

The pain as ikigai in the filmography of Hirokazu Koreeda

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Abstract

Hirokazu Koreeda is a Japanese film director and screenwriter who became famous, in the last decade, both in Japan and in the West. His filmography has a special quality related to the Japanese concept of *ikigai*. It is not easy to translate *ikigai*. It seems to be a feeling related to the “reason to live”. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Koreeda’s filmography communicates internationally through this human feeling, that turn to be a kind of “dramaturgical operator” to express different singularities of family affections. We will analyze three films: *Maboroshi* (1995), *Distance* (1999) and *Still Walking* (2008). All of them have presented questions about life and death based on family memories. Silence, melancholy and resilience of wounds and pains are attached to past experiences that express *ikigai* as a reason for living. Through Koreeda’s images, *ikigai* can also be intimately connected to the dark side of human behavior. Therefore, in his filmography, the reason to live is not necessarily happiness, but also a complex ambivalence between life and death, sadness and happiness.

Keywords: Hirokazu Koreeda, Japanese cinema, Japanese family, *ikigai*, memory.

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Introduction

The main themes of the films of Japanese filmmaker Hirokazu Koreeda (1962 -) are family, memory, death and especially the resilience of those who have left behind. On death, Koreeda comments:

When you reach a certain age, almost half of the people who have supported us, encouraged us and built us are already dead. In this aspect, therefore, they are not as "far off" as before. Both "death" and "the people who died". In other words, it is not because they died that they disappeared somewhere. This is because "the time we have to think about the people who died increases."¹

In this aspect, the three feature films of Koreeda that we will analyze next, show us the constant presence of those who died and how the family has to deal with the loss and re-create an *ikigai*. Because the departed are constantly haunting the relatives who were left behind. There are in the narratives of his films, a twist of understanding about the *ikigai* prior to and subsequent to death. The *ikigai* from before is deconstructed at the moment of loss and the central characters need to somehow seek a new reason to live. However, now this reason to live is no longer sustained by hopes or joys. It is rooted in the lie, the rancor, the imprisonment with the past and the attempt of resilience.

How to deal with *ikigai*, the reason for living, which is so much in vogue in people's lives, but which strangely does not exist in any language other than Japanese, according to the Japanese psychiatrist Mieko Kamiya (1914 - 1979), in her work *Ikigai Ni tsuite (About ikigai)* (KAMIYA, 2014):

*It seems that the word ikigai exists only in the Japanese language. The fact that this word exists should indicate that the goal to live, its meaning and value within the daily life of the Japanese soul has been problematized. (...) According to the dictionary, ikigai means "power necessary for one to live in this world, happiness to be alive, benefit, effectiveness." When we try to translate it into English, German, French etc. It seems that there is no other way than "worth living" or "value or meaning to live". Thus, compared to philosophical-theoretical concepts, the word ikigai shows us how much the Japanese language is ambiguous, but because of this it has an effect of reverberation and amplitude.
(...) There are two ways of using the word ikigai. When someone says "this child is my ikigai," it refers to the source*

¹ ぼくらのような歳になると、自分のこと支えてくれたり、応援してくれたり、自分を形作ってくれた人の半分くらいが、もう死んじゃってるんですよ。そんな場所に立ってみると、前ほど、だから、「遠く」ないんですよ。「死」も「死んだ人」も。つまり、死んでしまったからってどこかにいなくなっちゃわけじゃない。なぜかって言うと「死んだ人のことを考える時間」がどうしたって、増えるから。

https://www.1101.com/hirokazu_koreeda/2015-07-24.html (Access: 12.dec.2015)

*or target of the ikigai, and when one feels ikigai as a state of mind.*²

We will see that in the three films we will explore, the characters have the two forms of *ikigai* meaning. However, what separates them is precisely the death event reported in the narrative of the films. This is because *ikigai* involves a feeling of satisfaction, of fullness, but also of reality with the present, something more concrete like family, career, health. In addition to the above-mentioned translations, the word could also be translated as self-actualization, meaning of life, purpose in life, productivity, sense of life worth living or subjective well-being.

There is no way to measure, qualify or quantify *ikigai*. If it necessarily involves happiness, the feeling of fullness, or the joy of being alive, then perhaps the English translation is assertive. But, in this sense of concept that encompasses reason for living, the possibility of the feeling of revenge, obsession or even living a lie can also become an *ikigai*.

Maboroshi, life haunted by the past (1995)

Maboroshi, a film adapted from Teru Miyamoto's novel (MIYAMOTO, 1979), tells the story of Yumiko and her husband, whose inexplicable suicide becomes an obsession for her. Nonconformity and resilience become, after this loss, her main *ikigai*. "A person, when loses his or her *sei* (精 - essence, inbeing, energy), feels like dying," says one of the characters in the story (MIYAMOTO, 1979, 78), in a subtle attempt to explain to Yumiko the reason for the death of her husband. So when Ikuo, Yumiko 's husband, loses the connection of his *nikutai* (flesh) with his *sei* (精 - essence, inbeing, energy) and breaks free from his *sei* (生 - life), he commits suicide. Yumiko begins to live isolated of liveliness and feelings haunted by the past for not being able to understand the situation in which suddenly she came across. Without knowing the reason for his death, she begins to live around the search for an answer. Why would a person who went out once to work would come home in the morning to get an umbrella on a cloudy day if at night he intended to commit suicide? Why that same night, that person would tell the owner of the cafeteria he used to go to, who would pay the coffee bill the next day for forgetting to bring the money, if minutes later he would be walking down the train track where, despite the sound of the brakes, did not even turn back when he was about to be run over?

² 生きがいということばは、日本語だけにあるらしい。こういうことばがあるということは日本人の心の生活のなかで、生きる目的や意味や価値が問題にされて来たことを示すものであろう。(…) 辞書によると生きがいとは「世に生きているだけの効力、生きているしあわせ、利益、効験」などとある。これを英、独、仏などの外国語に訳そうとすると、「生きるに値する」とか、「生きる価値または意味のある」などとするほかないらしい。こうした理論的哲学的概念にくらべると、生きがいということばにはいかにも日本語らしいあいまいさと、それゆえの余韻（よいん）とふくらみがある。

(…) 生きがいということばの使いかたには、ふた通りある。この子は私の生きがいです、などという場合のように生きがいの源泉（げんせん）、または対象となるものを指すときと、生きがいを感じている精神状態を意味するときと、このふたつである。(KAMIYA, 2004, 10-11)

Mieko Kamiya writes:

Most people who lose the ikigai and who fall to the bottom of the dark abyss full of despair and kyomu (emptiness) think of suicide.

(...) When a person loses the ikigai and thinks of wanting to die, what else she feels that is disturbing is her own nikutai (flesh). However, in reality it is precisely this very nikutai who works and supports the subject without him not realizing it.³

The monochrome and gray film reflects not only Yumiko's melancholy, but her solitude and emptiness. The sad contemplation of her by the banal and commonplace scenario seems at first even unsettling. Yumiko's absence of emotional aggression also makes us question the love she felt for Ikuo. She does not shed tears after learning of his death.

Her body is emotionally paralyzed because can not understand the situation. But this shows us that grief can affect people's lives in many ways. The policeman responsible for reporting Ikuo's death also only informs Yumiko of the circumstances surrounding his death. Passively and indifferently he shows her only Ikuo's bicycle keyring and one of his shoes so Yumiko can "recognize" the dead. Yumiko insists on seeing her husband's body, but the guard advises her not to do so, since he was almost totally torn by the train.

After a few years, Yumiko moves to an isolated seaside village far from the center of Osaka where she lived with Ikuo, to marry Tamio, equally a widower, a father of a little girl. The hectic sea that appears in the second half of the film seems to denounce a silent cry: the isolated city, the winter, the snow, and the aggressive and furious white waves. Was this scenario portraying her *kokoro* (心 - heart)?

The time course of the film is perceived not by the adult characters, because they change nothing in their appearances and physiognomies, but by the baby Yūichi, son of Yumiko and Ikuo, who at the beginning was only three months and in the second half is already a child of five years. Yumiko, on the other hand, stopped in time. Her facial and body expressionlessness, her dark clothes, her contracted and timid movements continue to communicate to us her solitude. Ikuo's outer body has been shattered like Yumiko's *kokoro* and there is no resiliency strength capable of reconstituting both. In the same way that Ikuo's body was hidden, Yumiko passes the whole movie hiding her obsession in finding an explanation.

³ 生きがいをうしない、絶望と虚無の暗い谷底へおちこんでしまったひとの多くは自殺を考える。

(...) 生きがいをうしなった人間が死にたいと思うとき、一ばん邪魔に感じるのは自己の肉体であった。しかし実際はこの肉体こそ本人の知らぬ間にはたらいで、彼を支えてくれるものなのである。(KAMIYA, 2004, 142)

Shōji Ōkōchi comments on the afterword of Miyamoto's book:

A story that narrates in depth the intimate feelings of the heart of a woman who ultimately transformed her ikigai in anguish and deep sadness as if she were treading aggressively on the ground, in a feeling that seems to be a curly serpent inside her chest due to the death of her husband who went through indifferent to the last moment before being hit by a train, died walking in the middle of the rail without even looking back. This causes her to be trapped to an incomprehensible form of death, penetrating into our chest a strange presence of the obscure border between life and death in humans.⁴

But one day, Yumiko leaves the house and begins to wander around the vicinity of his village. Her husband Tamio leaves desperately in search of her. Yumiko sees a funeral procession and follows it to the place of cremation of the body. Tamio finds her and waits until she approaches him. This is the first time Yumiko says, "I do not understand. I can not understand why he committed suicide. I do not know why he was walking the rail that day. Every time I think about it, I can not sleep anymore. Tell me, why do you think he would do that?" Tamio then tells a story that his grandfather told him one day: at night, when a fisherman goes out to fish, he sometimes sees a light from afar. It blinks, flashes as if it is calling the fisherman. Maybe Ikuo saw this light on the rail the night he died. Tamio was the breath of spirit Yumiko needed. He does not force her to be different and respects Yumiko's space because he knows about Ikuo's suicide and how important he was in her life.

Yumiko, then, reflects on what Tamio told her and begins to think that there are in the world a disease that extracts the *sei* (精 - essence, inbeing) of humans. It "steals" this energy and causes a person to lose his *ikigai*. It's not a physical or psychological energy, Yumiko thinks. It is not something superficial, visible or qualifiable. Yumiko goes on to believe that everyone has this "disease" within them, but because they are located in such a deep region of *kokoro* (心 - heart), not everyone realizes its existence.

The rigorous winter passes, the spring arrives, the monochromatic scene starts to have a discreet nuance of color. The summer arrives, Tamio and Yumiko happen to have a more harmonious life. The death of Ikuo is no longer the main *ikigai* of Yumiko. Her acceptance is now only a small part of it. It no longer mattered if the light Ikuo saw was an illusion or was a disease of his *kokoro*.

⁴ 轢かれる瞬間まで列車に背中を見せて、一切ふりかえらないで進行方向に線路を真ん中を歩き続けて死んだという夫にむかっての、団地駄踏むような悔しさと哀しさが胸の中できぐるを巻いて、ついにはそれが生甲斐にもなっている女の胸のうちに切実に語るこの物語は、得体のしれない死に方にこだわることで、人間の生死、幽明の堺を奇妙な存在のものとして、こちらの胸のうちに注ぎこんでくる。(MIYAMOTO, 1979, 163)



Figure 1: Yumiko visits Ikuo at the workplace one day before he commits suicide⁵



Figure 2: Yumiko after Ikuo's death⁶



Figure 3: Yumiko follows a funeral procession meters behind⁷

⁵ http://avxhome.se/video/genre/art_house/maboroshi_by_koreeda.html

⁶ <http://www.mask9.com/node/114555>

⁷ http://avxhome.se/video/genre/art_house/maboroshi_by_koreeda.html

Distance, memories of lost (2001)

「人の心の闇を描きたい。」

I want to portray the dark side of people's hearts.

With this phrase, Hirokazu Koreeda begins the prologue to his diary of the movie *Distance* (KOREEDA; WAKAGI, 2001, 7). Anyone, he says, embraces within him or herself the obscurity, the envy, the evil, the murderous instinct, the insecurity and the doubt. These feelings exist in the bottom of the soul (*kokoro* - heart) of all and deny them or even ignore them means to look away from the existence of humanity itself. And thus, with this reflection on the self and on the other, Koreeda begins his project of *Distance* script.

Five central characters. Five stories that converge and diverge in different but similar ways: betrayal, disillusionment, death, reconciliation, acceptance and weight of the anchor linked to the past as *ikigai*.

The five characters of *Distance* try to deal with their memories and sufferings before the death of their beloved ones. All are connected together with individual and collective trauma simultaneously. Between fiction (script) and reality (film based on true fact), Koreeda makes reference to the sarin gas bioterrorist attack that occurred in Tokyo in 1995⁸, made by a Japanese religious sect *Aum – Supreme Truth*. Koreeda tells the story of these four characters who had their family members killed by the *Ark of Truth* sect. These families, who become members of the sect, pour into a pond, a chemical lethal weapon that victimizes more than 8,000 residents, consumers of this water. In the film, according to police, what the sect believed was that only the *chosen* would survive the poison, and those considered impure would die by drinking this water.

With a double time narrative, between the present and scenes of flashbacks, the film initially shows the four getting ready to go together to the pond where the contamination occurred, and the past, when relatives tell them they were joining the cult. The fifth character in the film, Sakata, a former member of the sect, is also in the present (pond), along with four others, and in the past, is talking to one of the converts, Yūko.

Of the four, Atsushi, the boy who claimed to have had his sister Yūko murdered by the sect, is the most intriguing character. Sakata is the only one who knows that Atsushi was not the brother of any member of the sect. Atsushi's father was the leader of the sect, whose identity is not revealed in principle, but we learn that he committed suicide soon after the scandal came to light. However, the film shows Atsushi often visiting an elderly man named Tanabe in a hospital and posing as his son. He also made the other four characters believe that he was Yūko's brother. But her farce is gradually being unmasked. He ends up creating an *ikigai* based on lies and fantasy because he can not deal with the traumatic reality. To visit this old man periodically in a hospital passing by his son, to go to the lagoon with three other personages every year after the attack. This was his *ikigai*, the meaning of his life.

⁸A bioterrorist attack in Tokyo in March 1995, in which the religious sect *Aum*, known as the *Supreme Truth*, released the lethal sarin gas at a subway station, killed more than 6300 people.

The breakdown of family unity and the trauma of those who have to deal with this rupture are recurring themes in the films of Koreeda. He does not want to explore the motive or the facets of those who have caused the tragedy, but rather to portray those who in one way or another must learn to reconcile with the past. "It's not a matter of overcoming," says Koreeda. It is a new setting of experience that deals with memory and history of a person's life, and ultimately living with this new memory.

This technique of portraying the characters in a fictional and real way is quite common in Koreeda's early films. Long scenes of silence, gray tonality and dialogues often improvised by the actors. An awkward conversation can give a documentarist touch in this drama, reminding us Koreeda's professional origin.

Figure 4: The five central characters visit the lake where the water poisoning occurred⁹



Figure 5: In the form of flashback, Atsushi recalls the moment that walks with Yūko¹⁰

⁹ <https://www.trigon-film.org/de/movies/Distance>

¹⁰ <https://www.trigon-film.org/de/movies/Distance>



Figure 6: Final scene - Atsushi goes back to the lake alone after people have found out that he wasn't either son of Mr. Tanabe, nor brother of Yūko¹¹

Still walking, the grave of a son (2008)

This film depicts the life of an elderly couple who, after the loss of their eldest (and dearest) son, named Junpei, must deal with resentment and rancor in the face of an unexpected death. Fifteen years ago, Junpei drowned while saving a child (Yoshio) who didn't know how to swim. Over the years, Yoshio, an adult, continues to visit the couple on the day of Junpei's death anniversary, as he has done every summer after the incident. The father, an elderly man, became a bitter person and can not communicate affectionately with the younger son Ryōta, because it is through Junpei that the father had expected that he would inherit his career as a doctor. The mother, Toshiko, treats Yoshio with affection and tender, always insisting that the young man returns in the following summers. But the film reveals that it is she, despite the smiles, who most has been holding grudge and hatred for the boy, since she shows that she never intends to release him from this obligation to visit the altar of his beloved dead son. After all, the couple's *ikigai* was Junpei and with this loss, both the father and the mother were never able to guide their lives.

At one point during this visit, Ryōta, feeling sorry for the young man who seems to suffer due to having to visit Junpei's grave year after year, asks his mother to release him from this obligation. Surprisingly, she answers him in an obscure tone of voice and full of rancor: "The boy has to remember my son's death only once a year. I have to remember it every day. What harm is there in making him suffer once a year, forever? " Thus, Toshiko makes this hatred (*nikushimi* – 憎しみ, hatred; *urami* – 恨み, resentment) her *ikigai*.

Despite this resentment at first obscure, Toshiko still confesses that because she has no one to blame for Junpei's death, she can't (and doesn't want to) detach herself from the past, making Yoshio's presence a way to deal with the loss and never forget that there is someone who can take responsibility for her pain, no matter how rationally she understands that it was an irreparable accident. "A mother should never have to visit the grave of a child," she says. So Toshiko plans year after year to see how wasted her son's death was because Junpei ended up saving the life of a boy who became "just an employee of an advertising agency where he makes supermarket inserts," the one who started a theater's course, but dropped; the one who started a

¹¹ <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/559079741218394348>

college, but who also left. At one point, the father murmurs that Junpei lost his life to save a "useless person".

Koreeda works the sadness and the pain of the characters, mainly here portrayed by the figure of the mother, who balances with black humor and sadness the weight of the familiar relation. This relationship shows us how also suffocating the family bond can be: unrecognized rancor, fraternal envy, paternal disappointment, maternal cruelty. Koreeda reports that this film was inspired by his personal life and honors the figure of his own mother. "A lot of the behavior and features of my mother are present in the figure of Toshiko and if this film reverberates in a positive way, it will be thanks to my parents," says Koreeda. "I wanted to make a movie where I could immediately recognize my mother. Not to mourn her death, but to be able to laugh with her again".

Koreeda writes about his mother in his book *Eiga o torinagara kangaeta koto*: *My mother was not a warm-hearted person. She had a poisonous tongue and was a person with a very laughable malevolent attitude.*¹²



Figure 7: The mother Toshiko and the youngest son Ryōta on the way back from the eldest son Junpei's grave¹³



Figure 8: Yoshio prays at the altar for the death of Junpei¹⁴

¹² 母は決して心優しき善人ではありません。かなりの毒舌家で、悪態がけっこう笑えるユニークな人でした。(KOREEDA, 2016, 161)

¹³ http://ryanhisa-blog.at.webry.info/200807/img4_3.121535255017816410447.html



Figure 9: Scene in which the mother reveals not intending to "release" the boy from the obligation to visit Junpei's tomb annually¹⁵

Conclusion

These three films from Koreeda, *Maboroshi*, *Distance* and *Still Walking* speak exactly about *ikigai* and how mourning can affect in many ways those who have being left behind, the *izoku* (bereaved family). Koreeda says that in making these films he is not interested in telling the story of those who died, but rather of those who have to continue living and living with the death of someone in the family.

In *Distance*, for example, Yumiko tries at all costs to understand the reason for the suicide of her husband Ikuo. This quest for response, nonconformity, and anguish become her *ikigai* throughout the narrative. When it's said: *sei ga nukeru* (精が抜ける - energy that escapes the body) or *tamashii ga nukeru* (魂が抜ける - spirit that escapes the body) means that either energy or spirit have abandoned their bodies.

Whatever the translations of the word *ikigai* could be, we realize that they are all explanatory phrases. Kuniichi Uno (1948-), in *Translating the Voices* (GREINER; SAITO; SOUZA, 2013, 19), states that "sometimes we invent words by adding two or three words to translate only one. It is necessary to do this to translate 'precisely' the multiple meanings of the word 'sense' (...)". The same might be worth to the word *ikigai*.

Although there is no literal translation for *ikigai*, it does not mean that there is no such feeling in other cultures. What moves a person to live? What made someone get out of bed everyday? What permanently and significantly rounds a person's thoughts and minds to stay alive? Several answers could be a possible description of what *ikigai* is. If this is associated with joy or hatred, it doesn't matter. But it is certainly not tied to any judgment of value. This is what, constantly and insistently, appears in the films of Hirozaku Koreeda.

¹⁴ <http://alexsheremet.com/review-hirokazu-koreedas-still-walking-2008/>

¹⁵ http://ryanhisablog.at.webry.info/200807/article_3.html

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