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Static Shots and Everyday Narration in the Films of Hirokazu Kore-eda

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Abstract. Family relationships, ordinary routines, memory, and social change recur throughout Hirokazu Kore-eda's cinema. Working against this background, the present study asks a narrower formal question: what do static shots do within his everyday narration? Through literature analysis and close comparison of *Nobody Knows, Still Walking,* and *Shoplifters*, it argues that restrained framing holds everyday actions and domestic interiors in view long enough for them to acquire narrative weight, and that it renders relationships between characters legible through distance, proximity, movement, and silence. In combination with Kore-eda's anti-climactic narrative structure and his use of ambient sound, the fixed frame also keeps major events from standing apart as independent dramatic peaks; they remain inside the continuous flow of daily life. Static shots, on this account, are not merely a visual technique. They are one of the means by which these films narrate—shifting attention away from dramatic conflict and resolution toward living, waiting, remembering, and living together.

Keywords: Hirokazu Kore-eda, static shots, everyday narration, domestic space, anti-climax

1. Introduction

Viewers coming to Hirokazu Kore-eda for the first time often remark on how little seems to happen. Meals are cooked and eaten, children walk to school, family members wait, clean, listen, and share rooms. Yet it is precisely these unremarkable activities that carry his films. Where conventional narrative cinema organizes itself around dramatic conflict and decisive events, Kore-eda builds stories out of the daily routines of ordinary people, and it is through family relationships and everyday life that emotional states and social environments come into view. Ehrlich links this manner to observation, restraint, and a preference for suggestion over direct explanation [1]. The present study takes this orientation toward everyday life as its research background and singles out one formal device—the static shot—as its topic, asking how static shots participate in everyday narration and how they interact with spatial organization, narrative duration, family relationships, silence, ambient sound, and off-screen space.

Kore-eda's films have in recent years been approached from many angles: everyday life, family, space, sound, and social change. Ehrlich reads his cinema through its attention to quotidian detail and its observational, restrained manner [1]. A broader account of narrative structure and film style comes from Wu and Chermanchonlamark, who treat cinematography, editing, sound design,

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characterization, and narrative complexity as interconnected components of his work [2]. On *Shoplifters* in particular, Dias shows that the small, cluttered house at once restricts the characters physically and discloses something of their inner circumstances [3], while Martins contends that restraint in the handling of emotion, far from diluting intensity, throws into relief precisely what the characters cannot say directly [4]. Lee stays close to the lived texture of poverty and everyday experience in the same film [5]. Ogata widens the lens, relating cinema to architecture, light, memory, narrative, and the perception of time [6]. Through the idea of "costumbrist cinema," Medina Marañón shows that the customs, gestures, and habitual activities in *Still Walking* do narrative work of their own and prompt viewers to reflect [7]. Other scholars set the family narratives against larger social shifts. For Jae, *Shoplifters* registers a transformation of the Japanese family in which bonds are formed through personal choice and shared living practices rather than biological ties alone [8]; Yamada reads the film alongside Heisei-era poverty, unemployment, family change, and broader economic change [9].

A related line of research has taken up formal restraint and the anti-dramatic. Zhang connects anti-climax, ambient sound, off-screen space, and spatial restraint to a lowering of dramatic pressure that moves viewers from immediate emotional reaction toward contemplation and everyday ethics [10]. On *Nobody Knows*, Wu examines suggestive dialogue, tactile close-ups, naturalistic performance, and long takes in relation to abandonment, responsibility, and human development [11].

What this body of work has not done is treat the static shot as a topic in its own right. Everyday routines, family relationships, domestic space, sound, anti-climax, and social change have each received attention, but mostly in separation, as dictated by the central concern of each study. The fixed frame is where these concerns can meet at the level of film form. There is also a gap at the level of close analysis. Labels such as "slow," "restrained," and "realistic" capture the overall impression of Kore-eda's cinema without explaining how that impression is produced in any particular scene. To answer that question, one has to begin with the frame itself: what remains inside it, where the characters are positioned, how they move through the space, what the camera declines to follow, and how sound extends beyond the visible. These questions allow the narrative significance of static shots to be discussed without collapsing them into slow pacing. The static shot, this study argues, is an important link between visual form and everyday narration. The chapters that follow trace this link in two steps: chapter 2 considers how fixed framing shapes the observation of daily life and the meaning of domestic space, while chapter 3 turns to narrative rhythm, silence, ambient sound, and off-screen space.

2. Static shots and the construction of everyday space

2.1. Static shots and the observation of daily life

In this study, a static shot means a shot in which the camera holds more or less the same position for a stretch of time while movement may continue inside the image. The distinction that matters is between the camera moving and things moving in front of it: characters can enter, leave, cross a room, or rearrange themselves while the camera stays put. Such framing suits Kore-eda's attention to ordinary life, since it gives the surrounding environment time to become visible. Ehrlich stresses how much his cinema invests in everyday routines and small details; by holding the same visual field, the static shot keeps such details available to the eye rather than letting the next viewpoint replace them at once [1].

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The opening of *Shoplifters* shows how much narrative information an unremarkable routine can carry. Osamu and Shota steal together, signal to each other with gestures, buy food, and walk home. The sequence is not organized around the theft alone: the walk, the meal, and the chance meeting with Yuri all belong to the same movement toward the family home, and it is on this ordinary return journey that Yuri is first encountered and gradually absorbed into the family's daily life. Because the camera stays in place, the characters never detach from the spaces they inhabit; store, street, household, and the bodies moving among them read as one connected visual environment. Rather than reducing a scene to a single action at a time, the static shot lets an action appear together with the conditions under which it occurs. Several activities can therefore remain visible within one frame—a character in the foreground, someone moving in the background, or an empty area of the room that continues to shape the action.

Medina Marañón's discussion of *Still Walking* makes a useful comparison. His concept of costumbrist cinema foregrounds customs, habits, body language, cultural details, and ordinary activities, and in *Still Walking* these features feed directly into narration and cinematic contemplation [7]. The family gathering matters, then, not only because a death is remembered at its center; the preparation of food, movement through the house, family conversation, and repeated habits themselves make up the narrative experience of the gathering.

The same principle governs everyday activity across Kore-eda's films: an action can be narratively important without causing another event. Washing, waiting, eating, or walking may reveal a character's place within a family or a pattern of social life. Zhang counts such routines among Kore-eda's anti-dramatic methods, noting that washing dishes and waiting remain within the temporal field of the film instead of serving merely as transitions [10]. The fixed camera also changes how a viewer looks. A moving camera directs attention by pursuing a particular character or action; a static one leaves more of the image open, so that the spectator decides where to look within the given spatial arrangement. Directorial control does not disappear—framing, duration, editing, and mise-en-scène still determine the boundaries of perception—but the image no longer indicates at every moment where attention should be placed.

Nobody Knows offers another case. Wu discusses the children's everyday existence in relation to their apartment, the city, and the people around them [11]. The gravity of the film's subject is not carried by major confrontations alone; the children go on occupying and negotiating their surroundings, and the apartment remains part of their lives as their circumstances change. Here the importance of the static shot lies in continuity. A camera that stays where it is lets an environment accumulate narrative value: a room becomes familiar, a routine becomes recognizable, and small changes within the same environment register as meaningful precisely because the viewer has already seen the space under different conditions.

Everyday narration in Kore-eda is therefore not a matter of absent action but of a different distribution of attention. By giving everyday activity enough visual time, the static shot allows it to become part of the narrative instead of leaving it as background.

2.2. Domestic space and character relationships

Nowhere does Kore-eda's everyday narration become more visible than in domestic space. Houses and apartments set the terms of cohabitation—how closely people live together, how they interact, how much privacy they can keep—and the physical environment also discloses their material conditions.

Shoplifters states this most clearly. Its small, cluttered house restricts the characters' physical space while also revealing aspects of their inner lives [3]. The house is more than a setting: it shapes

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how the family interacts and how its relationships develop.

In the early domestic scenes the family is presented through shared activity. People eat, talk, move around one another, and care for Yuri, and their relationships come into view through repeated acts of living together. No complete explanation of who is related to whom is offered at the outset; the household becomes intelligible through behavior, interaction, and spatial proximity.

Static framing can hold such relationships inside a single visual field. When several family members occupy the same frame, their relative positions become part of the characterization. One character may remain in the background while another speaks in the foreground; someone may move closer, drift further away, or leave the shared space without the camera immediately following. Relationships can then be read through spatial arrangement as well as through dialogue and action.

This matters all the more because the family in *Shoplifters* gradually turns out not to be a conventional biological family: its bonds rest on shared choices and everyday practices rather than on biological ties [8]. The house gives these relationships a daily material form. Family identity is made through eating together, sharing space, caring for children, and maintaining routines. When the family later falls apart, the members' care and respect for one another become more visible [3]. The meaning of the house shifts with the relationships inside it: what first appears to be a crowded and restricted space can equally become a representation of intimacy, while the same limited space exerts material pressure and makes small acts of care more visible.

Quiet domestic moments of this kind can still carry strong emotional meaning, because emotions do not always need to be expressed directly. Kore-eda's restrained and melancholic style allows unspoken emotions to emerge through silence, distance, and changes in movement [4]; a character does not have to state an emotion for it to become part of the scene. This is where the static shot and domestic space intersect. The camera can retain the physical circumstances surrounding a character's silence: a reaction need not be isolated in a close-up but can remain connected to the person who caused it, the room in which it occurs, and the other people who continue their routines.

What such domestic actions mean also depends on the conditions under which they take place. Human experience is closely connected to concrete forms of everyday life, and actions such as eating, waiting, or caring for someone cannot be separated from the surrounding social and emotional conditions [5]. The same action may therefore carry different meanings depending on a family's economic situation, emotional relationships, and living environment.

The apartment in *Nobody Knows* works differently but to a related effect. It begins as a home shared by children and gradually becomes associated with isolation and vulnerability; the children's everyday existence remains closely connected to the apartment while their relationship with the living environment changes as their circumstances change [11]. Its significance develops through repetition: the viewer first grows familiar with the space and only later notices changes in its meaning.

Domestic space also opens onto a broader social dimension. In *Shoplifters*, the home is connected to unemployment, poverty, changing family structures, and the social conditions of the Heisei period [9]. The home thus carries two kinds of information at once: it shows how people care for one another, and it reveals the material circumstances that shape and limit their lives.

The static shot is useful in this context because it can keep the personal and the social within the same image. A character's behavior remains connected to the room, to the people around them, and to the conditions of everyday life, so that domestic space becomes part of the narrative rather than remaining a passive background.

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3. Static shots and the construction of everyday narration

3.1 Anti-climax and the rhythm of everyday narration

The role of static shots becomes more apparent once they are considered together with Kore-eda's narrative rhythm. His films often withhold a clear resolution from important emotional problems: conflicts may remain incomplete, and characters may continue living after important events without receiving a conventional conclusion. Anti-climax is a central feature of this approach—conventional dramatic resolution is weakened while emotional meaning is left in an unfinished state [10]. A major event, in other words, does not necessarily constitute the final meaning of the entire film; what happens after the event can be important as well.

Still Walking provides a clear example. The film centers on a family gathering associated with the memory of a deceased son, yet the gathering does not resolve the family's emotional conflicts in a conventional way. Everyday activities and family customs occupy an important place in the narration, so that the gathering is not merely a setting in which the plot takes place but a process in which everyday life continues to unfold [7]. This narrative approach changes the function of the static shot. If scenes do not have to move toward a climax, the camera can remain in moments that produce no immediate dramatic result, and the viewer becomes more aware of the passage of time itself. An action can end without producing a new plot event; a conversation can end without resolving the underlying problem; a character can leave the frame while the space remains. Everyday narration, on this view, is concerned not only with "what happens next," but also with "what does it mean to remain here?" Ordinary time and activities acquire narrative significance accordingly.

This structure is also related to the films' restrained expression and non-closed endings [1]. An event is not always given a clear explanation; instead, conditions are created for viewers to connect details across different points in time. *Shoplifters* contains serious social and family conflicts, but its narrative does not turn them into a conventional courtroom drama or a family reconciliation story: through omission, off-screen space, and incomplete emotional exchanges, the film avoids providing a clear conclusion directly [10]. This restraint does not reduce emotional intensity—part of the film's emotional force comes precisely from the characters' inability to express what they feel [4]. When a static or restrained shot preserves such a moment instead of immediately cutting to a reaction shot that explains the character's emotions, the viewer has to recover the emotional meaning from the specific context.

Nobody Knows presents a similar narrative approach, moving back from serious experiences such as abandonment and loss to ordinary communal life. Its ending does not treat death as the final meaning of the narrative but brings attention back to everyday activities and the continuation of life [11]. Anti-climax here is not a rejection of narrative but a redistribution of narrative emphasis: major events remain important, but they are placed within a longer continuum of everyday life. The stability of the static shot corresponds to the same approach—it does not force every moment toward a conclusion.

3.2 Silence, ambient sound, and off-screen space

Static shots never function independently of sound. In Kore-eda's films, visual restraint is often combined with ambient sound, silence, and off-screen sound sources, and ambient sound can present the psychological states of characters without direct dialogue or conventional musical cues [10]. Static framing can also make viewers pay more attention to what is happening beyond the main

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action. When the camera remains still, sounds from outside the frame acquire narrative significance: viewers hear an activity without directly seeing its source, and a sense of space beyond the visible frame is created.

The relationship between image and sound is particularly evident in *Still Walking*, where ambient sound contributes to the presentation of family conflicts that are never spoken about directly [10]. Such sounds do not need to announce a major event; they become part of the environment in which the characters exist. Ambient sound also strengthens everyday narration in a deeper sense, because the world of the film continues to exist even when the plot does not move forward. Traffic sounds, household sounds, weather sounds, voices, and other environmental sounds persist even when the characters are not speaking. *Nobody Knows* offers a similar example: ordinary sounds and character activities are connected with the possibility of continuing communal life after loss [11].

Off-screen space does related work. When an event is not presented directly, viewers have to construct part of the situation through sound, character reactions, spatial continuity, or information obtained earlier. Kore-eda's use of off-screen space prevents viewers from receiving all the information directly and thereby creates a form of interpretive incompleteness [10]. The technique is closely related to static framing. A moving camera can follow an off-screen event and reveal it; a fixed camera can remain in its original position and let the event move beyond the visible area. The viewer thereby experiences the limitations of visual knowledge. This limitation matters especially in Kore-eda's films, which often present interpersonal relationships that cannot be completely explained—characters misunderstand each other, hide information, or are unable to express their feelings. Restrained camerawork preserves this uncertainty.

Taken together, static framing, silence, and off-screen space create a form of emotional participation that differs from traditional cinema. Viewers are not told directly, through music or close-up shots, how they should feel; they need to work out the relationship among image, sound, and absence by themselves. This corresponds to the overall character of Kore-eda's anti-dramatic cinema, in which emotional participation is directed more toward contemplation [10]. The perspective of cinematic architecture offers one further vantage point: spatial experience is connected with light, memory, and the slow perception of time [6]. Space in these films is accordingly not only visual but also experienced through duration, sound, movement, and memory. Each of these formal elements preserves something—the static shot preserves the frame, ambient sound preserves the environment, silence preserves what remains unspoken, and off-screen space preserves what cannot be seen directly—and everyday narration is formed through their interaction.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the role of static and restrained shots in the everyday narration of Hirokazu Kore-eda. The analysis indicates that relatively stable framing can give ordinary actions enough visual duration to become part of the narrative itself: cooking, eating, walking, waiting, and remaining together are not treated merely as material between major plot events, but as things that can reveal relationships, routines, and social conditions.

The discussion of space has shown that domestic environments are especially important to this process. In *Shoplifters*, the cramped house represents both material restriction and intimacy; in *Nobody Knows*, the apartment changes in meaning as the children's circumstances change. Static framing strengthens these effects because it maintains the relation between characters and their surroundings.

Static shots also become more meaningful when considered alongside Kore-eda's anti-climactic narrative structure. His films do not always resolve emotional conflict through a single dramatic

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event; important experiences are often followed by more ordinary time, and the consequences of an event continue through routine, memory, silence, and repeated encounters. Static framing gives this continuation a visual form.

Sound and off-screen space extend the function of the fixed image further. Ambient sound keeps the larger environment present; silence preserves what characters do not express; off-screen events remind the viewer that the visible frame does not contain the whole world of the story. Together, these elements encourage interpretation through context rather than through direct explanation.

The impact of this narrative method is that everyday life becomes a significant site of meaning. Family relationships emerge not only from dialogue or major events but also from proximity, distance, shared routines, and the physical conditions of domestic life, and social pressures can be seen within the same spaces in which care and attachment are expressed.

The significance of examining static shots lies, finally, in the connection between form and experience. A stable frame does not simply slow a film down; it can change what counts as narratively important, so that a room, a pause, an ordinary meal, or an action repeated within a familiar environment can carry information about the people who inhabit it. This is especially relevant to Kore-eda, whose films repeatedly locate emotional and social meaning within ordinary situations.

The static shot should therefore be understood as one component of a broader system of visual and narrative restraint, working together with domestic space, duration, anti-climax, silence, ambient sound, and off-screen space. Through this combination, Kore-eda's cinema gives everyday experience a sustained place within narrative. The ordinary is not simply the background of the story; it is one of the main forms through which the story is told.

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