

FILM REVIEWS

Nobody Knows (Dare mo shiranai)

Director/writer/editor: Hirokazu Kore-eda. Cinematographer: Yutaka Yamazaki. IFC Films.

Small children smuggled into an apartment in suitcases. Four children, between the ages of four and twelve, each with a different (indifferent) father. A mother who is sometimes there, more often gone, and then finally gone forever with the new “love of her life”—a man who surely doesn’t know these children exist.

In most films that have children as characters (*Cinema Paradiso*, *E.T.*, *The Chorus*), the child’s world is filtered through an adult’s perspective. With *Nobody Knows* (2004), by Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda (*Maborosi* [1995], *After Life* [1998]), there are few adults of note—a playful mother living in a permanent state of illusion, a few sympathetic convenience-store clerks, a high-school baseball coach, a landlord couple, and a bevy of fathers. But none of them appears on screen for long or plays more than a temporary, fleeting role.

Based on an actual story Kore-eda read in a newspaper article, the film introduces us to four siblings—two girls (ten-year-old Kyoko [Ayu Kitaura] and four-year-old Yuki [Momoko Shimizu]), and two boys

(twelve-year-old Akira [Yuya Yagira] and seven-year-old Shigeru [Hiei Kimura])—each of whom has a different father. The children are left to fend for themselves in a small Tokyo apartment when their mother (Keiko Fukushima, played by a TV personality known simply as “You”) disappears with a new man. Akira then takes over the running of the household in the absence of any adult figure. Left to their own devices, the children play in construction sites and convenience stores, while attempting to hide from the view of the landlords and welfare officials. (Later, Akira confides to one sympathetic adult that, in an earlier living situation, they had been split up by welfare officials and it was “terrible.”)

As harrowing as the situation filmed by Kore-eda becomes, the actual story is even more shocking. The 1988 “Affair of the Four Abandoned Children of Nishi-Sugamo” (*Nishi-sugamo kodomo okizari jiken*) found four children, of different fathers, living on their own for six months after their mother had left the scene. There was also a fifth child, a baby whose decomposing body was found in the Nishi-sugamo apartment, and the fourth child was discovered dead in the mountains, a crime blamed on the oldest boy. According to closed-door court records, the eldest boy—upon seeing his mother again in court—cried and apologized to her that he could not take care of his siblings as she had expected. Reading newspaper statements from the actual trial involving the Nishi-sugamo children, Kore-eda sensed that there was something that took place in that



On the whirligig:
Hiei Kimura as Shigeru

apartment that demonstrated the richness of a child's sense of compassion and ingenuity: "I intended to express that with words other than 'hell.'"¹

Kore-eda's original screenplay (whose first draft, entitled "Wonderful Sunday," was written over 15 years ago) takes place across four seasons and—following what really happened—was filmed during the autumn and winter; then the director had to wait until spring and summer vacations to complete the filming with his student-actors.² Before filming the summer sequences, the director asked the children to draw pictures of the apartment as they remembered it—the verandah, *genkan* (area inside the door), walls. This helped him develop the plot for the summer episodes, and also helped him recall the space as the children had perceived it.

Kore-eda decided not to give the children any specific dialogue to learn; rather, he whispered each line to them just before filming a scene. He also did not tell them in advance how the story would develop. (His working process was to edit one season's section, and then—based on the edit—revise his writing for the next season's section.) By not giving his first-time child actors set lines to memorize, he hoped to create an atmosphere in which going to film was like going to play. Nevertheless, he noted how the main actor, Yuya Yagira, matured over the course of a year just like his character. (Kore-eda was at first somewhat surprised when Yagira,

a child who had been instructed *not* to act, but only to respond, won the award for Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival—the first Japanese and the youngest person ever to do so.)

To be "seen but not heard" has been the fate of generations of children. However, a handful of films have given those unseen and unheard children a voice. In making *Nobody Knows*, Kore-eda claimed influence from films like Truffaut's *400 Blows* (1959)—the freeze frame at the end of *Nobody Knows* surely calls to mind the ending of the Truffaut film—and the 1969 British film *Kes*, by Kenneth Loach. But to listen to childhood is not always to listen for what one expects to hear, or even for what one wants to hear. Kore-eda is rigorous in his willingness to listen to childhood's silence, to the silence that surrounds the flood of words and the flurry of everyday actions. Listening to childhood includes listening to what remains unsaid.

The basic setting in *Nobody Knows* reflects the space of the actual incident reported in the newspaper. The oldest son can move around the neighborhood freely, but the other three children are confined to the apartment because the landlords are not aware of their existence. (In an opening scene, the landlords tell the mother and Akira that the neighbors wouldn't want "noisy little children" around.) Kyoko, Shigeru, and Yuki watch from a window as other children play outside. Yuki, the youngest one, seems oblivious at first to



Alone together:
Ayu Kitaura as Kyoko and
Momoko Shimizu as Yuki

the chaos around her, but her drawing of a girl with long curly hair is later revealed to be her rendition of the absent mother. When Akira takes Yuki out of the apartment for her birthday (and indulgently lets her wear her favorite "squeaky" sandals, despite the noise), she recites the names of the stores and objects she passes as if they were magical incantations. Little Shigeru, the most clownish child, invents excuses to venture further and further out onto the apartment's narrow verandah.

Akira does not choose his new responsibility. "Commissioned" by his mother to serve as the leader of a mismatched group of half-siblings, he rises to his appointed role out of necessity.³ He is the only one who confronts the errant mother, albeit briefly, to find out if she has truly told her new lover about her four children. He knows the answer before she even offers an evasive reply. At one point, enraged at her lengthy absence, he pulls all her remaining clothes out of the closet to sell.

As funds disappear, Akira tracks down the different fathers he can find—a cab driver, a lackey in a Pachinko parlor. He senses their worthlessness, yet hopes against hope in his desperate attempt to hold the family together. All he gets for his efforts is a meal, small change, and vulgar talk about his mother. In an interview, Kore-eda offers no excuses for the fathers, but is more charitable in his thoughts toward the mother ("She was the victim of her particular circumstance and maybe she loved her children in her own way").

Akira is accused of shoplifting at the 7-11 store where he frequently stands and reads *manga* (comic books) for free. Only the sharp eyes of a young clerk notice that other boys put the stolen goods in Akira's bag ("nobody knows" does not *always* equal "nobody cares"). When another clerk becomes aware of Akira's increasingly frantic efforts to keep the family together, he saves leftovers from the store's food counter for him. Akira waits at the back of the store with his blue bucket to receive the handouts. (This is the same bucket the children use to wash out their clothes in the neighborhood park once their water is shut off.)

At one point, the mother returns briefly with small gifts for each child. She paints ten-year-old Kyoko's fingernails, but then berates her when the girl inadvertently spills the bottle of polish. A few days later, the only trace of the mother is that stain on the floor.

For children in such an extreme situation, happiness resides in small things—the smell of fresh *tatami* mats upon moving into the new apartment, seeds gathered from a discarded plant that germinate in empty ramen cups and grow on the verandah. One of the

plants falls off the ledge, foreshadowing more serious accidents to follow. The passage of time is marked by small changes—the deepening of Akira's voice, the switch from frozen hands in winter to skin streaked with sweat in summer. As resources become more and more stretched, the children use whatever they can find for drawing paper, including the overdue gas bill.

In one ecstatic sequence, all four children venture out surreptitiously as a group. The camera revolves around them as they play on the whirlygig in the public park near their apartment. This is not the exuberant rebelliousness found in Jean Vigo's *Zero for Conduct* (*Zéro de conduite* [1933]), though it shares with the French film the sheer joy of movement after being cooped up for a long time. It also calls to mind the scene in *400 Blows* when the "unruly child" Antoine joyously spins around on the large wooden cylindrical drum ("The Roter") in an amusement center. Akira practices baseball by himself in the park, using a fallen branch for a bat, and later is invited by a high-school baseball coach to fill in for an absent player. Standing behind the boy and guiding his hand on the bat, the coach offers a moment of connection between the young boy and an adult.

In the background of all of Hirokazu Kore-eda's films hovers the slow revelation of inner depths, often circling around an inexplicable loss—the suicide of a young husband (*Maborosi*); the death of family members who belonged to a murderous cult (*Distance* [2001]); the inevitable fading of memory (*After Life*); Kore-eda's documentaries, shot with his distinctive style of objective camerawork and subjective presence, cover a wide range of topics—from AIDS in Japan (*August Without Him* [*Kare no inai hachigatsu*, 1993]) to the plight of a Korean trying to pass as Japanese (*I Wanted to Be a Japanese* [*Nihonjin ni naritakatta*, 1992]) to a group of rural schoolchildren with a unique classroom project (*Lessons from a Calf—The Education of One Class at Ina Elementary School* [*Mo hitotsu no kyoiku*, 1991]). One of his most powerful documentaries, *Without Memory* (*Kioku ga ushinawareta toki* [1966]), opens a window onto the personal hell of a young man suffering from a rare kind of short-term memory loss.

In their introduction to *Trauma and Cinema*, E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang outline four main positions for viewers of films about traumatic situations. The one that seems most appropriate for viewers of all of Kore-eda's films is the fourth, that of a witness, a triangular structure involving the horror, the victim, and the listener/viewer.⁵ (This is also the only viewing



Maborosi: Playing on the beach—"a little danger"

position Kaplan and Wang identify with the possibility of feelings of compassion.) All Kore-eda's feature films, and many of his documentaries, are about a compassionate listening to people who live "betwixt and between," but he is more interested in depicting survivors than victims. Within seemingly straightforward stories, he unearths insights into human resilience. In *Nobody Knows*, he took a sensational news story and imagined its depths.

A scene in Kore-eda's first feature film, *Maborosi*, foreshadows his portrayal of children in *Nobody Knows*. In that earlier scene, the protagonist Yumiko's son and new step-daughter explore the beach of Sosogi, on the rough Japan Sea coast. The small children play among some dead branches and discarded boats; then they run through a dark tunnel. Kore-eda comments:

Some people just say the children are adorable. Others say it's a beautiful scene, and this is all fine. But what I intended was for people to feel a little danger in that scene—to smell a bit of death.⁶

The precarious situation of *Nobody Knows* is bound to head toward disaster. The apartment that at first seemed crowded but workable becomes more and more run-down. Akira's visiting "friends" (tough kids who take advantage of his loneliness) mumble about the stench of garbage. Tempers flare as the temperature outside rises. In this day-to-day existence, the children are truly alone in the apartment; like "beings on a raft lost in the immensity of the world."⁷ As the situation in the apartment deteriorates, Kore-eda decenters more and more of the shots, stressing the children's vulnerability. And yet an odd balance is restored each time

through Akira's small but heroic efforts. It is only at the most tragic moments, when death strikes the precarious family, that an open framing leaves the children without any defining structures around them, truly vulnerable to the elements and to the city (shown as a dizzying array of lights). At the grimmest moments, Kore-eda adjusts the lighting so that it is either blindingly bright (and matched by a shaky hand-held camera) or grotesquely shadowed. The effect is eerie and profoundly moving.

So many questions remain about the children of *Nobody Knows*—never having attended school, never having spent time with their fathers, not even properly registered at birth: What thoughts do they wake up to each morning? What do they do all day in their narrow confine? How do they mark the passing of their days? When Kyoko quietly implores her mother to send her to school, the mother (in a rare moment of realistic reflection) reminds her that "kids at school make fun of kids without dads." The freeze frame at the end of the film of four children walking away from the camera refuses to offer any tidy ending to this engrossing tale, yet it also does not close off the possibility of change.

When pressed to state what his film might accomplish, Kore-eda ventures that he hopes it will inspire people to pay more attention to the children around them. As one reviewer noted in dismay: "Even when the rent goes unpaid and they are left without electricity and water, [the children] still fail to register on the radar of anyone's concern."⁸ While I agree with the many reviewers who consider the film to be a validation of the children themselves rather than a condemnation of the mother or society at large, I feel sure that there is a subtle, but insistent, anger at work here. After all, Kore-eda does not title the film "Four Abandoned Children," but rather, "Nobody Knows." Of course the title refers to the fact that nobody knew the children were living in the apartment, yet might it not also remind us that nobody knew what really was going on inside those children? Children cannot grow without some degree of psychological safety; when sheer survival is a child's constant struggle, nobody knows where such a childhood disappears.

One might be tempted to see the film as a sociological statement documenting the movement from a traditional philosophy of *kodakara* (literally "child treasure") to the current rise in reported cases of child neglect and abuse in contemporary Japan. The so-called *kyoiku mama* (literally "education mama") of postwar Japan, whose whole existence is focused on getting her child into the best university, and the legend

of the perfectly behaved Japanese student have increasingly been nudged out of the spotlight by news articles about broken families and sadistic bullying in school. Stories of parental abuse and neglect appear in Japanese newspapers with painful frequency. This rise in reported incidents of parental abuse has been attributed to many factors: the foregrounding of consumer culture and a concomitant need for instant gratification; the reliance on *konbini* (convenience stores) by *tenuki okusan* (literally, "hands-off" wives) without the time or energy for traditional elaborate cooking; the growing sense that the schools have become verbal and physical battlegrounds, and so on. While Japan does not suffer from the inadequate health insurance and wild fluctuations in funding for public education found in the U.S., it is undergoing what sociologist Merry White has aptly termed "an era of upheaval."⁹

While inspired in part by those kinds of sociopolitical problems, *Nobody Knows* subtly reminds us that children are compelling individuals. The director stresses what these children have, not what they lack. In fact, we measure our own lives not by our greater prosperity and stability, but by how enriched we have become in sharing the children's resolve and hope for the future—what the director refers to as their two main qualities: *takumashisa* (sturdiness, resoluteness) and *kowareyasusa* (vulnerability, literally "being easily broken"). As Japanese film scholar Aaron Gerow perceptively observes: "In the distance between our world and that of these children, we realize we have come out on the wrong end of Kore-eda's profoundly detailed exploration of reality in cinema."¹⁰

To those on the outside, unaware of the sacrifices involved, the four children in *Nobody Knows* appear dirty, unkempt, oddly silent. Kore-eda opens another door onto their world. Recognizing their ingenuity, their profound desire for "normal life," we are shocked at the outside world's limited perspective. Kore-eda focuses on the children's fundamental goodness. In one scene, the increasingly withdrawn Kyoko—aware that they are out of funds—quietly gives Akira the money she was saving to buy a real piano, her one dream. The director makes space for the children's sense of ceremony. This calls to mind another great film told primarily from a child's point-of-view: René Clément's *Forbidden Games* (*Jeux interdits* [1952]). André Bazin noted that Clément did not judge the two children, Michel and Paulette, as they struggled to make sense of life in wartime France through their elaborate burial procedures for pets and other small animals.¹¹ Kore-eda also does not play the role of the moralist or the

teacher; rather he takes on the role of novelist of the children's lives. We are amazed at the children's sense of ritual in the face of death, especially in the case of children who are themselves living on the edge.

From its inception, the cinema has been quick to depict the sentimentalized child, the violent child, the feral child, the child genius. Less frequently do we see a child's simple magnanimity—often expressed as nothing more than a telling gesture. Recall, for example, the reassuring way little Bruno slips his hand into the hand of his humiliated father (*Bicycle Thieves* [*Ladri di biciclette*, Vittorio de Sica, 1948]), or how Scout gracefully escorts a painfully withdrawn Boo Radley back to his house after he has saved the children's lives (*To Kill a Mockingbird* [Robert Mulligan, 1962]). In Kohei Oguri's *Muddy River* (*Doro no kawa*, 1981), the child of a noodle-shop owner reaches out his hand to the children of a prostitute who travels from town to town on a houseboat, transcending adult stigmas to become fast friends for a while. On the other hand, the plight of the children in Kore-eda's film can be contrasted with recent films that stress the partnering of a troubled child with a mentor-adult (films like *Monsieur Ibrahim*, *Le Papillon*, *Central Station*)—a narrative pattern that can be traced back to films like Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921) and which is ultimately more reassuring than what we find in *Nobody Knows*. The same child and mentor-adult pattern can also be found in Japanese films like Shimizu Hiroshi's *Children of the Beehive* (*Hachinosu no kodomotachi* [1948]), in which the strong urge for renewal in an impoverished postwar Japan is exemplified by a group of war orphans who band together with a repatriated soldier in the countryside. This unlikely group survives the difficult postwar period by their wits and by sticking together. The absence of this kind of significant mentor-adult in *Nobody Knows* is indicative of an ominous trend in our large cities: we neither see nor hear the most marginalized among us.

Against the enormous tragedies in the world arena, the plight of four small children abandoned by their mother and fathers might seem inconsequential. But from this microcosm of precarious sanity, we are in a better position to understand the simple moments of happiness—and the deep anxieties—of our times. Kore-eda reminds us of the richness of inner landscapes of childhood through his discreet but forceful use of close-ups: a child's hand counting out the remaining coins as it pastes receipts carefully into a notebook (real-life math lessons). A red toy piano with one leg broken. Shoes—and a growing adolescent's dangling feet. A friend clutching the hand of a distraught

child, almost a man. A hand shaking with cold and fear.

What are we to take away from this film? Sadness, surely. An incipient and growing rage. From his first film about a group of elementary school children who learn how to keep a calf alive to this most recent one about the efforts of a group of children to keep themselves alive, Kore-eda never averts his eye, or his heart, from the remarkably human dimension of a story. At the close of *Nobody Knows*, we still have to ask ourselves who this "nobody" in the title truly is. What great absence allows four children to be so alone and so unnoticed in the midst of one of the world's great cities? What part of this "nobody" includes us as well? How many other children have been left behind?

NOTES

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1. Mami Tsukahara, "Kore-eda: A man of humanity and imagination," *Daily Yomiuri* online, Arts weekend section (8 August 2004). www.yomiuri.co.jp. One of the sisters is said to have told welfare officials: "Oni-chan (older brother) was kind to us. He gave us more food than mom."
2. Originally Kore-eda considered structuring the film as a kind of false picture diary narrated exclusively from Akira's point of view, with a fantasy ending in which all the members of the family (including fathers) are reunited one Sunday. As the director himself surpassed the age of the mother in the film (40), both the title and the focus of the story changed (*Dare mo shiranai* booklet [2004], 41, 44).
3. The story of the oldest son has haunted the director's thoughts since he first read about the case. Here was a child who had stayed with his family when all others had run away. Kore-eda made the film as his only way of telling the boy, "Yoku gambatta ne!" ("You tried hard, you did well" [*Dare mo shiranai* booklet, 41]).
4. Kuriko Sato, "Hirokazu Kore-eda," *Midnight Eye* online interview, 28 June 2004. www.midnighteye.com.
5. E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, "From Traumatic Paralysis to the Force Field of Modernity," in *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 10. The other three viewing positions they define are trauma films that end with a comforting "cure"; the audience as vicariously traumatized; and the viewer as voyeur.
6. Milestone Film and Video guide to *Maborosi*, 8.
7. Marie-Noëlle Tranchant, "Des enfants oubliés: En compétition, *Nobody Knows*, de Kore-eda Hirokazu," in *Le Figaro* (14 May 2004): 25.
8. Allan Hunter, "Nobody Knows," *Screen International* (14 May 2004).

9. Merry Isaacs White, *Perfectly Japanese: Making Families in an Era of Upheaval* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).
10. Aaron Gerow, "The Breakdown of a Tiny, Insular World," special to *The Daily Yomiuri* (5 August 2004). www.yomiuri.co.jp.
11. André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1958-1962), 15-21. Translated in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2002): 4.

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ABSTRACT The award-winning *Nobody Knows* (*Dare mo shiranai*, 2004), by Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda, is reviewed, with reference to theories of trauma and to other films featuring child protagonists. *Nobody Knows* is based on a true story of four half-siblings who must fend for themselves in a small apartment in Tokyo when their mother deserts them.

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