Understanding Skinship in Japanese Cinema: Physical and Non-physical Touch between Family Members in the Films of Kore-eda Hirokazu

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1. Introduction: Analysing *Skinship* in the Films of Kore-eda Hirokazu

Film critics and scholars have long discussed the use value of Japanese cinema for area studies, literature, and the academic world more generally, recognising that the recent debate and research around Japanese film has become marginalised, both in film studies as a regional cinema, and in area studies as a fragment of cultural studies.[1]

For these reasons, one of the goals of this thesis is to attempt a new and different approach to Japanese cinema, and combine it with perspectives from Japan studies and anthropology, in order to analyse its cultural content, using it both as an object of study and as a tool for analysing Japanese society.

More specifically, I examine touch in present day Japan, by focusing on both physical and non-physical touch between family members in two films by director Kore-eda Hirokazu: *Like Father, Like Son* (*Soshite chichi ni naru* そして父になる, 2013) and Shoplifters (*Manbiki kazoku* 万引き家族, 2018).

Thus, my main research questions are: what role does *skinship* play in kinship relationships within the Japanese director's films? How is it portrayed? What does it mean for the audience?

I am aware that the dimension of touch is not limited to *skinship,* and that there are other ways in which touch is conveyed in films, however this thesis focuses on *skinship* because of its specificity to the Japanese cultural context.

As Gregory affirms, *skinship* is a Japanese word which combines the sense of touch with the concept of kinship. By suggesting a sensory approach to familial

[1] Daisuke Miyao, *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–2.

relations, it draws attention to the role of "touchability" as a non-verbal code in relationships between people. Moreover, although the basic sense of the word comes from touch, it involves the other senses as well, because it is impossible not to see, hear and smell people when you are close enough to touch them.[2] Tahhan, on the other hand, defines *skinship* as something that is not just located in the "skin" or in the "body" of separate people, but as something that finds meaning through the embodied and sensuous connection between parent and child.[3]

Skinship and touch in Japan have been extensively studied by anthropologists such as Diana Adis Tahhan[4] and Scott Clark,[5] but to the best of my knowledge none of these studies incorporates films. I am confident that analysing film content in relation to the existing anthropological literature on *skinship* and touch will not only lead to a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of kinship relationships in the films of Kore-eda, but it will also contribute to the enrichment of both film studies and anthropology more generally. Feature films, as cultural documents, can teach us extensively about the society within which they are made, even when they do not reflect behaviour and thought faithfully. For example, they might inform us about a society's fears and desires, how it perceives itself and how it deals with change. Furthermore, with regard to Japanese cinema, film critic Stuart Galbraith IV has written that:

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[2] Chris Gregory, "Skinship: Touchability as a Virtue in East-Central India," *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 1, no. 1 (2011): 179–180.

[3] Diana Adis Tahhan, "Blurring the Boundaries Between Bodies: *Skinship* and Bodily Intimacy in Japan," *Japanese Studies* 30, no. 2 (2010): 228.

[4] Diana Adis Tahhan, *The Japanese Family: Touch, Intimacy and Feeling* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Franicis Group, 2014).

[5] Scott Clark, *Japan, a View from the Bath* (Honolulu: Honolulu University Press, 1994).

> Japanese filmmakers have been remarkably adept at looking inward, at casting an unflinching, reflective gaze at the country's culture, its traditions, and ordinary life. If you want to understand the Japanese psyche, Japanese cinema is full of insight on how the Japanese see themselves.[6]

As aforementioned, this study examines two films by director Kore-eda: *Like Father, Like Son* and *Shoplifters*. Kore-eda Hirokazu (1962–) is a Japanese film director, producer, screenwriter and editor, winner of several awards at international film festivals such as the Palme d'Or at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival for *Shoplifters*.[7]

In *Like Father, Like Son*, which received the Prix du Jury following its première at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival,[8] the director tells the story of a workaholic architect who learns that his biological son was switched at birth with another child, and is thus faced with having to make a decision that will change his life. The film presents the issue of what makes a family real; in answering this question, touch and *skinship* play an important role. Similarly, the second film is about a dysfunctional family living in the suburbs of Tokyo, whose complicated bonds also raise questions about the authenticity of families, although from a differing perspective.

Moreover, this study includes an analysis of non-diegetic sound as a tool used by the director to further articulate the meanings of touch and communicate them to the viewers. The soundtracks of the films open up the possibility for a deeper

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[6] Stuart Galbraith IV and Paul Duncan, *Japanese Cinema*, (Hong Kong: Taschen, 2009), 15.

[7] Tom Batchelor, "Hirokazu Kore-Eda's 'Shoplifters' Wins the Palme d'Or at Cannes," *The Independent*, May 19, 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/shoplifters-palme-dor-cannes-hizokazu-kore-eda-award-blackkklansman-spike-lee-a8359736.html.

[8] "Cannes Jury Prize Goes to Koreeda's 'Like Father, Like Son'," The Japan Times, May 27, 2013, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2013/05/27/entertainment-news/cannes-jury-prize-goes-to-koreedas-like-father-like-son/.

understanding of family relationships and *skinship* from a multisensory perspective. By reflecting on the notion of "added value" theorised by Michel Chion,[9] I examine the effects that the soundtrack has on the audience, investigating whether it successfully communicates additional meaning.

1.1. Contextualising Touch in Japan

To date, several books and articles have been written about the Japanese touch within the fields of literature and anthropology, but no similar study had yet been undertaken in the cinematic field.

In the literary context, the most recent publication is *Touching the Unreachable* (2021) by Fusako Innami, where the author offers an analysis of touch in modern Japanese writing. Innami argues that writing, since it implies a physical and temporal distance from the story and the reader, shapes a particular aesthetics of touch that involves attempting to touch the unreachable. More in detail, she explains that any act of touch is inevitably mediated through material elements, such as skin and objects, and by memories of previous experiences of touching, which results in forming a reflexive consciousness of the self and its relation to the world.[10] Although the scope of analysis in this book is limited to written texts and the writing process, I make use of some of its analytical tools to examine the relationships between the characters in *Shoplifters*, which appear to be mediated through objects and memories of past tactile encounters.

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[9] Michel Chion, "Projections of Sound on Image," in *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, 3–21. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

[10] Fusako Innami, *Touching the Unreachable: Writing, Skinship, Modern Japan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 1–4.

Within the anthropological field, on the other hand, Diana Adis Tahhan has written several articles on bodily intimacy in Japan, such as *Blurring the Boundaries between Bodies* (2010), in which she explores the embodied experience in the intimate spaces of the Japanese family, investigating different ways of understanding intimacy and touch within parent-child relationships.[11]

Nonetheless, her most comprehensive work is without doubt *The Japanese Family* (2014), where she deals with the development of the relationship between child and parent, showing why touch and intimacy are important. More in detail, in the book she explains that when the child is young, physical closeness plays a key role in mother-child relationships, and is achieved through practices such as co-sleeping and co-bathing. As the child grows up, however, the processes in which intimacy is achieved change. To investigate this phenomenon, Tahhan introduces the concept of "touching at depth" to explain why these shifts occur, exploring intimacy outside physical and visible forms.[12] Tahhan's works are most relevant to my study of parent-child relationships in both films, in particular when examining the differences between maternal and paternal understandings of *skinship*.

Furthermore, anthropologist Scott Clark has written a book about the Japanese bath, in which he dedicates a chapter to bathing alone and bathing together. He states that "aspects of social behaviour are reflected in the matter of bathing with others versus bathing alone,"[13] and illustrates how bathing practices influence interactions between individuals. Specifically, in a paragraph called "Skinship" he writes that bathing with one's children is important in Japan because it

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[11] Tahhan, *Blurring the Boundaries*, 215.

[12] Tahhan, *The Japanese Family*, 11–12.

[13] Clark, *A View from the Bath*, 66.

is believed to develop a bond between parent and child, as the skin-to-skin contact happening during co-bathing creates an intimate form of communication.[14] I refer to this source to support my analysis of the bath scenes in *Like Father, Like Son*.

Additionally, in his article *From Mothering to Othering* (1996), Eyal Ben-Ari has analysed the effects of co-sleeping practices on the development of Japanese children, illustrating how the preference for sleeping together in families is not a function of lack of space, and how it promotes dependence of the child on others through proximity and physical contact.[15]

Although no study on touch has ever been conducted with regard to any Japanese film, some scholars have dedicated their research to cinema and the senses, including tactility and haptics. For instance, Laura Marks' *The Skin of the Film* (2000) illustrates how physical contact in movies may stimulate the viewer to think about tactile encounters they experienced in the past, which may contribute to the interpretation of touch in a specific film image. More generally, she also affirms that:

> The cinematic encounter takes place not only between my body and the film's body, but my sensorium and the film's sensorium. We bring our own personal and cultural organization of the senses to cinema, and cinema brings a particular organization of the senses to us, the filmmaker's own sensorium refracted through the cinematic apparatus.[16]

However, this and similar works exclusively investigate how the senses of the viewer contribute to the perception and understanding of the film, and do not

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[14] Clark, *A View from the Bath*, 73–4.

[15] Eyal Ben-Ari, "From Mothering to Othering: Organization, Culture, and Nap Time in a Japanese Day-Care Center," *Ethos* 24, no. 1 (1996): 143–4.

[16] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 153.

include any analysis of the meaning of the senses within the films, which, by contrast, is one of the main goals of this thesis.

Finally, the only book-length publication dedicated to the Japanese director is *The Films of Kore-eda Hirokazu* (2019) by Linda C. Ehrlich, which analyses his films up to *Shoplifters*. More in detail, she dedicates a chapter to each film, using the five elements – earth, water, fire, air, metal – as a thematic thread, focusing on one element per movie. Thus, the analytical process originates from Ehrlich's personal reflection rather than a strict academic method.[17] Nevertheless, it offered some useful insights for my analysis.

When talking about *Like Father, Like Son*, the author affirms that the film mostly features air images, which convey a sense of weightlessness and play, while *Shoplifters* is presented as a film that emphasises all the elements, being the result of what the director had learned through the years.[18]

1.2. Interpreting the Cultural Meanings of Touch

Since no study has ever been conducted to analyse the cultural significance of the senses within films, a new relevant methodology will need to be defined to fulfil the aim of this thesis.

In *L'analisi come interpretazione. Ermeneutica e decostruzione* (Analysis as interpretation. Hermeneutics and deconstruction, 2014) film scholar Paolo Bertetto describes interpretation as an analysis method to gain deeper understanding of the filmic text, by looking beyond its most immediate and prominent aspects.

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[17] Duncan Breeze, review of *The Films of Kore-eda Hirokazu: An Elemental Cinema*, by Linda C. Ehrlich, *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 13, no. 2 (2021): 189.

[18] Linda C. Ehrlich, *The Films of Kore-eda Hirokazu: An Elemental Cinema* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 194.

He explains that the interpretation of a film requires multiple and diverse kinds of knowledge, applied according to the specific needs of the text and the discourse developed. Instead of relying on a specific film theory, the interpretation of the filmic text brings into play a set of knowledges and places them in a dynamic and interactive relationship with the text.

In reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), Bertetto affirms that "in the [filmic] image, the significance is always invisible,"[19] and that the significance as Invisible is produced by the Visible. Thus, if what has to be interpreted is the significance of the film, both the visible and the invisible will need to be analysed.

Therefore, in order to study the cultural meanings of touch in Kore-eda's films, I combine interdisciplinary knowledge from the fields of cultural and sensory anthropology, Japan studies, and Film studies, such as the sources mentioned in the previous section, which will be used to support a plot-driven analysis of the films' content.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Due to the theory and methodology employed, my research is restricted to the two aforementioned films of the Japanese director, which have been selected because they feature stories of unconventional families with young children, where *skinship* patterns are most present.

As my analysis mostly relies on anthropological sources that have a correlation with the content of the two specific films, further research would be required to extend this study to all of the director's production. However, supported

[19] Paolo Bertetto, "L'analisi come interpretazione. Ermeneutica e decostruzione" [Analysis as interpretation. Hermeneutics and deconstruction], in *Metodologie di analisi del film* [Methods of film analysis], (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2014), chap. 6, EPUB.

by the appropriate literature, this analysis might be expanded to more films, either within other cultural contexts or with regard to different aspects, for instance by examining the other senses.

2. *Like Father, Like Son* / そして父になる

In *Like Father, Like Son* Kore-eda tells the story of two families whose children have been switched at birth by a hospital nurse.

Set in Tokyo, the narration starts with the admission exam of one of the boys, Keita, to a prestigious elementary school, but the status quo is soon disrupted by a call from the hospital where Keita was born: another boy, Ryūsei, took a DNA test required for school admission, and it did not match that of his parents.

The two families meet and get to know one another, trying to decide whether the kids should return to their biological parents or not, after having spent almost six years together.

Keita comes from a family with a high income, is an only child, and has to live up to the high standards of his competitive father Nonomiya Ryōta, an established architect, despite having an extremely docile temperament, more similar to his mother's, Midori. He is referred as gentle (*yasashī*) by his father, although Ryōta makes this praise sounds more like criticism.[1] On the other hand, Ryūsei comes from a humble family, has two siblings, and his father, Saiki Yūdai, owns a small electronics store, while his mother, Yukari, works part time in an *obento* shop. In terms of personality, Ryūsei resembles his biological father, especially with regards to his aggressiveness and cleverness.[2] However, when the children spend time with their biological parents, Ryūsei constantly questions the discipline Ryōta tries to impose on him.

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[1] Ehrlich, *The Films of Kore-eda*, 166.

[2] Ehrlich, 166.

By proposing a variation on the famous theme of babies switched at birth, the director reflects on what makes a family real, what it means to be a father and what is the significance of being a son. He poses these questions to the audience through his characters, and tactility plays a key role in the attempts he makes to answer them.

Figure 1. The two families on a camping trip together.

2.1. (Dis)embodying *Skinship*: Parent-Child Relationships

When observing the relationships between parents and children in the film, what stands out at first is the difference in behaviour of the two families. If the Nonomiyas appear as a serious and unemotional family that does not give enough attention to their son, the Saikis come across as being playful and close-knit. These aspects can be noticed as early as the scene of their first meeting, at which the Nonomiyas arrive on time and wait in silence, while the Saikis arrive late, preceded by the sound of their loud voices coming from outside. The Nonomiyas bring a headshot of Keita, where the child is wearing formal clothes and looks quite serious, while the Saiki bring a colourful picture of Ryūsei at the riverside, where the child is smiling: when a close-up of the two photographs side by side on the table is shown, the contrast is striking.

Additionally, the Saikis recall the day it was taken, and proceed to show the Nonomiyas a video of Ryūsei playing in the water, fearing that the photograph they have brought does not allow them to have a proper look at the child.

However, by paying more attention to how the parents interact with their children individually, a difference can be observed in the type of contacts they have with them and in the activities they carry out together. As Tahhan demonstrates, *skinship* often varies according to mother-child and father-child relationships. While mother-child interactions take the form of bodily expressions such as hugging and holding hands, father-child experiences of *skinship* assume more subtle forms of interaction, such as playing and sight.[3] Similarly, most of the interactions between Midori and Yukari with their children have a physical component, whereas Ryōta and Yūdai interact with them in less bodily forms, resulting in a differing perception of *skinship*.

Moreover, the mothers bond with each other somewhat easily, by exchanging phone numbers, talking extensively about their children and their motherhood experiences, hugging, and sharing a similar perspective, whereas the fathers are almost in competition with one another, opposing two different visions of fatherhood.[4]

2.1.1. Mothering: Midori and Yukari

After the Nonomiyas are informed about the results of Keita's DNA test, Ryōta implicitly blames Midori for what happened, remarking that she had ignored his doubts when he had questioned the safety of the hospital at the time. Midori, on the

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[3] Tahhan, *Blurring the Boundaries*, 219.

[4] Katrina A. Bramstedt, "Like Father, Like Son," *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (2015): 360.

other hand, as she sits beside him leafing through old photo albums, takes it upon herself: “Why didn't I see it? I'm a mother.”[5] The matter is brought up again later in the film, during the lawsuit against the hospital. In the courtroom, the defence lawyer asks Midori: “Even if the hospital did make an error, shouldn’t you have been able to tell? You are his mother,” to which she replies that perhaps under healthy conditions she should have realised it, but after giving birth she was unwell for several days. The fathers, on the contrary, are not to be held accountable for the incident and they are not questioned about it.

As a mother, Midori is expected to have a deep physical bond with her child, started prior to birth, that should have made her understand that she did not have any biological bond with the baby she brought home from the hospital. Supposedly, this expectation is implicit in a conception of motherhood that has a strong bodily component, that contemplates the mother caring for the child as if he was an extension of her own body, which undoubtedly affects the mother’s understanding of *skinship*. This assumption is confirmed by Tahhan’s study, in which the Japanese women interviewed describe *skinship* largely in physical terms when referring to their relationship with their child.[6] Although these women mostly mention breastfeeding and co-sleeping practices, the author explains that *skinship* goes beyond cutaneous touch and physical closeness, as by sharing such experiences the mother and the child merge into one another in a feeling of intimacy and connection. Thus, to understand this perception of *skinship* the space and the connection

[5] In order to improve the readability of the text, time stamps will not be reported for each dialogue, which will instead be contextualised within the film plot.

[6] Tahhan, *Blurring the Boundaries*, 219.

between mother and child need to be considered, as these feelings of intimacy and connection happen when the boundaries between the two bodies are blurred.[7]

Furthermore, the relationship between Midori and Keita is articulated in reciprocal bodily expressions throughout the whole film: when Midori and Ryōta pick up Keita from school, he runs towards her and she greets him by stroking his hair and his back, and holds his hand as they leave, as well as whenever they are out all together. However, there is rarely the same kind of contact between Keita and Ryōta, and by comparison it becomes quite evident how the materiality of their relationship takes on different forms.

Figure 2. Midori and Keita on the train.

Additionally, when Midori and Keita return home together on the train after he spent his first weekend at the Saikis', a medium shot shows Midori holding the child while she asks him whether they should run away together to a place that no one knows. The shot gradually turns dark as the train approaches a station, making it almost impossible to catch a glimpse of the expressions on their faces when the child

[7] Tahhan, 220–2.

asks why the father is not included in the impractical getaway plan, to which she replies that Ryōta has his work, implying that her job is to take care of him.

Similarly, Yukari establishes her relationship with Keita through touch. When the child moves permanently to the Saiki house, Yukari finds him sitting by the doorway, visibly sad. She sits behind him asking if something is wrong, and when he does not answer she lifts him up and turns him towards her, acting as if he were a broken robot that needs to be repaired. Pretending to fix him, she tickles him until he starts laughing. Once he has been "fixed" Yukari hugs him, and Keita, at first hesitant, eventually hugs her back. In this scene, the director makes use of the "shot/ reverse-shot" technique, which makes an exchange between two characters appear logical and natural by cutting from the person speaking to the person being addressed.[8] By showing the interaction from both points of view, the viewer is able to see how both characters act and react, perceiving the relationship as a whole.

Moreover, Yukari's interaction with Keita is not limited to cutaneous touch but includes play, associated with feelings of fun that create a space of intimacy where they can connect and trust one another,[9] which could easily be identified as *skinship*.

2.1.2. Fathering: Ryōta and Yūdai

On the other hand, Ryōta and Yūdai have different ways of interacting with their children. Similarly to what emerges from Tahhan's study,[10] the two fathers connect

[8] Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2014), 70.

[9] Tahhan, *The Japanese Family*, 53.

[10] Tahhan, 57.

with their sons in less bodily forms, often less obvious to the eye, but which contribute to expand and reframe the most shared understandings of *skinship*.

In one of the first scenes of the film, Ryōta comes back from work quite late, and Keita and Midori greet him by taking his coat and briefcase. Although Keita was playing Wii before his arrival, his father urges him to practice the piano, stressing how important discipline is. When the child begins to play, he walks over and lowers down to his height, and starts playing with him. The camera then shifts to a close-up of their hands moving on the keyboard, seen from Ryota's point of view, observing Keita's hand looking extremely small next to his.

Figure 3. Ryōta plays the piano with Keita after coming home from work.

Several Japanese fathers interviewed by Tahhan identified sight as a form of *skinship*. In fact, looking at a child's sleeping face or looking at each other are associated with a kind of tenderness that can fill up the physical space between the two bodies, also defined as "proximity through distance in sight" or "touching at a distance".[11] In particular, a 31 year-old man explained that:

[11] Tahhan, 56.

目線は大切です。子供と同じ目の高さで話したら、もっと親しくなれる。

Eye-contact (*mesen*) is important. If you speak to your child at the same height/level, you can become much closer.[12]

By lowering down to their child's height to speak or interact with them, fathers help the child acknowledge the mutuality of their space and how they are implicated in one another.[13] Thus, Ryōta's attitude towards Keita indicates his willingness to create a connection by inhabiting a shared space, if only according to his strict rules. As Ehrlich notes, in fact, in order to motivate his son and guide him down the path he has chosen for him, Ryōta creates what he calls "missions," not free play.[14]

Contrarily, Yūdai plays freely with his children on various occasions, such as when the families spend some time together at the mall. While Yūdai and the mothers play with their children at the bouncy castle, Ryōta watches them from a distance, sitting at the café table. Later, Yūdai joins him and they have a conversation that reveals their conflicting views on parenthood. However, when Yūdai advises Ryōta to follow his example and spend more time with his son, at first he justifies himself claiming that his work is demanding, but Yūdai explains to him: "for children, it's all about time." The issue is brought up again later during camp, when Yūdai reminisces about when he used to fly kites with his own father, and asks Ryota to continue doing so with Ryūsei, to which he finally agrees.

This concept is also stressed by some of the fathers in Tahhan's research, as they affirm that devoting time to play with their children is often associated with

[12] Tahhan, 50.

[13] Tahhan, 56.

[14] Ehrlich, *The Films of Kore-eda*, 166.

skinship, which can include bodily contact if part of the activity, or objects that become part of the space of play. Devoting time to one's children is particularly relevant in the Japanese context, as fathers are most likely to be absent because of work compared mothers, who have always been traditionally responsible for the care of children.[15]

Furthermore, towards the end of the film Ryōta discovers on his camera a series of photos Keita had taken of him – pictures of him sleeping, reading a book, – that make him realise that, contrarily to what he believed, sharing the same blood was not a necessary condition to form a real bond with this child. For all that time, Keita had tried to establish a contact with him, which was now made visible by the camera lenses. In the last scene, the Nonomiyas visit Keita at the Saikis' house, and after seeing Ryōta the child runs away. Ryōta chases him and the camera tracks their movement along parallel paths in a park, physically separated by a railing until their paths converge:[16] the mission is over, and now they can finally hug.

2.2. "You don't even bathe together!": Co-bathing as *Skinship*

As illustrated by Itoh Hironori 伊藤弘了, Kore-eda's films often feature bath scenes that serve a specific narrative function, often linked to the theme of families without blood-ties, in which bathing together contributes to the creation of intimate

[15] Tahhan, *The Japanese Family*, 50–5.

[16] Cynthia Fuchs, "The Adults Must Learn from the Children in Like Father, Like Son," PopMatters, 2014, https://www.popmatters.com/hirokazu-koreeda-like-father-like-son-2495694269.html.

relationships between characters, whereas bathing alone represents the loneliness of a character.[17]

In *Like Father, Like Son*, the director makes use of two opposing conceptions of bath – bathing together as a way to develop bonds and bathing alone as a way to become independent – to emphasise once again how the two families have different understandings of kinship relationships.

When Ryūsei spends a weekend at the Nonomiya house for the first time, he is portrayed while taking a bath (*furo*) alone, playing with the chopsticks that Ryōta has taught him how to use during dinner. Here, bathing alone conveys a sense of distance and symbolises the lack of a solid bond with Midori and Ryōta, whose absence is emphasised by the chopsticks, a direct link to the previous scene.

On the other hand, at the Saikis' Keita takes a bath with Yūdai and his younger brother Yamato, and they play together in the bathtub, making the *furo* a fun experience. Furthermore, the narrow space of the bathtub imposes physical proximity between the three of them, and the impression of intimacy is reinforced by the fact that they are shown all within the same frame.[18]

In Tahhan, co-bathing is described as a form of *skinship* because of its daily and unconscious nature. Since bathing together is something that happens every day, it reflects an innocence that creates a space for intimacy.[19] This space is made up of the water that encompasses parent and children and allows them to "touch at depth", by erasing the boundaries between their bodies as well as any distinction between

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[17] Hironori Itoh 弘了伊藤, "Kore-eda eiga ni okeru nyūyoku no kinō 'Distance' (2001 nen) ni okeru nyūyoku bamen no ketsujo to sono imi 是枝映画における入浴の機能 —『DISTANCE』(2001年)における入浴場面の欠如とその意味—," [The Representation of Bath Time in Kore-eda's Films, or the Lack Thereof in *Distance* (2001)]. *Ningen kankyōgaku* 人間・環境学 25 (2016): 44.

[18] Itoh, *Distance*, 33.

[19] Tahhan, *The Japanese Family*, 43–4.

touching and being touched.[20] Moreover, when Yūdai plays in the *furo* with the children, he pours water from his mouth over Keita's face, turning some of the bath's water into a bodily fluid that becomes an additional means of conveying non-physical touch.

Figure 4. Yūdai takes a bath with Keita and Yamato.

At the mall, while talking about their parenting practices, Yūdai shares his disappointment about the fact that Ryōta does not bathe with Keita ("You don't even bathe together!"), to which he replies that the policy in their home is for the child to be independent. As Clark explains, bathing has a strong significance within Japanese culture, because it is a daily ritual with multilayered meanings. In fact, the Japanese do not immerse themselves in hot water simply to wash, but rather to relax and purify themselves, as the water is imbued with cultural and religious symbols and meanings.[21] The public bath (*sentō*) is a place for the Japanese to bathe with their families and neighbours in order to form a community by exchanging gossip and

[20] Tahhan, 44.

[21] Clark, *A View from the Bath*, 1–5.

ideas, and although the trend has shifted to the individualistic tendency of bathing alone, it is still quite common for parents to bathe with their children until they are seven or eight years old, as it is thought to develop a special bond between them.[22] Thus, because of the cultural and social meaning embedded in the *furo*, Yūdai's criticism of Ryōta's bathing policy does not only concern the quality of his personal relationship with Keita, but also the effect that bathing together may have on the child's capability to relate to society more broadly, due to its key role in developing bonds both within and outside the household. As shown by these sequences, "是枝作品の地合, 血よりも風呂の水の方が濃いのである" (in the case of Kore-eda's works, the bath's water is thicker than blood).[23]

2.3. The Architecture of Touch

When describing the houses of the two families, Ehrlich mentions that the Nonomiya apartment – which the grandmother compares to a hotel – has a pristine and precise table, whereas the Saikis' table is small and crowded, and everyone circles around it.[24] If the first house feels empty and impersonal, the second one by comparison appears warm and lively.

Regardless of their financial situations that allow them to live in two different kinds of houses – a modern apartment in downtown Tokyo and a small house at the back of Yūdai's electronics store in the suburbs, – the relationships within the two families are reflected in the disparate ways in which they inhabit their shared spaces.

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[22] Clark, 66–73.

[23] Itoh, *Distance*, 33.

[24] Ehrlich, *The Films of Kore-eda*, 168.

In one of the first scenes of the film, Keita falls asleep alone in his parents' bed, and once asleep Midori goes to check on him while Ryōta continues working in the living room. The family is seen spending time together in the bedroom only on one occasion, after Keita is admitted to his new school: the camera captures them first from outside the window, laughing and playing, and then from inside the room, showing a close-up of their hands, grabbed and pulled together by the child as he says: "Very close, very close." The director, by cutting from outside to inside, gives the impression that, when looking at the family from up close, it is clear that it is Keita who keeps the family together, something that is later confirmed by the conflicting ideas that Midori and Ryōta have about switching the children. On the other hand, when Keita sleeps at the Saiki home, the whole family sleeps in the same room, on the *futon* laid on the floor.

The Japanese term for co-sleeping is *soine*, which in most cases involves the child sleeping between the parents, a style referred to as *kawa no ji*, the character for river (川), because it imitates the lines that compose it.[25] As Eyal Ben-Ari explains, co-sleeping in Japan is perceived as a form of *skinship*, as it includes physical contact and the transfer of body warmth between parents and children. Furthermore, the parents sleep with their children on *futon* as, due to proximity, they can easily comfort their children if needed, or the children can join the parents on their mattress. Whereas in other cultures the notion of sleeping in one's bed – immovable, with specific boundaries, and often in a different room – has the purpose of promoting independence, in Japan the aim of *soine* is to promote dependence of the child on others, starting from the parents.[26]

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[25] Tahhan, *The Japanese Family,* 63.

[26] Ben-Ari, *From Mothering to Othering*, 142–5.

When the two families decide to make the switch, in the Nonomiya home things begin to change, as Midori and Ryōta realise they need to make an additional effort to integrate Ryūsei into the family. After playing around the house using an electric guitar and a vacuum cleaner as fake weapons, Ryōta, Midori and Ryūsei pretend to fish from the balcony overlooking Tokyo. This leads them to open a camping tent in the middle of the living room[27] and sleep inside it, all close to one another, again filmed first from the outside through the window, on which are reflected the city lights, and then from the inside.

Figure 5. Ryōta, Midori and Ryūsei pretend to fish from the balcony.

Midori and Ryōta, by inhabiting their home in a different way, hope to fill the emotional gap in their relationship with Ryūsei while overcoming physical distance and playing together. This sequence demonstrates that physical proximity can help people connect with each other further, especially when it comes to practices imbued with a strong cultural meaning as *soine*. By sleeping all together in the tent with Ryūsei between them, in fact, Midori and Ryōta encourage him to rely on them,

[27] Ehrlich, *The Films of Kore-eda*, 167.

showing that he can trust them as his newfound parents.

2.4. Summary: Defining Family through *Skinship*

As this analysis demonstrated, *skinship* within kinship relationships is understood in different ways by mothers and fathers in *Like Father, Like Son*. Whereas Midori and Yukari have a deep physical bond with the children, which is articulated through tactility during most of the film, Ryōta and Yūdai interact with Keita and Ryūsei in less bodily forms, that could be defined as non-physical touch. Both Ryōta and Yūdai dedicate time to playing with their children on multiple occasions, and Yūdai also bathes with them: this signifies their intention to create a connection with the children by inhabiting a mutual space. The paternal relationships in the film are crucial in reframing the maternal ones as well as in redefining the meaning of *skinship* more generally, as they demonstrate that *skinship* can be located outside of the physical boundaries of bodies, in the space between and around them, and does not necessarily include bodily interactions.[28]

Furthermore, with regard to both mother-child and father-child relationships, the director emphasises these connections in two ways. The first one is by showing parent and son in physical proximity within the same frame, as it happens when Ryōta plays the piano with Keita or when Midori takes the train with the child, while the second one is by filming the children from the parents' point of view, like when Ryōta stares at the hand of his son on the keyboard or when Yukari looks at Keita sitting in the entryway.

[28] Tahhan, *The Japanese Family*, 57.

Finally, what becomes clear from the attempted switch is that "blood ties take second place to planting the seeds of caring,"[29] as the characters learn that family relationships are established through *skinship* and defined by the time they have spent together, not by bloodlines.

[29] Ehrlich, *The Films of Kore-eda*, 169.

3. *Shoplifters* / 万引き家族

In a 2019 interview following the release of *Shoplifters*, when asked about the genesis of the film, director Kore-eda explained that:

> In *Like Father, Like Son*, I explored the theme of family and blood ties, and after finishing that film, I started to think about what it would be like to create a family that has absolutely no blood ties. If they are not genetically bound to each other, then what brings them together? I thought about what I might connect them with and I came up with the idea of a family that is tied together through crime, and how the parents teaching criminal activity to the children is ethically problematic.[1]

More in detail, the film depicts the story of a family living in the suburbs of Tokyo, unrelated by blood, bound together by their survival instincts that drive them to carry out thefts.

The Shibata family consists of Osamu, a day labourer, his wife Nobuyo, who works in an industrial laundry, Shōta, a young boy, Aki, a sex worker, and Hatsue, an old woman, the owner of their cramped house who supports them with her dead husband's pension because she is afraid of dying alone, a growing phenomenon for the elderly in contemporary Japan.[2] Scholar Songtao Zhang described them as "a tight-knit family of three generations, living together and in great poverty," that seems to be "satisfied with their current situation."[3]

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[1] Hirokazu Kore-eda, "Questioning the Nature of Family Bonds: An Interview with Hirokazu Kore-eda," by Paul Risker, *Cinéaste* 44, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 42.

[2] Ehrlich, *The Films of Kore-eda*, 195.

[3] Songtao Zhang, "Shoplifters: The Tale of an Anarchic Family," *Film Criticism* 42, no. 3 (Summer 2018).

The narration opens with a scene of Osamu and Shōta shoplifting from a grocery store, communicating by hand gestures. On their way back home, they see Yuri, a young girl who is often locked out on the balcony, and because of the cold they decide to take her home and feed her. However, later they realise that she is being abused, and decide not to bring her back. The police only starts investigating her disappearance after a couple of months, and when the family hears about it on the news, they cut her hair, burn her clothes and give her new ones, and change her name to Lin.

Moreover, after the family spends a day out at the beach together, Hatsue dies peacefully in her sleep, and Osamu and Nobuyo decide to bury her body in the backyard, to continue collecting her husband's pension.

One day, when Shōta and Yuri are shoplifting from a store together, the boy steals some fruit in front of the store staff, out of guilt for teaching his sister how to steal. Chased by the police, he breaks his leg by jumping off a bridge and is eventually arrested. Meanwhile, the rest of the family gets caught trying to escape, abandoning him, and all their crimes are exposed.

The family ultimately breaks apart: in order to protect Osamu, Nobuyo takes all the blame for their crimes and is sentenced to prison, while Shota is sent to an orphanage and Yuri is returned to her neglectful biological parents, nostalgic about her time with the family that loved her.

In *Shoplifters*, the director essentially talks about how this family actually becomes a family just as it falls apart, and how only after the group dissolves "what each member of the family meant to them starts to expand and take form in each individual's mind, imagination, and heart."[4]

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[4] Kore-eda, *Interview*, 43.

By addressing these themes, Kore-eda once again urges the viewer to reflect on what binds a family together and what are the relationships between family members truly made of. Analysing the *skinship* patterns between the characters in the film is a key element in answering these questions, as for the precarious nature of their relationships they are not inclined to verbalise their feelings but rather tend to express them through non-verbal forms of communications.

Figure 6. The family enjoys their time at the beach.

3.1. "Mediated Touch": Tactility through Memory

In her book *Touching the Unreachable*, Innami claims that any act of touch between two people is "necessarily mediated through material elements, such as skin and objects, as well as immaterial elements, such as layers of previous contacts and memories: an imaginary membrane."[5] Thus, each individual has their own personal understanding of touch, affected by memories of past tactile encounters, that allow them to develop a reflexive consciousness of the self in relation to the other.[6]

[5] Innami, *Touching the Unreachable*, 2.

[6] Innami, 3–4.

When analysing the relationships between the characters in Shoplifters, it can be noted that this concept of "mediated touch" theorised by Innami could be applied not only to physical tactile encounters but also to non-physical ones, as within the Japanese context the latter have the same potential to convey meaning compared to the former.

From the very first scene of the film, it becomes evident that the social ties within the shoplifting family diverge from the norm, which brings the characters to privilege non-verbal ways of communicating, such as the system of hand signals that is repeated and replicated by Osamu, Shōta and eventually Yuri. This process of repeating and replicating gives the gestures a sense of rituality and collective meaning, which however take up a different form within the individual memories that each of the characters have of one another. In addition to the immediate significance of the gestures, such as signalling the presence of store clerks nearby, on a deeper level for Osamu the hand signals could be a means of positioning himself as a father figure who teaches his child something, whereas for Shōta they are an emblem of responsibility, falling upon him to support the household. On the other hand, Yuri sees them as a secret code that grants her access to the family. Furthermore, as Ehrlich notes, "it is intriguing that [...] Kore-eda represents childhood as having an innate understanding of rituals."[7]

In a similar way, objects that belonged to people become associated with them in the mind of others, and carry on specific meanings. For instance, when Yuri is given Shōta's clothes, she feels a deeper connection to him, which is mediated through the fabric.

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[7] Ehrlich, *The Films of Kore-eda,* 196.

Finally, having lived parallel experiences in the past might lead different people to interpret certain tactile encounters in the same way, as in the case of Nobuyo and Yuri, both victims of abuse. In fact, because of her personal experience, Nobuyo understands the reason behind Yuri's initial reluctance and mistrust of the family, and knows how to engage with her in order to make her feel at ease, leading to the development of a deep bond between them.

Thus, examining the elements – material or immaterial – that constitute the membrane mediating the characters' encounters is important for understanding the *skinship* patterns between them, and for deciphering the nature of their relationships, specifically as they are not dictated by blood but by the need to survive outside the predetermined canons of Japanese society.

3.1.1. Touching through Objects: Yuri and Shōta

During Yuri's first night at the Shibata house, the family abruptly awakens as they realise that she has wet the mattress. The scene opens with a frame of Shōta sleeping in the *oshīre*, a closet with sliding doors normally used to store *futon* during the day, and resumes from his point of view once he opens his eyes. From inside the cabinet, in-between the doors, he sees Yuri standing still, while Nobuyo and Osamu move away the wet *futon,* until she is dragged out of sight by Nobuyo, who gives her Shōta's old clothes. The boy immediately complains, stating that those are his, but Nobuyo replies that they do not fit him anymore. It now becomes clear that Shōta is jealous of her, as she suddenly gets all the attention and disrupts the balance of his everyday life.

However, still wearing his old clothes, Yuri starts following Shōta everywhere like a shadow, as if having something that belonged to him implies a connection between them, mediated through the clothes' fabric.

Gradually, the boy starts to be protective of her, and even steals her favourite gluten cakes from the shop, pulling them out of his backpack to show her while they are eating some snacks sitting down in an alley. Once again, their connection passes through objects, which "nurture" their relationship. More specifically, Mallory Andrews explains in her review that "Shōta's jealousy of his new sister eventually gives way to a growing awareness of the complicated morality of their existence on the fringe and to the roots of his own loyalty to his adoptive family."[8]

Figure 7. Yuri and Shōta eat a few snacks they stole from a shop.

Furthermore, when Yuri shoplifts with Shōta and Osamu for the first time, by unplugging the metal detector of a shop to allow Shōta to steal a couple of fishing rods, the boy complains to Osamu that "she is in the way," to which he replies that

[8] Mallory Andrews, "Shoplifters (Kore-Eda Hirokazu, Japan)," Cinema Scope, July 2, 2018, https://cinema-scope.com/spotlight/shoplifters-kore-eda-hirokazu-japan/.

she is his sister, but Shōta denies. Being scared of Yuri's entry into the family, Shōta opposes it by wanting to exclude her from shoplifting, something characterised by its own rituals and gestures that until now only he and Osamu know. On the other hand, when later on Osamu asks him what Yūri is to him, he gives in and says she is his sister.

This change in thinking is soon reflected in his behaviour, after a storekeeper who notices the two children stealing from his shop gives Shōta some candies and tells him not to make his sister steal.[9] In the last part of the film, when they go to the store to shoplift again they find it closed, with a sign in *kanji* meaning "in mourning" on the door, but since they have never encountered the word before, they do not understand the message.[10] Yuri wonders if it is closed for holiday, while Shōta thinks it went bankrupt. Reflecting on what the storekeeper had said to him, he acknowledges his responsibility towards his sister, and, wanting to shield her from that risky business, tells her to wait outside before going to steal from the supermarket. Once he has done the finger-twirling ritual, however, he notices that Yuri has entered the shop and started doing it as well, signalling her intention to steal. Afraid that she will get caught, he tries do divert attention by throwing cans on the floor and stealing a bag of oranges. Cornered by the store clerks who ran after him, he jumps off a bridge, and the oranges scatter on the ground. Despite being a symbolic demonstration of Shōta's affection for Yuri, the frame of the scattered oranges foreshadows what will happen to the Shibata family, which will be broken

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[9] Manohla Dargis, "'Shoplifters' Review: A Family That Steals Together, Stays Together," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/22/movies/shoplifters-review.html.

[10] Ehrlich, *The Films of Kore-eda*, 196-7.

apart as a result of the chain of events initiated by Shōta's actions.

3.1.2. Sharing the Same Skin: Nobuyo and Yuri

In his review of the film, scholar Simon Paxton writes that "perhaps the most notable relationship is between Nobuyo and Yuri," as "the loneliness and abuse which Yuri has been subjected to is something with which Nobuyo seems to relate."[11]

While Nobuyo and Osamu are bringing Yuri back to her biological family after they fed her, they hear her parents fighting, and her mother being hit by her father; Osamu thinks it is the right moment to return the child, as they probably did not even notice she was missing, but Nobuyo crouches down and holds Yuri tighter in her arms, as if she wants to shield her from the violence taking place inside the house. Eventually, they bring her back home with them.

After the Shibatas see on television that the police is investigating Yuri's disappearance, Nobuyo and Hatsue take her to the mall to get her new clothes. However, while trying on swimsuits in the fitting room, Yuri starts shaking her head, and Nobuyo asks why she does not want them. The child demands in response: "You won't hit me later?," leaving Nobuyo speechless and prompting her to take a concerned look at Hatsue before replying that she will not. With this sequence, Kore-eda urges the viewer to reflect on how touch can sometimes have a negative connotation within a domestic context, and how it can bring children to misinterpret similar situations in other contexts, as they may have associated them with violence.

Growing aware of what Yuri may have suffered, throughout the film Nobuyo tries to show her that she will not harm her and that she can trust her. In fact, since

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[11] Simon Paxton, "Stealing and Healing in Downtown Tokyo: A Review of *Manbiki Kazoku* (Shoplifters)," *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 19, no.2 (2019). http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcjs/vol19/iss2/paxton.html.

Nobuyo too has experienced abuse in her past, she knows what Yuri's "imaginary membrane" is made of, and what she has to go through if she wants to reach her.

Figure 8. Yuri touches the scar on Nobuyo's arm.

In the following scene, Yuri plays with a fake fishing lure while Nobuyo is taking a bath. When she notices that the woman has a scar on her arm, she asks what happened, and after Nobuyo explains that she got burned with a hot iron in the dry-cleaning establishment where she works, she brings her arm closer to hers to show a very similar scar, presumably the result of the her biological parents' sadistic behaviour.[12] The next frame displays the two scars from Nobuyo's perspective, as she tells her: "We are the same." Then the child starts touching the woman's scar, and continues until the camera cuts to the next scene. By touching her scar, Yuri not only acknowledges Nobuyo's pain, but also her own, developing her own sense of the self in her encounter with the other.

[12] Ehrlich, *The Films of Kore-eda*, 202.

Moreover, Nobuyo lights up a small fire in the porch by using a rolled-up newspaper, in order to burn the dress that the child was wearing when they found her; she asks Yuri's permission to dispose of it, and she agrees. As Ehrlich affirms, "a close-up of the little dress burning draws out the expressive potential of fire,"[13] as it is an image of warmth that has the power of cancelling symbols of violence, and eventually lead to a different understanding of touch. During the whole scene, in fact, Nobuyo hugs Yuri from behind, explaining to her that: "If they say they hit you because they love you, that is a lie. If they loved you, [...] this is what you do," which becomes particularly relevant when taking into consideration that children who are abused may be "extremely timid in dealing with others" and "likely to conclude that they are not worthy of being loved by other people."[14]

3.2. Summary: The Memory of *Skinship*

In her book, when reflecting on *skinship* as a site of accumulations of sensations and feelings, Innami writes that:

> The skin's capacity to accumulate past sensations and feelings and memories, all resulting from (attempts at) relationship with others, to become overlaid with [...] a kind of an imaginary membrane, a repository of the ambiguous nature of physical contact and the inevitable uncertainties or failures experienced, suggests that there is much more to "skinship" than a simple tactile-based mutual affirmation between mother and child.[15]

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[13] Ehrlich, 205.

[14] Fumie Kumagai, and Masako Ishii-Kuntz. *Family Violence in Japan: A Life Course Perspective* (Singapore: Springer Singapore Pte. Ltd., 2016), 70.

[15] Innami, *Touching the Unreachable*, 10.

As my analysis of the relationships in *Shoplifters* demonstrated, the characters' encounters and their personal understandings of them are affected by memories of past encounters, physical and non physical. Thus, these encounters are not limited to their material or visual component, but include am imaginary membrane that affects not only the interpretation of the encounter itself but also the perception of their own self.

This is the case of Yuri and Shota's relationship as well as Yuri and Nobuyo's. In the case of the former, due to the non-canonical nature of their bond and their young age that does not enable a mature understanding of kinship relations, the children communicate through objects, which become imbued with meaning. When it comes to Yuri and Nobuyo, on the other hand, their encounters are mediated by their past experiences of abuse, that lead Yuri to misinterpret specific situations while encouraging Nobuyo to have a positive influence on the child's understanding of touch and maternal relationships more generally.

Finally, as in *Like Father, Like Son*, the director emphasises these skinship patterns by making use of close-ups, as with the frame of Yuri's dress consumed by flames and of the two identical scars, or by showing one of the characters from the other's point of view, as with the scene filmed from inside Shōta's makeshift bedroom at the beginning.

4. Touch Beyond the Screen: The Tactile Quality of Non-diegetic Sound

Non-diegetic sound – whether it takes the form of background music or voice-over – refers to a sound that accompanies a scene but has its source outside the fictional world of the film, and thus is not part of the sensory world that the characters are able to touch, smell, hear, or see.[16] On the contrary, diegetic sound originates within the narrative world of the film, whether onscreen or offscreen,[17] for instance when a character plays an instrument.

As Herget affirms, the soundtrack of a film enhances the cinematic experience, influences the perception and interpretation of images, and contributes to the understanding of the events shown.[18] More generally, non-diegetic sound has the scope to convey meaning directly to the viewer, who is its only designated recipient.

In *Projections of Sound on Image*, film theorist and composer Michel Chion has studied the influence of sound in interpreting a filmic image, and theorised the notion of "added value," described as:

> the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression "naturally" comes from what is seen and is already contained in the image itself. Added value is what gives the (eminently incorrect) impression that sound is unnecessary, that sound merely duplicates a meaning that in

[16] Corrigan, *Writing About Film,* 76; Siu-Lan Tan, Matthew P. Spackman, and Elizabeth M. Wakefield, "The Effects of Diegetic and Nondiegetic Music on Viewers' Interpretations of a Film Scene," *Music Perception* 34, no. 5 (2017): 605.

[17] Corrigan, *Writing About Film*, 76.

[18] Ann-Kristin Herget, "On Music's Potential to Convey Meaning in Film: A Systematic Review of Empirical Evidence," *Psychology of Music* 49, no. 1 (2019): 22.

> reality it brings about, either all on its own or by discrepancies between it and the image.[19]

More in detail, music creates a specific emotion in relation to the situation depicted in the scene in two ways: "empathetically" or "anempathetically." In the first case, music participates in the feeling portrayed by taking on the scene's rhythm, tone and phrasing, and thus synchronising with its mood, whereas in the second case music can exhibit indifference to the emotion portrayed and intensify it through juxtaposition.[20]

In either case, the director makes use of the soundtrack to further emphasise or isolate a specific emotion that could not be fully verbalised by the filmic image and its dialogue, and takes advantage of the multisensory perceptions of the audience to convey meaning. In fact, film music is a means of communicating that is not mediated by the actors or the story, which goes straight beyond the screen to the audience. More in detail, investigating whether Kore-eda makes use of background music empathetically or anempatethically in *Like Father, Like Son* and *Shoplifters* is an effective way to understand what the added value of sound is, as well as what message it aims to communicate not only visually but also auditorily.

4.1. *Like Father, Like Son*: Identifying *Skinship* through Music

In *Like Father, Like Son*, Kore-eda makes use of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations – Aria,* performed by classical pianist Glenn Gould, as background music for key scenes of Ryōta's relationship with Keita.

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[19] Chion, *Projections of Sound on Image*, 5.

[20] Chion, 8.

Analysing the various movements of the *Goldberg Variations*, scholar Peter Williams affirms that:

> the Aria melody, particularly as it begins, is an exquisite example for the claim that all beautiful melody has a tinge of sadness or (as I would prefer to say) transports us to a world of imagination always inclined by its transience towards melancholy.[21]

When listening to the song, in fact, it is impossible not to notice the notes of sadness and melancholy that characterise it, and which stimulate deeper reflections.

In the film, the *Aria* is heard for the first time during the sequence of the Nonomiyas' dinner to celebrate the admission of Keita to the new school. The music starts while Ryōta is smiling and looking at his son, and continues on to the following scene, while the family plays together on the bed. Although the scene initially appears as lighthearted and cheerful, and the background music combined with their laughs might seem to act anempathetically, the melancholic motif foreshadows what will happen next. The music transitions on to the next sequence: Midori and Ryōta bring Keita to take the DNA test, which confirms that the child is not their biological son. *Goldberg Variations* keeps playing in the background while the Nonomiyas drive home, until the car stops at a railway crossing and Ryōta punches the car window out of frustration: the music is suddenly interrupted, replaced by the acoustic signal of the train passing. It now becomes evident that the music was acting empathetically, participating in the gloomy mood of the scene and matching its dark colours.

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[21] Peter Williams, "The Movements," in *Bach: The Goldberg Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 55.

The song is heard again during the final scene, in which Ryōta chases Keita in the park after he ran away. When their parallel paths merge and the father hugs the child he now recognises again as his son, the first notes of the Aria start playing, and continue until the credits roll, merging with the laughs and chatter of the characters as they gather in the Saiki house. If the music at the beginning of the film had the aim to imply that the relationship between Ryōta and Keita was about to break apart, in the final scene its function is empathetic and anempathetic at the same time. By starting right after Ryōta's conversation with his son, the melancholic notes of *Goldberg Variations* urge the audience to acknowledge that, even though it might not be easy, with commitment and dedication their relationship can be restored, as Ryōta is now aware that what binds him to Keita is not blood, but his love for him.

Figure 9. Ryōta reconciles with Keita at the park.

As this analysis demonstrated, a song not only can be used both empathetically and anempathetically within the same film, but it can also convey multiple meanings, significantly enhancing the cinematic experience.

Furthermore, since the *Aria* is a keyboard piece, it draws the viewer back to the scene in which Ryōta plays the piano with Keita, described in the second chapter. Throughout the film, Ryōta encourages Keita to play the piano – even though he is not skilled – as it is part of his idea of a successful son, seeing it as a means to establish a bond with the child. However, while talking to Keita in the park he confesses to him that he also quit piano practice as a child, giving up all his expectations and communicating his intentions to cultivate their relationship, something that is further conveyed by the music.

By making use of the same song to accompany the most significant scenes of the relationship between father and son, Kore-eda links the filmic images with the emotions and meanings augmented by the music, guiding the viewer in identifying the *skinship* patterns associated with it, whether they are more obvious to the eye or not, from Keita holding his parents hands, longing for touch, to Keita and Ryōta's parallel paths in the park merging together, emphasising their heartfelt reunion.

4.2. *Shoplifters*: Identifying *Skinship* through Silence

In *Shoplifters*, director Kore-eda makes an extremely subtle use of the soundtrack, which was specifically composed for the film by Haroumi Hosono of Yellow Magic Orchestra, a key figure in the field of Japanese electronic music.[22]

In the first scene, an iconic jazz piece accompanies Osamu e Shōta while they wander around the supermarket, drawing the attention on the characters and dictating the mood of the scene. As soon as Shōta starts doing the finger-twirling ritual, however, the music fades out until it stops completely and is replaced by the diegetic sounds of the supermarket, creating a suspense effect as the boy hides the

[22] Ehrlich, *The Films of Kore-eda*, 210.

goods in his backpack. Here, music is used by the director to capture attention and stimulate curiosity, leaving the viewer to focus unaccompanied on the most important parts of the sequence.

Figure 10. Osamu and Shōta at the supermarket.

Similarly, music is used throughout the movie to change the rhythm, establish a mood or link scenes, but it rarely accompanies a sequence with the aim of creating an emotion or isolating meaning with an empathetic or anempathetic function. Furthermore, when comparing the duration of the film with that of the soundtrack, it can be noted that whereas the film lasts over two hours, the soundtrack only lasts eighteen minutes, implying that the majority of the film is either marked by silence or by the diegetic sounds of the Tokyo suburbs, such as the chirping of cicadas.

More specifically, the absence of non-diegetic music during most of the film encourages the audience to reflect on the unspoken, on the non-verbal forms of communications between the characters, employed due to the precarious nature of

their relationships. Consequently, the soundtrack does not hold any "added value," while silence invites the viewer to look for it within the filmic image.

As O'Rawe explains, in the 1960s European directors such as Tati, Fellini and Bergman had begun to be aware of the dialectical role of silence in relation to sound, creating new possibilities for "configuring alienation and fragmentation, absence and the asynchronicities of Being."[23] In *Shoplifters*, silence plays an analogous role. In fact, the absence of background music in the film is associated with the poverty of the Shibata family, as it underscores their sense of marginality from Japanese society. An example of this is the sequence of Hatsue's death, characterised by dark tones and which takes place in near-total silence, as the family's circumstances do not allow for it to be reported.

Thus, in order to truly understand the nature of family relationships within the film, and identify their *skinship* patterns, the audience has to listen to silence.

[23] Des O'Rawe,"Silence: Film Sound and the Poetics of Silence," in *Sound and Music in Film and Visual Media: A Critical Overview*, ed. Graeme Harper (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 94.

5. Conclusion: The Role of *Skinship* in the Films of Kore-eda Hirokazu

The overall aim of this thesis was to advance an understanding of *skinship* in Japanese cinema, particularly with regard to physical and non-physical touch between family members in the films of director Kore-eda Hirokazu. The objectives of my study, within the context of *Like Father, Like Son* and *Shoplifters*, were to identify the *skinship* patterns between the characters and to interpret their cultural meanings, investigating how they are conveyed to the audience. More specifically, my research questions were: what role does *skinship* play in kinship relationships within the Japanese director's films? How is it portrayed? What does it mean for the audience?

My analysis of *Like Father, Like Son* demonstrated that in relationships between parents and children, *skinship* was not limited to cutaneous touch, but that it also took place outside the physical boundaries of bodies, in the space between and around them, and did not always include bodily interactions. By comparing mother-child and father-child relationships, in fact, I found that while Midori and Yukari had a deep physical connection with their children, Ryōta and Yūdai bonded with them by inhabiting a shared space, devoting time to play or bathe together. Moreover, I found that there is a cinematic transposition of the concept, as specific filmic techniques are used by the director to emphasise the *skinship* patterns within family relationships, such as showing parent and son in physical proximity within the same frame, and filming the children from the parents' point of view.

Similarly, my analysis of *Shoplifters* proved that, since any act of touch between two people is mediated by an imaginary membrane made up of memories of

past tactile encounters, there is more to *skinship* than simple bodily contact. The characters, in fact, communicated through objects imbued with meaning, as in the case of Shōta and Yuri, or related to one another on the basis of past experiences of touch, that influenced their understanding of the self and called for alternative forms of *skinship*. Once again, Kore-eda focused on these patterns by making use of close-ups or by showing one of the characters from the other's point of view.

Finally, my analysis of non-diegetic sound suggested that the soundtrack was used within the films to convey meaning from a multisensory perspective. In the case of *Like Father, Like Son*, the director associated a specific track with the relationship between Ryōta and Keita, using it to emphasise different emotions at different times, empathetically and anempathetically. Additionally, it was used to guide the viewer in identifying the characters' understandings of *skinship* as well as its meanings, enhancing the cinematic experience. On the other hand, in the case of *Shoplifters*, the near-absence of soundtrack urged the audience to reflect on the non-verbal forms of communication between the characters, and to search for the "added value" directly within the filmic image, by identifying the meanings of silence.

Thus, my answer to the research questions is that not only *skinship* plays an important role within the films and is emphasised by the director with specific filmic techniques, but it also makes the ties between family members significantly more evident and transparent. More in detail, examining *skinship* in kinship relationships brings out a network of bonds which has nothing to do with blood ties, and yet is solid, especially as its forms of intimacy are not limited to physical touch. These connection become obvious when analysed through the tools of anthropology and film studies, but they would otherwise be harder to understand for a viewer unfamiliar with the Japanese cultural context. As explained by Marks, in fact, "when

a work is viewed in a cultural context different from that in which it was produced, viewers may miss some multisensory images."[24] However, the use of non-diegetic sound to further convey meaning is something that can overcome cultural barriers and can be easily understood by any viewer.

Furthermore, these findings are based on the analysis of the two films that was supported by related literature, which means that what was concluded in this research only concerns the two case studies and cannot be automatically applied to all the production of the director. Another limitation is that not all of the relationships in the films have been explored, especially romantic ones. Such data would have enriched the study further, but this would have compromised the focus of the research and required additional space. However, what was researched in this study will be of interest to other scholars intending to analyse the cultural contents of different films. Further research might explore romantic relationships, include the other senses, or concern other cultural contexts, and see how the results relate to those of my study. For example, it would be interesting to analyse the upcoming remake of *Like Father, Like Son*, directed by Chinese-American filmmaker Lulu Wang,[25] and examine the way family relationships are portrayed, how *skinship* is transposed to a different cultural context, and what are the differences from the original version.

[24] Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 153.

[25] "Like Father, Like Son," MUBI, 2022, https://mubi.com/films/like-father-like-son-2021.

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