

Finding the Self beyond the Threat of Loss Re-watching *Shoplifters* and *This is England* with Cavell and Gadamer

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In this paper, we attempt a re-interpretation of the apparently pessimistic and misfortunate trajectory of two children protagonists in the films, Shoplifters and This is England. To achieve this, we will draw on the philosophical works of Stanley Cavell and Hans-Georg Gadamer. We will explore, the way these thinkers account for the complex and controversial process of finding the self, and allow us to trace elements of hope and possibilities of redemption in the painful journeys of the film characters and their encounter with recurring events of disappointment. Cavell's Thoreauvian notion of doubleness, understood as an act of keeping constant nearness of the self to the self and as requiring resolution both to lose and find, opens a way to reconceiving Shota's loss of his family in Shoplifters, and also helps to shed light on his anticipation of leaving in favour of becoming a decent grown-up. Gadamer's account of the nature of human experience sheds lights on the invisible transformation in Shaun in This is England who, returned to loneliness and social-isolation, accepts his loss as part of his personal history, and from this accepting and forgetting a new horizon comes to be open. After showing the films as stories of the children characters who undergo a kind of education, this paper closes with the possibility that they become sites of education also for their adult audiences today. The growing power of globalisation sets us in the standing threat of loss, but the films and the philosophy in them also invite us to find ourselves again in a new integrity.

INTRODUCTION

This paper follows a discussion about the films, *Shoplifters* (2018) by Hirokazu Kore-eda and *This is England* (2006) by Shane Meadows, which we watched in the context of the Kyoto Colloquium on Film and Philosophy in February 2021. *Shoplifters* is a story of a family who lives in the outskirts of Tokyo, and earn a living through temporary jobs and regular robberies, carried out by 11-years old Shota and his adoptive dad Osamu. Despite the reprehensible conduct of their lives, the family seems to be quite happy, relying on reciprocal loyalty and sincere love towards each other. However, when the emotional balance is broken, first by the arrival of a new member in the family, then by the death of the unifying figure of the grandma, Shota reports his adoptive parents to the police, causing the dissolution of the whole family and the revelation of much worse crimes on which it was founded. *This is England* is the story of Shaun, a 12-years old boy, who, after the death of his dad in the Falklands War in 1982, moves to a new town with his mother, where he joins a group of Skinheads. He seems to have found a new life and new friends, but after a violent fight between two members of the gang, the group is dissolved and Shaun finds himself alone and isolated again.

At first glance, both these films seem to be construed on the pessimistic and misfortunate

trajectory of two children who lose their social bonds just when they need them most, that is, when they are about to enter adulthood. The films seem, therefore, to allude to a symbolic failure of society as a result of economic disadvantage, precariousness, misinformation, violence and hypocrisy: the Japanese society of the 1990s' recession and the Thatcherian society of the 1980s in UK. We think that a critical observation on the failure of society to provide a secure environment for the development of the self is indeed one theme explored within these films. However, we are in this paper more interested in bringing to the light something subtler and also educational in the boys' attempts to deal with their loss of trust in themselves and in the society. What they go through, we think, also reveals the complex and controversial nature of the process of self-formation. To explore this underlying theme of the films, we will turn to Stanley Cavell and Hans-Georg Gadamer's works. Although these thinkers come from different traditions, and our selection of their philosophical works approach the theme from different angles, without having to smooth out such differences, we will take their works as rich resources for a more profound interpretation of the stories in discussion.

This paper consists of three parts. In the first section, Cavell's reading of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* will be explored before applying it to trace in *Shoplifters* elements of hope. Then in the following section, we will introduce the theoretical arguments of Gadamer about the formation of self in relation to the story of Shaun in *This is England*. In each section, we will come to see, through the philosophical eyes of Cavell and Gadamer respectively, the possibilities of redemption embedded in the painful journey of the characters through recurring events of disappointment. This paper will end with a concluding section in which we will bring out more explicitly educational implications about Shota and Shaun's stories of growth.

CAVELL ON SEEING THE DOUBLE

Cavell's re-reading of Thoreau in *The Senses of Walden* would help us to detect and trace the gleam of redemption, or hope, in the seemingly misfortunate failure of the film characters to find their society, home and self. A central theme explored by Cavell within this text is the idea of "resolution," which, on Cavell's reading, is a notion intimately connected to "the recovery of the self" (Cavell, 1992 [1972], p. 80). One way in to understanding what is at stake here is via Cavell's exploration of what Thoreau means in speaking of seeing his "doubleness" projected onto the surface of the iced pond at Walden in winter: "When the ice was covered with shallow puddles, I saw a double shadow of myself, one standing on the head of the other, one on the ice, the other on the trees or hillside" (Thoreau, as cited in Cavell, p. 101). Cavell notes how the kind of double Thoreau is expecting stands a cubit away from his self. This distance of a forearm length signals the "mystical harmonies and dissonances" of our relation to the double (p. 102).

Before going any further, however, we might ask: what is this double, exactly? Cavell finds Thoreau referring to it as a transcendental part of self—Thoreau calls it "a spectator" who stands outside the self and reflects upon what I am doing and I who am doing (p. 102). The double renders "my experience of my existence, my knowledge 'of myself as a human entity,' my assurance of my integrity or identity," and in this sense, constitutes 'the condition of "having" a self, and knowing it' (p. 104). However, Cavell also brings into view the nature of externality in the double—for I stand to my double as I stand to another. Hence Thoreau's articulation of the double in terms of its nextness to me, and of my neighbouring and befriending it. This

elaboration in neighbourly terms is crucial, for it prevents us from misconceiving doubleness as a matter of simple absorption—such as may be the case when we submit ourselves to outside opinions of ourselves, usually proffered by some authority. The example Cavell has in mind is the case in which we follow at every moment of our lives the dominant modern-epistemic view of ourselves as a self-conscious thinking agent, but relevantly to the films in discussion, this will also be the case when we identify ourselves with our affiliation to certain communities, including one's family. Although this is the kind of distance at which we commonly stand to ourselves, it is to stand "in an insane sense" (p. 106). For what stands outside and next to the self is, "not the workman whom we have hired" but "the workman whose work we are" (p. 106), and "whose answerability is endless for the constructions in which it houses itself" (p. 109).

What Cavell finds in Thoreau's account of doubleness as nextness, is a call for the reinterpretation of our sense of doubleness, and of what it is to find the self. The writer, and Cavell with him, have not invoked the double to suggest that there is a static point to be found and then to transfer ourselves to; but to point to *the act of keeping a constant nearness to it*, of "[lying] on the ice long enough not to settle upon hasty conclusions" (p. 100). What is found about the self in the position of the spectator always has to be brought all the way down to where we are and what we are doing at each moment, putting the spectator to the position of the workman. Crucially, this is not to deny the spectator aspect of the self. For only when we have great enough confidence of what the spectator observes can we become willing to listen to its confession: the self is still to be found in what happens to us here and now. In that sense, it is an act of uniting both the spectator and the workman aspects of the self, or of founding the *whole* self upon its disappointing experience of "incoherence or division or incompleteness" (p. 103).

As has implied already, this demands our willingness to be confessed, or our great courage of accepting the incompleteness of what we take to be complete – which Thoreau depicts as resolution. Then, resolution "comprises both hardening and melting, the total concentration of resources and the total expenditure of them; the suspension of winter and the progression of spring" (p. 109). And to resolve both to harden and progress is to become resolute in "leaving, anticipations of departure" from where and when we so love to anchor (p. 110). Just as in nature, when the winter comes and at the crisis of losing the world one has constructed, one "dies down to the root" and the root becomes one's faith; and when the spring comes, that befalls again the crisis of giving up the assurance in the root "in favor of the labors of rehabilitation" (p. 110). This reveals resolution is also to do with retrieving a clarity of our poor sense of being at the crisis of leaving, losing the self and the world we have so far built. For each direction of dying down to the ground in the winter and then of springing out for rebirth, "is an entrustment, or bequeathing, of the self" (p. 110). What we take to be the crisis is in fact not one of loss, but also of hope for finding the next self. And perhaps disappointingly to some, what is thereby found is nothing (not a thing) but its trail of loss, of leaving from where it sojourned. It is the condition of our existence that the self is always to be found, and finding is looking for what has been lost. But this is in a crucial sense different from finding nothing, and hence, from accepting loss or absence of (a thing-like) self as preordained and permanent. In earlier pages, Cavell writes, the place you will come to find yourself "may be black, something you would disown; but if you have found yourself there, that is so far home; you will either

domesticate that, naturalize yourself there, or you will recover nothing” (p. 54).

SHOPLIFTERS : FROM LOSS TO FINDING, FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE

Having explored Cavell’s philosophy of re-conceiving our doubleness as keeping a good distance, and as requiring resolution both of losing and finding, we are ready to apply this for a more hopeful interpretation of what happens to Shota, the main character of *Shoplifters*, with the dissolution of the family. And to make a start with this, we would like to recall a scene at a corner shop, in which Shota teaches his younger sister theft. The elderly owner stops Shota on his way out, grabs snacks in his hands, and tells him not to make his sister to shoplift. In so doing, the elderly man can be considered, in a Cavellian perspective, to represent and demonstrate to the boy a kind of his doubleness as nextness. This indirect experience of his doubleness gradually awakens Shota to head outwards from his family and to observe the strangeness of his current life in the family. So, in the following sequences he is shown questioning the family about shoplifting: Osamu, the father figure, told him shoplifting necessities is not wrong because merchandise does not belong to anyone yet, and the mother figure agrees as long as it does not do harm to the shop owner; and they together misappropriate the grandmother figure’s money after her death without a sense of wrongdoing, perhaps for thinking it is now owned by nobody (no-body, as they buried her under their house). But these, in fact, have never been unowned—just like the brand handbag, and perhaps the boy himself too, which Shota witnesses Osamu *steal* from a locked car. The painful secret is revealed: shoplifting is the way in which Shota joined his family and forged special bonds with Osamu; but it is an amoral foundation and habit of the family in which he no longer wants himself or his sister to be implicated.

Later in the scene at a grocery shop, Shota takes courage to accept the painful truth, and to deal with the crisis it brings of dismantling all the trust he has built so far in the family and in his self. The brother does not want his sister to shoplift, so instructs her to stay outside. However, when seeing her follow him in and roll fingers (a sign for theft), he stops her by causing a mess in the shop and running away with a bag of oranges. Before too long, he is, too, stopped by himself – by throwing himself off an overpass and getting reported to the police. Near the end of the film, when Shota visits Osamu for the last time, he recounts that he got caught on purpose. Phrased in Cavellian-Thoreauvian terms, the incident is an expression of his resolution to let go of the family from him (not the other way around as Osamu has admitted the night before).

Reflected in light of Cavell’s *Walden* reading, then, Shota’s resolution to relinquish the family does not solely cause the character despair but also hope. It is a loss that he anticipated, welcomed, and hoped for, as much as was afraid of. Afraid, for it is a determination to accept that those ordinary moments which he has cherished so much have reprehensible contributions of theft: the finger-rolling sign between Osamu and him, going fishing, going to the beach, and countless others but most importantly his becoming part of the family. This necessitates leaving the family, and one might wish to put it as his loss of family again. But that departure is also anticipated by the child who becomes interested in learning about right and wrong, and as described in a scene with a police officer, in beginning a life without unadmirable adults and receiving education for what his family could not teach him. That is, he has turned towards

becoming a decent grown-up. In this sense, the resolution is also Shota's *grasping* the opportunity of turning, to borrow Cavell's expression, from the total concentration of his interests in the shoplifting family life, to the total expenditure of them in favour of his re-birth to a little man.

GADAMER AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE NEGATIVE

Gadamer's account of experience, as well as Cavell's account of resolution, provide us with a special angle for watching the unfolding of events related to the young protagonists of the films, Shaun and Shota. In particular, Gadamer's philosophy helps us to see the invisible transformation that occurs in the boys' way of thinking. If, in fact, the films' ending seem to return the characters to where they began—that is, to loneliness and social isolation—there are, conversely, elements that point towards a substantial difference in the way the characters will now be able to deal with their condition of uprootedness. If nothing has changed in terms of *what* identity the characters have, something is in terms of *how* they find and found one for themselves, their voluntary acceptance of the risk of loss.

If we look at how Gadamer describes the nature of human experience, we can start to appreciate the constructive side embedded in the experience of a personal crisis. The first thing to notice is that if we regard such experience only in terms of its visible result, we completely miss its positive outcome. Experience is to be regarded as a process, and it is within the process that a meaning, if any, has to be found. In this sense, an authentic experience is not one that confirms our beliefs or expectations, but, by contrast, is characterised by striking disappointment. An authentic experience is, according to Gadamer, always negative in as much as we realise, by going through it, that our previous conception of the world was wrong:

If a new experience of an object occurs to us, this means that hitherto we have not seen the thing correctly and now know it better. Thus, the negativity of experience has a curiously productive meaning. It is not simply that we see through a deception and hence make a correction, but we acquire a comprehensive knowledge. We cannot, therefore, have a new experience of any object at random, but it must be of such a nature that we gain better knowledge through it, not only of itself, but of what we thought we knew before—i.e., of a universal. (Gadamer, 2004 [1960], p. 348)

It is important, however, to specify that the knowledge acquired thanks to a negative experience is of a special kind, which cannot be understood in mere epistemological terms, but in ontological terms. The enhancement and the empowerment that such an experience allows is possible only if not just our criteria of judgment change, but also, we change with that. The knowledge acquired through first-hand experience in one's life is always, also, self-knowledge. This latter is, however, not without internal and external tensions. Gadamer refers to Hegel's account of dialectical experience to explain that the most important achievement of the negative experience lies in a "reversal of consciousness," its recognising itself in something that it had regarded as alien and different before. He re-interprets, though, Hegel's notion in a slightly different sense, seeing in the temporary division, or estrangement (what Cavell calls the "double"), something that is not to be disciplined or overcome, but something to familiarise with, since it contains in embryo the achievement of our new integrity.

The concept of experience means precisely this, that this kind of unity with oneself is first established. This is the reversal that consciousness undergoes when it recognizes itself in what is alien and different. Whether experience moves by expanding into the manifoldness of the contents or as the continual emergence of new forms of mind, ..., in any case it is a reversal of consciousness. (p. 349)

We can, in this way, explain the apparent absence of palpable progress at the films' ending and the return of the characters to their original start point as the visible expression of this dialectical reversal of the consciousness: Shota reports his family to the police, causing the arrest of his adoptive mother, and as we will see soon, Shaun throws away the flag, symbol of his attachment to Combo. However, this is not how, actually, the films end, and the content of the last scenes can still provide fuel for the reversal of consciousness to be complete, and a new wholeness of the self to appear. The rejection of the old standpoint makes sense only inasmuch as it makes way to the rising of a new horizon, whose apparent emptiness stands exactly for its being characterised by openness, and undogmatically waiting for new experiences:

Rather, experience in this sense inevitably involves many disappointments of one's expectations and only thus is experience acquired. That experience refers chiefly to painful and disagreeable experiences does not mean that we are being especially pessimistic but can be seen directly from its nature. Only through negative instances do we acquire new experiences, as Bacon saw. Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation. Thus, the historical nature of man essentially implies a fundamental negativity that emerges in the relation between experience and insight. Insight is more than the knowledge of this or that situation. It always involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive. Thus, insight always involves an element of self-knowledge and constitutes a necessary side of what we called experience in the proper sense. Insight is something we come to. It too is ultimately part of the vocation of man—i.e., to be discerning and insightful. (pp. 350-351)

We have now reached the angle from which we can start to see the possibility of a productive meaning embedded in the experience of a crisis/of negative: that the loss of part of the self is needed in order to become insightful human beings, as the limits and losses entangled in our being on earth show us not only our human finitude, but also, and more importantly, the liberating way towards experiences that we could never have by keeping hold of viewpoints that have revealed themselves as false. As Cavell would put it, being able to leave and depart is what one needs to learn to “grow” her own self, or to become, in Gadamer's words, an experienced person, one who “knows that all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain” (p. 351).

This perspective appears, therefore, paradoxically optimistic, if we see the acceptance of the risk, of the losses and of the uncertainty characteristic of human life as a necessary step towards a sort of existential “rebirth.” This helps us to conceive the formation of the self as a process of continuous renewal, and gives the suffering experienced in the crisis—the “bad luck” of the final song of *This is England*—a shadow of light and hope. As we will see in the next section, grief does not, necessarily, come for nothing.

THIS IS ENGLAND : FROM LOSS TO FORGETFULNESS

Shaun, the main character of *This is England*, is a 12-years-old boy, who after the death of his father in the war, is forced to move to a new town with his mother. Shaun is deeply displaced, isolated and downhearted by the load of his emotional trauma. The loss of the father-figure is what drives his desperate search for inclusion and protection. This leads him in the hands of a gang of skinheads, which persuade him to change his look and attitude in order to appear bold and brutal.

Shaun is, therefore, guided by the group to think that character and self-confidence are features that can be attached to his identity like stickers or badges, and that inclusion into the group is achieved simply through the conformity to a common lifestyle and to common beliefs, even if alien to the self. The scene in which the boy lets his friends shave his head and changes his clothes to look the same as the others suggests an interpretation of the identity formation as an initiatory ritual, poignantly reminiscent of an army enrolment such that Shaun's dad, as a soldier, might have gone through. Thus, the director seems to point to the boy's desire to find his self by reiterating his dad's history, and fate, something that we can describe as an insane way to dwell in one's own trauma, the condition of being lost in a loss.

There is, however, a further deepening of this perspective, which will serve as a propeller of that "reversal of consciousness" needed to the protagonist to fulfil his trajectory. The scene in which Combo, the nationalist, racist member of the gang, holds a speech on the leading values of the group is evidently key to the interpretation of the film. Combo argues, convincingly, that identity values are not just empty words and statements, but actions driven by critical thinking and authentic feelings, pointing to the fact that identity has to do with knowledge and emotions, with brotherhood and loyalty. Shaun believes to have finally found in Combo the person who can replace his father, and builds with him a special bond of trust, symbolised by the St. Georges Cross, which he gives to Combo as a gift. That a religious symbol is chosen to represent the relationship between Shaun and his friend can be interpreted, following the Gadamerian thread, in the sense of the dogmatic attachment, scrapped of any "doubleness", in Cavellian terms, that connects, at once, the members of the group and Shaun with his inner self. The way in which this scene develops comes as a confirmation of the untenability of this perspective. As one of the boys questions the rationality of Combo's beliefs around the nation, he is brutally kicked out of the gang with the reason that beliefs, like properties and borders, must be defended through overt violence. It will soon be clear, in the following scene, in which Combo beats nearly to death one of his friend for racial hate, that the dogmatic attachment to the self leaves no room for the bonds of brotherhood and loyalty.

As this perspective reveals false and contradictory in all his lines, Shaun is left with the failure of his attempt to fill the emptiness caused by his father's death with another authoritative figure. Towards the end of the film, we have the impression that the suffered loss starts re-emerging as a load of which he can't get rid of. The ending scene shows Shaun throwing the flag, the symbol of his attachment to Combo, into the sea. As we watch the flag slowly disappearing through the waves, we are moved to see the profound discouragement and distrust embedded in this gesture, which comes at conclusion of an unlucky and unsuccessful story. However, that this is not the very end of the films is demonstrated by a last shot, in which Shaun looks straight into the

camera. The reversal is complete, the consciousness turns away from his false belief. However, the loss is not cancelled, but actually seen, accepted. What the gesture of throwing the flag symbolises is also its settlement into the waters of memory. The loss becomes definitive, irreversible, part of a personal history, and at the same time it must be forgotten in order for a new horizon to rise, since “Only by forgetting does the mind have the possibility of total renewal” (Gadamer, 2004 [1960], p. 14).

As mistakes and false beliefs, grief cannot be eradicated from life. It needs to sink in us, to settle at the bottom of our memory, so that we can move on and look forward with fresh eyes.

CONCLUSION: FILM AS A FORM OF EDUCATION

We have thus far shown from the perspectives of Cavell and Gadamer that the films are also stories of children who go through the complex and paradoxical process of becoming who they are. From their perspectives, where the characters are shown to be estranged from who they think they are, turns out to be where they come nearer to who they really are; and to trace backwards, when they are in most kinship with who they profess themselves to be, their true self recedes the farthest away from them. Cavell-Thoreau’s notion of resolution, and Gadamer’s account of going through the reversal of consciousness, pave a way to understand why this is the case, and accepting the truth in it is the kind of education these films show: what it is to take on the journey towards who we really are, is to acknowledge ourselves as *travellers*.

But is this not so much an education for adults as it is for the children characters? For the paradoxical nature of becoming who we are prides open the possibility that the confidence we as grownups have of living our own life and of having attained who we really are, might actually be a sign of the neglect of our education. The films feature those uneducated adult figures through Combo who fails to learn from his separation from his old friends a chance to befriend his true self; and through Osamu who does not learn from Shota’s expressed disappointment and strangeness to his thieving life an opportunity to find a better way of living, perhaps one in which he might become “dad” to Shota (as he becomes at the end of the film, after showing his resolution to accept the shameful truth that he was abandoning Shota). Then the films are featured to us, with the very last close-up shots of the boys: Shaun looks up to the camera and Shota (and his sister) look out over the screen, viz., the adult audiences. These shots are their invitations sent to the adult audiences for education of the kind they underwent. Are we who we are; or who we have pinned ourselves to, afraid of leaving or rather bettering ourselves? Is the insensibility of the threat of losing trust in our lives and in our society because we have found ones in *perfection*; or because we have forgotten ourselves that our lives of travellers cannot be founded on where we are but on our anticipations of leaving? And how are we responding to the old friend/child figures who cause in us a sense of strangeness? Are we befriending them, or impelled to make them wholly foreign to us, or even worse, condemning them in an effort to deny our existential condition?

What we finally come to is the films seen as a form of education that has pertinence to the current political landscape of globalisation. The growing power of globalisation dissolves and re-establishes the boundaries of cultural, political, and socio-economic communities; and a secure sense of who we are is constantly under challenge—in both the lives of migrants who estranged themselves from their local community in view of a new one, and in those of locals

who feel estranged from their original community under radical change. The process of globalisation in our time sets us in the standing threat of loss, or rather reminds the plain fact that we all come into the world with some kind of loss, in the state of loss. This makes, as Cavell puts in *The Senses of Walden*, society dependent upon our “companionability” with loss (Cavell, 1992 [1972], p. 108). As he laments, however, this cannot be taught by our society itself, but we have argued for the possibility that two films discussed in this paper can. The mounting struggle for a greater inclusion and the growing resentment against a more diverse society can be an expression of our fear of exclusion, that is, our fear of loss. And if films, and the philosophical in them can do something about the grown-up’s education, it is that they help us to turn this state of loss into a space for learning, and living our conflicts and divisions with authenticity and nextness to our self. With regard to the globalisation, and its threat to the sense of belonging, what we can learn from a Cavellian and Gadamerian reading of these films is that it does not necessarily have to end up in the hopeless failure of society, but that we must be prepared to take departure from false beliefs if we are to give ourselves a chance to find a new integrity. Like bad memories, our fears and prejudices, can be a way towards the future if we just let them fall to the bottom, where they no longer impede us to look forward.

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