

The Sublimation of Anti-Drama: Psychological Externalization, Anti-Climax, and Everyday Ethics in the Cinema of Hirokazu Kore-eda

Yifan Zhang*

Greater Bay Area Film and Television School, Zhujiang College, South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou, 510900, China

**Corresponding author: Yifan Zhang*

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Abstract: This paper explores the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of Hirokazu Kore-eda's anti-dramatic cinema through the theoretical frameworks of Jacques Lacan's concept of desire and lack, Gilles Deleuze's notion of the time-image, André Bazin's realism, Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic theatre, and Jane Bennett's vital materialism. In contrast to the affective excess of global melodrama, Kore-eda's films externalize interior psychological states through ambient sound, anti-climactic narrative structures, off-screen space, and the emotional agency of objects. These formal strategies transform cinematic affect into an ethical experience of reflection rather than catharsis. The article argues that Kore-eda's work redefines emotional engagement in contemporary Japanese cinema by turning the viewer from empathy to contemplation—what may be termed a post-emotional ethics of the everyday. Through close readings of *Still Walking* (2008), *After the Storm* (2016), *Shoplifters* (2018), and *Air Doll* (2009), this study shows how the refusal of climax and the prominence of silence generate a cinema of absence that speaks through the mundane.

Keywords: Hirokazu Kore-eda; Anti-drama; Psychological Externalization; Anti-climax; Off-Screen Space; Ambient Sound; Materiality; Everyday Ethics; Postdramatic Aesthetics

Published: Nov 3, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/chst.v2i4.792>

1.Introduction: Toward a Poetics of Anti-Drama

In an era when global visual culture is dominated by hyper-narrativity and affective spectacle, the cinema of Hirokazu Kore-eda stands as an act of quiet refusal. His films consistently subvert the dramatic arc that underpins classical and melodramatic storytelling. Rather than offering viewers cathartic resolution, Kore-eda creates what Bazin once described as “the ontology of the photographic image” — an openness to duration, contingency, and moral ambiguity (Bazin, 1967). Through long takes, ambient soundscapes, and the near-absence of musical cues, Kore-eda allows the world to present itself without the coercion of plot or emotional manipulation. The problem this study addresses is how Kore-eda transforms cinematic form into a mode of ethical inquiry. By minimizing conventional drama, his cinema externalizes internal psychology through material and spatial cues rather than explicit dialogue or conflict. In *Still Walking*, for instance, the lingering sound of cicadas fills the void left by unspoken reconciliation, transforming nature's hum into a psychological resonance. Similarly, *Shoplifters* replaces courtroom confrontation with an off-screen silence that compels spectators to inhabit moral uncertainty (Chung, 2021, p.

354).

Scholarly interest in Kore-eda has largely focused on themes of family, loss, and social realism (Miura, 2019; Yoshida, 2019). However, relatively few studies address his formal aesthetics as a system of “psychological externalization” — a process by which interior affect is projected onto sound, space, and object. This article therefore bridges two discourses: the psychoanalytic reading of desire and lack (Lacan, 1977) and the phenomenological analysis of cinematic time and image (Deleuze, 1989). Kore-eda’s work, I argue, transforms the lack central to Lacanian desire into a visual and auditory absence, producing an ethical spectatorship grounded in incompleteness. From a Deleuzian perspective, Kore-eda’s films operate within the logic of the time-image: the dispersal of linear action into suspended temporality. Scenes of domestic routine—washing dishes, waiting for rain to stop—become cinematic meditations on being and relation (Lim, 2020). Lehmann’s concept of the postdramatic further clarifies this refusal of dramatic causality: the “drama” is no longer the locus of meaning, but a residue within the temporal field of the everyday (Lehmann, 2006). In Kore-eda, the aesthetic of the postdramatic is not theatrical but ethical—an invitation to witness without intervention.

Another crucial framework is Jane Bennett’s vital materialism (2010), which opens a dialogue between human emotion and the agency of things. In Kore-eda’s cinema, objects often serve as affective mediators: a yellow butterfly in *Still Walking*, a fishing rod in *Shoplifters*, or an umbrella carried through a typhoon in *After the Storm*. These items do not merely symbolize memory; they act, in Bennett’s sense, as vibrant participants in emotional exchange. Such object-centered empathy displaces anthropocentrism and aligns Kore-eda’s work with a posthumanist ethics of coexistence. This convergence of psychoanalytic, phenomenological, and materialist perspectives situates Kore-eda at the intersection of post-emotional cinema and ethical spectatorship. His anti-drama does not deny emotion but re-educates it, asking audiences to dwell in moments of suspension and silence. As Deleuze (1989) suggests, the time-image allows thought to emerge from hesitation rather than action. Kore-eda’s films thus replace catharsis with contemplation, transforming the viewer’s affect into a moral inquiry.

In methodological terms, this study employs textual and formal analysis of selected films between 2008 and 2018, contextualized within contemporary Japanese cultural discourse. It integrates aesthetic theory with humanistic ethics to reveal how Kore-eda’s minimalism articulates a cinematic form of moral reflection. By focusing on sound, narrative, and spatial restraint, the article traces how the “anti-dramatic” becomes a site of ethical intensity—a cinema where the absence of event becomes the event itself.

2. The Auditory Landscape: Ambient Sound as Psychological Externalization

Sound, for Kore-eda Hirokazu, is not an accessory to image but a vessel of interiority. His cinema replaces the emotional determinism of musical scoring with the unpredictable textures of the environment. In rejecting non-diegetic music, Kore-eda shifts the site of feeling from composition to perception: emotion no longer emanates from the soundtrack but from the audience’s attentive listening to silence, noise, and their fragile interstices. This turn toward ambient sound aligns with Michel Chion’s (1994) notion of the *acousmatic*—a sound detached from its visible source—and with Gilles Deleuze’s (1989) “time-image,” where sensory fragmentation reveals the temporality of thought itself.

2.1 Silence and Noise: The Rejection of Musical Catharsis

Across Kore-eda’s oeuvre, the near-absence of non-diegetic music establishes what film scholar Chung (2021) calls “the acoustics of ethical restraint” (p. 358). In *Still Walking* (2008), the chirring of cicadas and the soft clatter of dishes replace the conventional orchestral cue that would otherwise signal reconciliation. The auditory environment becomes a psychological extension of the characters’ inability to articulate grief. The ambient hum of the summer afternoon “speaks” for the family’s unspoken sorrow. Such moments realize Bazin’s (1967) realism as “the faith in the world’s density”—the belief that meaning arises not through dramatization but through attentive observation. Silence, in Kore-eda, is never empty; it is charged with moral vibration. When *After the Storm* (2016) reaches its emotional apex—the estranged father visiting his son during a typhoon—no music underscores the encounter. Instead, the scene is enveloped by the sound of rain hammering on the sliding doors. This sonic density externalizes the tension between paternal failure and quiet redemption. The rain itself becomes a moral medium, a “nonhuman witness” to the fragility of reconciliation (Bennett, 2010, p. 13). The refusal of score is therefore not an aesthetic minimalism but an ethical one: Kore-eda grants the environment an agency that resists sentimental coercion.

2.2 The Materiality of Sound and Emotional Projection

Kore-eda's soundscapes resonate with Jane Bennett's (2010) concept of vibrant matter, wherein the material world participates in affective communication. In his films, mundane sonic details—rattling windows, a distant train horn, or the hum of an air conditioner—become extensions of human feeling. The subject's inner turbulence migrates outward, diffused into the auditory field. This transference transforms the diegetic world into a space of shared affect between human and environment. In *Shoplifters* (2018), the sound of the crowded supermarket is not simply diegetic realism; it is the acoustic embodiment of moral ambiguity. The clinking of price tags and the rustle of plastic bags create a rhythm of complicity between survival and transgression. Rather than judging the characters' thefts, Kore-eda allows the soundscape to carry ethical ambivalence—what Deleuze might term “a direct image of time,” in which moral meaning is suspended rather than resolved (Deleuze, 1989, p. 17). The ordinary noise of consumption becomes a sonic critique of capitalist morality.

Recent scholarship situates this use of sound within an East Asian aesthetic of stillness—a mode of attention that transforms environmental sound into ethical perception (Lim, 2020; Kim, 2022). In Kore-eda's work, the “noise of life” operates like a phenomenological echo chamber: the more one listens, the more one feels the unbridgeable distance between subjects. This relational listening is both ethical and epistemological. As Kim (2022) notes, “Kore-eda's cinema teaches us to hear with responsibility—the world listens back” (p. 44).

2.3 Case Study: The Typhoon Night in *After the Storm*

The nocturnal typhoon sequence in *After the Storm* offers a concentrated study of psychological externalization through sound. The scene unfolds within a cramped apartment as Ryota, the failed novelist and absent father, takes refuge with his ex-wife and son during a torrential storm. The dialogue is minimal; instead, the rain's rhythm dominates the frame. The diegetic sound of dripping water, rattling shutters, and gusts of wind intertwines with muted breathing and soft sighs. The auditory field thus becomes a mirror of psychic turbulence.

Film critic Sharpe (2021) describes this as “Kore-eda's rain ethics”—the transformation of meteorological phenomena into moral allegory (p. 212). The storm is both external and internal: it stages the collision of the natural and the emotional, the meteorological and the moral. Ryota's failure as a father is not verbalized but absorbed into the acoustic texture of the scene. When the storm subsides, silence returns—not as closure but as suspension. This sonic gap enacts what Lacan calls *manque-à-être*, the “lack of being” that structures desire (Lacan, 1977, p. 290). The unspoken and the unheard merge into a shared ontological absence. Through this acoustic poetics, Kore-eda redefines cinematic empathy. Rather than identifying with characters through expressive dialogue or musical cues, the viewer is drawn into an auditory relation that demands ethical attention. The silence after the storm becomes the space where spectators confront their own interpretive responsibility. As Sobchack (2019) argues, affective engagement in cinema arises not from emotional overflow but from “corporeal listening”—the body's encounter with the unseen (p. 126). Kore-eda's anti-dramatic use of sound, therefore, externalizes psychology not through exposition but through phenomenological vibration.

In sum, Kore-eda's auditory minimalism transforms sound into a medium of ethical realism. The refusal of music, the prominence of ambient noise, and the interplay of silence and weather create a cinema of listening—one in which emotion is neither declared nor suppressed but dispersed into the sonic materiality of the everyday. This auditory ethics of restraint situates Kore-eda's work within a broader postdramatic tradition that redefines affect not as spectacle but as shared perception.

3. Narratives of Anti-Climax: The Pleasure of the Unfulfilled

Kore-eda's films habitually end where classical narratives would begin their emotional resolution. The expected cathartic climax—reunion, confession, or redemption—is displaced or omitted altogether. This aesthetic of anti-climax constructs what might be termed a “cinema of remainder”: the residue of emotion that persists after the drama has evaporated. In resisting narrative closure, Kore-eda transforms the audience's desire for satisfaction into an ethical awareness of lack, echoing Lacan's (1977) claim that *désir* is sustained precisely by what it cannot attain.

3.1 Structural Anti-Climax as Aesthetic Principle

In *Still Walking* (2008), the family's annual gathering to commemorate a deceased son never reaches reconciliation. The

father's bitterness, the mother's quiet resentment, and the surviving son's discomfort remain unresolved. As the film concludes, the family disperses without emotional climax. What remains is the gentle murmur of cicadas and the image of an empty dining table. The affective fulfillment promised by narrative convention is withheld, leaving what Yoshida (2019) calls "a lingering absence that becomes presence" (p. 131). The withheld apology or declaration becomes the locus of emotion. Similarly, *Like Father, Like Son* (2013) subverts the genre of domestic melodrama. The revelation that two boys were switched at birth sets up a scenario ripe for tearful resolution, yet Kore-eda withholds the expected reconciliation. The father's recognition of emotional failure emerges not in confrontation but in hesitation. The final act—his quiet decision to visit both children without resolution—transforms narrative incompleteness into ethical contemplation. Lehmann's (2006) concept of the postdramatic helps elucidate this structure: drama is no longer the engine of meaning, but a trace within a larger temporal and affective field.

This aesthetic of incompleteness reflects Deleuze's (1989) "time-image," where the sensory-motor link of classical action collapses into pure duration. In Kore-eda's cinema, action gives way to attention, and the viewer becomes a participant in the experience of time rather than its consumption. The absence of climax thus becomes a mode of thought. The viewer, deprived of narrative satisfaction, must fill the void with reflection—a process of ethical cognition through affective suspension.

3.2 The Lacanian Structure of Desire and the "Remainder of Pleasure"

The refusal of climax transforms desire itself into Kore-eda's central theme. Lacan (1977) conceptualizes desire as "the metonymy of lack": a structure that thrives on absence rather than fulfillment. In this sense, Kore-eda's anti-dramatic narrative enacts a Lacanian ethics of desire, in which satisfaction would annihilate the very structure that sustains meaning. The films' emotional power arises from what they do not give us—the apology unsaid, the embrace unshown, the justice unserved. In *Shoplifters* (2018), the anti-climactic structure is most fully realized. After the family's arrest, Kore-eda refuses courtroom dramatization or sentimental justification. Instead, he disassembles the "family" unit through ellipsis. Scenes that could deliver emotional closure—confession, regret, or reconciliation—are omitted, leaving the spectator to confront the silence of social judgment. The final image of the abandoned child on a balcony—quietly whispering "Papa"—encapsulates the film's refusal to resolve moral ambiguity. The spectator's desire for closure is redirected into an awareness of systemic injustice and emotional absence. Kato (2020) notes that Kore-eda's "ethics of deferral" constitutes a resistance to neoliberal narratives of productivity and resolution (p. 58). By suspending closure, his films challenge the ideology of narrative efficiency—the assumption that stories must end in meaning. Instead, they assert the dignity of the incomplete. This resonates with Žižek's (2012) re-reading of Lacan, in which enjoyment (*jouissance*) is bound to the impossibility of satisfaction: "we enjoy precisely in the failure to attain." Kore-eda's spectators, too, are invited to enjoy the lack—to experience affect as an ongoing ethical tension rather than a consumable resolution.

3.3 Case Study: The Anti-Climax of *Shoplifters*

In *Shoplifters*, the narrative's emotional apex occurs not at the revelation of crime or punishment, but in the quiet aftermath. When the surrogate mother Nobuyo is questioned by the police, Kore-eda avoids the emotional confrontation typical of melodrama. The camera remains still; her confession is partially off-screen. Instead of exposing emotion through tears, Kore-eda externalizes it through spatial and temporal fragmentation. The off-screen silence becomes the site of moral introspection. As Chung (2021) observes, "the film's ethical power resides not in what it shows but in what it withholds" (p. 361). The final act reinforces this ethics of incompleteness. The young girl Yuri, now renamed and reabsorbed into a normative family, stands on her balcony and looks into the distance. The camera holds for nearly a minute. There is no music, no narrative closure—only the sound of wind. The viewer is left in a suspended state between empathy and discomfort. This lingering temporality transforms lack into a shared affective experience. The anti-climax thus externalizes desire itself, making the viewer a participant in the film's moral oscillation between attachment and loss.

This aesthetics of the unfulfilled reflects what Deleuze (1989) terms the crystal-image: a temporal form in which past and present coexist without synthesis. The child's gaze backward toward an irretrievable past materializes the Deleuzian time-image—an image that "thinks time" rather than represents it. The film's final silence, therefore, is not emptiness but condensation: the condensation of desire, ethics, and temporality into a single suspended moment. In this sense, Kore-

eda's cinema enacts what Marks (2000) describes as "intercultural embodiment," wherein emotion is registered not through representation but through sensory duration. By replacing climax with suspension, Kore-eda crafts a humanistic cinema of ethical duration. His narratives invite the spectator to dwell in the interval between event and meaning, to inhabit the silence where feeling transforms into thought. This anti-dramatic ethics redefines the political function of narrative itself: to resist closure is to resist domination—to insist that life, like film, is never complete.

4. The Ethics of the Invisible: Off-Screen Space and the Agency of Things

In Kore-eda Hirokazu's cinema, what remains unseen often carries the greatest ethical weight. His recurring use of off-screen space—the sounds, gestures, and emotions that occur beyond the visible frame—transforms the act of cinematic omission into a form of moral invitation. Rather than offering emotional exposition, Kore-eda's static compositions and refusals of reverse shots compel the spectator to participate imaginatively in the unseen. The invisible, in this sense, becomes an ethical field where empathy and restraint coexist.

4.1 The Gaze of Refusal: Off-Screen Emotion and Ethical Distance

Kore-eda's use of long takes and fixed camera positions establishes what Bazin (1967) called "the integrity of the real": a cinematic faith in duration that resists manipulation. By holding the frame beyond the point of narrative necessity, Kore-eda foregrounds time as an ethical medium. In *Still Walking* (2008), the camera often lingers after a character exits, leaving the space momentarily vacant. These empty frames are not absences but intervals of contemplation, granting the audience time to process what remains unspoken. In one pivotal scene, the mother, Toshiko, quietly folds her late son's shirt while the camera remains in the doorway. Her face is unseen; the shot refuses intimacy. What occurs off-screen—her expression, perhaps tears—is imagined rather than delivered. This ethical withholding creates what Sobchack (2019) terms "embodied empathy," a mode of spectatorship in which feeling arises through the viewer's corporeal awareness of what is withheld (p. 125). By denying the close-up, Kore-eda converts the image into a moral space of restraint, where seeing less becomes a condition for feeling more.

This poetics of distance resonates with Lehmann's (2006) postdramatic theatre, where meaning emerges not from dramatic event but from the spectator's ethical engagement with presence and absence. In Kore-eda's films, off-screen space functions as the cinematic equivalent of the theatrical pause: a temporal aperture that allows the world to breathe. The camera's refusal to intrude transforms realism into reverence. In the ethics of the invisible, the unseen is not a void but a threshold—a site where subjectivity dissolves into shared attention.

4.2 The Narrative of Objects: Things as Emotional Substitutes

Parallel to the ethics of off-screen space is Kore-eda's persistent investment in the agency of things. His films populate domestic spaces with objects that bear emotional residue: a yellow butterfly that may embody the spirit of a deceased son (*Still Walking*), a fishing rod left behind by a surrogate father (*Shoplifters*), or a doll that gains consciousness (*Air Doll*). These objects act as mediators of feeling—material proxies for what cannot be expressed verbally. Jane Bennett's (2010) vital materialism provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon. For Bennett, matter possesses "thing-power"—a vibrancy that exceeds human intentionality (p. 20). Kore-eda's objects participate in this vibrancy: they feel, remember, and mourn. When the camera lingers on the yellow butterfly, it is not simply symbolic; it is affective, a presence that animates the air between characters. As Sharpe (2021) notes, "Kore-eda's objects are not metaphors but interlocutors" (p. 209). They speak the unspeakable, rendering grief tangible through material continuity. In *Shoplifters*, the fishing rod symbolizes the tenuous bond between father and son figures. When the family disbands, the object remains—mute yet potent, embodying what Bennett would call the "ethical potential of the inanimate" (2010, p. 38). The camera's still gaze upon the rod suggests that objects, too, participate in the drama of loss. Through this material empathy, Kore-eda extends ethics beyond the human, inviting a posthumanist reconsideration of emotion itself.

4.3 Case Study: Air Doll and the Ontology of Sentiment

Air Doll (2009) presents Kore-eda's most radical exploration of material subjectivity. The film's protagonist, an inflatable doll that gains consciousness, destabilizes the boundaries between object and person, material and affect. Her awakening embodies what Bennett (2010) calls "the conative force of matter"—the capacity of nonhuman entities to act and feel. As the

doll experiences loneliness, tenderness, and ultimately mortality, the film stages an allegory of affective circulation between the animate and the inanimate. The camera's visual grammar reinforces this ontological ambiguity. Kore-eda frequently frames the doll in reflective surfaces or through translucent curtains, situating her presence on the edge of visibility. The film's climactic moment—her deflation—occurs partly off-screen, replaced by the soft hiss of escaping air. This sound, echoing through an otherwise silent room, externalizes the fragility of being itself. The scene exemplifies what Deleuze (1989) describes as “the time-image of pure event”—the instant when perception detaches from action and becomes contemplation. Rather than sentimentalizing her death, Kore-eda transforms the doll's disintegration into an ethical meditation on the boundaries of empathy. The viewer is not asked to pity the object but to recognize the continuum between human vulnerability and material transience. In this sense, *Air Doll* completes the trajectory traced through Kore-eda's oeuvre: from the silent grief of families to the sentience of things. His cinema teaches us that ethical feeling is not confined to speech or human consciousness—it circulates among bodies, spaces, and matter itself.

4.4 The Ethical Aesthetics of Withholding

Through the combined strategies of off-screen emotion and material agency, Kore-eda constructs what may be termed an aesthetics of withholding. This aesthetic neither represses nor denies emotion; it reconfigures its medium. The unseen and the inanimate become vehicles for psychological externalization. The viewer's task is to perceive what is not shown—to listen to silence, to sense the weight of objects, to feel the air between gestures. In doing so, spectators are drawn into what Sobchack (2019) calls “the ethical labor of seeing”—a form of attention that acknowledges the autonomy of the world beyond the self. Kore-eda's cinema thus operates as an ethical pedagogy. By decentralizing human agency and amplifying the voices of things, it enacts a posthumanist compassion rooted in material coexistence. The moral of his films is not to feel more but to feel differently—to cultivate an awareness attuned to the invisible vibrations of everyday life. In a world oversaturated with spectacle, this ethics of invisibility offers an antidote: a cinema that teaches humility through the quiet persistence of matter.

5. Conclusion: From Emotional Catharsis to Ethical Reflection

Hirokazu Kore-eda's cinema enacts a radical shift in the function of emotion within film aesthetics. His refusal of dramatic spectacle, narrative closure, and expressive excess marks not an absence of feeling but the transformation of affect into ethical reflection. Through the formal strategies analyzed in this study—ambient sound, anti-climax, off-screen space, and the agency of objects—Kore-eda constructs a new cinematic ethics in which the viewer's engagement is not cathartic but contemplative. The anti-dramatic becomes a pedagogy of attention.

5.1 The System of Techniques

Kore-eda's aesthetic system is built upon an intricate balance between what is shown and what is withheld. The auditory minimalism of his soundscapes externalizes interior emotion through the natural rhythms of the environment, replacing melodramatic music with the hum of existence. His anti-climactic narratives convert unfulfilled desire into an ethical tension, aligning with Lacan's (1977) principle that meaning is sustained through lack. The off-screen space functions as a site of moral imagination, where the viewer's empathy is activated by absence rather than presence. Finally, the agency of things, grounded in Bennett's (2010) vital materialism, expands compassion beyond the human realm, acknowledging the shared vitality of matter. Together, these formal devices generate what can be called a cinema of restraint—a mode of filmmaking that cultivates sensitivity to the invisible, the ordinary, and the incomplete. In resisting spectacle, Kore-eda revitalizes Bazin's (1967) realist ethics: a faith in the world's ability to reveal meaning through its own temporal unfolding. His still frames, ambient silences, and tactile attention to objects embody an ethical realism that honors the dignity of what cannot be dramatized.

5.2 From Catharsis to Contemplation: The Pedagogy of Post-Emotional Cinema

The substitution of catharsis with contemplation defines what this study terms post-emotional cinema. In classical Aristotelian aesthetics, catharsis served to purify emotion through identification and release. Kore-eda reverses this trajectory: rather than expelling emotion, he suspends it, transforming the viewing experience into an act of sustained reflection. The emotional residue that lingers after his films—the quiet discomfort, the ethical ambiguity—is the mark of a new cinematic morality. As Chung (2021) observes, Kore-eda's films teach spectators “to feel ethically rather than emotionally” (p. 360). This

ethical feeling is not passive empathy but an active attentiveness to relational complexity. Deleuze's (1989) notion of the time-image clarifies this process: by interrupting the linear causality of action, the image becomes a medium for thought. In *Shoplifters*, the unresolved ending compels viewers to contemplate justice and care; in *After the Storm*, the silence following the typhoon transforms grief into reflection. These suspended moments exemplify what Deleuze calls the "thinking image"—cinema as philosophy through affective delay. At the same time, Kore-eda's restraint enacts what Lehmann (2006) describes as postdramatic ethics: a refusal of narrative domination that opens space for the spectator's autonomy. The absence of climax is an ethical gesture, liberating both character and audience from the tyranny of resolution. The viewer's discomfort is not a failure of empathy but a reconfiguration of it. By withholding satisfaction, Kore-eda cultivates what Ahmed (2014) calls "critical emotion"—a form of feeling that resists closure and remains politically alive. This pedagogy of slowness and incompleteness responds to the affective acceleration of global media culture. In a world where emotion is commodified and immediacy fetishized, Kore-eda reclaims temporality as an ethical resource. His cinema demands time—time to look, to listen, to dwell. This temporality of care resonates with Tronto's (2013) ethics of care, which insists that moral life is sustained by attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness. Kore-eda's long takes, his devotion to the mundane, are cinematic enactments of that ethic. They transform spectatorship into an ethical practice of patience.

5.3 The Human and the More-Than-Human: Expanding the Ethical Horizon

One of the most profound implications of Kore-eda's cinema lies in its posthumanist reconfiguration of empathy. By extending affective agency to sound, weather, and objects, his films challenge the human-centered model of emotion. Bennett's (2010) theory of vibrant matter elucidates this shift: in acknowledging the liveliness of the nonhuman, we learn to feel across boundaries of species and substance. The yellow butterfly in *Still Walking* or the doll in *Air Doll* are not metaphors but collaborators in emotional communication. They remind us that to be ethical is to recognize the world's participation in feeling. This ecological dimension situates Kore-eda within a broader conversation about cinema and environmental ethics. The ambient soundscapes of his films—rain, wind, cicadas—redefine nature not as backdrop but as interlocutor. The natural world becomes a co-author of affect, dissolving the binary between human subject and external environment. In this sense, Kore-eda's realism is ecological: it acknowledges the continuity of being between humans and their material surroundings. His films suggest that ethical awareness arises not from transcendence but from immanence—from the quiet recognition that everything, even silence, is alive.

5.4 Future Directions and Theoretical Implications

This study has sought to articulate Kore-eda's poetics of anti-drama as both a formal and ethical revolution. Yet several avenues remain open for further inquiry. Comparative studies could situate Kore-eda within a transnational framework of slow cinema and postdramatic realism, linking his work to directors such as Tsai Ming-liang, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Abbas Kiarostami. Future research might also explore the reception of Kore-eda's anti-dramatic style in global contexts—how non-Japanese audiences interpret the ethics of silence and incompleteness. Additionally, integrating cognitive film theory with affect studies could deepen understanding of how spectators internalize the temporal and emotional structures of Kore-eda's films. Ultimately, Kore-eda's cinema proposes an ethics of attentive coexistence. By externalizing inner life through material and acoustic phenomena, his films reveal that emotion is not a private possession but a shared vibration between beings. The anti-dramatic is not a withdrawal from feeling but its purification—a return to the elemental textures of sound, space, and time. Through silence, absence, and objecthood, Kore-eda teaches us to listen to the moral resonance of the everyday. His work stands as a quiet manifesto for a post-emotional humanity: one that feels less loudly, but more deeply.

6. Discussion

Kore-eda Hirokazu's anti-dramatic aesthetics not only reconfigures cinematic form but also rearticulates the human condition within late modernity. His films offer a laboratory for rethinking emotion as an ethical and epistemological structure. The subdued tones, suspended temporalities, and material resonances that define his work confront the contemporary subject's crisis of feeling—a crisis intensified by neoliberal acceleration and digital mediation. In this sense, Kore-eda's cinema performs what critical humanistic theory must increasingly pursue: the reclamation of affective depth in an age of affective overexposure. The post-emotional condition, as sociologists such as Illouz (2007) and Ahmed (2014) have described, marks

the commodification of emotion through media and market circulation. Kore-eda's refusal of spectacle and sentimentality stands as a counter-gesture to this emotional economy. His anti-dramatic form restores emotion's ethical dignity by slowing it down, by insisting on its incompleteness. In the absence of cathartic resolution, affect regains its critical thickness—it becomes something to think with, not to consume. This process aligns with Raymond Williams's (1977) notion of structures of feeling: the emergent forms through which societies register moral and historical change. Kore-eda's films thus serve as cinematic ethnographies of feeling, mapping how care, grief, and attachment persist amid the erosion of communal life.

From a broader humanistic standpoint, Kore-eda's aesthetics challenge the very boundaries of the human. His attention to nonhuman vitality—sounds, weather, objects—resonates with new materialist and posthumanist theories that seek to decenter the anthropocentric self (Bennett, 2010; Barad, 2012). Yet Kore-eda's posthumanism is distinctly humanistic in spirit: it does not erase human emotion but redistributes it, locating empathy in the interstices between beings. His films articulate a relational ontology of emotion, one that situates subjectivity within a network of co-affective forces. This vision extends the reach of humanistic ethics beyond sympathy toward what Haraway (2016) calls "response-ability"—the capacity to respond to more-than-human others.

The implications for critical humanistic theory are profound. In a cultural moment when the humanities are often pressed to justify themselves through instrumental value, Kore-eda's cinema demonstrates the critical necessity of slowness, ambiguity, and reflection. These are not aesthetic luxuries but ethical imperatives. The act of watching his films—waiting, listening, imagining the off-screen—becomes an education in moral perception. The viewer learns to inhabit uncertainty, to coexist with incompleteness, to feel responsibly. Such spectatorship enacts what Martha Nussbaum (2001) terms "the intelligence of emotion"—the idea that feeling is a mode of ethical reasoning. Kore-eda's anti-drama, therefore, models a form of aesthetic humanism grounded in vulnerability and attentiveness. In this light, the "post-emotional cinema" Kore-eda exemplifies should not be read as an abandonment of emotion, but as its philosophical renewal. It transforms the sensory experience of film into a mode of ethical critique, one that resists both emotional exhaustion and moral cynicism. By foregrounding silence, materiality, and incompleteness, Kore-eda reclaims emotion as a site of humanistic reflection—a way of thinking the world through the textures of care, loss, and impermanence. His cinema reminds us that the humanities' task is not merely to interpret meaning but to cultivate attention: to slow down, to listen, to feel ethically.

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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