

Can Connections Be Classified? Existential and Epistemological Connections

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This paper attempts to explore what our bonds can be and might be through the analysis of films, Shoplifters and This is England. The paper is an analysis of two short sequences from the films. One sequence is in Shoplifters and it involves the mentions about body temperature. The other is in This is England, and involves the promise between Sean and Combo. In conclusion, the paper discusses the aspect of human bonds by contrasting an existential bond in Shoplifters and a bond of epistemology in This is England. This references the contrast between acknowledgement and recognition. Furthermore, the paper makes an analogy between the contrast of bond in two films and John Dewey's idea about democracy. In The Public and its Problems, Dewey discusses democracy as an idea and democracy as a system. The paper tries to interpret democracy as an idea – a way of life as existential bond. Throughout this course, the paper contemplates the impossibility of categorization our bonds and the possibility that we start to bond from existential dimension.

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the new coronavirus in 2020 has brought to light a problem that we have tried to ignore. As the flow of people has slowed, countries that had previously barely cooperated on economic interests have become fractured, and poverty has deepened the conflict. This is illustrated by the civil strife in Myanmar and the conflict between the US and China, to name but two.

The coronavirus epidemic is forcing us to stop and think about the question of what it means to be “connected,” and not just in terms of the political and economic links between countries. We are seeing changes in the way we communicate and relate to each other in Japan as well, as people refrain from going out, and work remotely. This transformation of connections has led to an increase in the number of suicides¹. In Japan, and in our daily lives, we urgently need to reconsider the nature of our connections.

In the light of this situation, this essay will examine the theme of connection through an analysis of two films. In Chapter 2, I will look at the film *Shoplifters*. In the second section, I will look at the film *Shoplifters*, and its depiction of “body heat.” Then, in section 3, I will examine *This is England* as a contrast to the connections discussed in section 2. Throughout the discussion, I aim to draw out the nature of connection on a personal level. In section 4, I will discuss the possibility that these connections at the personal level can lead to public and political ones. Specifically, I use Dewey's argument in *The Public and its Problems* (1927) as a medium to make this case. In conclusion, in section 5, I will suggest ways in which ethical connections can be made that affect the personal level as well as the public and political level.

THE POSSIBILITY OF EXISTENTIAL CONNECTIONS: A STUDY OF THE FILM *SHOPLIFTERS*

In this chapter, we will consider the connections between people based on the film *Shoplifters*.

The film tells the story of five people who are not related by blood, but who live together and make a living by shoplifting. There is not much in the way of detail about their individual circumstances. The film is also characterised by its gaping camera work and its lack of dialogue. This makes the audience feel as if they are watching from close up, and in this way, with people who are not connected by blood or land, ask: “Why are they together?” “What is their relationship?” These are the questions that draw us in.

In the film, various answers to these questions are suggested. For example, when we see Hatsue as the grandmother living on her pension, or when Osamu as the father tells Shota as the son that “the more useful you are (even if it is shoplifting), the more you can stay together without worrying,” we can imagine a relationship based on money. Also, the way they commit shoplifting together reminds us of the connection through complicity. In addition, the bedroom scene between Osamu and Nobuyo, and Aki’s role as the daughter of a sex worker suggest a physical connection.

However, we are never given a clear answer in the film; moreover, these connections break down in the end. So, is *Shoplifters* a film that just asks questions?

In contrast, this essay argues that there is one connection that does not break down: it is the connection found in the scenes where body temperature is mentioned. There are two specific places.

The first is the line that Hatsue says to Aki. The two of them sleep together every night. Hatsue’s feelings for Aki are not shown, but Aki has at least a special attachment to Hatsue, for example, she tries to monopolize the right to sleep with her. One day, when Aki comes home after a bad day at work, Hatsue says to her, “Are you okay? Your feet are colder than usual today.” Afterwards, Aki doesn’t say anything about her bad day, but she looks satisfied and sleeps peacefully.

In another scene, Aki is talking to a customer at the brothel where she works. The customer pays an extra fee to buy time alone with Aki. However, not only does he not speak at all, but he also does not ask for any special services from Aki. When Aki looked closely at him, she saw that his knuckles were covered with scars and that he was crying. He was a stutterer. She didn’t know why he was crying as he had no language to communicate with others, but Aki clenches her fist and says, “It’s warm,” and cries with him.

From these scenes, this essay will make three observations. First of all, Aki is in a special position in this film. Only Aki knows her “real family”; it is a place to which she can return at any time. This may mean that she has a memory of a loving connection, but it also means that she has actively and willingly chosen to be part of a shoplifting family. This is why, when the shoplifting family is broken up in the second half of the film, Aki is the only one who returns home. Secondly, these two scenes show a connection that goes beyond the recognisable act of language. Aki does not explain the reasons for her feelings, nor does she try to understand her stuttering guest verbally. Last but not least, the result is a connection that transcends roles. A connection based on the warmth of one’s skin is not a relationship based on money, nor is it a relationship based on family. It is a connection that defies any *a priori* categorisation.

It suggests that the relationship between Hatsue and Aki is preserved and bereaved, and that the relationship between Aki and her guest has developed into a romantic relationship. These two relationships are not chosen to be dissolved, at least not like the relationship between Osamu and

Shota. Can we say that this is the difference between the “cognitive” connection that tries to connect them as a family and the existential connection that is created by chance?

This paper proposes that this existential connection is the key to thinking about future connections that transcend divisions, from the personal to the political level. This contrast between connections beyond roles and intentions and connections through roles is also seen in the film *This is England*. I would like to continue with a look at *This is England*.

THE FAILURE OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS: AN EXAMINATION OF *THIS IS ENGLAND*

In this chapter, I will explore the contrast between “epistemological” and “existential” connections in the film *This is England*, as identified in the previous chapter. Through the discussion, I want to show how the epistemological connection does not work. I begin with a synopsis of the film.

This film is about skinheads in 1980’s Britain. The main character, Sean, is a ten-year-old boy who lives with his mother after his father dies in the Falklands War. One day, by chance, he meets Woody, the leader of the skinheads, and they get to know each other.

The film opens with an appearance by Thatcher. In this way, the film is interspersed with political topics faced by Britain in the 1980s, such as neoliberalism, the ever-increasing number of refugees and the Falklands War. In this sense, it is a film that can be watched in many different ways. In this essay, I would like to focus on the relationships of the main character, Sean, and specifically, how he connects with the two leaders of the skinheads, Woody and Combo.

The connection between Sean and these two men is symbolised by the way their relationships begin. In the case of Woody, he sees Sean is being bullied at school and is worried about him, so he calls out to him. Combo and Sean, on the other hand, begin their relationship by making a pact that they will always be friends.

From this, we can read the contrast between the connection between people who actually exist in front of us and the connection that is based on a concept. Eventually, Sean’s relationship with both of them ends, but his relationship with Woody is not completely extinguished. Combo, on the other hand, is ultimately violent and his relationship is completely over. Under a certain concept, in other words, the conscious connection does not last.

So far, our examination of the two films has led us to the following suggestions: there is a dimension in which people can be connected to each other, prior to the categorisation of “colleagues, family, friends, customers,” I would call them existential connections, while the categorised connections are epistemological connections.

This might be a contrast between what Cavell calls “acknowledgement” and “recognition.” However, I will not explore this point further here, instead, I will continue to interpret Dewey’s theory of democracy in terms of the suggestions I have made, in particular, the contrast between democracy as an idea and democracy as a system in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). Through this work, we will discuss the process by which existential connections at the individual level become public.

UNDERPINNING THE REMODEL OF A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY: THE PUBLIC AND ITS PROBLEMS

In this section, I would like to consider the process by which the existential links we have identified so far become links of a public dimension. In order to do this, I will use Dewey's account in *The Public and its Problems* as a medium.

In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey distinguishes between democracy as a social idea and democracy as a system of governance, and then argues for the remodelling of society on the basis of democracy. Dewey's intention is not to oppose ideas and institutions; he distinguishes between ideas and institutions because he is concerned with the hope of a democratic society. Dewey says: "If the idea of democracy is to be realised, it must affect all forms of human association: the family, the school, industry, religion" (Dewey, 1927, p. 179). Thus, Dewey's intention was the constant remodelling of society based on the democratic ideal.

In what concrete way, then, does Dewey think that the remodelling of society can be achieved? He says,

Democracy must begin at home, and that home must be a community of neighbours.
and that home is nothing but a community of neighbours. (p. 261)

Dewey's democracy starts from "home." Izawa (2010), for example, interprets this as a "concentric circle model."² He says that Dewey considers the ideal of democratic relations to be the connections between people in the small American communities of the time. Gradually increasing the size of that community is Dewey's way of remodelling a democratic society. At the same time, Izawa points out here that Dewey's ideal is an aporia in today's highly individualized society (Izawa, 2010, p. 148).

Whether or not Dewey was actually thinking in concentric circles is a point that needs to be examined in detail. However, for reasons of space, I will not enter into that discussion in this paper. What does it mean to start from one's home-base? According to Dewey, the reason why it is necessary to start democracy at the home-base is that there is a "face-to-face relationship of direct give and take" (Dewey, 1927, p. 266). In other words, Dewey's emphasis in his discussion of the remodelling of democratic societies is not on the formality of expanding in concentric circles from a home-base, but on starting with face-to-face, direct connections. Dewey's use of the word "home" was intended only to emphasise the fact that society at the time was a great society and that it was not possible to communicate directly with everyone.

Thus, in *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey emphasises the importance of direct acquaintance. Why? Dewey says that there is "a vitality, a steadiness, a profundity of human relations which can only appear in a close community" (p. 262). Furthermore, "unless local community life can be restored, the public will not be able to adequately solve its most urgent task, the task of finding and identifying itself" (p. 264). In other words, for Dewey, the quest for a democratic society was not only a remodelling of society, but a constant remodelling of the self.

Of course, Dewey did not believe that direct communication alone could transform the great society of his day into a great community. Compared to the total number of other people with whom each of us has a direct relationship, the scope of influence of social change in those days (as well as today) was much greater. For this reason, Dewey advocated openness of communication and the art of communication in order to be able to collaborate with people with whom one has indirect

relationships.

How real is Dewey's communication, and what are its realities and mechanisms? The question has not yet been settled. However, what we can be sure of is that Dewey's theory of democracy had as its starting point an existential connection, that is, a face-to-face relationship with the person in front of him that transcends roles. The similarities between the two films discussed in this essay and Dewey are now apparent. Finally, in the next section, I would like to summarise my conclusions.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we summarise our conclusions. The question of this paper was: how is it possible to connect across divides while respecting the individual? To answer this question, we have done two main things. The first was an analysis of two films, *Shoplifters* and *This is England*. The second was a study of Dewey's *The Public and its Problems*. Through this work, the following has become clear.

Firstly, the two films reveal that there are two patterns of human connection. These two patterns are continuous, but they are different in nature. The first is what we call in this paper existential connection, which is generated through direct human-to-human communication. The other is what we call epistemological connection, this is communication based on some predetermined category or reason. Of these two, existential links must exist first in order to connect across divides while respecting the individual.

Next, we examine Dewey's theory of democracy in *The Public and its Problems*, and it becomes clear that Dewey also places great importance on existential connections. For Dewey, the existential connection is the key to self-transformation and social remodelling.

The conclusion of this paper is that existential connections are important in order to connect across divides while respecting the individual. This has implications not only for communication between individuals, but also for the public and political dimension.

NOTES

1. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20210321/k10012927131000.html>
[Accessed 15/04/2021]
2. Izawa, S. (2010) Family-School-Community Aporia in a Dewey that Fosters Democratic Child Proclivities The Family-School-Community Aporia in a Druidic World, *Journal of the Japan Dewey Society*, 51, pp. 147-161.

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- Meadows, S. (dir.), Turgoose, T., Graham, S. (Perf.) (2006) *This is England*. [DVD] (KING RECORD C O.).