

# Documentary-Warm-Restrained: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Style of the Long Take in Hirokazu Koreeda's Films

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**Abstract:** Director Hirokazu Koreeda's films are unique in their documentary aesthetic style, which is somber and simple, calm and warm, and plainly realistic. In terms of content expression, he uses skillful and delicate expressions such as long takes, fixed lens, slow editing, and horizontal composition to dilute the traces of directorial creation, get rid of the constraints of techniques, and exude natural emotions, forming a unique social concern for the marginalized characters at the bottom of the hierarchy. In the study of Koreeda's films, three keywords are extracted: life, conflict, and death. Through analyzing representative long take paragraphs, I interpret his documentary, warm and restrained long take aesthetics. Koreeda uses long takes to show the beauty of Japanese life, eliminate family conflicts, and reflect on the issue of death, which can provide multiple perspectives of the film's rhythmic ambience, emotional expression, and marginal narrative for a deeper understanding of his films.

**Keywords:** Hirokazu Koreeda, long take aesthetics, Japanese director, documentary photography, the issue of death

## 1. Introduction

André Bazin believes that the long take is conducive to maintaining the integrity of time and space, making the movie closer to real life, and Bazin's documentary aesthetics is a respect for the art of film, and even more so, a reverence for real life. Koreeda is one of the most iconic contemporary Japanese directors, whose works are known for their heartfelt storytelling, delicate depiction of emotions, and distinctive visual styles. The long take, a common filming technique in his movie creations, gives the actors more time to interpret the connotations beyond the text, presenting the audience with a true and simple slice of life. And because the separate shot is essentially a forced inculcation of the director's will, the long take gives the right of selective viewing to the audience, providing them with more space for reflection. After being influenced by Hou Hsiao-hsien's and Theo Angelopoulos's creative concept of long take and fixed lens, Koreeda often utilized the aesthetic concept of long take in his personal movie creations to convey a simple and unadorned state of life of the Japanese grassroots and the true nature of life, and also formed a narrative style that eliminates the conflicts of the Japanese families and explores the issue of death of the characters. Koreeda's films are gentle and delicate, down-to-earth and touching. While telling the story of marginalized families in Japan's social environment, he maintains a relatively smooth dramatic conflict, giving Japanese people's ordinary life an extremely abundant detail description, making the characters' emotions under the calm surface of the narrative water actually surging in the dark. In the movie, he skillfully utilizes the subjective camera's point of view to blend the vague and complex emotions between the characters with the objective environment, and in the blank space of the images, he constructs a kind of implicit and distant aesthetic landscape. The poetic flavor of his films, which is full of sadness, is gradually integrated into the shots language of emotional integration and diffuse narrative, showing unique artistic thinking and aesthetic perception of transcendence in empathetic experience, which makes the audience have a more profound sense of life while enjoying the film.

## 2. Documentary Long Takes: Showing the Beauty of Underlying Life

Photography is different from painting in that its uniqueness lies in its essential objectivity. Koreeda utilizes the objectivity of the long take to carry out *automatic writing*, and this automatic way of generating has completely changed the psychology of images.<sup>[1]</sup> The documentary and objectivity presented by the use of the long take technique has given Koreeda's images an undeniable power, which is calm and gentle on the surface, but in essence, it is the use of the silent long take that restores the innocence of the world, and shows the beauty of the lives of the ordinary people at the bottom of the Japanese society. For example, in his early film *Maboroshi no hikari* (*Maborosi* 1995), Yumiko tries to get over the sadness of her first husband Ikuo's suicide, and when she and her second husband form a new family, Koreeda uses a lot of long takes to present their daily life, such as eating, cleaning, and eating watermelon, etc. The purpose of spending so much time on this is to inform the audience that Yumiko's self-healing is not accomplished by a dramatic climax purification moment, but by slowly piling up the trivial and ordinary things in life. The beauty of life is hidden in the jolly ordinary daily routines of life.

Or at the beginning of the film *Arutemo arutemo* (*Still Walking* 2008), he used a long take to record a father walking alone on the street with a cane, the street scene under the camera is the most common daily life, and it is this daily scenery that draws the audience closer and adds to the life flavor of the film. In the subsequent long take of the family seated for dinner, the depth of the actors' positioning in the cramped space shows a unique order, clearly indicating the relationship of the family members. Another low-frame fixed long take is during the family dinner in the evening, which truly shows the relationship between the two parents and the differences in facing the problems of the elders. The dining table under the camera has become an important place for the Yokoyama family to communicate their emotions and show their power, where the conflicts of daily life accumulate and explode, but the dining table also brings physical and mental warmth to the family. Although it is a common meal, but also simple and happy. In addition, the director uses long takes to dexterously show the subtle and ineffable emotions of the two generations of the family, just like a poetic prose, blending the distinctive aroma between the virtual and real. As the one-day party comes to an end, the spatial layout of Yokoyama's home remains as it was at the beginning, except for the noise that fades away, like the gentle return of the tide. Another example is at the end of the film *Umimachi Diary* (*Our Little Sister* 2015), a long take of the four sisters laughing and talking about their common father on the beach, during which their half-sister, Suzu Asano, steps out of the frame. The continuation of the long take here is accomplished by the movement of the three sisters of the Kôda family walk towards Suzu Asano, representing their true acceptance of Suzu Asano, treating her as their closest sister. This nearly four-minute long take requires a high degree of integrity in the actors' performances and sets the stage for a happy ending to this heartwarming and healing movie.

Another example is the movie *Manbiki kazoku* (*Shoplifters* 2018), in which the family is unrelated by blood and lives in a cramped house, Koreeda uses fixed long takes to allow the audience to focus more on the communication and interaction of the characters within the frame in the dinner passages shown several times, showing a cozy family atmosphere. The director builds the narrative plot through fragmented life and uses plain, calm fixed long takes to present the characters' living environment and psychological activities in order to reflect reality and expose human nature. According to Koreeda, "While blood ties do have importance, I question whether there are non-blood ties that can sustain a family. Sorrow and beauty are connected, and family contact outside of normal blood ties is seen as *the beauty of material sorrow* in the context of normal blood ties, which is both momentary and imperfect, both eternally silent and connected." In one scene of a family meal, for example, a fixed long take documents the family's acceptance of the newest member, Yuri Hojo, as Shota eats with his head down, while his mother Nobuyo and grandmother Hatsue chat with Yuri Hojo and keep giving her food. Though this image may seem mundane, it vividly demonstrates the children's confusion and helplessness along with the parents' loving gaze. Another example is when Shota and his sister come back from the rain and bump into their *parents* who are making love inside the house, a 30-second long take in which Nobuyo in the foreground fumbles to get dressed and Osamu Shibata in the background wipes off the rainwater from the children. This take not only reflects the humor of *being caught*, but also highlights the warmth of the family. Another example is the long take of Nobuyo and Aki's bathing passage, they feel each other's bodies, and this kind of body intimacy allows the *mother-daughter relationship* to infiltrate. Because of the traditional Japanese family culture of common bathing, so that the two found the same scars on their arms, and the scars remain a mark that carries the same memories of the two in the past. The *mother-daughter relationship* has thus become even more intimate.<sup>[2]</sup> Koreeda's use of long takes enables the movie to focus more deeply on more profound topics

such as human nature, death and life, and to convey a grand theme through the trivial details of life. The fixed long take can guide the audience into the characters in a more objective and neutral manner, allowing the audience to feel the subtle changes in the emotions of the characters, and this form of *filming* without too much intervention increases the audience's mobility and pleasure in *decoding* the images.

### 3. Warm Long Takes: Eliminate Conflicts between the Family Members

In an interview, Koreeda said, "Movies do not exist to judge individuals, and directors are not God or judges. Designing a bad guy the story (the world) may have a clear distinction between black and white, but I don't think so, instead, the audience will bring the issue back to their own daily lives to think about it again and again." Koreeda has always been cultivating the land of society and humanity, he does not want people to always look at the characters in the movie and the daily life with a critical eye, no judgment is the position of his movie creation, so his movies are full of humanistic concern, depicting the happiness and sadness in the world with a delicate and restrained brushstrokes. Family conflicts have always been the focus of film and television art, but compared to most works that present conflicts with quarrels and scoldings and eliminate them with passionate embracing and weeping, Koreeda's portrayal of family conflicts is much lighter. He always uses warm and long takes to eliminate the conflicts between family members, which triggers the audience to think deeply about a series of universal issues such as human nature, affection, and family.

For example of the film *Arutemo arutemo*, in a one-minute fixed close-up long take of Kyohei's shower, his wife, Toshiko, tells him the story of finding out that he betrayed his wife when he was young. The audience can hear Toshiko's narration behind the glass, and see the ashamed Kyohei, who seems to escape the scrutiny of the audience's eyes. Although Toshiko's forgiveness of Kyohei is not in this scene, the knot in Kyohei's heart is eliminated at this moment, therefore Kyohei will be more relieved later. What's more, at the end of *Soshite chichi ni naru* (*Like Father, Like Son* 2013), the director first uses a side-by-side close-up shot to show the audience a father-son conversation, in which the two men communicate with each other from two paths, and the father tries to retain and ease the relationship until they come to the confluence of the paths. And then the director employs a frontal panoramic long take with a length of 43 seconds, which eliminates the gap between father and son. In Sigmund Freud's system, the child's relationship with the father creates what is called the *superego*.<sup>[3]</sup> Another example is the last long take of the movie where the two families converge, the two different concepts of education of the career father and the family father are in conflict with each other, but due to the relevance of the two children, this conflict must be eliminated. As they enter the house, the camera slowly rises to the accompaniment of soft piano music, and the whole story moves from the emotional entanglements and conflicts of the two families to reconciliation and harmony. The movie does not focus on criticizing the act of taking the wrong child and the social problems behind it, but rather calmly describes how the two families cope with the exchange of the children. The long takes objectively record the ups and downs of the emotions of the father and the son, and bring the audience enough aesthetic enjoyment in terms of shot composition and motion design. It is worth noting that Koreeda always utilizes an open-ended ending to leave the resolution of the father-son conflict in the film in an imaginative reconciliation, which on the one hand brings the audience space to continue thinking and imagining, and on the other hand also expresses Koreeda's concern and helplessness about the changing discourse and collision of values between fathers and sons in the drastically changing Japanese society.<sup>[4]</sup>

Another example is a farewell passage between two brothers at the end of *Kiseki* (*I Wish* 2011), which is a 58-second panning long take that records Koichi descending the steps from the station and running happily into the distance from a surveillance-style high angle, with no close-ups or cuts, but showing Koichi's relief in a cloudy manner. While Koichi lives with his mother at his grandmother's house in Kagoshima, his younger brother Ryunosuke lives with his father in Fukuoka, and this separated and broken family will never be as happy as it once was, but through this *miracle trip*, the children all readily accept this reality. In *Manbiki kazoku*, the director records the closed indoor environment in which the six members of the family live through long, fixed lens, thus achieving a warm narrative of reunion and warmth and creating a non-dramatic, static and soothing effect. In addition, near the end of the film, the police's trial of Nobuyo is obviously critical and discriminatory in tone, and when Nobuyo is asked how the children called her, she is sometimes puzzled, sometimes disdainful and coldly smiling, sometimes calm and collected, and seems to be in a dialog with the audience in between his words, making the viewer think deeply. Nobuyo's self-description eliminates the discrimination of the police and the contradictory views of the judges. Such an objective and

realistic fixed long take allows the viewer to feel the warmth of Nobuyo's emotions, and at the same time, enter into her emotional heart.

Last but not least, in the family film *La vérité* (*The Truth* 2019) with Japanese warmth and French romance, where the conflict between the mother Fabienne and her daughter Lumir, her husband, and her housekeeper fills most of the movie. Fabienne, an egotistical high-minded once-famous actress who published a memoir that glorifies herself as a responsible and loving mother and said nothing to the housekeeper, who has worked diligently for years, which leads to the housekeeper's resignation. Although the daughter and mother are reunited in a foreign country, the memoir's misrepresentation of the facts makes everyone unhappy with Fabienne, and conflicts are everywhere. In the story within a story setting, Koreeda makes the strong and tough characterization of the mother turn into a tender and loving one, and in the one minute and 47 seconds of fixed long takes on the set, the dialogues reflect the sincerity of Fabienne's heart, which reveals the strong feelings between mother and daughter in a tangible way. The story then continues the warm attributes of Koreeda, the two open up to each other and bring out the truth of previous years. It turns out that Fabienne seized the role of Sarah because her daughter loved the role, she didn't want to let Sarah grab her *daughter*, and for this reason she even sacrificed her body to get the role. As Lumir embraces her mother in her words outpouring, the longstanding emotional gap between them disappears in the heart-to-heart conversation and embrace.<sup>[5]</sup> Two minutes and 18 seconds of long takes of the characters seemingly unperturbed, but the sizzling emotions are mobilized just right. The long take is soft and highly expressive in Koreeda's movie, always serving the deep emotional motives of the characters, utilizing simple and unadorned techniques to create a typical character, thus making the emotion more moving.

#### 4. Calm Long Takes: Exploring the Death of Characters

Japanese people always think highly of death rather than life, the suicide rate remains high. When mentioned about the Japanese suicide, people are familiar with the *hara-kiri* (*commit seppuku*), because Japanese have been advocating death since ancient times. They believe that all crimes committed in life will disappear with death. Many modern Japanese artists also vigorously promote death, after the Japanese painter Koga Harue, Kawabata Yasunari also wrote: "There is no higher art than death, death is life."<sup>[6]</sup> The Japanese view of life and death has led to the widespread existence of a *collective unconscious* that seeks to sublimate the soul by destroying the physical body, and this *aesthetics of death* is also present in the films of Koreeda. Nevertheless, his portrayal of death is not a sad and sublime one, but a calm and restrained one. André Bazin's documentary aesthetics had a profound influence on Koreeda's TV documentaries at the beginning of his career. Bazin's documentary aesthetics used dramatic plot as a structural model, striving to achieve a realistic and believable effect, and reasonably presenting the theme of cultural reflection. For director Koreeda, he chose an implicit expression of the Japanese tradition of death, depicting the profound meaning of life and death that lies beneath the surface of everyday life through objective long takes and unflinching narrative.

In his debut film *Maboroshi no hikari*, Koreeda used quiet and restrained *mise-en-scène* for the first time to explore the issue of death. At the end of *Maboroshi no hikari*, Koreeda employs a two-minute documentary-style long take of Yumiko following a funeral procession from a distance, as if she were attending the funeral of her ex-husband, who had committed suicide five years earlier. Such a long, tedious and solemn funeral ceremony seems to be a farewell to her ex-husband, a final conversation between the living and the dead, after which the dead rest in peace and the living start a new life.<sup>[7]</sup> Yumiko, who has been depressed over the sudden loss of her loved one, lacks just such a long farewell, which can only be shown through long takes. In the film *Wandafuru raifu* (*After Life* 1999), which also explores the issue of death, Koreeda employs long takes, hand-held photography, and the use of natural light illumination in order to talk about living memories in about three minutes in the guise of a documentary interviewee. The film uses a large number of long takes of the interviews, among these deceased, there are young girls in their flowery season, middle-aged men, the oldest old man, etc. With different life, they chose different happy memories, and finally sat down under the big screen and watched the memories they chose flow on the screen, conducting a happy and warm farewell ceremony. From this poetic setting alone, we can see the director's personal romantic display of the concept of life and death. Koreeda once said: "I have never used the depiction of someone's death process to incite sadness in the characters and the audience; in *Wandafuru raifu*, it was depicting the preciousness of life from the side of death, and *Dare mo shiranai* (*Nobody Knows* 2004) has also tried to distance itself from the process of death and sadness."<sup>[8]</sup>

In the movie *Dare mo shiranai*, Akira Fukushima and his new friend bury his sister by the river,

here is a fixed wide long take that ends with a *J-cut* which combines the next 52-second long take, leaving the musical prelude in the previous shot. While the next moving long take appears, the song plays as the two characters travel downhill from right to left on a bridge. Cars come and go in the foreground and the sun rises in the distance. Their hair is dirty and disheveled, their clothes stained with dirt, their eyes are lifeless and they are silent when walking on the bridge. Meanwhile, the song accompanied by the piano seems to be making a silent cry on their behalf. As always, Koreeda takes a calm approach in dealing with death; there are no tears, let alone hysteria, only the look of the two of them continuing on their way without sleeping all night. The young Akira Fukushima lost his sister, the pain is difficult for the audience to empathize with. Through the long take of the long gaze, the audience can slowly understand Akira Fukushima's heart at a loss and the cruelty of real life. According to director Koreeda, *Dare mo shiranai* "does not start from a simple black and white dichotomy, but records the world from a gray perspective. There are no pure heroes or villains, just a realistic depiction of the world we live in, which is constructed by relativistic values."<sup>[9]</sup> However, in these long takes exploring death by Koreeda, it is rare to see images directly related to death, such as the specific details and process of dying, the gory and unpleasant nature of the corpse, and the mourning of the most loved ones. The prototypical events in *Dare mo shiranai* are far more brutal than those presented in the film, and Koreeda avoided brutal images so that the public would not criticize the characters after witnessing the tragedy without knowing the full story, and he didn't want the audience to criticize the mother who abandoned her son in the film. In addition, the father's funeral in *Umimachi Diary* is not shown with a portrait of the deceased of his father, his remains, and a coffin. On the one hand, it is the absence of the father during the growth of the four sisters, and on the other hand, it is also a downplaying treatment of death. "Koreeda's persistently expression of death and deliberately removes the details of death and the scenes of mourning. Actually, he is more fond of and obsessed with depression rather than death itself. The subject of depression is the living, the subject of death is the dead."<sup>[10]</sup> Koreeda is ostensibly writing about death, but in fact, he is writing about how the living can bear the pain of losing their closest relatives and whether they can face life with a smile afterward.

## 5. Conclusions

The themes of most of Koreeda's films focus on the warmth of human feelings and the parting of life and death. This subtle sadness is a source of beauty, just as Kawabata Yasunari interpreted the sorrow of things, and sadness and beauty are connected. The realism and romance of Koreeda's images are based on his meticulous observation of daily life like a long take, and his deep understanding of the impact of the shooting angle and the rhythm of the camera on the emotions of the characters. It is precisely this basic perception of real life and deep understanding of life that Koreeda captures, focusing a large number of shots on the depiction of the minutiae of life, which expresses the idle and broken time seemingly useless and cumbersome, but makes the beauty of life flow quietly on the screen. He disliked movies that conveyed social concepts because they were always melodramatic, and Koreeda had always shunned them.<sup>[11]</sup> He is keen on using long takes to show the characters in the drama walking on city streets and in natural scenery, following them steadily, showing their relationship with the big time and the environment calmly and objectively. His films incorporate traditional Japanese aesthetic interests and Western realist narrative techniques to reproduce trivial realities of life in a simple and natural way, and then sublimating them from realities of life to realities of art. In the end, by expressing the meaning of family and portraying the missing or reorganized family relationships, he depicts the living condition and spirit of contemporary Japanese families quietly.

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