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Linda C. Ehrlich

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ESSAY

Turning Away from the Fire: A New Look at Films of Kore-eda Hirokazu

Linda C. Ehrlich

“Through fire, everything changes.”¹

Introduction

In Kore-eda Hirokazu’s films, raging fires mark painful memories, and smaller ones invite momentary family gatherings. In my earlier essay “Kore-eda’s Ocean View,” I focused on scenes of water in films by this innovative director.² In this essay, I re-examine two of the same endings (of the films *Maborosi no hikari/Maborosi* [JPN, 1995] and *Distance* [JPN, 2001]) and then move on to a film that was released after the earlier essay’s publication: *Sandome no satsujin/The Third Murder* (JPN, 2017). In these three Kore-eda films, fire turns troubling, and often inexplicable, disappearances into resolution, so living protagonists can move on. We ponder at length a transfixed meditation by a funeral pyre (*Maborosi*); the burning of a pier connecting current lives to a painful past (*Distance*); and the burning of the body of a man as an act of murder? justice? sacrifice to a greater good? (*The Third Murder*). The three raging fire scenes occur in lonely areas devoid of human habitation that offer no shelter from the elements. All three sequences are liminal sites of death that blend the dynamic energy of fire with the solace of water.³

To “set the stage,” I take a sweeping look at several related topics: philosophies of fire, Japanese traditions involving fire—especially the fire festival—and several other films with key fire scenes. At that point, we will be well prepared to examine the culminating (or beginning) cathartic fires, and the intermittent smaller fires, in Kore-eda’s films.

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Figure 1. *Kanji* (Chinese character) for “fire,” *Ran* (Kurosawa Akira, JPN, 1985). Frame grab.

General Notes about Fire

One can find paradise in fire’s movement or in its repose, in the flame or in the ashes.⁴

—Gaston Bachelard

As a living force, fire has a “Janus-like character.”⁵ It is democratic, affecting both rich and poor. It is destructive, warming, purifying, transformative. The utilitarian (domesticated) fire—the fire of the forge and of agriculture—incites reverie, deep shadows, and enchantment.

But we must also consider wild fires, arson, the burning of books. Fire marks our history: Great Fire of London (1660), Chicago (1871), Dresden (1945), the fires after the Kantō Earthquake of 1923. A monumental painting by J. M. W. Turner captures the terrifying spectacle of the burning of the Houses of Parliament in London (Houses of Lords and Commons) on 16 October 1834. Spectators, including the artist himself, observed the progress of the flames from a safe perch along the banks of the Thames River. The fire started around 6 p.m. and raged for hours, partially because the low tide made it hard for firefighters to pump enough water to extinguish the flames.⁶

Fires can draw a community together in other ways. For example, the first “Burning Man” Festival began on a Los Angeles beach in 1986 and has continued annually until the present. In this modern-day festival, people put mementoes of



Figure 2. *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 16 October 1834, 1835*. Joseph Mallord William Turner (British, 1775–1851). Oil on canvas; framed: 123.5 × 153.5 × 12 cm (48³/₁₆ × 60³/₈ × 4¹¹/₁₆ in.). Courtesy of The Cleveland Museum of Art. Bequest of John L. Severance 1942.647.

deceased loved ones in the “Temple of Stars” that is burned down near the end of the week-long event. Such innovative festivals help us recall the “clever disobedience” of Prometheus stealing fire for the sake of humankind.⁷ And his punishment.

Japan and Fire

In Japan, the connection between fire, spirituality, and the arts reflects either an inward focus or a communal spectacle.⁸ Before entering a Shintō shrine, devotees often brush smoke on themselves, as a form of symbolic cleansing. The hearth in the tea ceremony (*ochakai*) provides the hot water for the tea and a central focus for the ceremony. Traditional wood-burning kilns for Japanese pottery produce marvelous effects that differ from those made in gas or electric kilns. In a more recent development, the *Takigi Noh* (Noh performance by torchlight) adds an extra note of drama to that masked theatrical form dating back to medieval times.

We see dramatic fire scenes in scrolls like the “Night Attack on the Sanjō Palace” in the *Heiji monogatari emaki* from the Kamakura period (second half

of the thirteenth century, a time of the Heiji Insurrection, 1159–1160).⁹ In this scroll, huge clouds of flame travel over black rooftops, while people of all social classes flee for their lives. An example from more contemporary times would be the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Ceremony, which offers thousands of lit lanterns, filled with messages of peace, that float down the Motoyasu River, past the Atomic Bomb Dome.

In this context, we can also note examples of Japanese fire festivals from different regions (this is only a partial list):

- *Kurama-dera Fire Festival* (Kyoto, October 22). Houses along Kurama-dōri are lit by bonfires as adults and children carry flaming torches through the streets, shouting loudly. Around 9 p.m. two hundred huge torches are gathered together in front of the gate to the temple, and two portable shrines are carried down from the shrine. In former times, the festivities lasted until dawn.
- *Bikuni jinja* (Hokkaido, July 4–6). A large man, dressed in red, on high *geta* sandals, walks through the flames. A statue of a Tengu demon is passed through fire as part of a Shintō cleansing ritual and a prayer for safety at sea.
- *Dosojin Fire Festival* in northern Nagano prefecture at the foot of Mt. Kenashi takes place in January. Men of the “unlucky years” of ages 25 and 42 defend a burning mock-shrine.
- *Daimonji Gozan* in Kyoto at the end of the Obon season (August 16) offers five large bonfires on the mountains. The bonfires form the shape of a *torii* shrine gate, a boat, and Chinese characters (*kanji*). This date marks the time when (according to belief) the ancestral spirits of the dead return to the spirit world after coming briefly to our world.
- *Yoshida Fire Festival* (August 26–27) in Yamanashi prefecture. The goddess of Mt. Fuji is paraded around the city, accompanied by large torches. In an ancient legend, the goddess of Mt. Fuji proves she has not been having an affair by locking herself in the Fuji Sengen Shrine, setting it on fire, and surviving.

Many examples from Japanese cinema stress the connection between fire and transformation (often death). A fire festival appears in *Himatsuri/Fire Festival* (JPN, 1985) directed by Yanagimachi Mitsuo (1945–).¹⁰ The protagonist in the film, Tatsuo (Kitaoji Kinya), is a lumberjack in his thirties who lives with his wife, two sons, and mother on family-owned land.¹¹ The idyllic beauty of his remote area is being threatened by a planned marine park for tourists, and Tatsuo is being pressured by developers to sell his land. On the day after the Fire Festival, Tatsuo kills his family in a brutal scene.



Figure 3. Soldiers shooting flaming arrows, *Ran* (Kurosawa Akira, JPN, 1985). Frame grab.

An equally overwhelming fire scene highlights Kurosawa Akira's 1985 film *Ran* (JPN, 1985), inspired by *King Lear*. Archers release arrows topped with flames deep into the castle where dazed patriarch Hidetora (Nakadai Tatsuya) sits immobile, somehow removed from the chaos around him. Only when he suddenly regains awareness and “awakens” to find himself surrounded by flames and the corpses of his soldiers, retainers, and servants does he realize that he doesn't even have a sword or dagger with which to commit ritual *seppuku*.

Hidetora slowly descends the flame-encrusted stairs and appears in the front portal of the castle, more an apparition than a man. The shocked soldiers at the foot of the stone stairs draw in their breath as one and—as Hidetora descends—part to give him a path. Eldest son Tarō's yellow-clad soldiers and younger son Jirō's red-clad soldiers make a path for the elderly man. Garbed in white with a red under-kimono, the disheveled Hidetora walks through the flames as if they didn't exist. With the disintegrating castle in the background, what remains of the shell of Hidetora walks solemnly between them and then turns at the front gate, momentarily disappearing from view. As commentator Stephen Prince observes in his Criterion DVD commentary, this “aged, beaten warrior” walks “into the void.”¹²

Fire in Kore-eda's Films

In Kore-eda's films, fire clears the way. It is a transition, a bridge, whether it occurs at the end of the film (*Maborosi*) with a subtle coda following, or at the end as a

strong punctuation (*Distance*), or at the beginning as the impetus for all that will follow (*The Third Murder*). These massive fires always take place by a body of water.

Although I focus on those three films, I will also mention the brief appearance of fire in Kore-eda's *Daremo shiranai/Nobody Knows* (JPN, 2004), *Kūki ningyō/Air Doll* (JPN, 2009), *Kiseki/I Wish* (JPN, 2011), *Umimachi Diary/Our Little Sister* (JPN, 2015), and *Manbiki kazoku/Shoppers* (JPN, 2018). These smaller fires signal a space for a traditional, or reimagined, family to gather, as well as (in one case) a reminder of the potentially menacing potential of fire.

Kore-eda is never a sensationalist but he does not turn away from harsher aspects of human nature and society. His are not the raging fires of Thornfield Hall in various versions of *Jane Eyre*, where a mad Bertha Mason takes out her vengeance on her husband, Mr. Rochester, and on her isolated existence in England.¹³ Nor are they the fires of flaming arrows and sibling greed of Kurosawa's *Ran* with its spectacular (if extravagant) burning castle. They are not the raucous celebratory fires after the completion of a grueling harvest, nor are they the horrific smoking-out of a plague of locusts in Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (US, 1978), set in 1917.¹⁴ Instead they are powerful insights into ways the past burns up behind, even as the protagonists turn to gaze.

Maborosi

Maborosi offers a circular structure, moving from water to fire and back to water again. The film is based on a short story/ novella by Japanese novelist Miyamoto Teru (given name, Miyamoto Masahito, b. 1941).¹⁵ The short story is structured as an extended monologue by the young protagonist, Yumiko (Esumi Makiko), addressed to her deceased husband, Ikuo, a monologue she describes as "something indescribable, intimate, and dear . . . as if in a trance."¹⁶ Ikuo (played in the film by Asano Tadanobu) had committed suicide shortly after their son, Yūichi, was born.

Kore-eda's idea was to present a story—not through the expression on a person's face but through light and shadow and the use of empty space (*kukan*). Moving away from his earlier documentary experience, he was especially interested in a kind of filmmaking that could not be carried out easily on television. This results in a film with few close-ups and little movement within the frame. After seeing *Maborosi* at the 1995 Venice Film Festival, the great French actress Jeanne Moreau wrote:

I have had the privilege to discover the film MABOROSI. . . . I am still strongly moved by the unique simplicity of this beautiful film. Its calm face made me share the life and destiny of a young woman, so far away and so close. . . .¹⁷



Figure 4. Funeral pyre and sea, *Maborosi no hikari/Maborosi* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, JPN, 1995). Courtesy of Milestone Film and Video.

Touches of red punctuate this muted film and point to the possibility that the depressed Yumiko will recover her sense of vitality. The color red is used carefully at points in the film to help us focus: red flames in the stove under the kettle in the police office; red around the train lights; the song about *akai hana* (red flower); red seats of the mountain train and of the children's satchels, and so on. In a metonymic fashion, objects in *Maborosi* stand in for the person who used to own them or who had a connection with them. A bell from a bicycle, a crab caught from the sea, a mirror or window, all take on additional significance. These objects tie together the story but only as clues, not answers. For example, when Yumiko's (now five-year-old) son Yūichi (Kashiyama Goki) loses one shoe when he goes through a tunnel, we can recall Ikuo's one shoe on the table in the police dept, one of the few surviving traces.

After Ikuo's death, Yumiko eventually remarries Tatsuo (Naitō Takashi), a widower with a young daughter, and moves to the distant town of Sosogi in Noto Peninsula on the rough Japan Sea coast. She adjusts, and even flourishes in some ways, but thoughts of Ikuo haunt her. At one point she disappears, and we see her following a funeral procession to a remote finger of land over the cold ocean where a pyre is burning. The unusual high shot of the funeral procession recalls the shot when the train pulled into Noto station, when Yumiko and Yūichi first arrived at their new home.

What follows is a remarkably restrained long take of the funeral procession, ending with Yumiko's pained voice asking the question that was so difficult to ask. We see calligraphic figures along the horizon. We hear the bicycle musical theme,

Ikuo's theme, mixed with the sound of a bowed instrument—a combination we haven't heard so far. The music tells us that matters are coming to a crucial point. Two forces work with and also against each other, in this otherworldly music. On that sliver of land capped by smoke from the funeral pyre, we're standing between life and death, as in *mugen Nob* (phantasmal Noh) when a ghost returns in an embodied form.

The music has an insistent rise at one point, like Yumiko's voice when she asks why Ikuo was compelled to take his life in that way. As Tatsuo speaks calmly to her, there is no embrace nor rushing towards each other—no dramatic close-up. This is a kingdom of death and such actions would have no meaning. The music just tapers off, with no rounding off, and the sound of the sea takes over.

This is a film about asking questions rather than finding answers, and perhaps those kinds of questions can only take place in extreme locations like a sliver of land jutting out over seemingly endless water, accompanied by the cleansing smoke of a fire. The ending is open; Yumiko's epiphany is understated but irreversible. In the final scene of the film, we see a calm, still shot of the village leading down to the sea. The light is pure, not filtered as before. Fade to black.¹⁸

Maborosi's use of fire is like that of an older film *Ugetsu monogatari/Ugetsu* (JPN,1953) by the great master Mizoguchi Kenji. Both Mizoguchi's film and Kore-eda's use fire as a punctuation to a troubling, ephemeral love and a return to a more grounded one. In *Ugetsu*, the flames that burn down the illusory Kutsushiki Mansion become the single flame the apparition of the potter Genjūrō's deceased wife Miyagi uses to sew by, deep into the night. There are also the fires of the kiln where Genjūrō bakes wares for the market, and later, out of a new awareness of beauty and family. Yumiko, like Genjūrō, learns that fire destroys and transforms. When he awakens after the all-consuming fire, Genjūrō wonders: Was he asleep a month? a day? When his love for the ghost Wakasa is over, Genjūrō looks around and sees only ruins. Charred, jagged spears of wood. After returning to his village and seeming to find Miyagi there, Genjūrō sleeps deeply. In the ending moments, Genjūrō lights a fire in the kiln as his deceased wife Miyagi's voice encourages him. Fire equals creation and memory.

Distance

That which has gone through the ordeal or fire has gained in homogeneity and hence in purity.

—Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*

Distance opens with a shot of a pier in a blue light and closes with the pier aflame. In this film, fire destroys the site of a reunion of surviving family members of the



Figure 5. Family photo burning, *Distance* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, JPN, 2001). Frame grab.

apocalyptic religious cult Aum Shinrikyō (Ark of Truth) and, hopefully, helps those survivors start life anew. The burning of the family photos that precedes the larger fire scene signals in a sense, of “separation . . . and destroying of impurities.”¹⁹ The kind of fire in *Distance*—to purify a site of evil—is later echoed, and expanded, in Kore-eda’s more recent film *The Third Murder*.



Figure 6. A family member drops lilies off the pier, *Distance* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, JPN, 2001). Frame grab.

Distance centers around a few days in the lives of relatives of Aum cult members, who visit the cult's mountain headquarters three years after the mass killings perpetrated by their loved ones. On March 20, 1995, the Aum members placed packets of liquefied sarin gas on Tokyo subways during rush hour, causing 13 deaths and affecting an estimated five thousand people (in an act of domestic terrorism called the "*Chikatetsu sarin jiken*" [Subway Sarin Incident]). Kore-eda changes the historical facts by writing a narrative in which (as the back story) the cult members commit suicide after poisoning the water supply (not by putting sarin gas in the subways, as was the actual case). In *Distance* we learn little about the actual attack; instead, the director offers us glimpses into the lives of several surviving family members through non-consecutive flashbacks.

We sense an uneasy union between the family members as they stand near the lake where the cult members committed mass suicide.²⁰ Family members pray silently at the end of the pier, seeking some connection with those who have disappeared. The mountain landscape—beautiful in itself—seems empty, and the wooden pier gives off hollow echoes of their footsteps.

The young woman in the group, Ryōka (Natsukawa Yui), is commemorating her husband who had joined the cult. Makoto's (Terajima Susumu) wife had joined the cult. In one flashback, we see her and a young male cult member try to convince a disgusted Makoto of the rightness of their cause. Hip young Masaru (Iseya Yūsuke), a swim teacher in a school, had an older brother who had joined the cult. Atsushi (Arata), who works in a flower shop, states that it is his sister who had joined the cult. The choppy flashbacks stress how one story is separate from, and yet interconnected to, the others. These flashbacks appear near the beginning and then intermittently throughout the film.

As the four start to return from the forest to their everyday lives, they find, to their amazement, that their car has been stolen. It is already late in the day, and they will need to find shelter in the forest until the following morning. At the pier they had met a former member of the cult, Sakata (Asano Tadanobu), who had left Aum before the horrendous incident took place. Sakata finds that his motorbike has also been stolen, so he is forced to join the four relatives who decide to spend the night in the cult's former hideaway not far from the pier.

The relatives enter the cult's dingy headquarters in the mountains, with its strange green tinge that gives the carpets and walls an air of unreality. Some look into drawers or peek under a moldy cloth covering a pile of *futon*, as if searching for some clue to their loved ones' violent behavior. Others just stand or sit, withdrawn, almost immobile. The camera is moved very gently, almost unobtrusively, yet sometimes with surprising changes of angles. Masaru plays a *didgeeridoo* to pass time during that seemingly endless evening. The sound of this traditional instrument is echoed by the loud chirping of crickets and the

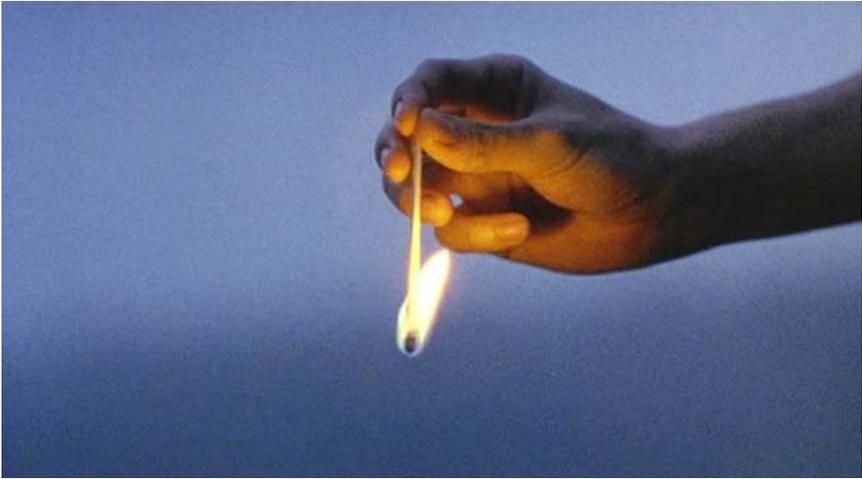


Figure 7. Atsushi (Arata) with match, *Distance* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, JPN, 2001). Frame grab.

incessant sound of the rain. Some of the family members remain inside, not speaking much; others gather around a makeshift campfire outside, talking about the past or their views of the Divine. The next morning the small campfire is reduced to ashes.

As Alexander Rojas wrote in the *Viennale 2004* catalogue of Special Programs:



Figure 8. Gazing momentarily at the flaming pier, *Distance* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, JPN, 2001). Frame grab.

Whether it is the emotional distance characters have from one another or the physical distance the religious sect took to separate themselves from the rest of the world, the word “distance” is symbolic in many forms.²¹

Rojas also points to the distant location of the cult headquarter and how it allowed the surviving family members to distance themselves from their everyday lives (and thus, perhaps, feel closer to the ones they had lost).

Given an outline of situations, the actors in this film constructed their own characters through meaningful expressions and frequent pauses. The result is a lengthy film that is both frustratingly meandering and arresting at the same time, and that builds to a powerful close.

Sakata doubts Atsushi’s statement about his sister as a cult member and confronts him with a question when they are all on a train, returning from the strange evening in the woods. The final scene reveals the truth. In that scene, we see family photos being cut up and burnt as painful, even excruciating, memories call out to be forgotten. Atsushi returns alone to the pier at a later time (we assume) and drops a few lilies into the lake, uttering one word: “Father.” Then (as a sudden impulse?) he lights a match and drops it down, igniting the wood over the lake and effectively destroying one key site of memory in a roaring blaze.

In *Distance*, Kore-eda refuses to create a wall of evil versus purity in his depiction of the aftermath of the Aum killings. “Aum is born from our society,” he reminds. “Without such a consciousness, you end up taking the attitude that they should not be allowed into society.”²² In the Japanese trailer to the film, the narrator asks poignantly, “Are we the victims or the perpetrators of the violence?” — a question the relatives attempt to answer through their unexpected overnight ritual of purification through words, rain, and fire.

The fire in the culminating scene of *Distance* is reminiscent of that of the earlier Japanese film *Enjō/Conflagration* (Ichikawa Kon, JPN, 1958), based on the eponymous novel by Mishima Yukio (translated as *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*). In this film, the acolyte Mizoguchi Goichi (Ichikawa Raizō) is alarmed at the use of his beloved “pure” temple Shukaku (Kinkakuji, the Golden Pavilion) as a tourist lure and site of sexual advances. He gradually becomes convinced that the sacred building needs to be purified. When he learns that the fire alarm at Kinkakuji is out of order, Mizoguchi lights one match so he can see inside the building, illuminating a Buddhist statue. Then he lights a bundle of straw and is overcome by the smoke. A dramatic line of fire peeks up through the floorboards and flames outline the black silhouette of the building in this magnificent sequence filmed by master cinematographer Miyagawa Kazuo. The crazed acolyte climbs a hill and sees a halo of sparks on the rooftop below. He “sees” the reflection of Kinkakuji in the reflecting pond, but really there are only shards blackened by the fire.



Figure 9. Opening scene, *Sandōme no satsujin/The Third Murder* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, JPN, 2017). Courtesy of Film Movement.

In making this comparison, I do not mean to imply that Atsushi in *Distance* is crazed or obsessive like Mizoguchi in *Enjō*. In fact, in Arata's typical acting style of calm surface/hidden depths, we can read volumes in his simple gestures at the pier. The act of completely destroying a structure (a wooden pier jutting out over a lake; a famous temple) as an act of purification offers a powerful punctuation to internal turmoil in both films.

The Third Murder

In comparison to *Maborosi* and *Distance*, Kore-eda moved in a reversed narrative pattern in *The Third Murder*. A raging fire by a body of water ignites onto the screen at the very beginning of the film, as if to say “let’s get this horrific image over with quickly.” We return to that riverside site a few times with the shocking opening images engraved on our minds.

The attention-grabbing opening of *The Third Murder* moves from a close-up of Misumi Takashi (Yakusho Kōji) to a long shot of a violent attack. To the accompaniment of elegiac music by Ludovico Einaudi, we see a close-up of hands, flames, and then a body being burned. With an out-of-focus background we see red and white lights in the distance. A person pours a liquid over a prone body (gas?). In a traveling close-up we see Misumi’s face.

Spirals of flame reach up to the dark sky. The camera rises. Now we can make out the Tama River *kawara* (riverbed), daylight, a city, a bridge. The camera zooms in closer to the city traffic. What had seemed a remote wilderness was actually not far from an urban space.

The Third Murder is very different from other Kore-eda films, and very much a Kore-eda film at the same time. From the first sequence to the last, it is

mesmerizing, baffling, unsettling. At times it is like Kurosawa's *Tengoku to jigoku/High and Low* (JPN, 1963); at other times like Bresson's *Pickpocket* (FR, 1959) or Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (US, 1956). There are even shades of O. Henry. *The Third Murder* continues the philosophical strain of Kore-eda's *Wandarufu raifu/After Life* (JPN, 1998), the outrage of *Air Doll*, and his focus on families with barely concealed fissures of *Aruitemo aruitemo/Still Walking* (JPN, 2008), *Soshite chichi ni naru/Like Father like Son* (JPN, 2013), *Umi yori mo mada fukaku/After the Storm* (JPN, 2016) and *Shoplifters*.

The Third Murder's use of fire is in the tradition of *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*—fire to destroy a troubling person. This kind of shocking opening scene is not frequent in films—one that comes to mind also stars (coincidentally?) Yakusho Kōji: Imamura Shōhei's *Unagi/The Eel* (JPN, 1997). In that film the actor plays the explosive Yamashita who attempts to reenter life after causing a jealous murder but is emotionally frigid. We can find this kind of narrative structure (a shocking beginning or early scene) in the opening of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (US, 1958) and in Todd Field's *In the Bedroom* (US, 2001), to name two other examples.

The Third Murder's recurrent symbol of a cross is telling. On the riverbed the burial site is marked by a cross made out of ashes. Later, the lawyer Shigemori (Fukuyama Masaharu) finds the burial site of five birds marked by crosses, near the room Misumi was renting. Why kill five birds? “Even if I set them free, they couldn't survive on their own,” Misumi explains. Is this mercy-killing or a sick attempt at feeling powerful, by a man who has no real place in society?

At the close of the film, the vastly changed lawyer stands—literally—at a crossroad, aware that his choices have now expanded but unclear about which way to turn. Why this Christian imagery, I wondered? Why do they use the word “*tsumi*” (sin) for “crime,” rather than the more typical “*hanzai*”?²³

As Joe Morgenstern writes of Shigemori in his perceptive *Wall Street Journal* review:

All his lawyer knows is that this case, with this cryptic client at its center, is undermining much of what he believes, or wants to believe about confessions, compassion, judicial efficiency, innate evil and the possibility of doing good.²⁴

Early in *The Third Murder*, Shigemori gruffly announces: “There is no need for understanding (*rikai*) or empathy to defend a client.” The lawyer's assistant is more emotional and prays at the site of the murder. We see three lawyers in the back seat of a taxi: three ages, three different temperaments, three levels of cynicism, with Settsu (Yoshida Kōtarō) the eldest and most cynical, and the young assistant the most naïve and religious. Shigemori is somewhere in the middle and hence has the greatest potential for change.

The crucifix is not an inherently Japanese symbol, except among a small minority of Japanese who converted to Christianity. During the late medieval period, these converts were forced to become “hidden Christians” (*kakure kirishitan*) to escape death by shogunate decree. There is no indication in the film that Misumi is, or ever has been, a Christian. The intermittent symbol of a cross made out of ashes draws this film out of the realm of Shintō/Buddhist beliefs and into a rather troubling mix of Christian and Japanese iconography and logic.

“This mysteriously beautiful film . . . explores the elusiveness of motives, the nature of truth and nothing less than the justice system [itself].”²⁵ If the first murder is the one a 25-year-old Misumi supposedly committed decades earlier in Hokkaido (he was imprisoned for 30 years), and the current trial is for the second murder, what then is the third one?²⁶ The death penalty for Misumi? The murder of justice? Could it be the murder of the innocence of children? (Thirteen-year-old Sakie [Hirose Suzu] is lame and—it is implied—the victim of the incestuous desires of her father, the man whose body was burned on the riverbank.) The one truly evil character (if reports are true)—Sakie’s father—is barely seen—except for a moment in the opening scene and as a photo carried by his “grieving” wife, an actress by trade. We do see him in the opening sequence by the riverbank, but it is nighttime and the image is unclear. With *The Third Murder*, an outraged Kore-eda adds the theme of sexual abuse to those of child abandonment and child prostitution seen earlier in *Nobody Knows* and later in *Shoplifters*.

In the meeting space at the prison, we often assume Misumi’s point-of-view and see the lawyers on the other side of the glass. But in several surprising moments, we see Shigemori and Misumi on the same side of the glass or—as understanding grows—talking as if there was no glass between them at all. There is even a scene, as in *High and Low*, with Misumi’s hands on the glass. Eerily, Misumi informs the lawyer: “I can tell what you’re thinking.” The entire setting of the film has a floating, “groundless” feel to it; very rarely do we see the main characters firmly standing on the ground.²⁷

The policeman (Watanabe-san) who arrested Misumi in June 1922 described him as “a mere vessel” (*utsuwa*)—as *bukimi* (spooky) and *karappo* (empty). (Is this like the *karappo* expressed by many characters in *Air Doll*, I wonder?) Misumi rarely loses his gentle demeanor, like a cat waiting for the foolishness of his owners to be over. Is he a man of will or merely an instrument?

At the riverside, Sakie is wearing red gloves. The smell of the gas that ignited the fire lingers. She carries a bouquet of flowers. Ashes in the shape of a cross mark the spot. In an incriminating tone of voice, Sakie asks, after the trial: “Who

decides who gets judged?” The entire film is a cat-and-mouse game of layering and tripling. Misumi Takashi might not be a killer but neither is he a saint. He is certainly cleverer than he seems. In the lawyer Shigemori, Misumi meets a mirror image and asks for understanding. Their overlapped images near the end show a growing rapport, but such unexpected moments are still unnerving. With (overly) obvious signification, empathetic corresponding gestures (wiping the right hand over left cheek) link Misumi, then Sakie, and later Shigemori.

In his final visit with Misumi, Shigemori mentions the blooming of the *sakura* (cherry blossoms) that will happen shortly. This evokes a sense of the final poem by the wrongly judged Asano Naganori in the famous *Chūshingura* historical event and legend.²⁸ Like Yumiko in *Maborosi*, Misumi expresses his belief that he hurts (*kizu tsuku*) the people around him.

The Third Murder recalls in part Hitchcock’s film *Rebecca* (US, 1940), based on the eponymous novel by Daphne du Maurier. In a late sequence in *Rebecca*, we see slight lights in consecutive rooms of the mansion Manderley, which reveals the housekeeper Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson) holding a candle. Mrs. Danvers is obsessed by the memory of the first Mrs. De Winter, the deceased Rebecca. Mrs. Danvers illuminates the figure of the second Mrs. De Winter (Joan Fontaine) asleep by a fireplace with a pleasant (contained) fire burning. To the accompaniment of discordant music by Franz Waxman, Mrs. Danvers’s eyes survey the scene. There is a cross-cut to a shot of the widower Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier) racing towards Manderley, noting an odd light in the sky at that hour. The camera takes his point-of-view, panning across a huge fire. Mrs. Danvers becomes a dark figure in the West wing, surrounded by flames, with fire-laden beams crashing around her. Her crazed eyes are the last we see of her form. As in *The Third Murder*, fire is conceived of as the only way to end the power of a person whose harmful actions are deforming others. More subtly than *Rebecca*, *The Third Murder* is indeed, as critic Manohla Dargis writes, a film in which “everything seems to crumble, Shigemori and the truth included.”²⁹

Danger and Celebration

Looking at other films by Kore-eda, we can see punctuations of fire to illustrate celebration or danger. For example, a candle is used in *Nobody Knows* to offer a soft illumination to the tragic scene where the three surviving children and their friend struggle to place the corpse of little Yuki in a suitcase.³⁰ (Since they had no funds to pay the electrical bill, they have no lights at night in their crowded apartment.) The candlelight underscores the surreptitious, and painful, nature of children who must bury other children.



Figure 10. Candlelight illumination, *Daremo shiranai/Nobody Knows* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, JPN, 2004). Frame grab.

In *Air Doll*, Nozomi (Bae Doona), the sex-doll-come-to-life, sees a little girl's surprise birthday party at a restaurant, with a cake and candles. Nozomi is sitting with her boyfriend Junichi (Arata) and pretending to eat. Her final dream, or imagining, before her demise is of her own birthday party—with all the people who had entered her brief life in attendance.³¹

Kiseki/I Wish

In *I Wish*, Koichi (Maeda Kōki) lives with his mother in the home of his maternal grandparents in the Kyūshū seaside town of Kagoshima. Every day the boy can see Sakurajima, an active volcano facing Kinko Bay, which erupted in 1914.³²

Living things change—volcanoes, children. Parents, like Koichi's, sometimes separate. Sakurajima, an active volcano, spews ash over the city regularly. "He's a little kid; it's a big volcano—and an even bigger, and more uncertain, world," Manohla Dargis reminds.³³ In her (somewhat lukewarm) review of the film, Manohla Dargis uses a fire metaphor when she writes: "Whenever its children are on screen, lighted up with joy or dimmed by hard adult truths, the film burns bright."



Figure 11. “Birthday party” dream of Nozomi in *Kūki ningyō/Air Doll* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, JPN, 2008). Frame grab.



Figure 12. The brothers, *Kiseki/I Wish* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, JPN, 2011). Frame grab.

***Our Little Sister*³⁴**

Learning to overcome a bitterness toward parents who failed as parents is a frequent theme in Kore-eda’s films. *Nobody Knows*, *Still Walking*, *After the Storm*, even *Distance* hint at this.

In a scene late in *Our Little Sister*, aerial fireworks reflected on the surface on the summer sea show us how a young love is taking root. Later, all the sisters



Figure 13. Fireworks over the sea, *Umimachi Diary/Our Little Sister* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, JPN, 2013). Frame grab.

cluster around handheld sparklers in the garden—a scene of a uniquely extended kind of family on a summer evening festival.

Shoplifters

Kore-eda's most recent film, *Shoplifters*, is a movie with a sticky surface. The cramped, close-framed griminess of the small traditional house where the “family” lives is relieved only by occasional brief shots of rice growing in a field on a rare excursion to the ocean. The house owned by the grandmother Hatsue (Kiki Kirin) has an overgrown garden, a dried-up pond, and filthy interior full of wrappers from cheap food. The result is a kind of *Lower Depths* but with cell phones and Pachinko.

In one scene, the makeshift family in *Shoplifters* gather around a large tin receptacle in the cramped garden area of the grandmother's house they have (in essence) sequestered.³⁵ Nobuyo (Ando Sakura), the adult female in the family, lights a rolled-up newspaper and starts a controlled fire to burn up the pink dress five-year-old Yuri (Sasaki Miyu) was wearing when they found her virtually abandoned on a freezing cold balcony of a neighborhood apartment. Nobuyo asks Yuri's permission to burn the dress and receives a solemn nod. The others gather around in a ceremonious manner. Only after the dress has burned to ashes does Nobuyo tell Yuri—eloquently, but simply—that love means embracing someone, not abusing them. The young boy they abducted as a small child, Shōta (Iyo Kairi), watches as well. Shōta assists with the shoplifting and tries to piece together a



Figure 14. The four sisters in *yukata*, with sparklers, *Umimachi Diary/Our Little Sister* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, JPN, 2013). Frame grab.

sense of ethics, but draws the line with breaking windows to a car to steal what's inside. Fire can burn up a dress, a clue to the past, but it cannot end the almost constant sense of danger of this kind of marginalized life style, without a safety net, in contemporary Japan.

Later the family gather on the same narrow porch to “watch” fireworks over the Sumida River—a summer activity since at least the Edo period. In comparison to the comfortable fireworks scene in *Our Little Sister*, this fireworks-viewing sequence reveals a different socioeconomic level. The construction of high-rise apartments around the grandmother's low-level, traditional home means that their view of the river is completely blocked. The six of them can only imagine the “peony” and “willow” firecrackers from the sounds alone.

Conclusion

“I made this fire from the first peat of winter.
 Look at me in the last, burnished light of it.
 Tell me that you feel the warmth still.
 Tell me you will never speak about the ashes . . .”
 —from “Embers,” by Eavan Boland³⁶

Different faces of fire are ultimately connected: “A reverie by the fireside . . . is sufficient to evoke the volcano and the funeral pyre.”³⁷ Kore-eda's fire scenes are

markers, punctuations, bridges that link—irretrievably—what came before and what might come after. The most important raging fires take place by a body of water. That juxtaposition is crucial. Fire, in Kore-eda's cinematic universe, forms a passageway between one life and another, to erase painful memories or the site of madness or to free a young person from trauma.³⁸

Mourning underscores many of Kore-eda's films: particularly *Maborosi*, *Distance*, and *Still Walking*. In *Shoplifters*, the two children see a sign "In Mourning" posted on the door of a small convenience store where they have been shoplifting. This is a word, and an emotion, they have never encountered in their rough young lives. In their book *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*, E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang posit a model of trauma and cinema that differs from that of Hollywood melodramas in which trauma is shown as a discrete past event—locatable, representable, and curable.³⁹ But as film historian Donald Richie noted: "For Kore-eda, 'shock' is our reaction to having experienced what is real."⁴⁰

In Kore-eda's films, people journey to understand. Or to forget. They might shuttle back and forth between two uncertain presents (*Like Father like Son*). They might hover in uncertainty between past, present and future (*After Life*). They might go on a train with the hope to meet the father who works in the airport, or might not be there at all (*Nobody Knows*). More rarely, they might travel in dreams (*The Third Murder*).

In an interview about *Maborosi*, the director explained:

In Japan, I feel that it's not really about a belief in God necessarily but a belief in the dead and how the dead watch us. That's something I feel directly—that it's like they are speaking to us all the time, and it's not a scary thing and it's not that they disappear when people die. . . . It's that life and death run parallel at all times. They reflect each other, so I live that way and I think that translates to my films as well.⁴¹

There are few happy endings in Kore-eda's films. Broken marriages are not mended. Irresponsible mothers do not return and make a permanent place in their life for their children. Grandmothers intent on revenge do not suddenly discover compassion. And yet, even in the endings most devoid of hope, we find some glimmer of light—a flame—to lighten our darkness.

Linda C. Ehrlich is an independent scholar who has published extensively about world cinema and about traditional Asian theatre. Her book *Cinematic Reveries* (Peter Lang Publishers, 2013) explores the intersection of prose poetry and cinema. *Cinematic Landscapes*, her first book (co-edited with David Desser), is an anthology of essays on the interface between the visual arts and cinemas of China and Japan

(University of Texas Press, 1994; reprint in 2008). Her second book, *The Cinema of Víctor Erice: An Open Window*, appeared in the Scarecrow Press Filmmakers' Series (#72) in 2000 (with an expanded paperback edition in 2007). Ehrlich's full-length commentary is a key feature of the Milestone Film and Video 25th-anniversary DVD/blu-ray of *Maborosi* (dir. Kore-eda Hirokazu). Her taped commentary also appears on the Criterion DVD/blu-ray of *El Espíritu de la Colmena/The Spirit of the Beehive* (Víctor Erice, ES, 1973). Dr. Ehrlich has taught at Duke University, Case Western Reserve University, the University of Tennessee/Knoxville, and on two Semester-at-Sea voyages.

Notes

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 63. Note that Japanese names will be presented in traditional Japanese order, with surname first (for example, Kore-eda Hirokazu—surname, then first name).
2. Linda Ehrlich, "Kore-eda's Ocean Views," in Special Double Issue: Kore-eda Hirokazu, *Film Criticism* 35: no. 2–3 (Winter/Spring 2011): 127–146.
3. "Liminality" implies a sense of "betwixt and between." As a transitional space, it can also carry with it a sense of danger, disorientation, and even of pollution. Liminal persons are sometimes reintegrated into a society (often through ritual), but this is not always the case. Note the writings of British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, such as *Liminal to liminoid in play, flow, and ritual: An essay in comparative symbology*, Rice University Studies 1974. Kore-eda's 1998 film *After Life*, set in a way-station for the recently deceased, is in itself a study of liminality.
4. Bachelard, 112. Quoting Paul Eluard.
5. Alan Krell, *Burning Issues: Fire in Art and the Social Imagination* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 7.
6. After making some watercolor sketches, Turner completed two oil paintings (this one, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art, and another, now owned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art). One of the watercolor sketches hangs in the Tate Britain.
7. Bachelard, 11.
8. In Western languages, the word "nature" tends to signify what lies outside, although one can also speak of a person's inner nature. In the traditional Japanese concept of nature, the self and the external environment are intrinsically connected.
9. This painting is now housed in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Sanjō Palace was the home of former Emperor Go-Shirakawa (who abdicated for his son Emperor Nyō).
10. This cinematic story was based on an actual incident that took place in Kumano city (Mie prefecture) on February 1, 1980. A farmer and stonemason, Ikeda Kazumichi, age 44, killed seven members of his family and wounded three, later killing himself. The 1985 film was based on a novella by Nakagimi Kenji (1946–1992), a *burakumin* ("outcaste") author who also

- assisted with the screenplay. Yanagimachi and Nakagimi transposed the story to a fishing and forestry setting in Nikishima, a remote mountainside village close to Shingu. The film won the third prize in the Kinema Junpo awards of 1985. It features appropriately jarring music by the great composer Tōru Takemitsu and cinematography by Tamura Masaki (who also worked with Yanagimachi on *Saraba itoshiki Daichi / Farewell to the Land*, [JPN, 1982]).
11. Tatsuo is credited with being able to communicate directly with divinities of Nature. In fact, he was compared to the ancestral god Susanoo. The character Kimiko in the film draws on the legend of Himiko, a shamaness-queen of the third century BCE.
 12. To build an entire castle of weathered wood on the cold slopes of Mt. Fuji just to burn this 1½-million-dollar fortress-set down in one take is a sign of . . . dedication. It is also one of the most unforgettable sequences in all of film history. Actor Nakadai recalls that part of his beard caught fire in that scene! Tōru Takemitsu's elegiac music and dramatic use of silence underscore this depiction of war's smoky hell. Very soft wooden *ki* clacks remind us of the theatricality of this epic sequence.
 13. Cinematic versions of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* include: the 1910 US silent film, the 1943 version starring Orson Welles and Joan Fontaine (US, with screenplay by John Houseman and Aldous Huxley and music by Bernard Hermann), the 1996 one directed by Franco Zeffereilli (US/UK/FR/IT, starring William Hurt and Charlotte Gainsbourg), and the 2011 British film directed by Cary Fukunaga.
 14. As cinematographer Nestor Almendros recalled about using the Panaglide camera in *Days of Heaven*: "The camera could get right in among the flames and follow the progress of the fire with dizzying, dramatic movements" (Criterion DVD booklet).
 15. The short story is set in the late 1970s, which was the time the author was writing the story. In the film, the time frame is left somewhat vague.
 16. Miyamoto Teru, *Phantom Lights*, trans. Roger K. Thomas (Fukuoka: Kurodahan Press, 2011), 116.
 17. Sept. 1995. From the Milestone Film and Video file.
 18. In Kore-eda's Director's Commentary, he states: "You can reaffirm life every time you think about death and loss, and you can go back and forth like that. This is an active reaffirmation, so I disagree with anyone who might say that this is a film about destiny, or about just accepting what comes our way."
 19. Bachelard, 104.
 20. In actuality, seven of the senior members of the cult were executed only recently, on July 6, 2018, after a long imprisonment. The six on death row have now been executed. Although the cult may have resembled a reconstructed family, it was a highly patriarchal and restrictive one.
 21. Alexander Rojas, "Distance" in *Viennale 2004* catalogue: 219. Vienna International Film Festival.
 22. Interview with Kore-eda Hirokazu, *Daily Yomiuri* (24 May 2001).
 23. For example, the straight-laced female prosecutor criticizes Shige as being the kind of lawyer who doesn't help the accused face up to their guilt (*tsumi to mukiau*).

24. Joe Morgenstern, "Mystery and a Master's Vision: An Accused Killer Insists on his Guilt in Hirokazu Kore-eda's Hauntingly Beautiful Drama," *Wall Street Journal*, August 2, 2018.
25. Morgenstern (online).
26. To continue an exploration of the East/West mixture in this film, we can recall that Shakespeare had a third murderer in *Macbeth* (1606), mentioned in six lines in Scene 3.3. The third murderer joins the first and second murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance. He was unknown to the other two. Was it perhaps a disguised Macbeth himself?
27. With thanks to philosopher Otavio Bueno for this insight after a University of Miami film screening.
28. Kore-eda drew from this legend to make his one *jidaigeki* (historical drama), *Hana yori mo nabo/Hana* (JPN, 2006), very loosely based on the *Chūshingura/Tale of the Loyal 47 Rōnin* historical account.
29. Manohla Dargis, "In *The Third Murder*, Guilty as Charged Isn't the Whole Story," *New York Times*, July 18, 2018.
30. *Nobody Knows* (based on an actual news event) introduces us to four brothers and sisters—two girls (Kyoko and Yuki) and two boys (Akira and Shigeru)—each of whom has a different father. The children (between the ages of four and twelve) are left to fend for themselves in a one-room apartment in the Nishisugamo section of Tokyo when their 40-year-old mother disappears with a new man.
31. In the dream, the man, Hideo (Itao Itsuji), who treated Nozomi as a mere sex tool to mask his loneliness, proudly carries in a cake topped by candles that light up her lovely face, now no longer the static face of an inflatable doll.
32. Younger brother Ryūnosuke (Maeda Ōshiro) lives with his easy-going guitar-playing father Kenji (Odagiri Jo) in a cramped apartment in Fukuoka on Kyūshū's northern shore. Koichi desperately wishes that his separated family could be reunited, and when a new Bullet Train links the two towns, he sees the possibility for a miracle.
33. Manohla Dargis, "Detours on the Road to a Family Reunion," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2012, C2.
34. In *Our Little Sister*, three sisters live in their grandmother's house, then invite their 13-year-old half-sister to join them as well. In this film, adapted from Yoshida Akimi's graphic novel *Umimachi Diary*, Sachi (Ayase Haruka), Yoshino (Nagasawa Masami), and Chika (Kaho) are joined by half-sister Suzu (Hirose Suzu). Suzu jokes that it is "like a girls' dormitory" with strong bonds of affection, despite differences. (Suzu had lived in Sendai with their father and her unstable mother before joining her half-sisters.) This reconstructed family, without standard parents, builds up its own traditions: making plum wine from a 55-year-old plum tree, buying fruit for the others when a relationship ends, walking together along the beach, and so on.
35. The grandmother is played by frequent Kore-eda actress Kiki Kirin (1943–2018) in her last performance for the director.
36. Eaven Boland, "Embers," in *Against Love Poetry* (New York: Norton, 2003).

37. Bachelard, 18.
38. Kore-eda's films are full of passageways, tunnels, spaces under overpasses. One of the first images of his feature films is a determined grandmother in *Maborosi* walking across a bridge in her attempt to return to her hometown in Shikoku to die.
39. E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 9.
40. Donald Richie, "Kore-eda's *Maborosi*: Showing Only What is Necessary," in Special Double Issue: Kore-eda Hirokazu, *Film Criticism* 35: no. 2–3 (Winter/Spring 2011): 44.
41. Stephen Saito, "Hirokazu Kore-eda Talks about Life after Death in his Directorial Debut *Maborosi*," *The Moveable Feast*, July 10, 2018.