

In *Broker*, petty thieves teach us to forgive

Hirokazu Kore-eda's characters find and create families in the margins of late-stage capitalism.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue



Song Kang-ho (left) and Gang Dong-won in *Broker*. (Photo courtesy of Zip Cinema / CJ Enm)

About midway through Hirokazu Kore-eda's new film *Broker* (limited theatrical release, coming soon to Hulu), Soo-jin (Bae Doona) holds her phone out of a car window to capture the sound of Aimee Mann's song "Wise Up," playing in a Seoul coffee shop. The song is the only English-language moment in this film by a Japanese filmmaker set in South Korea, and it caught my ear as strongly as it did Soo-jin's. "Do you remember? It's from that

movie we watched,” she says to her partner on the phone.

“That movie” is Paul Thomas Anderson’s enigmatic masterpiece *Magnolia* (1999), about forgiveness and transformation and the ways human lives are tangled together, for better or worse. I immediately remembered the film when I heard the song, even before Soo-jin alluded to it. Few songs are so intimately linked with the movie they appear in as “Wise Up” is with *Magnolia*. Showing up at this moment in Kore-eda’s own beautiful, melancholy story of human connection, the song felt like a gift and a clue, connecting me through Anderson’s film to what Kore-eda wanted me to see.

Soo-jin is a detective tailing a group of would-be human traffickers she wants to nail in the act of selling a baby on the adoption black market. Former orphan Dong-soo (Gang Dong-won) collaborates with Sang-hyeon (Song Kang-ho), a meticulous hand launderer in over his head with debt, to steal babies out of a Busan church’s “baby box” and place them with loving families for a fee. They think of themselves as a kind of Robin Hood operation, stealing children from a broken system and giving them to loving parents who for one reason or another can’t navigate the inhumane bureaucracy of official adoption. They are joined by So-young (Lee Ji-eun), the mother of a baby they are trying to sell, who is on the run from her baby daddy’s gangster family. As they crisscross Korea in search of the perfect family, they begin to form one of their own.

Kore-eda has long been a filmmaker interested in whether the wounds families inflict on each other can be forgiven or overcome. In both *Broker* and the highly acclaimed *Shoplifters* (2018), he eschews the traditional nuclear family for the expanding networks of kinship people make out of necessity and circumstance. His characters are scam artists and petty thieves, sex workers and low-wage laborers. On the margins of respectable institutions—stable jobs, official marriage, or state-sanctioned reproduction—they find and create families.

From their perch on the margins of late-capitalist life, the adults in both films can see the many ways that parents use children as props in their striving for success. Unencumbered by respectability, Kore-eda’s characters act out of their own sense of morality. “Does giving birth automatically make you a mother?” Nobuyo Shibata (Sakura Andô) asks a police officer in *Shoplifters*, when questioned about how she could absorb children into the expanding circle of kinship she has formed with her longtime partner. This question could be the thesis for the entirety of *Broker*, though

it is answered quite ambiguously.

Magnolia makes a sprawling epic out of the ways parents fail their children. It is also one of the great “overlapping stories” films of the last several decades—films in which the viewer can see how characters are connected to each other when the characters themselves often cannot. Their choices spiral out to affect each other, and we see their lives as one overlapping, tangled tapestry. This kind of storytelling is meant to generate wonder, maybe even awe, akin to solving a mystery or being offered a secret key that recasts all the characters’ lives with hidden meaning. Anderson swings for the fences with these themes, imbuing them with the quasi-miraculous: frogs falling from the sky like a biblical plague, characters colliding into each other’s stories with the force of divine providence.

Kore-eda is also interested in the sense of possibility generated when the plots of human lives overlap—when a birth mother gets caught up with the men who are trying to sell her baby, a detective gets pulled into the dramas of the people she is tailing, an orphan has to help out a mother who chose to abandon her child—but his scale is less epic or miraculous. Or perhaps, with Aimee Mann in our ears and Anderson’s movie on our minds, we can see the miracle where it always was: in the choices people make to see past their own wounds and fears and choose love and connection.

“It’s not going to stop ‘til you wise up,” Mann sings as Soo-jin listens. Her sense of justice is scrambled as she wrestles with her family demons and tries to figure out the motives of the people she’s been watching. Something shifts in Soo-jin, a shift that has profound consequences for all the other characters, weaving their lives more tightly together.

That doesn’t mean that things work out in a happy ending. As Dong-soo remarks, things never really work out for people like them. Nor are they immune to hurting each other with small lies, bad decisions, or selfishness and fear masquerading as love. But they do wise up—about what real care requires and how to act out of love instead of anger or fear. Like a song worming its way into your consciousness in the rainy night air, Kore-eda offers us a film about all the ways we can learn the transformative possibilities of forgiveness, including from the movies.