

Lessons on the Superego in *Shoplifters*

by Herbert H. Stein

It is always a gift for me when something I am teaching in class resonates with a film I have seen recently. Such a gift occurred around the film, *Shoplifters*, which came to mind as I was preparing for a class on the development of the superego.

Shoplifters is a film from Japan that challenges us with questions about morality. It is about the members of a makeshift family bound by compassion and dependent on theft. The film begins with an act of compassion which is ultimately condemned and punished. It raises questions not only about right and wrong, but also about the meaning of family.

The gift that I experienced is the artfully presented story of the development of conscience in a pre-adolescent boy. “Artfully” because we, the viewers, experience the inner emotions of the characters almost out of our awareness from subtle facial expressions and postures, brief comments, gazes and finally action. The filmmakers do not provide music to evoke our feelings, do not seem to tell us what to feel or what the people in the film are feeling. This creates for us the sense that we are experiencing their feelings simply from being with them.

The boy's name is Shota, a name given to him by his “father” in this self-created family. The father calls himself Osamu. As the film opens, we see them working as a team to steal items from a grocery store. The boy does the shoplifting under the watchful eye of the father, who communicates through hand signals and nods and carefully blocks the boy from the view of others so that he can do his work.

We are introduced to them at an ordinary moment of their lives just before an event that will change everything. On the way home, on a dark, quiet street, they hear a noise and see a very young girl—we later learn she is four—sitting alone in an apartment. Apparently, they have seen her there alone before. This time, the man, Osamu, offers her one of the croquettes they have just bought on their way home. As the scene shifts, we see that they have brought her home with them to share

dinner with the family.

The other family members are an elderly woman, whom they call Grandma, a younger woman, Nobuyo, the titular mother of the family, and a young adult/adolescent girl, called Aki. In the course of dinner, Grandma notices that the girl's arms are covered with scars. Nobuyo decides that they should take her back home before someone comes looking for her.

But when she and Osamu reach the place where they found the girl, who calls herself Yuri, they hear a violent argument coming from the apartment between a man and a woman.¹

“That's what you always say! You're never here!”

“I told you.”

“I'm the one looking after her!”

“Hell knows who the real father is.”

“Don't!”

“Shut up!”

(We hear a noise.)

“That hurts! Why?”

Now the woman screams loudly, “I didn't want to have her either!”

Nobuyo wordlessly decides that she can't leave the girl in this home of violence, abuse and neglect. They bring her home, an addition to the family.

This is not the first time. We learn at some point that Shota was also found by Osamu, abandoned in a car. This is a family that came together out of necessity, all there because of some loss or trauma, and Yuri is its newest member.

This opening sequence brings us into the film's complex presentation of morality. What will later be viewed by the authorities and society as a heinous crime, a kidnapping, is here experienced by us as an act of compassion; a girl is being saved rather than a girl is being stolen. It is on such matters that the drama hinges. As viewers just beginning to get a sense of the plot and the characters, we don't necessarily make special note of this point, but we feel clearly that taking the girl back to live with them is an act of compassion

1. Quotations are taken from the English subtitles.

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and courage. A little girl has been taken from a home of neglect and abuse to a home of love and compassion.

Without our fully realizing it, we, the viewers, have been drawn into a world of unfamiliar moral ground; and, as we watch, the boy, Shota, will begin to question the morality he has been living with, and we will be there to see it. That morality centers around a culture of shoplifting and teaching children how to shoplift along with other forms of institutional theft, such as taking money falsely from a pension belonging to Grandma's late husband. The filmmakers give some justification for it, presenting this family as living in a world that lacks protections for the poor. When Osamu suffers an injury to his leg on his job as a construction "day worker," he is not eligible for workers compensation. When Nobuyo's employer lets her go because of rising expenses, she has no recourse and no unemployment benefits. It seems to justify her having stolen objects from the pockets of the clothes she has been handling as a laundry worker. Certainly, the film seems to be persuading us to accept the necessary "crimes" of these poor people in an unjust world.

But it is through the pre-adolescent boy, Shota, that we see a struggle with moral questions and a gradual shift in values. It is here that we get a fictionalized, but clearly understandable process of the development and honing of morality as adolescence approaches. And it is that awareness of moral corruption by the boy, Shota, that pulls the film towards its tragic ending.

Once Yuri enters the family, some of the responsibility for her is automatically delegated to the older child, Shota. The first day that Yuri is there, we see Grandma receiving a visitor. As he comes in the front door, Shota leads Yuri out the back door and takes her for a walk. We soon understand that this is to hide their presence from the visitor. She follows him at a distance.

This becomes a pattern, with Yuri following Shota during the day. As the older brother, he begins to casually teach her things he has learned from his father, giving us some sense of his view of the world as well. When they

pass a couple of children with school bags, he tells her, "Only kids who can't study at home go to school." Shota doesn't go to school, obviously because it would expose the family, and this is the rationalization he has adopted, presumably from Osamu. We see him taking Yuri to a local store, Yamatoya, where he does some shoplifting, making sure to keep out of sight of the elderly owner. At a later point he says he'll teach her someday.

And, quite naturally, we begin to see a touch of sibling rivalry. Osamu, Shota and Yuri go to a store where Osamu distracts the salesman while Shota grabs a pair of fishing rods and Yuri unplugs the alarm so that Shota can walk out with the rods, Yuri following.

On their way home we see Shota walking apart from Osamu and Yuri.

He says, "We don't need her help."

Osamu replies, "This is what you call work-share."

"What's that?"

"It means what it sounds like, we all share the work."

"She's in the way."_

"Don't say that, she's your sister."

"She's not my sister."

Shota runs ahead, Osamu calling out to him,

"She's your sister, Yuri is your sister!"

Osamu pats Yuri on the head, reassuring her,

"You're his sister, right? It's no big deal. He doesn't mean it. He's just rebelling."

Back at home, Yuri waits outside, looking for Shota, who hasn't come home yet. Nobuyo tries to reassure her. Osamu finds Shota outside in an abandoned car he uses as a little workshop to shine some of the metal objects he's collected.

Osamu tells him, "Yuri's so worried, she's been waiting for you by the door the whole time. You don't like Yuri?"

Shota shakes his head, apparently meaning it's not that.

Osamu asks,

"So what's wrong?_"

"It's more fun with just us guys."

"Of course it is. But for Yuri, if she helps us out, it's easier to live with us. Right?"

After Shota nods approval and responds,

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"Got it," Osamu asks him, "Yuri is your what?"
"My sister."

Osamu is pleased, but he can't get Shota to say that he is his father. Nevertheless, in the next scene we see him and Shota playing together, clearly having bonded again.

The film gives us a similar bonding experience between Nobuyo and Yuri as Nobuyo attempts to help Yuri with her experience of abuse. This is set off by the family seeing a report on television that Yuri has been declared missing. They decide to disguise her, cutting her hair and buying her new clothes. At one point, in the dressing room as they are talking about the dresses for Yuri, Yuri tells her not to get a yellow dress that they thought looked better. When asked why, she asks Nobuyo,

"You won't hit me later?"

Nobuyo gently reassures her that she won't hit her.

We see them soon after back home. Yuri is wearing the yellow dress sitting beside the tub where Nobuyo is taking a bath. Yuri notices that Nobuyo has a mark on her arm.

Nobuyo explains, "I got burned with a hot iron."

Yuri shows her a similar burn on her arm, saying, "Me, too."

Nobuyo responds, "We're the same."

Moments later we see them sitting outside apparently burning Yuri's old clothes.

Nobuyo holds her, saying, "Let's burn it. OK?"

Yuri nods "Yes."

Her arms still around Yuri, Nobuyo tells her, "The reason they hit you isn't because you are bad. If they say they hit you because they love you, that is a lie. If they loved you, if they really loved you, this is what you do."

She hugs her and rocks her, tears in her eyes. It is a tender loving moment.

These scenes of parental understanding and compassion culminate in a family trip to the beach that brings out for the viewer the rewards of having a warm, caring, loving family.

There, Osamu provides the boy with fatherly advice, caring and encouragement. He invites him to enjoy his budding sexuality without

guilt or shame.

While blowing up a lifesaver on the beach, Shota appears to focus on a woman's breast. A moment later, while playing in the water with Shota, Osamu begins an adult discussion.

"Shota, you like boobs?"

"Not especially."

"Liar, I saw you looking."

"Why?"

"It's all right. All men like boobs. Your Daddy loves them, too."

Shota laughs.

Osamu goes on,

"Tell me. Are you getting big down there in the mornings?"

Laughing, Shota again asks, "Why?" then after a moment adds, "All men do?"

Osamu replies, "Everybody does. All men do. Feel better?"

A smiling Shota nods "Yes," then adds, "I thought maybe I was sick."

"You're healthy."

"Great!"

Much like Nobuyo has done with the little girl, reassuring her about the abuse she had suffered, that she is ok, Osamu has given Shota fatherly reassurance.

We move immediately to a friendly, loving exchange between Nobuyo and Grandma sitting on the sand. The other family members are at the water's edge, holding hands as they play with incoming wavelets. After Nobuyo gets up to join them, we see Grandma looking out at them, barely mouthing words we see in the subtitle,

"Thank you."

It is this loving, caring family atmosphere in which the children are encouraged to enjoy life and overcome their fears that gives us, the viewers, a warm feeling that prepares us for the development of the film's tragic finale. Already, in the scenes just described, we see hints of my association of this film to a class on the development of the superego, a moral sense, in children. Both Nobuyo, the mother and Osamu, the father, have encouraged the children to adopt a morality that is reassuring, Yuri over the abuse she has suffered and Shota over his budding sexuality. But that is not what particularly drew me back to the film.

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The motive force for the dissolution of the family comes from the development of Shota's conscience, which we can follow in a series of scenes shortly before and right after the tranquility of the beach trip. It is also that development that stood out in my mind as I prepared for a class on the development of the superego.

The detailed development of Shota's morality might be used in a psychoanalytic textbook. Our understanding is that a child's initial understanding of right and wrong comes from parental "do's" and "don't's". At around the Oedipal period, as the child begins to develop some autonomy, those moral rules cease to be directly connected to the parents, becoming the core of an inner authority that seems to come from within.

Freud first emphasized that when we lose or move away from a loved one, in reality or perception, we often take some aspects of them into ourselves, attaching ourselves to their beliefs and their values. The film shows us how this can happen at a later time in childhood, at the movement into adolescence, an even more striking period of growing autonomy from parents.

We see—perhaps I should say experience—Shota beginning to question his father's teachings to develop his own beliefs. It revolves around his relationships with his father, Osamu, and his sister, Yuri as well as the shoplifting that gives the film its name.

Having accepted Yuri (now called "Lin" as part of the disguise) as a sister, Shota has taken it on himself to teach her shoplifting, in effect taking on his father's role. We see them together in a small store. Shota stands behind Yuri to block her from the storeowner's view seemingly looking at some candles and reaches back to nudge her, giving a signal. Going through a little ritual motion with her fingers that we have seen Shota use, she takes a small piece of candy and moves out of the store, looking back at him.

As he is about to follow, we hear the elderly storeowner say, "Hey!"

The storeowner walks over to Shota, pulls down a couple of candles and hands them to

Shota, saying, "I'll give you these."

He looks at him a moment and adds, making the ritual finger motions he has obviously observed, "Don't make your sister do it."

Shota turns and walks out of the store.

Clearly the store owner has known for some time about the shoplifting, has allowed it to go on, but is drawing a line. We can deduce that, but can only surmise how aware Shota is of all of that. We know only that it has started him thinking because at a later moment, in the midst of a family fun time with Osamu performing magic tricks for the children, Shota says, quietly so that only Osamu hears him, "He said, 'don't make your sister do it'."

"Who said? Do what?"

Shota replies, "This," making the ritual hand motion.

"Who did?"

"The Yamatoya guy."

Osamu, looking away, starts to answer, "Of course, it's still too early for Lin to ..." and then breaks away to help someone find something across the room, seemingly avoiding the question.

This is left hanging, perhaps percolating further in Shota's mind as we go through the beach scene and its positive family dynamics. Immediately after the comforting resolution at the beach, we experience a series of events that lead the film to its tragic ending and allow us to experience and understand the development of a new morality in a boy just entering adolescence. All the pieces leading to that development have already been set in place.

It begins with a death, one of two that will be part of this "lesson." Grandma simply doesn't wake one morning. We hear Aki trying to wake her, then the others rush in. Osamu starts to call for an ambulance, but Nobuyo stops him, saying that she's dead, the ambulance can't help her, and they can't allow themselves to be found there. Instead, Osamu warns Shota that it must be kept a secret.

"Grandma was never here."

He and Nobuyo dig a grave and bury her, essentially hiding her body.

The scene shifts to the street, where Nobuyo is at something like an ATM collecting

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Grandma's pension money. Shota is with her, and they begin to talk. I've put in bold the dialogue relating to the morality of shoplifting.

"Whose money?" Shota asks.

"It's Grandma's money."

"So it's not bad."

"It's not bad."

"What about shoplifting?"

"What does your father say?"

"Whatever's in a store doesn't belong to anyone yet."

"Well, as long as the store doesn't go bankrupt, it's OK."

He quietly shakes his head "Yes."

This dialogue almost puts us inside Shota's head. He has been taught that shoplifting is not bad because no one really owns those things yet. But he has asked the question, and gets back that answer. We don't really know if he knows the meaning of "bankrupt."

As they walk, we hear a vendor asking Nobuyo, "Hello young mother, croquettes for your son?"

It leads to Shota asking her whether she likes being called "Mother" and when she asks him why he asked, he says,

"Because he wants me to call him Dad."

"But you can't," she answers with understanding.

"No, not yet."

She reassures him that it's not a big deal.

The scene moves. We are back in the house, where Osamu and Nobuyo are celebrating having found Grandma's hidden stash of money. They cheerfully count it out, "30,000 yen each." Shota and Lin look on and the camera focuses on Shota's face, showing nothing in particular, but leaving a sense of disquiet in the look.

In the film's typically understated way, we have been made aware of Shota's growing disquiet and doubts. The next two scenes change that doubt into certainty, the consolidation of a harsh morality.

Shota and Osamu are in an open-air parking lot. Osamu is looking into the car windows.

Shota asks him, **"Don't these belong to someone?"**

Again, I've used boldface for emphasis.

Having heard the dialogue with Nobuyo almost moments before, we are inside the boy's mind.

Osamu looks at him and says,

"So what?"

Shota just looks down.

Osamu again asks, "What?" and then offers to let Shota use the "crusher" he is holding to break the car window.

Shota shakes his head and walks away.

"In that case, you be the lookout by the stairs," Osamu tells him.

Shota, walking away, ignores him as Osamu breaks a car window, pulls something out of the car and runs.

As he runs away, Shota hesitantly following, Shota asks,

"Back when, when you saved me ..."

"What?"

"Were you trying to steal something from the car, too?"

"No, you dummy. That time I was just trying to save you."

Shota stops and watches Osamu run off.

We next see Shota and Yuri approaching the Yamatoya store. It is closed.

He reads, "In Mourning."

"What does that mean?" she asks him, as they look in the door, "Day off?"

He says, "Did it go bankrupt?"

Two deaths of elderly people, Grandma who was the elder of the family and the owner of the Yamatoya store, who attempted to teach Shota a moral lesson.

A rationale for shoplifting that no one was actually hurt by it shattered first by a "crusher" on a car window and then by the death and closing of the store reminding Shota of Nobuyo's comment about bankruptcy.

Together, they explain the next scene, the scene that plummets the film to its tragic ending, crushing the family as if with a metal crusher, sending it to its demise.

After leaving the shut down Yamatoya store, Shota and Yuri go to another, bigger store. He tells her, "You wait here."

He goes in, but she follows. He is looking around to steal something when he sees her getting ready to take something. He tries to

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get her attention, then runs to grab some fruit in a bag and runs out, obviously drawing attention. He is eventually caught between two pursuers on an overpass and jumps over. Yuri is watching and runs home.

We, the viewers don't need to be told why this happened. We don't even need a psychoanalytic textbook to explain that with his death, the words of the "Yamatoya guy" have become a moral injunction: "**Don't let your sister do it.**"

Shota is hospitalized and as matters develop, the family inquiring about him at the hospitalized draws police attention. They are caught trying to escape from their home. In the scenes that follow quickly, they are each interrogated and lectured at by police, social workers and other young, self-confident government workers who accuse them of corrupting minors, theft, and above all kidnapping. They are told that they are not a real family, and, most tragically of all, Yuri is sent back to her real parents, where we see her

avoiding her mother, and ultimately sitting all alone, with no one. We, the moviegoers, look on with a very different moral compass.

The power of loss and separation is brought out in one last touching moment in the film. Shota, who is now enrolled and living in a school, has a visit with Osamu, who is now living alone. They go fishing with the stolen fishing rods, have dinner, and then the boy sleeps over. At night in bed, he asks Osamu if they were indeed planning to leave him behind. Osamu says it's true that they were trying to get away before they were caught. Shota then tells him that he deliberately got caught. In the morning after they say goodbye, Osamu impulsively runs after the bus that is leaving, tears in his eyes. Shota is sitting in the bus, looking forward, seemingly unaware, then turns back and under his breath (we see the caption) says, "Goodbye ... Dad."

The loss of Osamu has solidified his place in the boy's mind, just as Freud said it would.