

# THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DEPTHS OF THE MELODRAMA, AFTER AN AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY BY FRANCISCO DIAS

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## ABSTRACT

Melodrama's adaptability is a direct cause of the way in which it can also be transmedial, transgenre and transnational, finding new ways of expression outside of the classic confinements of Hollywood's excesses. Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Manbiki kazoku*, also known as *Shoplifters*, is an example of a film that belongs to the melodrama category, but that explores the *pathos* and feeling that are characteristic of the genre in a way that not only is it not divorced of the political but contains within itself a fierce rebuke of the pressures of a capitalist society that underlines its emotional burden.

Keywords: Melodrama; Political; Society; Family.

*The Invisible Family*, by Francisco Dias, uses the audiovisual essay format to explore three points the filmmaker and author considers to be essential when it comes to analysing *Manbiki kazoku* — the 2018 movie by Hirokazu Kore-eda, famous for his explorations of “complex issues, such as class, loss, healing, and family” (Macfarlane, 2017) — as melodrama: the home, the family and society. The audiovisual essay is divided into three parts, according to theme, each with a quote that underlines that very same *leitmotif*.

Melodrama, a rather adaptable genre, is consistently linked to “the power and value of feeling” (Gledhill and Williams, 2018, p. 1), with “excess” as its most distinctive characteristic (Gledhill and Williams, 2018, p. 6). In *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, a book cited by Francisco Dias, the editors strive to refocus melodrama from simplistic ideas around it as a domestic genre or merely focusing on emotional and familial crises, by demonstrating its transmediality, or how it can be transgenre and transnational, something outside of the “exceptional excess” of “Hollywood’s presumed classical narrative forms” (Gledhill and Williams, 2018, p. 6) — in fact, melodrama has often had to mutate to survive, thriving in metamorphosis. This worry is not at all unwarranted as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, in *Film Art: An Introduction*, describe Hal Hartley’s *Trust* (1991) as *muting* a “melodramatic plot through slow pacing, brooding close-ups, and dynamic foreground/background compositions” (Bordwell and Thompson, 1991, p. 467). The melodrama, the *heightened feeling*, is then subsumed, controlled, made less *excessive* by the restraint of the filmmaking. As Francisco Dias shows in his audiovisual essay, the restraint-tinged melancholia used by Hirokazu Kore-eda is not what necessarily *mutates* its melodramatic plot but what underlines the emotions felt by characters that are often unable to properly express them.

Where *Shoplifters* is most imbued by melodramatic characteristics is through its “personalization of the social” as Deidre Pribiam says, who argues that “emotion is both generated by and channelled into social discourse and practice” (Gledhill and Williams, 2018, p. 7). While home and family and two of the three important pillars of this film — the Shibatas home is a place where a non-biological family unites through the need for companionship and familial love — it’s society the true crusher of human spirit and the main antagonist/villain of this melodrama. It’s the social conditions of these people’s lives that lead them to both hateful acts and incredible human connection. When Francisco Dias cites Linda Williams indicating that the melodrama starts and ends with the demonstration of innocence, this too is a comparison the author and filmmaker makes to Hirokazu Kore-eda’s quote that the film starts and ends with the formation of family. This cycle is furthermore conceptualized as characteristic of the melodrama as it, as summarised by Susan Hayward in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (2006), “serves to make sense of the family and in doing so perpetuates it” (2006, p. 238).

In his essay film, Francisco Dias continually contrasts scenes, creating thematic diptychs. When confronting the power of *home* in *Shoplifters-as-a-melodrama*, the intention is to underline the *mise-en-scène* — the warmth of the Shibata home, filled with people, and the coldness of Yuri's parents' home — but he also constantly underlines the characters' desires, tracing a line between their hopes and their reality, between what they can't have (security, familial love) and what they long for. This same thing happens in the next chapter, focused on family, where *reality* and *desire* (two components of the melodrama) are clashed together through both the film's story and Francisco Dias diptychs: Nobuyo may not have given birth to Yuri, but she became her mom as they burned her pyjamas. She and Osamu also become truly Shota's parents as they let him go, in the last diptych of the *family* chapter. Here, the emotions of the film, the power of the feeling it already has, is doubled, intensified through the composition of the audiovisual essay. By contrasting the two moments when Nobuyo and Osamu "release" Shota, the true power of the ragtag family they had created, through brute force and selfish reasoning though it may have been, is underlined, with these two scenes "speaking" to each other as the lines are edited for emphasis.

It's important to emphasise that melodrama, in all its adaptability, is inherently adept in negotiating the social and the political contexts. In fact, the significance of melodrama as a genre is precisely because it's able to both move audiences emotionally, but also politically. Consequently, this ability stems from recognition, because the audience recognizes the human feeling, the social experience of the moral dilemma. Recognition is

essential to melodrama's ends: for suspense or pathos to work we have to feel for the characters and recognize the forces at work in situations they may not understand themselves". (Gledhill and Williams, 2018, p. 10)

At the same time, it is essential for the melodrama to offer not only recognition but also realism — despite the "exceptional excess" that has marred the melodrama — and *Shoplifters* is a great example of exactly that. The argument here is that melodrama is not opposed to realism because of heightened feeling, its power and value, on the contrary, it is engaged with realism as the melodrama often "appeals to the recognition of classes of people, of social conditions, or the areas of life hitherto unrepresented" (Gledhill and Williams, 2018, p. 10).

Some people might be left wondering why such a central role is gifted to shoplifting, given the film's title, when it is only a small part of the film, especially because what unfolds is an endearing and melancholic story of a strange family who have formed unique bonds. But the family *melodrama* is there to also shine a light on the class, social conditions, and the lives of the impoverished that seldom see the spotlight — the depth of feeling in this melodrama is due to the oppressive world the characters live in. As Francisco Dias indicates in the last chapter, it is society that has hampered their lives, "all of them are inside the same

aquarium and one day will get caught". His last diptych speaks of abandonment but also of the need to bridge it, to surpass it.

It might be interesting to further contrast the *pathos* of *Shoplifters* with that of *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho's 2019 Oscar winning film), given both movies' position as films that portray the conflict within a family, gathered in a house that constricts them, and pressured by a society that both renders them invisible and casts iron rules to be followed. They share the same combination of emotional turmoil and expression, of family drama and social and political indictment, which allows *Shoplifters* to be seen in the light of the melodrama and connects the film to other properties that have explored the same ideas, the same pillars of home, family and society, that use heightened emotion, the excess of feeling. Though *Parasite's* approach is markedly different (and a product of a south Korean trend that indicts capitalism as the original sin and the most oppressive force on family, just note the recent success of *Squid Game*), it speaks of the capability of melodrama to possess different explorations of *recognition* and *realism*, its capacity for being transnational and transgenre and to turn the social into the personal, by framing the family unit as the microcosmos where life is represented.

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