

Kirishima: Reflections on Humanity and Nihilism

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The Asian Conference on Arts and Humanities 2019
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The *Kirishima Thing* is a 2012 Japanese film, which was awarded Excellence Film at the 67th Mainichi Film Awards as well as Best Director at the 37th Hochi Film Awards in 2012. The film won Japan Academy Prize for Picture of the Year as well as received several nominations. It has been screened worldwide, including Thailand in 2015. While *The Kirishima Thing* is not screened in any major film festivals and never wins any awards in well-known film competitions, the author is of a view that this film well reflects the society and its impacts on the human life. Particularly, the film depicts the self - searching's high school students through a seemingly central character called "Kirishima" who hardly appears in any scene. In order to gain further insights into the use of space, this article analyzes the film with narrative theory, formal criticism, and contextual criticism. In an attempt to do so, this article plans to investigate space so as to explore human relationships from small to large scales while questioning about the absurd society in which individuals live their lives just the way it is.

Keywords: Narrative, Space, Formal Criticism, Contextual Criticism, *The Kirishima Thing*

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Introduction

The Kirishima Thing tells a story of high school students, with “*Kirishima*” as the central character who is involved with every single character, but rarely or never appears in the film. The story of Kirishima is told or mentioned in conversation. Specifically, it is narrated by the third person who tells other people about events or situations in which they have seen or are involved (Paul Ricoeur, 1990, p. 89). Although Kirishima does not appear as main character, but he is the one who drives other characters to continue the story. The filmmaker uses the cross-cutting as storytelling technique from the vantage points of several characters so that viewers can see and feel connected with the situation replayed from various viewpoints. This technique is similar to completing a jigsaw from different pieces so that the complete jigsaw can be conveyed to viewers in order to understand the whole story (Jennifer Van Sijll, 2005). The common point shared by all characters is that they know Kirishima, a star athlete of the volleyball club who is popular among female students as well as the school pride. One day, Kirishima is absent from school and disappears mysteriously. His classmates and girlfriend are clueless about his absence. This event has turned to a social phenomenon. That is, the disappearance of Kirishima affects everyday life of other students, including that of his girlfriend, classmates and fellow volleyball players.

The filmmaker utilizes the structure of unfolding over five days. In order to prevent confusion, there are cuts with letters indicating that the situation being told occurs which day of the week, starting from “Friday”. When one event finishes, another will happen on the same Friday, yet from the viewpoint of another character. Most of the events occur after school. In other words, each event is narrated from the first person or a main character narrates the story. An advantage of this technique is that it is likely to take viewers closer to the film. On the contrary, viewers have to see the story from the character’s personal view (Stanzel, 1986, p. 208). When every character takes their turns, the film will display the new event on the next day. The filmmaker continues to use the cross-cutting technique from the beginning to the end which results in discontinuity (as the events are cut into pieces). At the same time, viewers can see different viewpoints of each character. According to Deleuze & Quattari (1988), this technique is to “put events together” from different viewpoints and actions of a single character in each cut on the ground that conversations and actions are taken as “events” or parts of making a story happen. Such events might function together in creating meanings by either supporting or conflicting with each other (Deleuze & Quattari, 1988).

Formal Criticism

In film analysis, formal criticism is a theory widely used in providing reasons and connecting presentation techniques because this theory aims to construct a scale measuring the film’s value by examining every detail of film composition. In this regard, filmmakers select and arrange each piece of composition to work together to convey emotions and ideas as well as create a form. In other words, the form is a result of interactions among components within the piece of art, as well as interactions between components within the piece of art and the whole piece of art (Taeng-aksorn, 2008).

Formalism is grounded on the basis that film is a genre of art with a particular aesthetic appeal. This means that those who will be able to acquire such experience must possess basic knowledge about nature and functions of film, as well as awareness about potential and limits of this genre of art. Such experience will then lead to the understanding of what each pieces of composition means, how they are related, and finally whether or not this relationship results in unity as well as to which extent. The ultimate goal of such experience is to access the deep down inside of a film (Bookrak Boonyaketmala, 1990). As for this movie, in the scene appearing in the ending part after the complicated situation has resolved, *The Kirishima Thing* manages to make use of film form in terms of idea presentation. Also, the scene can best represent the message of the film. This suggests its storytelling power to convey meaning of the film, including its theme efficiently.

Throughout the film, Maeda is always seen carrying a small movie camera (8 mm. movie camera) to everywhere he goes. Although his friends say that film cameras are outdated and digital cameras are much easier to use and provide more beautiful pictures, Maeda does not care, insisting that he likes shooting movies with film and believes that the images are better and more charming than those from digital cameras. Thus, his “camera” is a symbol and “motif” appearing throughout the film. His camera reflects the identity of Maeda who never lets the mainstream to change his ideas. Moreover, the photos through his lens are used to represent Maeda’s views towards things and happenings (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013. p. 63).

Similarly, the theme of the horror film on which Maeda has been working is about a battle against those with virus infection or zombies, using the school as location. Zombies, one of the monsters in the Western sci-fi fictions, are defined as living corpses of those infected with virus. Driven by id, they prey on humans for food (Christie & Lauro, 2011). According to the psychoanalysis theory, zombies are moving corpses without ego and super-ego. The remaining part is id, which is now unhidden and thus fully shown. Zombies in Maeda’s movie also symbolize daily life of the high school students. That is, everyone lets the environment and society to control their living patterns in the same way with no identity, and no difference from lifeless zombies who move aimlessly (Paninya Paksa, 2018, p. 102).

Contextual Criticism

Contextual criticism is another theory generally employed with its focus on content or script. According to Irwin Silber (1970 cited in Bookrak Boonyaketmala, 1990, p. 101-102), contextual criticism is used to analyze a movie that reflects the time and happenings in society, with a focus on contexts drawing on social theories. This theory is said to replace auteur theory, which looks at a movie as a creator. Contextual criticism investigates film on the basis of social contexts and sees film as cultural media, which interact with society in a sophisticated way.

The Kirishima Thing presents daily life in society at micro level through a group of high school students. Hence, it tells stories of several characters who represent various lives in society. And they are put together under the education system in which students are nurtured and taught to be ready for society. In this regard, the film content addresses issues about particular cultures and groups of society. To a great

extent, it might reflect the realities of society in which most problems about human relationships are caused by a highly competitive environment.

Nearly all the scenes are set in a high school, which is indicated as the current time of the film's screening year 2012. General viewers can relate to daily life of high school students in other countries to such similar patterns as attending classes, participating in clubs, making friends, and doing extracurricular activities. Since countries vary in culture and manners, depending on social characteristics and locations, people have to live their lives in a designated way and thus adjust themselves to each other. This is a norm or common practice. In this regard, schools are one of areas representing the designated life patterns whereas students are different with their own identities which is human nature. Sometimes identities are confined by psychological space, or the school in this case. This means that students are required to comply with the same pattern. At other times, difference can be threatening as it may make students lost (Paninya, 2018, p. 102).

Community Jigsaw: High School Society

Characters in this article means essence of a set of perceived human properties such as age and intelligence level, gender and sexuality, speaking and posture, outfits, education and career, private life, as well as values and attitudes. These properties make characters special because characters are genetically different and gain diverse experiences. And the unified properties are similarly defined as characterization (Fay Lamb, 2013). In this paper, the author has analyzed each character's habits through the filmmaker's view as follows:

Maeda: a reflection of being strange, different, yet full of determination, with a clear idea of future and his own choice.

Maeda is a small sized boy, widely viewed as a clown. Though seemingly physically fragile, he is determined, hard-working, and trying to do what he loves relentlessly. Maeda is the president of the school's movie club. His latest work has passed just the first round of the contest. Although the school sees it as a success that should be proclaimed, most friends at school see him as a clown, rather than a role model. No matter how others look at him, he just ignores and continues doing what he loves. Therefore, Maeda represents eccentricity often shunned by society. Yet, he does not let himself judged by others in society by choosing or doing things just the way he wants.

Kasumi: a reflection of blending in with the society while hiding her own needs to avoid conflicts.

Kasumi is a lovely young lady who is well-mannered, gets along with people, thus being liked by many friends. Kasumi does not stand out, or show her feelings. As a result, she looks normal and friendly, with no enemy. Even when her friends gossip about other people and she disagrees, she tries to hide her feelings and blend in. Therefore, Kasumi represents those who are under the influence of space or social dynamics at school. For survival, she goes by without arguments or issues with anyone. By doing so, she often does the opposite of her feelings.

Hiroki: *a reflection of self-contradictions.*

Hiroki is a good-looking young boy and a member of baseball club. He is tall and handsome, and thus popular among female students. Hiroki is a close friend of Kirishima and often spotted with Kirishima before Kirishima's absence. Though seemingly a golden boy, he does not perceive himself as perfect. His life is aimless: he does not know what he wants, what he wants to be, or what does he aim for each day. In other words, Hiroki's life is empty and aimless, without motivation to live a meaningful life.

Risa: *a reflection of perfect lady.*

Risa is Kirishima's girlfriend. She is tall with a gorgeous face so she looks like a model. She is doing well at school and well liked by male students, including Kirishima's friends in the volleyball club. While she is an acknowledged leader of the students, her fellow students know her just roughly, rather than being close to her and know the real Risa. While Risa is not so talkative nor good at expressing herself, she is determined. When it's time for action, she is ready to show her true color.

Sana: *a reflection of blending in with the society and self-centeredness.*

Sana is Hiroki's girlfriend and also close to both Kasumi and Risa. The three girls are often seen together, with Sana as center. Sana is a cheerful lovely girl. However, she often does whatever to get attention. She chooses people to hang out with just because they make her feel good or valuable such as Kasumi, Risa and Hiroki. This is why she looks at people Maeda with contempt. Actually, Sana represents those who fall victim to the mainstream that judges people with appearance only. In addition, she holds on her own thoughts and feelings as the basis of giving value to surrounding people or things.

Aya: *a reflection of shyness and lack of self-confidence.*

Aya is a shy girl of the music club. She is found sitting at the back of the classroom behind Hiroki because she has a crush on him. She is too shy to speak out, leaving herself with no close friends. She does not have courage to confess her feeling for Hiroki. All she can do is to pretend to practice music on the school rooftop in order to secretly watch Hiroki playing basketball after class.

Mika: *a reflection of compromise, choice to be impartial, though in conflict with her thoughts.*

Mika is a close friend of Kasumi from the badminton club and also belongs to the same group with Sana and Risa. She is unhappy with Sana's contempt for people. However, all she can do is simply say a few words or make a little unhappy face. This is because she believes that expressing opinions in conflict with those of other people could be troublesome. Therefore, she pretends to say yes or no in contrast to what she actually thinks. This makes her aloof or far from friends in the group. However, she likes Kasumi because they both are always nice to one another.

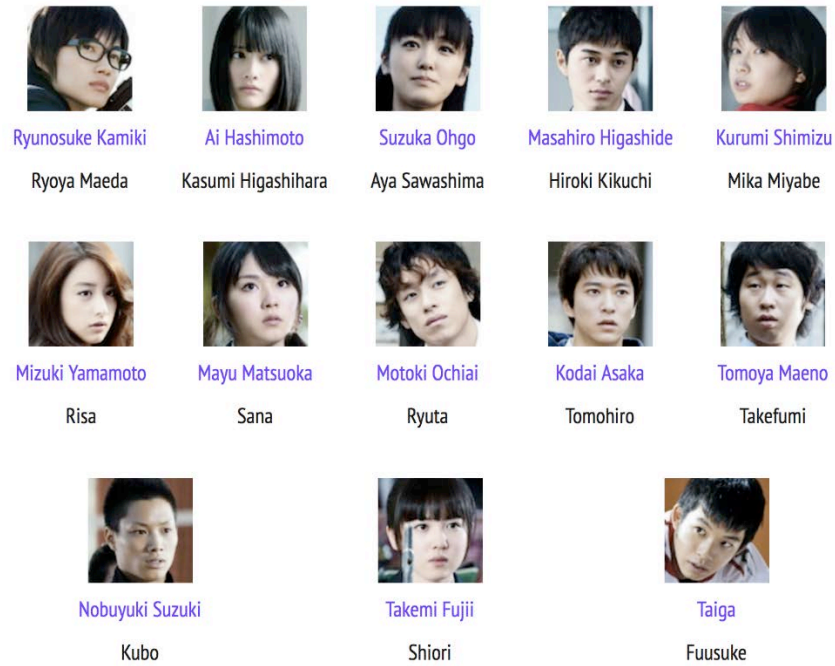


Figure 1: Cast of The Kirishima Thing
Source: http://asianwiki.com/The_Kirishima_Thing

Space and Human Relationship in Cinematic Arts



Figure 2: The encounter between Kasumi and Maeda at the cinema
Source: http://asianwiki.com/The_Kirishima_Thing

Maeda and Kasumi are alone for the movie and meet one another. They have a chance to chat, yet they feel shy and awkward. At school, they are classmates, but rarely have a chance to chat. Maeda does his best to break the ice by turning the conversation to film, which is what he likes. On the other hand, Kasumi talks about the past in which they have known each other since junior high school days. Maeda is glad that Kasumi still remembers him, which makes she laughs saying “Why not?” After the conversation, they go on their way.

The above event happens after the movie has run halfway. Both Maeda and Kasumi are initially introduced as key characters from the beginning. They never speak, say hi, or smile to each other at all. This creates 'empty space' between the two characters, making viewers understand that their relationship does not exist. Afterwards, the movie reveals their backstory during their encounter at the cinema scene: both have known one another. Orson Scott Card has defined backstory as an unseen aspect of characters that may not be revealed by film makers. This includes the character's background, starting from birth until the beginning of a story, or a process that shapes characters, takes viewers to believe, to get involved and to access the inside of characters as it creates dimensions of depth, development, conflicts and changes (Card, 2010).

The unseen space of relationship between the two has narrowed down from perfect strangers to be old friends. The space for their meeting is changed from the school to the cinema. This means that the influence of a place impacts not only the way characters interact, but also space of relationship known as physical space as well as psychological space. This also makes a difference for the way characters behave and act (Paninya Paksa, p. 106).



Figure 3: Event on the rooftop while shooting a movie
Source: http://asianwiki.com/The_Kirishima_Thing

While Maeda and his friends from the movie club are shooting a scene of zombie attack on the school rooftop, other students who receive the news that Kirishima reappears now at the area used by the movie club, are running to the area. As the rushing students do not find Kirishima, they feel so frustrated that they start a fight with the film crew members who are also in the bad mood caused by the interruption of their shooting. The situation gets worse when a member of the volleyball club puts his anger on meteorites used as props. This causes fury among the movie club, including Maeda who shouts to the other students and demand apologies. Finally, this leads to a battle between the movie club who are trying to continue their shooting and the volleyball club who are unhappy and try to use violence. In such a stressful situation, Sana enjoys encouraging other people to fight. This makes Kasumi so angry

that she slaps Sana's face. The conflict is then resolved and everyone gets on their way.

The disappearance of Kirishima, more or less, affects the lives of every student. For example, friends from the volleyball team are pressured from a lack of their captain. His close friends are worried and doubtful about his mysterious disappearance. The shooting is interrupted by a search of Kirishima. After a series of emotional pressures on every group of students, it is clear that the chaotic situation on the rooftop is the trigger for everyone to explode and express themselves. Originally, each lives their own lives and do their jobs with no interest in each other. This is the opportunity to speak out or reveal their true color. Given their distant relationship, the students who do not even look at each other have a chance to chat and express themselves. It could be a development, even it is driven by the violent event (Bordwell & Thompson, p. 67).



Figure 4: The conversation between Hiroki and Maeda at the end of the movie
Source: http://asianwiki.com/The_Kirishima_Thing

In the ending part, after the chaos on the rooftop is resolved, Hiroki retrieves Maeda's lens cover from the floor which creates the first time for them to speak. Hiroki borrows Maeda's camera to look through the viewfinder and pretends to interview Maeda about what he wants to do in the future. Maeda can answer the questions clearly. Even though he is not so sure what will happen in the future, he can say that he is living his life the way his wants. On the other hand, Hiroki, being asked with the same question, cannot say anything and just walks away with an awkward face. Maeda and Hiroki are the main characters with the opposite looks and roles. From appearance, Hiroki is perfect and well-liked, as opposed to Maeda who are disregarded. Deep down inside, Hiroki is empty or aimless, with nothing to hold on to. He does not know what he wants to do or pursue. This is opposite to Maeda who looks weak from the outside, but inside he is strong and clear.

From the space perspective, each character has space for their own story in the form of memory. The filmmaker starts the storytelling from personal space of each character and puts all spaces together into a large area, which is shared into public space. Memories are a form of psychological space, which is the deepest part that filmmakers can take viewers to by accessing characters' mental subjectivity, according to narrative theory (Bordwell & Thompson, p. 91). In this article, the author has categorized memories into two groups:

1. Personal psychological space is a memory perceived by an individual. From their individual view, it is about doing what, seeing whom, where, when, and how such as a

letter written by a living mother to her small kid and well-kept in a box. Her child would read it after he or she grows up or upon their mother's death. Stories in the letter are personal psychological experience between the mother and her child without anyone else's knowledge.

2. Public psychological space is a memory shared and commonly understood by a number of people such as the period from 13th to 15th April each year is Songkran (Water Festival) and Thai New Year's Days, according to the Thai calendar. This is commonly shared and understood by Thai people.

The filmmaker makes use of the two types of psychological space as the core function in maneuvering events to the eyes of viewers. Each character has both types of space (personal and public). The cutting of memory pieces to be told gradually and put them together is a stylish way to get into viewers' memory. Ultimately, this turns to the significant event at the end that tells a story far better than the chronological storytelling through a single character.

Conclusion

A theory is a set of intellectual tools that explain aesthetic quality, yet it is not always correct. Some theories may be more useful than others to understand certain movies with particularities. There is no theory that perfectly explains all movies (Giannetti, 2008). The Kirishima Thing presents issues of adolescents in society through a plot outstanding in both content and form of storytelling, which are in support of one another. The movie features the realities of life in Japan with a focus on society in big cities. Although they appear to live, work, and talk with each other, they have to live on their own. No one truly cares for each other. They do not even notice surrounding things, except things through their own eyes. The disappearance of Kirishima brings about the realization that while everyone talks and asks for him a hundred times in the whole story, that does not occur because they care for him. It is because they care about their own standing that could be changed by his absence. This reflects a range of personal feelings e.g. selfishness, pretense, confusion, and emptiness, and ultimately the whole society in which individuals are self-centered and judge others from their own views. They keep doing so without realizing that their humanity is devalued. Such realities are narrated by the storytelling structure that shows empty space between people in society. Finally, all the components make The Kirishima Thing a dark comedy as well as a reflection of realities.

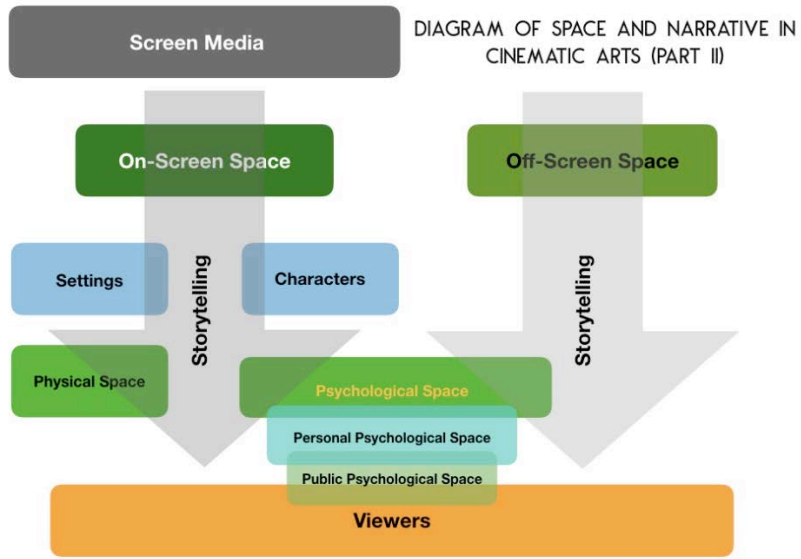


Figure 5: Interconnection of different types of space with viewers' perception

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