

Koreeda Hirokazu at Yale University February 25-26, 2011

“If anyone can be considered an heir of the great Yasujiro Ozu, it might be Hirokazu Koreeda.”

–Roger Ebert (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 2009) on *Still Walking*

Koreeda Hirokazu was born on June 6, 1962. He originally wanted to become a novelist, and attended Waseda University to study literature. Upon graduation, Koreeda joined the independent production company TV Man Union in 1987, and worked there as an assistant director for three years. In 1991, he made his first two documentaries: *Lessons from a Calf* (*Mō hitotsu no kyōiku: Ina shōgakkō haru-gumi no kiroku*) and *However...* (*Shikashi...fukushi kirisute no jidai ni*), which earned him a promotion to full director and launched a career filled with both feature films and television documentaries. Koreeda's first fictional film, *Maborosi* (*Maboroshi no hikari*, 1995), won the Golden Osella Award at the 52nd Venice Film Festival. He would go on to make other feature films such as *After Life* (*Wandafuru raifu*, 1998), *Distance* (2001, nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival), *Nobody Knows* (*Dare mo shiranai*, 2004), *Hana* (*Hana yori mo naho*, 2006), *Still Walking* (*Arutemo arutemo*, 2008) and *Air Doll* (*Kūki ningyō*, 2009, selected for Un Certain Regard at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival). At the same time, he would continue to make television documentaries that focused on figures such as the author Miyazawa Kenji, filmmakers Hou Hsiao Hsien and Edward Yang, poet Tanikawa Shuntarō, controversial AIDS victim Hirata Yutaka, and most recently comedian Hagimoto Kin'ichi.

While Koreeda has sometimes been overlooked by critics in Japan, his work demands our attention. He explores how people deal with loss and death, how they refigure these events in their memory and how they continue to go on living. His sensitive film technique conveys the lives and thought processes of his characters through meticulous and unsentimental exploration of the everyday aspects of their lives, revealing his subjects to be not extraordinary figures, but rather quite ordinary ones. At the same time, Koreeda often turns his camera to the marginalized in society, focusing on those separated from the mainstream by ethnicity, illness or even celebrity. Through Koreeda's camera, difference in its myriad shapes and forms is interrogated, and others turn out to be just like us. His fundamental humanism recalls directors like Ozu Yasujirō and Naruse Mikio, although Koreeda himself would prefer Naruse's fascination with the darker side of humanity. He also cites other directors like Hou Hsiao Hsien and Theodoros Angelopoulos as influences, particularly in the development of his first feature film, *Maborosi*.

While his works are never overtly autobiographical, at the same time they spring from his own personal experiences. His films, which often overlap thematically with events in real life, both on a national and personal scale, are marked by Koreeda's insistence on an ontological exploration of the self. Koreeda points to a sympathy between himself and the vantage point of his camera. Moreover, in some of his documentaries, this feeling is magnified when Koreeda turns the camera on himself, emphasizing the personal

investment he makes in his subjects. His relationships with his subjects often drive his work, fueling Koreeda's interactive approach towards his filmmaking style, an attempt to create a sense of real life.

Koreeda's roots as a documentary filmmaker also allow him to constantly challenge the boundaries between documentary and fiction in his works. His ambitious filmic experimentations include in-depth studies of human thought and behavior through the use of improvisation (as in *Distance*, for instance) in a manner reminiscent of John Cassavetes. The signature piece of his so-called "naturalistic" aesthetic, *Nobody Knows*, culminated in the sensational triumph of the film's protagonist, Yagira Yūya, a then 12-year-old ordinary boy without any acting experience, receiving the Best Actor Award at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival. Koreeda's use of nonprofessional (child) actors is one of his rigorous attempts to be sourced always in the real, letting cinema move toward evocative rapprochement with its subjects. This deferential recourse to neorealist proclivities is retained even in his recent efforts to reach mainstream audiences with *Hana, Still Walking*, and *Air Doll*.

Koreeda's continuing cinematic search draws from headlines and his own life to create nuanced films that echo real life events but result in an exploration and interrogation of the human condition all his own. Koreeda does not attempt to provide answers, resisting the notion that a filmmaker should pretend to have an answer to complex social problems, but instead chooses to allow his films to manifest the anxiety that he himself feels at these events. As a result, his films are masterful pieces rife with nuanced depictions of people wrestling with the questions of who they are and how to live.

—Michael Chan and Takuya Tsunoda

For Further Reading

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