A number of Japanese films position their protagonist children or youth in terms of their relationship to school, functioning happily, struggling miserably, or escaping either violently or fantastically. This is natural considering the extensive time Japanese children spend at school or study. A few films, like the Kitano Takeshi comedy Kikujiro (2000) and now Kore-eda Hirokazu’s tragedy Nobody Knows, make their children yearn for an absent authority rather than wish to escape it, removing them from schools and setting them in search of parents who have left them behind.

Nobody Knows is based on an actual incident of child abandonment in Tokyo at the peak of the 1980s’ glittering economic bubble, but takes place in the present. It depicts a year in the life of an itinerant single-parent family. The mother Keiko (a Japanese singer/essayist named You) moves her four children, ages four to twelve, into a dingy apartment, confining all but the eldest boy Akira (Yagira Yuya) inside because they’ve been evicted previously for disturbing the neighbors. Keiko is a failed singer, probably a bar hostess, who moves from job to job, soothing her children with stories of their respective, almost-impressive fathers, and promising that a man to bring stability to their lives is just now in the wings. She repeatedly abandons them with an envelope of cash, returning briefly just as their money runs out.

In a moment of maternal intimacy, Keiko applies red nail polish to the fingers of the eldest daughter, Kyoko (Kitaura Ayu), which later fades from her fingers as the days of the mother’s absence stretch on. When Keiko briefly returns, Kyoko reaches for the bottle again, hoping to revive their relationship. The girl drops the bottle and Keiko angrily wipes up spilled nail polish, crimson like blood. Kyoko ponders the spot of polish smeared on her finger as if from a cut. The bond between mother and child is severing; in its place is a wound. A crimson stain later reappears at a crucial moment, as if to blame the absent mother.

Keiko leaves again, and after several months the abandoned children run short of funds. Their utilities are cut off and their diet limited to handouts of food, past its expiration date, pilfered by sympathetic convenience store clerks. Akira, on the verge of adolescence, fears that the family will be broken up if their situation is discovered, yet longs to attend school and make friends. He must budget their money, rustle up meals, and maintain Japanese family rituals, such as cake for Christmas, and otsoshi dama, a gift of money for the New Year.
Nobody Knows also counters the outdated canard of Japan’s Confucian family values. And it accurately portrays many aspects of quotidian Japanese life.

did nothing but sing with the man. Akira takes the cash, but with pain and reluctance.

There are no sexual scenes and almost no violence in Nobody Knows. It contains one reference to condom use and pubic hair when Akira hits up two of his erstwhile fathers for money (Scene 5, “Seeking Help”). As the film shows, and as can be brought up in class, paternal contact with and financial support for their children are often limited or nonexistent when Japanese families break up. Japanese divorce rates mirror those of European countries such as Germany and Great Britain, but, unlike them, Japan lacks an effective mechanism to enforce child support payments.

The film’s length and languorous pace may bore high school students. It is a story of endurance and gradual disintegration, not of hope. Nevertheless, it can be used for university classes as a foil to films such as The Family Game, which may give the impression that all Japanese devote their childhoods to cramming for exams. Amid concerns about a growing gap between rich and poor in Japanese society, Kore-eda’s film points to childhood poverty that students may not usually associate with Japan. It usefully highlights the real anxiety in contemporary Japan towards divorce and single parent families, child abuse and abandonment, teenage crime, “supported relationships” and prostitution, bullying and chronic truancy, etc. Nobody Knows also counters the outdated canard of Japan’s Confucian family values. And it accurately portrays many aspects of quotidian Japanese life.

NOTES


2. Juku are private extracurricular tutoring schools or services offering supplemental academic instruction. Juku is often translated into “cram school” in English. This may be misleading because cram schools that specifically prepare students for school or university entrance exams are just one subset of a variety of after-school educational institutions in Japan.


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