaving the corridor empty; a furtive escape. Here, and then again at 1:22:42, the landing has become a place of risk – the risk of encountering someone who will discover the children's concealed existence. This time, Akira comes up the stairs to see a delivery man at their front door. He hides until the man has gone; inside the apartment, the other children also hide in silence, from the sounds from outside that threaten their exposure. At 1:25:27, the landing is temporarily the scene of joy, as the children run out of the front door together, towards the camera and down the stairs: the joy of escape, and of abandonment of a different kind, the abandonment of the rules of confinement and secrecy that have been imposed on them. Real as it is, though – and despite all its horrors, the children's lives do have their moments of happiness – this joyful release is just a temporary one. By its next appearance at 1:44:00, the landing has again become a scene of indifference and alienation, the backdrop for the landlady's shrug of indifference referred to above. Finally, when at 1:55:18 Akira storms out of the apartment and off down the stairs, disappearing, the camera lingers on the empty landing after his departure, and the sense of alienation remains: Akira's back has been turned throughout.

There is clearly a major difference in the way this landing/corridor is used compared to its role in the films of Ozu. In Ozu's films the corridor is a *roka*, an indoor space that is "the avenue of traffic inside a Japanese house … with members of the family coming into view and disappearing as they move about the house" (Richie, 1974, p. 117), whereas in *Nobody Knows* it is semi-public space. There are other doors, into other apartments, but nobody ever goes into or comes out of them. The children are almost as anonymous just outside their own front door as they are in the bustling city arcade through which they pass on their way to the shops or the station. When meetings of residents do take place – such as the brief exchange of New Year's greetings at 0:59:00, women chatting at 1:30:30 watched by the hiding children, mothers discussing their children's grades at 1:48:08, and a scene in which Akira, taking Yuki out for a walk as a birthday treat, meets the landlord's wife and tells her that his sister is, in fact, his cousin visiting from the country (1:03:58) – they occur at the bottom of the communal staircase, away from the doors of individual households and families.

Spaces in the film, then, are almost always entirely public, or entirely private, with few characters other than children ever crossing the boundaries into private spaces that are not their own. Akira's friends visit his apartment; their parents never do. He never visits them. Saki is a regular visitor, but Akira never goes beyond the front gate of her house (1:40:30). After the removal men have left, the landlord's wife is the only adult other than Keiko herself to enter the apartment, and she never comes beyond the doorway.

Bills, nail polish and hands

Even when they can enjoy something approaching a conventional family life with their single mother, the children in *Nobody Knows* are denied their major opportunity for meaningful contact between public and private worlds: the chance to go to school. Akira, Kyoko and Shigeru should be in compulsory education, but Keiko blusters and procrastinates when challenged about this. Akira studies at home: elementary Japanese, for example, at 0:17:14. Later, an elementary school maths problem has him working out simple sums based on shopping: "I spent 674 yen at the supermarket. I have 650 yen left in my wallet. How many yen were in my wallet to begin with?" (0:42:22). By this stage, though, he has already begun managing the family budget for himself in reality. The bills that have to be paid mark the decline in the structure of the children's lives. At 0:35:00, Akira carefully sticks the bills from their daily expenditure into a notebook, but by 1:14:52 the overdue gas bill has become a drawing pad for Kyoko. At 1:24:20 the bills are on the kitchen table. Akira counts the money to settle them, and this prompts Kyoko to hand over the money she has been saving to buy a piano: the abandonment of a child's dream. Finally, at 1:36:30 an announcement of the suspension of their water supply lies on the table amongst coins, stumps of crayon, food wrappers and other assorted litter. At 1:37:35, Yuki – who cannot, of course, even read or understand its contents – is drawing a picture on the water bill: the children's ability to cope in an adult world has reached its limits.

As Akira does the household accounts at 0:35:00, the focus shifts to his sister Kyoko's hands: their nail polish has faded and chipped. This nail polish was an exciting glimpse into the adult world, a moment of intimacy with her mother; and the transience of this moment was exposed just the morning after it had been shared, as first Kyoko's gaze, and then that of the camera, lingers on her painted nails as, doing the washing on the balcony, she absorbs the news from Akira of their mother's departure (0:30:40). When Keiko returns after a month, Kyoko takes the nail polish out again (0:45:35), spilling it, and being scolded for her carelessness:

Keiko: What are you doing? Don't touch my things. It's your fault. It won't come out…
Kyoko: Where were you really, mother?
Keiko: I told you I was working.
Kyoko: A whole month?
Keiko: I was in Osaka. It was just too far. I told you not to touch my things.

After this, Kyoko draws the brush across the side of her finger, the red nail polish like the blood from a cut, and smears it away. Later, at Christmas, she traces its stain on the floor at 0:53:08, the symbol of a broken promise and a disillusionment (the leg of Kyoko's piano is broken, too), and perhaps a foreshadowing of the tragedy to come. Next to Yuki's hand on the tatami mat as she lies unconscious after falling from the chair (1:59:50) is a bright red drop of what could be nail polish, or blood. The nail polish is simultaneously a naturalistic detail, and a powerful symbol, simply the most marked way in which the film draws attention to the children's hands. Akira's in particular document their tragedy, clean on Shigeru's suitcase at the beginning of the story (0:03:13), but grubby and with dirty nails on Yuki's suitcase/coffin in what is almost the first image of the film (0:00:40), and then soil-covered and shaking with grief and exhaustion after burying his sister close to its end (2:11:20).

Conclusion: something like a documentary

Nobody Knows makes no claim to be a documentary, and its fictional nature is foregrounded from the opening shot of the film. Its documentary-like qualities have attracted critical attention, and the unconventional way in which the film was shot, along with its lack both of a complex plot and of evidence of a overtly manipulative or didactic directorial hand, gives it an air of realism. It is, in fact, a highly structured film, but the structure derives from Koreeda's skillful deployment of a number of small details – the monorail, suitcases and other bags, a tear, the telephone, the apartment landing, bills, nail polish, and hands – which are in themselves nothing more than the minutiae of the characters' lives, but which gain through reiteration and subtle development a crushing symbolic weight.

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